Race Relations Research and Social Policy: A Review of
Some Recent Debates and Controversies

Policy Papers in Ethnic Relations No.18

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Introduction

What role does research on controversial 'social problems' play in the
development of social policy? To what extent can research on policy remain
autonomous from the immediate demands imposed by funding bodies and the
political agendas of policy makers and community groups? These questions are of
relevance to many areas of public policy research, and have been addressed in
relation to issues such as poverty, social welfare, family structures and urban
policy. Within the context of contemporary Britain, however, they have been
particularly important in controversies about the role of race relations
research and its impact on the development of policies and initiatives in this
field.

This issue has become particularly important over the past two decades. With the
racialisation of many aspects of social and economic policy there has been an
expansion of policy-oriented research on racial and ethnic relations. This has
led to a vigourous debate about the questions that should guide research,
funding processes, and the linkage of research programmes to policy makers and
community groups. Additionally, it has become all too clear that it is
impossible to isolate the conduct of research on racial issues from the wider
social and political context within which it takes place.

In this paper I want to explore some of the central problems which have arisen
in policy analysis in this field. My focus will be comparative, in that I will
draw on some aspects of debates about race related issues in the United States.
But my main concern is to analyse recent debates in Britain, and their impact on
the research process. Given the limited coverage of this paper I will not
outline in any detail an alternative analytical framework, but I will look at
ways in which critical policy analysis can help us to understand how racial
equality can be achieved.

The Politics of Race Relations Research

Research on race relations policies in British society has a long history.
Attention has been given to a wide variety of issues: ranging from immigration
legislation, race relations policies, central government intervention and local
government policies. By the very nature of research on racial and related issues
it has always given rise to vociferous academic and political debate. During the
last decade a lengthy debate has taken place about the ethics and politics of
research on race relations (Solomos, 1986 and 1988). There is no need to retrace
all aspects of this debate, but by way of a summary we can say that at least
four questions have been at the centre of this debate: (i) the definition of the
focus of study in the field of race relations; (ii) the interrelationship
between research and policy; (iii) the issue of who carries out the research and
who controls it; (iv) the impact of policy-oriented research on racial
inequality in British society.

All these questions relate in one way or another to the problem of how race
relations has been defined as a field of study for policy purposes. This is an
issue much debated during the Black Power period in United States, when black
militants and academics questioned the reasons why academic research was being
done, the relation of such research to governmental policy and the state, and
the place of white social scientists in such research (Ladner, 1973; Staples,
1974). In the British context this debate was refracted in the early seventies
through the struggle at the Institute of Race Relations and by the development
of fundamental criticisms of race relations research in radical black journals
such as Race Today, Race and Class, the Black Liberator and many others
(Mullard, 1985). More recently the focus of the criticisms has been on the
objectives which research on race should have, e.g. whether the main focus
should be on minority communities and their cultural and family networks, or on

the institutions of white racism (Rex, 1981; Cashmore and Troyna, 1981; Lawrence, 1982).

In addition the politicisation of race over the last two decades has raised a number a complex ethical and political dilemmas which confront any researcher working in this field, which are often somewhat simply put in the form of the following question: "whose side are you on"? Underlying this somewhat simplistic question, however, are a number of fundamental dilemmas about:
(a)   the organisation and funding of research on racial and related issues;
(b)   the focus of research, and the process by which decisions about what kind of research is done are arrived at;
(c)   the usages of race relations research, particularly by policy makers, governmental agencies and the media;
(d)   the relation between the researchers and the communities, groups or institutions which are the object of research.

I want to make a few initial comments about each of these issues, before moving on to the broader concerns of this paper.
Organisation and Funding: The issue of the ways in which race relations research is organised in governmental departments, policy think tanks and academic institutions has proved to be a major source of controversy over the past two decades. From the debate in the early 1970s about the role of the Institute of Race Relations to more recent controversies, the question of the location and control of research has been a central theme in academic and political debates. In particular questions have been raised about the ways in which research projects on some issues are funded while others are not, the reasons and possible biases on which such decisions about funding are based and the consequences of any bias for the ways in which race relations is constructed as a field of study.

Focus of Research: One important outcome of these debates is that it has become difficult to even think of doing research on race relations from what is sometimes called a value-free perspective, since they have emphasised the need to assess the values on which research is based and the political context within which it takes place.

A number of critics of the dominant trends in race relations research have shown, for example, how researchers have tended to look in some detail at the social, cultural and religious values of minority communities, while underplaying or sometimes ignoring the ways in which such social relations are structured through and by racism (CCCS Race and Politics Group, 1982; Gilroy, 1987). According to one writer researchers have tended to define their objects of research in a political vacuum or to 'actually study black communities and groups in ways which distort and dehumanise their experiences' (Stubbs, 1988: 43).

Usages of Research: The possible uses to which research findings can be put has been another major source of concern. This field of research has become so intensely politicised over the last two decades that the mere act of carrying out research on race relations necessarily involves questions relevant to policy makers or other interested bodies. Thus whatever the values and beliefs of the researcher or research institute it is likely that quite disparate beliefs about research findings may gain currency outside the immediate research environment. Such beliefs may result in political interventions which go against the values of the researchers themselves, but help governments and other institutions to legitimise their policies (Edelman, 1971)

The Research Context: Perhaps the most controversial concern in recent debates about race relations research has been the issue of how researchers relate to the communities or organisations that they research or that they come into contact with in particular settings. In particular debate has focused on the

following two questions: Should researchers be in some way accountable to the communities, groups or organisations that they are researching? Should they be responsive to pressures from community and other groups relating to the focus of their research?

These and other questions have become an important theme of current debates about the conduct of race relations research. I shall return to them briefly, when I examine some of the substantive issues in recent debates, but for the moment I would like to look briefly at some aspects of the debate about race relations research in the United States.

American Experience

Although it is difficult to compare the American situation directly with the British, aspects of the American debates about race relations research do connect up with some of the issues discussed above. In this sense reference to these debates may help to clarify issues which are currently the focus of debate in both countries.

During the 1960s and 1970s a wide ranging debate took place in the United States about the ethics and politics of research on racial questions. The experience of Lee Rainwater and David Pittman during their research on poverty and poor blacks in American cities is worth recalling in this context. Pointing to the inherently complex ethical and power issues involved in researching powerless groups, they argue that the most important of these issues are the researcher's relationship to the communities that are being researched, problems of sponsorship and confidentiality, and potential use or misuse of research findings for questionable or unintended political and policy objectives. Speaking particularly about the last issue they argue:

Concern for the effect of findings on public issues sensitised one to the question of how research results will be interpreted by others, and to his responsibility to anticipate probable misuse, and from this anticipation to counteract the possibility of misuse. That is, though we do not feel a researcher must avoid telling the truth because it may hurt a group (problems of confidentiality aside) we do believe that he must take this possibility into account in presenting his findings and make every reasonable effort to deny weapons to potential misusers (Rainwater and Pittman, 1967: 361-362).

Giving specific examples of types of research which could be misused the authors refer to research on black family systems, subcultural lifestyles among young blacks, crime and delinquency in the ghettoes, and on mental health problems. Similar problems were highlighted by other American researchers during this period, particularly in the context of the political responses to urban unrest (Blauner and Wellman, 1973; Edelman, 1971; Murray, 1973).

Perhaps a more familiar example, given the international notoriety which it achieved, is the controversy that has raged since the mid-1960s over the arguments of the Moynihan report on the black family in the USA, and its conception of the weaknesses of the black family structure as an explanation for the social problems faced by blacks in relation to poor housing, employment, bad schools, and poverty (Rainwater and Yancey, 1967).

What is particularly interesting about the controversy over the Moynihan report, apart from its immediate and subsequent academic and political fallout, is the way in which it showed quite clearly that (a) whatever the academic arguments in favour of doing a specific piece of research it is politically naive and potentially dangerous to see research as autonomous from its contextual political environment, and (b) that governments and other interested groups necessarily take a strong role and have a stake in academic research about so-called 'deviant' groups in society. In addition it highlighted the ways in which

reform oriented strategies, which are ostensibly premised on the idea of 'helping' the poor and the powerless, can also become another strategy for extending government control and institutional power over such groups. It is also an interesting example of how the media, policy makers and academics, when singling out black people for attention or special study, often concentrate on family structure rather than on other aspects of black life, particularly those that touch upon the dominant power structures or economic institutions (Edelman, 1971).

More recent American studies refer to these and related issues, and emphasise the ways in which research on 'social problems' in black and other poor communities is liable to be used by government or other bodies in ways which do not necessarily 'help' the people with which it is concerned, and the ways in which research may help popularise myths about such communities and give them a 'scientific' gloss. One way in which this may happen is referred to by Murray when he talks about 'mythology of black pathology' (Murray, 1973), while another is popularly referred to by the term 'blaming the victim'. The pathological approach tends to see black and other poor communities as suffering from cultural and family handicaps which in turn help to create material conditions which help reproduce poverty and inequality (Staples, 1976). The 'blaming the victim' approach, on the other hand, sees such groups as victims of their circumstances and as suffering from a culture of poverty which unwittingly reproduces their own troubles (Ryan, 1976).

Political and Ethical Issues

This controversy is particularly relevant because of the way in which it connects up with recent critiques of race research in Britain. A number of black and white academics and researchers have pointed to the ways in which some policy oriented race relations research has tended to reproduce negative images of the black family, of the life-styles of black communities and of particular social categories, such as black youth (Solomos, 1988). Others have pointed to the narrow focus of policy oriented researchers on decision making processes, and the relative neglect of the wider institutional structures of racism in British society (Miles, 1982).

Clearly not all the ethical and political issues discussed in the American context can be said to have a direct purchase on the British situation. There is a remarkable similarity, however, between the terms of the debate that took place in the U.S. in the aftermath of civil rights movement and the 1960s riots, and the debate that has developed in Britain over the last decade or so. This becomes particularly clear if one looks at the ways in which debate has increasingly focused on such issues as cultural pathology and 'blaming the victim', on the organisation of research and on the relationship between researchers and the black communities.

The dominant questions in recent British debates have been : What is race relations research for? What impact has research had on the development of policies to tackle the root causes of racism? How can research help to focus debate on ways to tackle the roots of racism and racial inequality? There have been three main sets of responses to these questions.

The first type of response is one which emphasises the need for research to be seen as autonomous from ideological and political commitments, or at best as having only a tangential link with existing political debates about racism. This school of thought is one with which a number of the early major race relations researchers have expressed some kind of sympathy (Banton, 1985). Another version of this approach does not eschew the need to look at the political or policy aspects of race relations, but argues that the only way to influence legislative and administrative branches of government is not through political analysis but through the presentation of factual statistical information about discrimination

in such areas as housing, employment, social services, etc. This approach is particularly associated with the work of the Policy Studies Institute (Smith, 1977; Brown, 1984). The end result of this approach may be said to be an emphasis on race research as either a neutral academic discipline or uncommitted policy research which aims to present policy makers with the facts on which they could base new policy initiatives.

The second response is more difficult to categorise. It has been most clearly articulated by John Rex in a number of his works since the early seventies (Rex, 1973 and 1981; Rex and Tomlinson, 1979). Taking his starting point from Myrdal's important discussion of how American research on race relations tended to be based on certain taken-for-granted assumptions and untestable hypotheses, Rex, argues that similar biases can be found in much of the race relations literature in Britain (Rex and Tomlinson, 1979: Appendix 1). He notes, for example, the tendency in the literature to assume that various inadequacies in the culture or family life of West Indian and Asian immigrants are responsible for social problems brought about by racism, unemployment, low wages, menial occupations, poor housing and bad schools. While accepting, however, the reality of this tendency to 'blame the victims', he argues forcefully against the reduction of social science research on race to the demands of special interests, whether it be those of the policy makers or those of the black communities or political activists themselves. The burden of Rex's position is thus to question the terms of debate posed by the question 'whose side are you on?' and introduce what he sees as an intermediary position which is based on the autonomy critical social science research.

In the context of the debate at the Institute of Race Relations during the early seventies he provided an important statement of his position:

I believe that we can do far more for the people of Notting Hill or Handsworth by setting their problem within a wider context of sociological theory that we can by ad-hoc strategies which may involve mock heroics but which will be doomed to failure. For this reason there is a role of the community sponsored race relations researcher. There is also a need for people to man the barricades. And, in between, and no more or less important, there is a need for educators bringing to bear on experience the fruits of theoretical reflection and on theory the fruits of political experience (1973: 487).

This is a position which Rex has recently restated in a response to some criticisms of his work, which argued that there are inherent contradictions in trying to maintain a position for critical social science research that is distinct from policy oriented or community oriented research (1981: 1-10). Arguing forcefully against both a neutral study of the 'facts' of racial disadvantage and a politically committed view of race relations he maintains, that despite the increased politicisation of race research over the last decade or so, there is still room of independent research which aims to get beyond the everyday appearances to the factors which have produced and sustain forms of racial discrimination.

The third type of response cannot easily be pinned down to academic arguments as such, since its adherents argue for the impossibility of divorcing the research process from the political context of doing research on oppressed racial minorities. Reminiscent as it is of the arguments that raged through American sociology during the 1960s and 1970s (Ladner, 1973: Staples, 1976), the impact of this response on researchers in Britain has been minimal until the last few years. The view that it was necessary to make research more politically oriented towards, and linked to the black communities and their organisations, gained a wide currency among sections of the black intelligentsia in the aftermath of the dispute at the Institute of Race Relations (Mullard, 1985). Increasing opposition to research and researchers was reported during the 1970s (Rex and Tomlinson, 1979). This was partly because of the increasing involvement of

government bodies in the funding and carrying out of race relations research, which helped to increase suspicion about the motives behind research.

But the view that research on racial issues could not be seen as separate from the political struggles surrounding this issue remained marginal in much of the race relations literature. It became identified either as a view held by radical black intellectuals or community leaders or simply as a view supported by politically committed Marxists or leftists. But despite its marginalisation in the context of academic debates it became a popular view in journals such as Race and Class and Race Today, and was reinforced by the relative paucity of community involvement in research and the relative absence of black research workers.

Over the last few years, however, fundamental objections to the orientation of research on race have been voiced within academic debates (CCCS Race and Politics Group, 1982; Miles, 1982) and by a number of radical writers and activists who have voiced strong objections to the ways in which research has been carried out on black communities.

Errol Lawrence's intervention, which formed part of The Empire Strikes Back, a collective volume produced by the Race and Politics Group of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, has attracted much attention. This is partly because of the forcefulness with which he connects certain sociological studies of black communities with common sense ideologies of race, which he argues see blacks as the cause of 'problems' or as culturally deprived and socially inadequate. But it is also because he links the popular images of black communities as suffering from communal helplessness and cultural handicap to the tendency of researchers to become preoccupied by the apparent social relations within black communal lifestyles at the expense of detailed studies of the personal and institutional mechanisms through which racism operates. He argues that an exaggerated emphasis on factors of this sort only shifts attention from racism, and shifts the problems of race relations onto the black communities as individuals or as collectivities. He gives as examples the tendency to compare the West Indian family structure negatively with the white family structure, the view of young Asians as 'caught between two cultures', the preoccupation with the supposed 'identity crisis' which afflicts second generation black youth, and the view of black ghetto life as pathogenic (Lawrence, 1982: 134-5).

According to Lawrence this leads to the marginalising the importance of racism in structuring the obstacles faced by blacks in British society, leading to 'blaming the victim' types of ideological images. In addition, Lawrence argues, the images presented of black communities tend to be ones which see them as passive, with little or no account taken of their capacities to respond positively and defensively to their historical experience of racism, either as individuals or collectively (Lawrence 1982, pp. 100-106 and 116).
A number of responses to Lawrence's argument have rejected specific aspects of his critique of the sociology of race as either over-generalised or misdirected, while others have accepted the relevance of some of his criticisms while arguing that they need more clarification and verification. John Rex, for example, has responded by arguing that while it may be true that some research is based on assumptions which take for granted inadequacies on the part of West Indian and Asian communities, it is incorrect to label the mainstream of sociological research on race or his own works as adopting a 'blaming the victim' approach (Rex, 1981). While accepting the dangers of ethnocentric and pseudo-psychological explanations of the attitudes of black communities or of their cultural values, he rejects the view that such research inevitably falls into the trap of seeing blacks as inadequate and as living in a 'culture of poverty' which reduces them to passivity (Rex, 1981a). Ernest Cashmore and Barry Troyna have also responded to Lawrence's critique, arguing that while there are obvious dangers involved in studying black people rather than racism, their own work

along with other studies, is unfairly criticised as no looking at the ways in which racism structures the lives of black people (Cashmore and Troyna, 1981).

The complexities of this debate require a more detailed analysis, beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the above summary of some of the central aspects of recent contributions should be enough to indicate that the question of what kind of research should be done on racial issues, and by whom is far from being adequately resolved.

The forcefulness with which the debate over the arguments of Lawrence and other contributors to The Empire Strikes Back has been conducted may also be read, partly at least, as a reflection of increasing doubts over the usefulness or appropriateness of research on race as a means of improving the social and economic inequalities experienced by black communities (Williams, 1987). Certainly, the seeming failure of research to help to bring about substantial changes in racial discrimination and inequality has tended to undermine the claims of researchers that their work can help to improve the life chances of black communities.

But the heated nature of recent debates is also the result of a degree of mistrust about the motives of largely white and distant academic research teams doing research about race relations in British society, often without close consultation with the communities or organisations which have everyday experience of the issues they are researching. An underlying, though little discussed, theme in recent debates therefore has been the question of whether white and black researchers are equally capable of doing research on racial issues. This theme has tended to be avoided in public discussion, or at best to be referred to in passing. But it remains an undercurrent in public debates about the conduct of race relations research.

Interestingly enough, although Lawrence critique was partly aimed at the work of white sociologists such as Rex and Cashmore, another of the authors he criticised was the black sociologist Ken Pryce. Pryce carried out an ethnographic study of a black community in Bristol, which concentrated particularly on the delineation of different subcultural life styles within this community and on sensitive issues about crime, drugs and prostitution (Pryce, 1979). For Lawrence this focus produced a study which could be easily misused to support stereotypical images of black communities, and which ignored the wider socio-political context of racism in British society.

No doubt the heated nature of these exchanges has produced a very stunted and personalised debate, and one which seems to have had only a minor impact on the everyday conduct of research work. This is partly because there is a tendency to see criticisms of existing research as ideologically loaded and to treat them as having little value in guiding research on the ground. The problem with such a response is that while it is reasonable to see research as relatively autonomous from immediate political considerations, it is implausible to think that research on race within the current political climate can be neutral in terms of its policy implications.

Moreover the feeling that such research is too dominated by white institutions and values, and concentrates on issues which are policy relevant rather than relevant to the interests of the black minorities, is not a priori one which can be dismissed as value laden. At a certain level it can be see as an reaction against the 'colonial' image of race research, in the sense that such research inevitably gets caught up in the relationship between white institutional power and black communities (Blauner and Wellman, 1973). The fact that much of the recent research on race issues has been premised on the need to take action to overcome racism has not necessarily convinced those sections of the black communities that have been critical of research on their 'problems' that there

is any more likelihood that public policy makers will take the question of racism any more seriously (Gilroy, 1987).

Research for Policy or Policy Analysis?

We have argued above that research on racial issues is not necessarily to be seen as directly determined by political priorities or the interests of particular groups. But at the same time it cannot be divorced from the social reality in which it is carried out, including its relations of power based on economic, class, racial and other social divisions. In this sense the challenge of doing critical research on the utilisation of race in political debates and policy-making must be to draw out the public and hidden agendas on which policies are based, analyse their impact on minority communities, and make explicit the symbolic and real attainments of policy changes.

Research which takes as given the value free nature of policies on race may in the long-term be seen as reproducing assumptions about race which actually harm the interests of minority communities. Part of the agenda of doing research on the politics of racism must therefore be a continual process of self-critical awareness that research can have both intended and unintended political consequences.

It is possible to combine a committed research view of racial ideologies and racism with a critical political perspective. In this sense researchers can address questions that have a direct purchase on political action. It does not follow from this, however, that researchers can be seen as speaking for or representing the views of communities which suffer from racism in a direct sense. Such a perspective would be tantamount to saying that the researcher can become a kind of representative of the oppressed or speak for them. There is much value in the critique of the separation of race relations research from the politics of anti-racism, and in the call made by political activists for researchers to help change the current situation rather than just study it. But it is a huge step to take from accepting the need for committed research to saying that researchers can actually 'speak' for minorities.

Such an assumption is problematic on a number of grounds, not least because there is no way by which a researcher can assume that all the black communities have one voice or interest, or that it is possible to speak for such communities as though they could not speak or struggle for themselves. This is not to say that research should not speak to current political and policy debates, or that it is indeed feasible to stay out of controversial issue areas. Indeed, a vital part of critical research on local and central state policies must be addressed to those debates and processes which link policy outputs to actual political interests and pressures.

What is at issue, however, is whether research evidence can be used to establish the 'interests' of social groups or classes or their 'needs'. Such an assumption is not easy to sustain, since in practice researchers are unlikely to come up with exactly the same findings and to agree on what should be done to change the policy agenda. A commitment to research which adheres to anti-racism as a political objective, does not require that researchers should all adhere to one analytical framework. Indeed, it is essential to recognise that little can be achieved by promoting a uniform research strategy which does not consider certain issues as legitimate subjects for research. This is likely to result in a partial and inadequate discussion of the complex variety of issues which are covered by the term race relations.

In this sense, a commitment to using research to promote social change in this field requires more open debate about the focus of research, a plurality of funding sources and sponsors of research rather than reliance on one or two bodies, consultation with interested groups or individuals and a clearer awareness of the linkages between politics and research.

Conclusion

It is difficult not to reach the conclusion that most ethical and political problems, which have been a consistent feature of debates among those involved in doing race relations research for the last twenty years, have defied resolution. At best they may have been clarified, yet their very persistence is indicative of a possible insolubility with the existing terms of reference.

For example, the question what is race relations research for? cannot be answered simply, since it inevitably involves some consideration about research interests, funding, publication, political climate and political judgement. Until such questions become part of the theoretical and research agenda of those doing research on race it is unlikely that the suspicion of research and the questioning of its relevance to the struggle against racism will end. For this reason alone, it is incumbent on researchers to make public the methods, values, and assumptions on which their work is based.

There are, no doubt, many more theoretical and political problems involved in doing research on race, which need to be discussed openly. But it is unlikely that all of these issues can be resolved easily. On a number of questions there is a need for more critical discussion. For example: What is meant by 'anti-racist research' or research which is intended to promote racial equality? In what sense is it different from other types of research? Is it simply a question of who carries out the research, the research objectives and the sponsors of the research? Answers to all these questions are unlikely to prove easy, but there is a need to encourage more open public debate about them.

In the final analysis, however, it may be that the ethical and political problems involved in studying race will only be resolved when critical research is shown to have made its contribution to understanding the origins and reproduction of racist structures and processes, and to have helped shape policies and political strategies which help undermine racist ideologies and racialist practices.

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