



Negotiating race in post-apartheid South Africa: Bernadette's stories

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Abstract

Contemporary scholarship on race investigates how racism is deeply embedded in everyday norms and practices in ways which subtly, even unwittingly, serve to reproduce white domination. In South Africa, like many other postcolonial societies, racial constructs continue to be particularly salient. This paper focuses on how a young South African, Bernadette, navigates the complex terrain of racial positioning in a focus group interview with her peers. Drawing primarily on Labov's seminal work on narrative, as well as more recent interactional approaches, it investigates how Bernadette uses the reported speech of others in her stories as a key narrative strategy for racial positioning. The analytical findings suggest that despite her efforts to distance herself from what she perceives as racist talk, she slips into a racializing discourse which is much less overt than that which she rejects, and which has the effect of reassembling the apartheid hierarchy as an explanatory framework. This paper argues that a narrative lens enables the researcher to begin uncovering the multilayered complexities of racial positioning and the subtle ways in which racial discourses circulate in contemporary talk.

1 Introduction

This paper is about race – or more particularly, the ways in which young people discursively negotiate the complexities of race – in a society which has recently emerged from more than four centuries of colonialism and legalized racial oppression. The context is South Africa, more than twenty years after the transition to democracy and the dismantling of the apartheid system (1948– 1994) which had entrenched white privilege and power. For young people growing up in the “new” South Africa, the terrain of racial positioning is difficult and uneven. Referred to as “born frees,” they aspire to be liberated of the past yet are themselves shaped by and positioned within its legacy (Bundy 2014).

Although scholars generally agree that there is no biological basis to racial classifications, race is experienced by South Africans as very real. Why this is so can be explained with reference to history. While racial segregation existed prior to 1948, racial labels were more variably and flexibly deployed, but with the advent of apartheid, each individual was assigned an inflexible category: “black,” “white,” “coloured”¹ or

¹ The term “coloured” in South Africa, when used to refer to a racial category, has a different meaning to the term “colored” as used in the United States.

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