Researching Ethnicity, Identity, Subjectivity: Anything but the Four Lettered Word

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To cite this version:


HAL Id: hal-00721225
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Submitted on 27 Jul 2012

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<th>Journal:</th>
<th>Ethnic and Racial Studies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript ID:</td>
<td>RERS-2010-0511.R1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Original Manuscript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keywords:</td>
<td>Cape Verde, Immigrants, Identity, racial identification, Racism, emotions</td>
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URL: [http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/rers](http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/rers)  
ethnic@surrey.ac.uk
Researching Ethnicity, Identity, Subjectivity: Anything but the Four Lettered Word

The article gives a frank account of how anthropological research on Cape Verdean migrant experiences of parenthood in Portugal developed from avoiding the use of the analytical concept of ‘race’ to encountering ‘race’ as a category of practice in fieldwork and discusses the implications of this for analyzing the data. Although the aim of the research was to look beyond categorizations, to explore the emotional dimensions of lived experience, the effects of ‘racial automatisms’ upon migrant subjectivities cannot be ignored. Racist effects are nonetheless distinguished from racist intentions. The ethnography elucidates the political potential of ‘race’ to foment critical reflection upon the relationship between an individual’s personal and collective identities.

Key words: Cape Verde, immigrants, identity, racial identification, racism, emotions

Introduction

As a mother who had enjoyed two home births in the United Kingdom and ‘suffered’ a hospital birth in Portugal, I was familiar with the disempowering effects of medicalisation and decided to research Cape Verdean women’s experiences in Portugal. Their ability to secure a degree of control over the birth process was likely to be further compromised by the fact that they were foreigners, immigrants, Cape Verdean, African….Clearly, implicit in my reasoning were some ideas about ‘race’ and ‘racism’ but I did not use either of these terms in my research proposal. It did not even cross my mind to mention ‘race’ because I had long left it behind as a useful concept. Having learnt my anthropological lesson, regarding the arbitrariness of phenotypcial classifications (Wade 1993) and concurring with the deconstruction of Afro-centrism (Gilroy 1993), I had no time for the unpleasant colonial connotations of ‘race’.

Notions of ‘race’ are integral to identity formation and viewing race as a social construction enables us to examine the ways in which ex-colonized people
have been racialized as ‘other’ and how this impacts upon their sense of self. Yet, I did not want this to be the central focus of my work. I feared that researching racism would result in examinations of counter-identities readily available for even more social deconstruction. I was tired of the constructivist approach that had dominated identity studies. Keen to avoid engaging in ping-pong deconstructions of oppositional categories, I intended to engage, at a deeper level, with the subjectivities of the women’s experiences and so naively dismissed the four lettered word ‘race’ from my mind. I later realized that the omission of ‘race’ had a name - new racism - critiqued by anti-racist scholars, for contributing to a blind universalism which overlooks difference in the name of equality or humanism. As a European white scholar, my dismissal of ‘race’ thus gained an unpleasant significance, contrary to my intentions.

This article discusses the different ways in which ‘race’ and ‘racism’ emerged in the fieldwork and explore its significance for the study of subjectivity.

**Researching ‘Cape Verdeans’ in Porto**

The original aim was to focus on the intercultural context of childbirth for Cape Verdean women. The exploratory interviews conducted raised a wider range of issues such as economic hardship, childcare, and dealing with state bureaucracy which offered equally rich ethnographic material as that of the birth process. The fieldwork consisted of conducting interviews and accompanying women in their appointments with health professionals, social workers and state officials. I also interviewed Cape Verdean fathers.

Despite turning my back on ‘race’, in the choice of Cape Verdaen immigrant mothers as a category of analysis, there was an underlying assumption
that the data would generate subjective experiences of ‘racism’. Aware of this contradiction; it did not worry me because, as a researcher, I felt ‘protected’ by the privileged insights gained from subscribing to the alternative analytical concept of ‘ethnicity’ which had a feel good ring to it and ‘avoided the nasty baggage that the concept of race brought with it’ (Wade 2002:3). As Banton explains, (cited in Cashmore 2003:143) the difference between an ethnic group and a ‘race’ is that ‘the former reflects the positive tendencies of identification and inclusion where the latter reflects the negative tendencies of dissociation and exclusion.’ With an appeased conscience, I could then focus my attention on ‘subjectivity’, knowing where I stood in relation to ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’.

What about identity? Brubaker’s (2004:4) description of the concept’s analytical impasse – meaning too much in a ‘strong’ positivist sense and too little in a ‘weak’ constructivist sense – helped me to understand my own dwindling lack of interest in researching ‘identity’. Subjectivity, on the other hand, appeared to constitute a more promising concept for an ‘experience-near’ analysis of immigrant motherhood, going beyond categorizations to explore ‘depth of personhood’ (Biehl, Byron and Kleinman: 2007:13) through the ‘inner dialogue’ (Archer 2000). Yet, just because I had kept the analytical concept of ‘race’ at bay, this did not mean that I could ignore its social life in the field.

At the onset of fieldwork, I was faced with the challenge of how to contact Cape Verdean women. There are hardly any Cape Verdean neighbourhoods in Porto, due to a social housing programme that relocated Cape Verdeans throughout the town.

Initial contacts were made through a Cape Verdean Association in Porto and the University Chaplaincy that had provided financial support to single
mother students. The Chaplaincy put me in contact with James Beard, an
anthropologist who was in the final stages of his fieldwork on African immigrants
in Porto. He offered to take me to African hairdressers to distribute a flier I had
produced to advertise my research. These initial contacts marked the beginning of
my re-awakening to the concept of ‘race’.

A Gentle Nagging

A researcher quoted in Darlington and Scott (2002.85) had included a graphic on
her flier so that the homeless people in her study would associate it with her work
without having to read any text. Inspired by this idea, I used a picture of a
pregnant ‘African’ woman from a magazine on the internet. She wore a long
swaying dress, in pale green, standing sideways in an artistic pose, with her right
hand on her swollen stomach. A rectangular hand bag hung off her left shoulder
and her hand rested on its patterned fabric, displaying a thick golden colored
bangle. A wide head band, made of the same fabric as the handbag, pushed her
hair back and up into a bunch of thick black curls and she wore large oval shaped
golden ear rings. Her facial features were displayed in an artistic silhouette form
in pale brown. Underneath this image, I briefly introduced the research and
myself.

Aware that I could face copyright problems, should I wish to publish an
article with a copy of the flier, I also asked a Portuguese artist friend if she could
produce a similar picture. Ana produced an image of a pregnant woman standing
slightly sideways, wearing a pick tunic and jeans, her left arm cradling a young
child at her side whose head was decorated with a number of small plaits. She had
a discreet grey handbag, small ear ring and blue head band that framed her face which revealed bright pink thick lips, wide nostrils and piercing brown eyes. Ana explained that she had found the magazine picture I sent her too exotic and had decided to produce something more natural.

Unsure which image was best, I used them both and in subsequent meetings with different women found that the majority preferred the original image, although some women preferred Ana’s picture. The images were generally seen to represent ‘European’ Africans versus ‘African’ Africans which brought to mind Meintel’s (1984) picture tests of racial classifications in Cape Verde.

The women I met in the hairdressers came from a range of African countries. ‘We are all African’, claimed one woman. ‘The Angolan community is much bigger’ affirmed another. I declined their invitations to include other nationalities in the study, on the grounds that a boundary had to be drawn which also ran the risk of imposing unsolicited inclusions. Several women refused to participate in my study and I wondered whether labelling them as ‘Cape Verdean’ jarred with their own ‘internal definitions’ (Jenkins 1994). I also knew that I was guilty of what Brubaker (2004:8) calls ‘groupism’: ‘…the tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations and races as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed’. Did these women experience the ‘Cape Verdean’ label as an obstacle to their integration into Portuguese society?

Despite my academic condemnation of phenotype as a basis for ‘racial’ classification, there were occasions when I approached ‘African’ looking women to ask them whether they were Cape Verdean. On another occasion, I failed to talk to a Cape Verdean mother in a party because the paleness of her skin led me to believe she was European. Although I dismissed this embarrassing incident in my
mind as a missed opportunity to meet another Cape Verdean mother, I knew that
the issue of race was gently nagging. Deconstructing the category of ‘Cape
Verdean’ women was a necessary theoretical challenge although it also sometimes
clashed with the practical need to meet ‘Cape Verdean’ women in the field.

*Encountering ‘Race’ in the Field*

The vignettes described below, from fieldwork conducted between April 2008 and
May 2009, reveal the need to address ‘race’ and ‘racism’ as part of a broader
framework for examining the interplay between collective identities and
individual subjectivities.

‘It is important to show who you are’

Joaquim, eager to return to Cape Verde, claimed people’s view of Africa is
conditioned by the bad news on television. (The head of the army and the
president of Guinea-Bissau had both been assassinated days before and gruesome
images of vestiges of the president’s brutal assassination had appeared on the
television). Joaquim gave an example of the ‘silly’ questions that his colleagues at
university – ‘educated people’, he hastened to add - had asked him, ‘Does Cape
Verde have roads?’ In the gymnasium, someone had asked what kind of clothes
they wore in Cape Verde and Joaquim had replied that they wore the same as the
Portuguese, or better.

I enquired whether he had experienced any racism. Joaquim replied, ‘not
really racism but rather prejudice’. He claimed not to have many problems
because he was very positive by nature and knew how to get on with people,
adding that it is important to show who you are. His colleagues at university were very impressed when he received high grades. When he had the same grade as a Portuguese colleague, they were more impressed with him because he was black and ‘managed to do it’. Later, I asked what the difference was between racism and prejudice and after thinking for a while Joaquim replied, ‘Prejudice is not the right word, it is more a question of fear’.

‘See (what I mean)?’

Silvia stood, in her local health centre, with her two year old daughter, near a door, out of which came a nurse.

‘Who’s next?’

‘It’s me’ replied Silvia, ‘I did not bother to pull out a ticket because nobody else was here’.

The nurse turned to look at a young white man standing behind us who held up a ticket. ‘But you should have’ he replied and after hesitating for a moment, signalled to the young man to go in and asked Silvia to wait for the other nurses.

‘See?’ she said in a tone of contempt.

We had been talking about how Silvia did not want to stay in Portugal because she did not feel able to realize her full potential. In the chemist where she works, she claimed that she had no chances of progressing in her career because, even though she had acquired Portuguese nationality, she was still seen as a foreigner. Maybe back in Cape Verde she could open her own chemist.
After we had left the health centre, Silvia mentioned the nurse’s attitude again: ‘He was rather rude, don’t you think? But, you know, he was always like that. Last time he was unable to weigh Cláudia because she wouldn’t let him. I didn’t lose out by having the other nurses’.

It was impossible to know whether the nurse would have acted differently if Silvia had been a white Portuguese woman or if the young man had been in Silvia’s position. There were not only issues of race and gender to be considered here. What had gone through the nurse’s own mind whilst he hesitated? Was he contemplating the prospects of failing to weigh the little girl once more? I only had access to Silvia’s thoughts which suggested that she had interpreted his actions as ‘racist’. Yet, since I did not ask her directly, I could not be sure. So a few days later, I sent her a text and asked if she had felt that his behaviour could be seen as slightly racist. She replied as follows:

‘I don’t think it was due to racism. He is just like that, he is unpleasant, but I think it is just him, poor thing’.

‘I suggest you remove the words “black race”’

A paediatrician I met whilst accompanying a Cape Verdean mother to an appointment in a health centre expressed a keen interest to become involved on a voluntary basis in my work. Frustrated by the small number of babies referred to her by her colleagues – who were all general practitioners - she decided to formulate a formal request to her superiors to set aside one day a week for Cape Verdean infants. The paediatrician sent me a draft of the letter by email and told
me to feel free to suggest any amendments. I suggested eliminating the words ‘black race’ from the following text:

…The applicant is available, as a Paediatrician, for:
- Health evaluation related to possible pathologies prevalent in the black race and region of origin - Cape Verde…

I hesitated before sending the mail, not only for fear of offending her, but also because I had no idea what the current situation was regarding the relationship between ‘race’ and medical genetic research. I had some vague ideas about the IQ tests in the Bell Curve by Herrnstein and Murray (in Hacking 2005) and this in the end gave me the courage to send the mail.

‘They do their best to treat you correctly’

Diana invited me to accompany her to the immigration authorities for the renewal of her visa which had expired nearly a year ago. She was finding it difficult to explain, in Portuguese, to the satisfaction of the immigration authorities, the complex circumstances that had led to this situation. ‘I feel shy’ she explained to me, in Creole, ‘I can’t express everything that I feel. Portuguese is our official language, but there are certain words that may be different to theirs and they don’t understand what I want to say’.

Diana believed that if I accompanied her she would be treated better. ‘When you come with a white person, they think that the companion is an educated person and so they do their best to treat you correctly’. I had noted, on occasions, how officials tended to direct their words more to me than to the women concerned.
‘There is no need to involve a white person in our affairs’

The president of the Cape Verdean Association made this statement, in private, to Diana during my brief absence from his office. I had taken Diana there to see if she qualified for food aid distributed by the association. Diana only disclosed his words to me months later, after I had helped to resolve problems with renewing her visa: ‘Black people’s problems, we resolve amongst ourselves’.

The president had made no efforts to introduce me to the Cape Verdean mothers he knew and I had presumed, at first, it was because he was too busy. Diana’s confiding of the president’s words helped me to understand the first time he had actively attempted to obstruct my work, at a later date, when the president tried to prevent me from speaking at the Cape Verdean Christmas show.

During one of the intervals, it occurred to me to suggest to a mother that she ask the president if we could speak together about our group. She returned with a blank expression on her face, reporting that he had refused but had offered to allocate a time for the group to meet, at the association headquarters. (The group had its own meeting place in a home for single mothers where three Cape Verdean women lived and which had a playroom for the children). I decided to approach the president myself. Once again he refused on the grounds that last minute initiatives were unacceptable; they would delay the scheduled performances which were already behind time. I pointed out that nothing was happening at that moment and that it would not even take five minutes to talk. He still refused. I then replied that for me this was a golden opportunity for my research to meet more women and he finally agreed, telling me to stand by the
door and wait for his signal. He then disappeared. Time went by, nothing
happened. I approached a woman who was standing on the stage, wistfully
holding a microphone, waiting to present the next performance. I asked if we
could speak and she replied that the president had not given us authorization. I
assured her that he had changed his mind but she said that without speaking with
him, she could not override his decision. I stood waiting on the stage, with a Cape
Verdean mother until the president emerged, nodded his head in our direction and
we were handed the microphone and began to talk. Suddenly loud music came out
through the curtains behind us, drowning out our words. We popped our heads
back stage and the music was switched off. When we finished talking and walked
past the president, he said to me ‘You will have to pay me a thousand dollars for
this’.

‘Democracy works for Europeans, not for Africans’

One Saturday afternoon group meeting, we had arranged to exchange infants’
clothes. Whilst I approached Porto in my car, it was pouring with rain. I began to
receive text messages from mothers asking for lifts to the meeting. Not totally
familiar with Porto, I lost my way in the process of giving lifts, arriving over an
hour late, with a carful of mothers and their babies and two suitcases of clothes. I
noted that a Cape Verdean father and his Portuguese wife were attending for the
first time. Somewhat stressed by the whole situation, I emptied out the suitcases
and everyone started looking at the clothes. This set the tone for the rest of the
meeting after which it became difficult to hold our planned group discussion.
At the end of our uncharacteristically disorganised meeting, Tiago – the first father to participate in a meeting – sat down beside me and suggested that next time it might be better to leave the freebies until the end. Embarrassed by my shambolic ‘performance’, I showed him the open ended questionnaire I had prepared on possible activities for the group and had completely forgotten to hand out. He praised my initiative but then went on to say that if I wanted anything to happen at all then I would have to take more control over the whole process. Tiago told me that Africans are like sheep, they need a leader to follow and suggested that I set an agenda for the meeting and allocate tasks to people: ‘Democracy works for Europeans, not for Africans’. He asked me if I knew the president of the Cape Verdean Association and told me that his was a good example to follow.

“‘Sampadjudu’ is more beautiful’

I interviewed Sara on a bench in the park because she did not want me to go to her home where she had fallen out with her neighbours. They had all got on well before her partner had left her, pregnant, for another woman, with whom he was also expecting a baby. But Sara’s failure to tell them her ‘badiu’ husband had left was interpreted as an indication of the typical superiority complex of the ‘sampajudu’. Now, whenever she put foot outside of her shelter, her ‘badiu’ neighbours called her names. ‘You have lived in Cape Verde’, she remarked ‘so I don’t need to tell you about the rivalry that exists between sampajudu and badiu’.

‘Sampajudu’ is used to designate the Cape Verdeans originated from the windward islands and ‘Badiu’ to refer to the Cape Verdeans from the leeward
islands which have a stronger African influence. Sara, daughter of a *sampajudu* and *badiu*, born in the windward island of São Vicente, identified herself as *sampajudu* and went on to explain the rivalry to me in the following terms:

‘They are jealous because *sampajudu* is more beautiful. *Sampajudu* is white, blue, green eyes, thinner hair,…’

‘Oh, they say that *sampajudu* is more beautiful?’

‘No, *sampajudu* is more beautiful. I don’t know if you know but *Badiu* has thicker hair’.

The day following our interview, Sara sent me a text message claiming that she had had a row with a neighbour who had seen her with me and exclaimed ‘you’re friends with a white woman; I am going to make your life hell’.

**Making Sense of the Data**

How am I to make sense of these encounters with ‘race’? Firstly, they reveal the impossibility of ignoring the influence of race as a ‘category of practice’ (Brubaker 2004:31) upon the ways in which social actors make sense of themselves and of others. Secondly, they serve to question the notion that racist behaviour is synonymous with racist intent.

**Automatic Responses**

Let us consider the case of Sara which portrays the racial disharmony between *badiu* and *sampajudu* as a cultural given. Sara’s description of the inferiority of the *badiu* phenotype corroborates Meintel’s (1984:104) findings regarding the existence of ‘a value-laden hierarchy in which ‘white’ skin and features are
aesthetically superior to ‘black’ ones’. Yet, we know that relations with her badiu
neighbours, with whom she lived in close proximity, were agreeable until Sara’s
neighbours took offence by her refusal to share the misfortune of her private life
with them. Sara had failed to meet the unspoken social expectations of reciprocity
that may develop amidst neighbours living in precarious conditions in such close
proximity. It could thus be argued that the easiest way for Sara’s neighbours to
make sense of her silence and for Sara to understand their reactions was to take
recourse to racial stereotypes due to what Brubakaer calls the ‘hyperaccessibility’
of ethnic schemas for interpreting the social world which crowds out the
possibility of alternative interpretations. He suggests that it may be more fruitful
to view the deployment of racial stereotypes as a ‘quasi-automatic
unselfconsciouss process’ that is ‘triggered’ in particular contexts which may not
necessarily indicate a ‘need to feel superior to others’ (2004:72-78).

Desai’s poignant study of Asian masculinities in Britain provides a
fascinating example of how the ‘trigger’ for racialised interpretations is not to be
found in rational deployments of the concept of ‘race’ but rather in ‘embodied

Desai takes recourse to Bourdieu (1984) on bodily memory for analysing
the ways in which individual bodily gestures symbolize other gestures and
practices so that a simple ‘look’ may evoke a particular kind of masculine identity
that challenges the power of another man from a rival group and thus triggers an
act of violence between white and Bengali young men without even the need for
recourse to verbal conflict (1999:253). Desai argues that the analyst must be wary
of imputing too much substance to the racialised interpretations of social actors
for fear of missing what else is going on (1999:20).
Was ‘racial motivation’ the real cause of the association president’s words or is this another example of the hyperaccessibility of ‘ethnic competition schemas’ (Brubaker 2004:78)? Did my insistence upon being allowed to talk in public with my embodied presence upon the stage ‘trigger’ historical memories of colonial domination? How were gender relations at work here? Did my insistence also challenge the president’s masculinity?

Although I cannot answer all of these questions, more context of what else was going on may shed some light on the matter. The president made it no secret that his position constituted a spring board for the potential acquisition of a political post in his planned return to Cape Verde. In this respect, he could see me as an obstacle or potential rival by weakening his command over the Cape Verdean Diaspora in Porto, irrespective of whether I was ‘black’ or ‘white’. The experience of a young black Cape Verdean male student gives weight to this interpretation. Having written a dissertation for his degree on African associations in Porto, the student commented to me that he had given up on the president who had been of no help whatsoever and had only displayed interest in him as a potential source of labour. By separating out intentionality from effect, we may thus conclude that the president’s motivation for making his racist comments about whites was not due to pure racism.

How are we to interpret Tiago’s comments on democracy? Firstly, his words need to be understood within the context of Cape Verde’s political history.

Cape Verde, which gained independence from Portugal in 1975, is a young democracy. The first multi-party elections took place in 1991. I describe elsewhere (Challinor 2005) how the habitus of single party politics continued some time after the change of regime. The polarization of Cape Verdean
democracy, between the two major parties, continues to be the subject of debate.

In a conference given by Jorge Fonseca - a former independent candidate to the presidency of Cape Verde - in May 2009, in Porto, Fonseca testified to the ongoing political polarization of social life which he exemplified by stating that even at a wedding people are likely to ask you whether you are MPD\(^2\) or PAICV\(^3\). He added that if you claim to be independent, people will still insist that you have to say which party you are more inclined towards. His remarks were met with laughter in the audience and a young Cape Verdean student sitting next to me exclaimed ‘It’s true!’

Secondly, the specific circumstances of a disorganised meeting also provide a clue, bringing to mind the literature on the paradoxes inherent in the ideal of non-directive participatory processes (Cooke and Kothari 2001). The line between facilitation and manipulation is often difficult to draw. The motivation behind Tiago’s decision to give advice was to help the group to function more effectively: people need to be told what to do. The easiest way to get his message across to me that I shouldn’t be afraid of giving out orders was to argue that democracy was culturally inappropriate for Africans. The effects of his pep talk may nonetheless be seen as racist: construing Africans to be inferior to Europeans because they are incapable of taking initiatives on their own. His advice also set him apart from the average African, implicitly claiming a superior status for himself. Originally \textit{badiu}, he did not speak in Crioule to his young daughter, born to a Portuguese mother who expressed concern in the group of how to expose her daughter to Cape Verdean culture.

The automatisms examined by Brubaker and Desai help to understand how situations and events may unexpectedly become racialised in a wide range of
different contexts and warn against imputing too much intentionality when social actors take recourse to racist resources.

My impulse to suggest to the paediatrician that she remove the words ‘black race’ from her letter may also be seen as a quasi-automatic response by an anthropologist distrustful of the four lettered word.

I don’t know whether my advice was taken on board or not (neither of us commented upon the issue) but I have since learnt that medical research indicates that there may be grounds for talking of a ‘race-targeted’ as opposed to ‘race-based’ medicine (Hacking 2005).

Hacking’s claim that ‘race’ may be a valuable indicator of the potential effectiveness of a drug is worth consideration since it need not be interpreted as a sign of genetic determinism. In his thoughtful study (2002) on the dialectic relationship between culture and nature, Wade points out that the identification of predictable and consistent patterns – such as the higher blood pressure of African American men – is not only about biology but also about consistent patterns in the cultural context. Whilst this may come of no surprise to the anthropologist, naturally allergic to biological essentialisms, (forgive the provocative metaphor), Wade’s point is that not all biologists subscribe to them either and that there are currents within the discipline that examine how ‘human biology is constituted through social processes’ (Wade, 2002:115). The argument is taken further by Ingold who claims that differences between cultures ‘are themselves biological’ since ‘they emerge in the process of development of the human organism in its environment’ ([Ingold, 2000:379] cited in Wade, 2002:115).

Yet, if social actors are more than what culture and biology make of them, this is due to the human capacity to reflect upon society and nature.
The Reflexive Self

My focus on subjectivity signals an attempt to apprehend the emotional dimensions of lived experience but it is not intended as a narrow pseudo-psychological approach towards self-understanding. On the contrary, it aims to explore the ways in which the collective and the individual are intertwined.

Archer (2000:195, 10) defines emotions as ‘commentaries upon our concerns’, arguing that ‘we are who we are because of what we care about’. Choices have to be made, primary concerns need to be separated from secondary concerns and this is achieved through the never-ending ‘inner conversation’ which tests our commitments against our different emotional commentaries. It is the self that arbitrates upon the relative importance of different commitments, conditioned, but not determined, by the self’s involuntary placement in the world:

…the “I” may be distressed to learn that its “Me” is considered…to be of a disfavoured colour or gender, and that nothing “I” can immediately do will change matters…As a reflexive monitor, the “I” may squirm inwardly to distance itself from the disfavoured “Me”…(2000:264-265).

The ‘inner conversation’, part of the process of constructing one’s subjectivity, is inseparable from social structures and interactions. We have seen how the ‘I’ of José, Silvia and Diana had to deal with the ‘external definitions’ (Jenkins 1994) of their ‘Me’. Racial automatisms may thus be seen to be a part of the social structure that impacts upon subjectivities. In the words of Brubaker (2004:86):
The domain of the “mental” is not identical with the domain of the individual...the schemes of perception and interpretation through which the social world is experienced in racial, ethnic or national terms – is social in a double sense: *it is socially shared knowledge of social objects* (emphasis in original).

And yet this socially shared knowledge may also be disputed. In certain circumstances the self evaluates schemes of perception in terms of its primary and secondary concerns. Diana’s readiness to share with me the association president’s ‘dispensing of whites’, for example, suggests that the ‘ethnic competition schema’ that the president had invoked failed to engage her.

Joaquim’s statement ‘you have to show who you are’ demonstrates a conscious attempt to overcome the obstructions caused by external, racial categorizations. His words also reveal Joaquim’s personal identity at work - tending to its self-worth in society. Both Silvia and Diana testify to José’s experience of having to deal with the effects of external categorization upon their agency and sense of self. Diana claimed that the mere presence of a white person accompanying her guaranteed superior quality of assistance and Silvia believed she was unable to progress in her career because she was not originally Portuguese.

The changes in Silvia’s reactions to the nurse’s behaviour provide a window into the workings of the ‘internal conversation’ (Archer 2000), elucidating the dialectical relationship between external racialised categories and subjectivities. Silvia’s comment, ‘See (what I mean?)’ suggests that her initial perception of the nurse’s behaviour was conditioned by previous experiences in which she felt she had been treated unfairly for not being Portuguese. Her initial reaction to the nurse’s behaviour could thus be seen as an automatic racialised response to previous subjective experiences of ‘racism’. Silvia’s personal identity
was protesting against the lack of recognition of her self-worth in Portuguese
society. My questioning whether she felt the nurse’s behaviour had been racist
provided an opportunity to engage with her ‘inner conversation’ which led her to
change her mind.

Joaquim’s feeling that he posed a threat to his colleagues’ own sense of
self by challenging their ‘racial automatisms’ regarding the inferior capacities of
blacks may be interpreted in the light of Suleri’s (1992:6) analysis of how colonial
fear of its own cultural ignorance of India was fetishized into latent threats posed
by the ‘other’. She claims the ‘cultural exchanges’ between ruler and ruled
produced a counter-culture that blurred the dividing line between ‘self’ and
‘other’. Subscribing to the idea of an impenetrable ‘other’ helped to keep the
unsettling reality of these ‘imperial intimacies’ at bay. Upholding the myth of the
steadiness of imperial control consequently resulted in an anxious drive to
interpret the ‘other’ culture in the colonizers’ own terms (1992:7).

The attempts to render Cape Verdean culture readable in their own terms,
by enquiring how people dressed and whether Cape Verde had roads also
appeared to jar on Joaquim’s own sense of self, provoking indignation.

Mothers’ and babies’ names also produced reactions that invoked
‘impenetrable otherness’ (Suleri 1992). I observed several instances where doctors
and social workers commented upon mothers’ and babies’ ‘weird’ or ‘unusual’
names. Several mothers answered to one name in their relations with Cape
Verdean friends and to another name in more formal relations. One mother
commented how she had stopped calling her son by his first name because her
Portuguese housemates, in the single mothers’ home where she lived, had
complained that it was too difficult to pronounce. Now, she had become used to calling him by his second, typically Portuguese, name.

Reflexivity does not only signify the human capacity to reflect upon one’s place within the world, but also, the capacity to seek to transform it. ‘One of the greatest of human powers is that we can subjectively conceive of re-making society and ourselves’ (Archer 2000:315). Commenting upon the lack of acceptance, in Portuguese society, of mixed ‘race’ couples, a black Cape Verdean father, who was expecting a baby with a white Portuguese woman, told me, with a big smile on his face, ‘the world is going to become a more colourful place’.

Conclusion

Conducting research is like walking in a labyrinth of on-going experimentation. I have attempted to portray a sense of this through discussing my changing attitude towards the concept of ‘race’. Cashmore (2003:334) claims it is problematic to substitute ‘race’ for ‘ethnicity’ because the former constitutes an important idiom for combating racism which may also be disguised in ethnocentric claims to cultural rather than racial superiority. Distinguishing racist motivation from racist effects constitutes, nonetheless, a significant analytical nuance: if on the one hand it helps to see what else is happening, on the other hand it suggests that racist attitudes can change. Tiago’s Portuguese partner commented to me that in the small town where they lived near Porto, it was common to hear people say ‘He is black but he is a good person’. Is this pure racism or an indication of the ‘personal commentator’ questioning racial stereotypes in the face of lived experience?
Whatever their intention may be, these kinds of comments can still be hurtful. This is evident in the following edited extract from an interview I conducted with Pedro who worked in a restaurant to finance his master’s studies.

In response to my question if he liked living in Portugal, he had complained about the police’s tendency to stop black drivers.

Challinor: What about people in general? Do you feel they treat you well?
Pedro: Yes, I have Portuguese friends who treat me well but at work, there are others who come with an attitude, with a way of treating a black person that is different, but I usually notice immediately and then I speak up. I don’t keep it to myself because I can’t stand it.

Challinor: What do you normally say? Can you recall an incident?
Pedro: Well, where I work now there is a cleaner, she is so stupid that when the boss or one of the employees draws her attention to something that is not right she says ‘oh do you think I am a black woman?’ She sometimes says this in front of me! Once in the restaurant...we were all having lunch together...the cook’s food that day was not very good...and she commented that she was now cooking for black men and women. She said this in front of me! Those kinds of things really affect me. I had to let it out; there are some things which you just can’t accept.

Challinor: So what did you say?
Pedro: I told her she was just a cleaner, and that she is no better than any black woman anywhere and that no black women has the bad manners that she has because if she were educated she wouldn’t speak like that. Then she started to cry and apologized. This happened twice. She said it wasn’t intended for me and she didn’t mean to offend me. But what is this about? “You are not black. All my family is black. You don’t need to speak directly to me. It is enough to say black and you have already shocked me”. We used to be very good friends but then it all ended....There are lots of people who are scared and there are others who think that blacks are all the same, but in reality, this is not true because everyone is different. Each person has a completely different education, some people do good things, and others do bad things irrespective of whether they are black or white.

The inability of the Portuguese cleaner to understand why Pedro took offence and his refusal to accept her explanation demonstrate how the meanings of ‘race’ are not set in the structure of language but are activated through social interaction. The claims that her comments were not directed personally towards Pedro suggest that the cleaner was engaged in a non-reflexive process that drew on the racial stereotypes embedded in some popular Portuguese expressions.
Pedro’s attempts to make the cleaner aware of how her words offended him, by stating that all his family was black, reveal how, in this particular social interaction, he was not prepared to dissociate his personal identity from a collective black identity. He then went on to do this in his comments to me, on how blacks are not all the same. Despite their arbitrariness, the phenotypical markers of ‘race’, such as skin colour, function, in practice, as involuntary embodiments of identification with imagined collective identities that are embedded in (contested) colonial histories. When activated through social relations, they may correspond, in some circumstances and not in others, to a person’s inner sense of self and belonging.

Too close a focus, in anthropology, on individual choice, risks losing sight of how external racial categorizations force people against their will “into boxes of singular identities” (Sen 2006:174). Whether the motivation for doing this is racist or not, the effect may be the same.

To ask the Cape Verdean women, in my research, which picture they liked best, constituted an implicit request for them to choose the image they identified themselves with most; was I not guilty here of fomenting what Sen calls ‘the illusion of single identity’? Why should the women have to choose at all? To do so, in response to a research question, generates more questions regarding what their choices signify. For those who preferred the more African looking woman is this, for example, because she represents a more authentic identity, unsullied by western influence? The term *badiu* was originally used to refer to the slaves who escaped their Portuguese masters and went to live in remote parts of Santiago Island. If, on the one hand, they were seen as backward, on the other, they also represented Cape Verdean resistance to colonial rule. For those who preferred the
more European looking woman, was this because she represents progress or modernity? Wealthy black people in Cape Verde have been referred to, in their local communities as ‘white by money’ (Meintel 1984:98). Meintel’s study poignantly illustrates how the racial classification system in Cape Verde is made up of a range of categories, activated in any given moment, according to the context. Lobban (1995:147) claims that whether Cape Verdeans consider themselves to be Western Africans, easternmost West Indians or Southern Europeans “the answers depend on who is asked, when he or she is asked, who is asking, and what the motivation is for asking in the first place”. The questions and answers could take many routes.

An interesting route to take, for this discussion, might be to consider whether asking the women to choose between the two images evoked the supposed rivalry between sampajudu and badiu referred to above, limiting their perspectives. Sen (2006:178-9) argues that whilst ‘theorists see themselves as “discovering” a confrontation, not creating – or adding to –one’, theories do influence social thought and practice. It is for this reason that deconstructing racial identifications is a theoretical necessity even if their social effects cannot always be avoided. In my endeavour to delineate a field of enquiry - constituted by the category of “Cape Verdean women” - I too became implicated in processes that activated racial identifications. Perhaps, in the attempt to gain an ‘experience-near’ analysis of people’s subjectivities, ‘race’ should neither be actively pursued nor purposefully shunned.

If I had adopted such an attitude, when I presented the images to the Cape Verdean women, it would have probably led me to ask more open-ended questions, such as, ‘What do you think of these pictures?’ This could pave the

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way forward for discovering new insights into the multiple allegiances (Sen 2006) that impact upon Cape Verdan migrant subjectivities. Perhaps the women would have commented upon the young girl with the plaits in her hair and the stylish clothes of the more European looking woman which could have generated discussions on hairstyle and fashion preferences. Was the girl an older daughter? This could have led to talking about family and gender relations. Even if the category of ‘race’ had still been activated, this more open-ended approach would have provided a window into the different kinds of factors that influence the ways race functions as a category of practice. Personal relationships, for example, constitute a significant factor (Meintel 1984:98). Pedro’s comments below illustrate how embodied racial identifications may be played with, within the safe confines of friendship.

Pedro: There are people who use the word black (preto) as an ugly word, as a discriminating word and there are other cases where they don’t because I have friends who call me preto.
Challinor: And you are not offended?
Pedro: No, I’m not, because I know them.
Challinor: And you can call them “white”? “Hey, white man!”
Pedro: Exactly, that is what I do! With a man who is nearly sixty years old; he was in Angola, he was in Mozambique, he has been in Cape Verde, he was in the army...there we are playing, and it is different. But if the first time I see someone they call me preto, someone with whom I don’t have much intimacy or whom I don’t know very well, then I take this as an offence...

That Pedro should be able to develop a close friendship with a ‘white’ man who had fought in the Portuguese colonial wars suggests that he was free from the colonial chains of history with their blinding ‘illusion of destiny’ (Sen 2006). To question the freedom people may have to choose their identity, should not blind us to the relative freedom people may exercise ‘regarding what priority to give to the various identities’ (Sen 2006:38) that shape their individual subjectivities.
The Cape Verdeans in my study did not refer to themselves as an ethnic group. They classified themselves in terms of a national Cape Verdean identity often referring to themselves as ‘African immigrants’. Within the context of this study, ethnicity does not function as a category of practice and consequently serves as an analytical concept to investigate the processes through which collective social identities emerge. It keeps me at a comfortable disembodied distance from the subjects of my study. The same cannot be said of ‘race’. Its pervasiveness as a category of practice implicates researcher and researched alike. I am in agreement with Hirschman (2004: 410) that “Race without racism is an anachronism”. Yet, even as we dismiss it as an analytical concept, we should not rob it of its political potential to foment the kind of critical reflection – in the battle against racist ideas and behaviours, including those unmotivated by racist intent – that promotes ‘priority of reason’ and ‘freedom to think’ about the relationship between an individual’s personal and collective identities (Sen 2006:161, 170). This, in my opinion, is what Pedro was trying to do in his confrontations with his Portuguese work colleague. Seen from this perspective, the more we reason about the implications of using the four lettered word, the better.

Acknowledgements

Research funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) Portugal. I am grateful to: Kesha Fikes, Charmaine Crawford, Miguel Vale de Almeida, Jeremias Carvalho and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments; James Beard for showing me around Porto and Ana Araújo for producing the image of an African mother.

Notes
1 I thank Charmaine Crawford for drawing attention to this.

2 Movement for Democracy

3 African Party for the Independence of Cape Verde
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