on_education
Journal for Research and Debate

how racism works – and how it doesn't work: why a totalizing understanding of racism is insufficient for theory and research

Albert Scherr

This article calls for a differentiated discussion of different forms of discrimination and racism. The reason for this is that a totalizing understanding of racism, which claims a comprehensive racist structuring of society, fails to recognize the complexity and contradictory nature of social conditions and relations. In connection with this, the question must be raised whether a critique of racism that claims for itself the position of a radical critique of contemporary societies is more appropriately to be understood as an expression of a social transformation in which racism is no longer suitable as an ideological basis for the production and legitimation of economic inequalities and political power relations.

Keywords: discrimination, hierarchies, human rights, inequalities, racism

Current political and scientific controversies about racism are often conducted as disputes in which clear positions are demanded, as if it were about religious confessions, or as if they were governed by a "logic of the trial" (Wacquant, 1997, p. 222), which aims at identifying culprits and victims. Accordingly, participants are expected to make clear commitments and provide straightforward answers to the question of whether they subscribe to the position of a radical critique of racism, which assumes that racism is a deeply embedded structure of society in which we are all entangled. Doubts and critical inquiries about it are seen as expressions of denial and repulsion. This occasionally combines with a simplistic division of society into privileged whites and disadvantaged blacks or people of colour, as well as the insinuation that "both white elites (materially) and working-class (whites), large segments of society, have little incentive to eradicate" racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 9).

Whether such definiteness and simplifications are suitable as a basis for promising political activism is not to be discussed here. However, they are certainly not an adequate basis for scientific research, which, also in the case of racism, should be interested in achieving a differentiated understanding of complex, dynamic and inherently contradictory social structures, conditions, and dynamics. Therefore, our task is to transform the political and moral energies that motivate us to engage against racism into good science, rather than replacing scientific principles with a militant gesture. To this end, it is not helpful to start from the assumption of an overall racist-structured society as a dogmatic presupposition and to narrow the empirical research to a search for evidence for what has been assumed to be valid. Rather, it is necessary to investigate whether and in which social contexts racist classifications are used and in what way; what their function, scope and effects are; and which counterforces and resistances this provokes. Understanding contemporary racism requires a

dialectical perspective that looks at racism as an object of social conflicts, not as a defining structure free of contradictions. Such a dialectical perspective is central to an understanding of pedagogy that does not misunderstand education as instructing ignorant and morally incompetent individuals, but rather recognizes their experiences and their moral convictions as important starting points for educational processes.

What is the point of racism?

If one follows the optimistic narratives inscribed in the self-image of modern western societies in the Global North, then racism represents a historical phenomenon that has largely been overcome. In contrast, critical scholarship on racism has asserted well-reasoned doubts about this narrative, pointing to continuities between colonialism, imperialism, and contemporary global inequalities as well as to the emergence of contemporary intra-societal inequalities between citizens and migrants, majority and minorities. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that since the end of the Second World War a fundamental change has taken place that is consequential for an analysis and critique of contemporary forms of racism, their political, economic and ideological contexts.

An important starting point for a contemporary discussion of racism is therefore the observation that – not least as a result of the defeat of German fascism, the anti-colonial liberation movements, the civil rights movement in the USA and the overcoming of the apartheid regime in South Africa – a moral and intellectual bankruptcy of traditional racial ideologies can be observed, and a gradual overcoming of racism as the official basis of state policy has taken place. This corresponds with the development of a human rights discourse that, as early as 1948, led to a codification of the ban on racial discrimination as a core principle in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has been of considerable importance as a point of reference for anti-colonial liberation movements since the 1950s. Since the second half of the 1970s, the assertion of human rights as a normative basis for politics has gained importance in the United States, and later in the European Union. As a consequence, an explicit, ideologically based racism can no longer be espoused by state policies that claim to be in accordance with the principles of international law. Rather, combating and overcoming racism is a declared program of state policy in the democratically constituted societies of the Global North, i.e., the societies that historically justified their global claims to supremacy on the basis of racist ideologies and that structured internal social power relations in a racist way. Even protagonists of reactionary countermovements usually do not call themselves racists anymore, and when they do so, they take a position by which they perform a provocative break with a hegemonic consensus.

Against the background of this briefly outlined development, there are no simple and clear answers to the questions of whether and in what way racism is currently still a phenomenon anchored in the structure of society, or "only" a relic of past times with significant consequences. In this regard, George M. Fredrickson (2011, p. 202), in his important study on the history of racism, formulates the assessment that contemporary capitalism "no longer draws a line between skin colours because it relies on consumers and employees of every skin colour," and that global relations of inequality also no longer rely on "active racism" for their maintenance and legitimation. Other theorists of racism, such as Étienne Balibar (1990, p. 36), also raise the question of whether there is a shift in the basis of legitimacy of inequality and power relations toward a "neo-racism" characterized by a "techno-political selection of individuals" based on criteria of performance and utility. This demands us to reflect on the question of whether under the conditions of globalized capitalism, traditional racist classifications and hierarchies are replaced by a radicalized meritocratic logic of selection and

hierarchization, for which differences of biological descent, ethnicity or gender are becoming irrelevant.

There is certainly a variety of developments that can be understood as evidence for this assessment. For example, the promotion of diversity and the rejection of racism are declared programs of leading international companies, and the strengthening and further development of measures against racism is an objective of state policy which, at least in Germany, is nowadays supported with considerable financial resources. Prohibitions of racial discrimination are enshrined as positive law in European law and national legislations. An element of this development is the effort to mainstream human rights education and the critique of racism in school education and teacher training.
Pedagogy and social work can be conceptualized as attempts to take up and strengthen anti-racist motivations and, on this basis, to provide knowledge and competencies that enable the strengthening and further development of racism-critical practices.

Racism as a form of discrimination

The meritocratic principle of selection and positioning according to criteria of ability and willingness to perform does not provide a sufficient solution to this problem, if only because, as Alfred Schütz (1957/2011, p. 225) classically argued, there are always more people capable of occupying privileged positions than there are privileged positions available. Moreover, methods of determining performance, e.g., school-based grading or company assessments, are only capable of making valid statements about individual performance to a limited extent. Therefore, different forms of discrimination – i.e., the categorical classification of people into collectives with supposedly different characteristics, abilities, and needs by means of supposedly sharply defined distinctions – represent a hardly dispensable answer to the question of how positional assignments in social hierarchies can be accomplished and justified (Scherr, 2017; Tilly, 1999). They are useful if they make it possible to base positional assignments and their justification on socially shared beliefs about the allegedly given characteristics of the members of a collective and thus to present them as appropriate and legitimate.

If racism is viewed against this background as a form of discrimination, this means firstly that racism is not the ultimate cause of socio-economic inequalities and power relations, but "only" a mode of assigning positions and legitimizing them. Secondly, this also means that racism cannot be adequately understood as an ahistorical universal classification system, but only in its concrete manifestations in the context of respective relations of inequalities and power relations. Thirdly, it follows that racism can be replaced by other forms of discrimination, as long as they are capable of taking over the function of positional allocation and legitimization in relation to socio-economic inequalities and power relations.

This can be seen, for example, in the fact that German law with regard to immigration and the acquisition of citizenship does not require reference to racist and ethnic constructions in order to justify privileges and disadvantages. For this purpose, it is sufficient to presuppose the right of nation-states to distinguish in a discriminatory manner between citizens and foreigners and to shape immigration policy on the basis of assumptions about the economic and political interests of the nation. The fact that discrimination by means of the distinction between citizens and foreigners can be charged with racist elements, as is undoubtedly the case in the discourse of the extreme right, does not mean that it is, in terms of its mode of operation and ideological basis, intrinsically racist.

The nexus of global inequalities, nation-statehood, and citizenship is a problem in its own right, not only when belonging to the nation is defined by racist criteria. A generalized use of the concept of racism that levels such distinctions is not helpful for scientific research.

Fourthly, it must be considered that modern societies, which are differentiated in complex ways, are not dependent on finding a single solution to the problem of assigning and legitimizing social positions that is binding for all domains of society. Entitlement to participate and the assignment of positions are decided in social subsystems and their organizations according to their own criteria. The only legally anchored and therefore binding rule for all organizations (in the economic system, the educational system, the health-care system, the legal system, the mass media, professional sport, etc.) is the prohibition of obvious discrimination. This means, as scientific studies in Germany and other countries have proven, that ethno-racial attributions can be used in schools to resolve decision-making uncertainty in the transition to secondary schools, for example, by using expectations of lack of parental support to recommend a lower track to avoid overstraining. Demonstrably, ethno-racial attributions in workplaces can also negatively influence decisions if this leads to the assumption of an inadequate fit with the workplace culture. Relevant research has pointed to these and other forms of institutional discrimination. However, this does not mean that these are actually practiced in all schools and companies, and everywhere in the same way. Therefore, it is necessary to empirically investigate whether and, if so, in what way racist distinctions are used or not in respective contexts, what forms of criticism and resistance this provokes, and what changes take place as a result.

For the practice of pedagogy, it is in this respect an important and worthwhile endeavour to design pedagogical institutions (i.e., schools, youth work, universities) in such a way that experiences of belonging, recognition and equality are made possible regardless of social and geographical origin, skin colour, ethnicity, religion and gender. Experiences of equal belonging and mutual recognition as individuals are a highly important basis on which human rights education and criticism of racism can start. Because here, too, instruction is no substitute for experience (Scherr, 2005).

If one views racism as a contextually situated phenomenon in this way, then it is true – and this represents a considerable challenge for international scholarly discourse – that those considerable differences between domains within societies, but also between national societies, and between regions within nation states too, must be considered. Racism exists in different forms, whose emergence and function can only be understood within each concrete context. Therefore, international research requires on the one hand a transmission of knowledge about different societal conditions. On the other hand, we have to engage with the question of whether terms and concepts developed in response to conditions in a particular societal context are appropriate and sufficient as a basis for analyses of forms of racism in other contexts. For example, it is questionable whether the understanding of race and racism as developed in the United States, and therefore closely related to the specific entanglement of racism and slavery and the reverberations of a politics of segregation, is suitable as a general framing for an analysis of structures and practices of discrimination and racism. For it can be quite misleading to analyse the German, French or Spanish reality, or even the situation in China or India, on the basis of concepts which are unreflectively based on an understanding of race and racism developed in the US-American context.

National societies as contexts

The fact that racist classifications, for example, are differently pronounced in the USA than in

Germany, or in Kosovo than in France, and that they have in Alabama a different meaning as a principle of ordering social relations in all areas of everyday life than in Seattle, is obvious and an evident result of the work stays and travels which have led me to these regions. This can be substantiated by numerous observations and descriptions. In the same way, an academic of African origin in Germany, for example, would reasonably be advised to expect everyday racism in a different way in Cottbus or Chemnitz than in Freiburg or Frankfurt.

To illustrate this, I would like to briefly describe an experience. In spring 2020, during a visit to California State University Cal Poly Pomona, a state university with a high proportion of first-generation academics that describes itself as the nation's most diverse polytechnic university, I expressed an interest to American colleagues in visiting the Watts Towers. I had mistakenly remembered these as iconic sites associated with the so-called Watts Riots of August 1965. However, I was strongly advised not to visit the area or, if at all, only during the day, and not to get out of the car because it would be too dangerous. None of the colleagues – who in Germany would be described as social scientists with an Asian migration background – had ever visited this place themselves because of their perception of it being a highly dangerous place for anyone not belonging to the Black community. Suspecting that academics tend to overestimate such dangers, I asked an administrative staff member at the university who then pointed me to one of her white friends who grew up in LA and ran a music club in the Watts Towers area, among other things. His answer to my question was: you don't have to worry, there are drug gangs there who shoot at each other in turf wars, but they have no interest in robbing tourists. As a consequence, we then visited the Watts Towers, which, by the way, were built in the predominantly black district of Watts by an Italian migrant, on foot without encountering any problems. On the contrary, we were very kindly welcomed at the nearby Watts Towers Arts Center & Charles Mingus Youth Arts Center. This story in all its aspects could not have happened in the same way in Germany, because in Germany there are no black ghettos, no war on drugs is waged, the use of firearms is considerably less frequent, and so on. This little story shows that you need to know a lot about a society in order to understand how racism works there.

The necessity of a differentiated view of forms of racism can also be exemplarily clarified by the fact that racial profiling in the USA is discussed as a racist practice characterized by the use of excessive force with often fatal consequences, whereas in Germany it is mainly discussed as a practice of unauthorized controls by police officers, during which no weapons are used. Even to understand this difference, a complex comparative societal view would be necessary: for the connection of racism with ghettoization, crime, criminalization, homicide rates, incarceration rates and police violence, as it is given in the USA, has no direct equivalent in Germany. There are some similarities, but a lot of differences.

Racism thus works in different ways in different societies and social contexts. How this happens in each case can only be understood from a perspective that takes into account the specific historical contexts as well as the intertwining of racism with the economic, political, institutional, and cultural features that characterize national societies. Therefore, empirical studies and analyses on the impact and the forms of racism and anti-racism in different national, regional and institutional contexts are crucial for educational science. For only in this way can the baseline conditions, the possibilities and the limits of political and educational interventions be determined in a scientifically sound manner.

References

Balibar, É. (1990). Is there a neo-racism? In É. Balibar & I. Wallerstein (Eds.), *Race, nation, class: Ambiguous identities* (pp. 17–28). Verso.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York University Press.
https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ggjjn3

Fredrickson, G. M. (2011). *Rassismus: Ein historischer Abriß* (H. Brühmann & I. Utz, Trans.). Reclam. (Original work published 2002)

Scherr, A. (2005). Social subjectivity and mutual recognition as basic terms of a critical theory of education. In G. E. Fishman, P. McLaren, H. Sünker, & C. Lankshear (Eds.), *Critical theories, radical paedagogies and global conflicts* (pp. 145–153). Rowman & Littlefield.

Scherr, A. (2017). Soziologische Diskriminierungsforschung. In A. Scherr, A. El-Mafaalani, & G. Yüksel (Eds.), *Handbuch Diskriminierung* (pp. 39–58). Springer VS.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-10976-9_3

Schütz, A. (1957/2011). Gleichheit und Sinnstruktur der sozialen Welt. In A. Schütz, *Relevanz und Handeln 2* (pp. 171–250). UVK.

Tilly, C. (1999). *Durable inequality*. University of California Press.
https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520924222

Wacquant, L. (1997). For an analytic of racial domination. *Political Power and Social Theory, 11*, 221–234.

Recommended Citation

Scherr, A. (2022). How racism works – and how it doesn't work: Why a totalizing understanding of racism is insufficient for theory and research. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *5*(13).
https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2022.13.8

Do you want to comment on this article? Please send your reply to editors@oneducation.net. Replies will be processed like invited contributions. This means they will be assessed according to standard criteria of quality, relevance, and civility. Please make sure to follow editorial policies and formatting guidelines.

Albert Scherr

Albert Scherr is Professor of Sociology at the University of Education Freiburg. In theoretical studies and empirical research, he deals with different aspects of the sociology of discrimination and racism. His other research interests include the sociology of migration and refugee studies. He has published widely, including as editor of an interdisciplinary handbook of discrimination research.