

Racism in the everyday life of Finnish children with transnational roots

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Abstract

In the vast area of studies of racism children's experiences have been overlooked. Questions of racism are often related to immigrants and their children, but in many European countries increasing numbers of children of mixed parentage, as well as children adopted from other continents, confront racism. My ethnographic study of racism in the everyday lives of Finnish children with "transnational roots" focuses on the experiences of transnational adoptees and those young Finnish citizens who have one Finnish-born parent, but whose Finnishness and right to belong is often questioned by others because of their parental ties to other countries and nations. This article explores the different manifestations of racism in their daily lives and concludes with a discussion of the importance of identifying those social and cultural factors which make it especially difficult for children to talk about and deal with their experiences of racism.¹

Children's experiences of racism and their positions in racialized relations and hierarchies have been notably absent from both childhood studies (Maniam et al. 2004:232) and studies of racism, even though children's means of negotiating their experiences of racialization (Miles 1989:73) and racism, and their ability to defend themselves, are limited compared to

¹ This article is based on my doctoral dissertation *Rasismi lasten ja nuorten arjessa. Transnationaalit juuret ja monikulttuuristuva Suomi* [Racism in the everyday life of children and young people. Transnational roots and multicultural Finland in the making], which consists of an overview (Rastas 2007a) and six separate articles published previously. The articles, two of which have been published in English, can be read on the internet by clicking the title of each article on page 7 in the electronic version of the dissertation (<http://acta.uta.fi/pdf/978-951-44-6964-0.pdf>)

young people and adults. In many western countries immigrants and some ethnic minorities are considered the most likely victims of racism. Those studies which focus on immigrant children's experiences show that in their everyday lives, "race" does indeed matter in many ways (e.g. Howarth 2002, 2004; Motsieloa 2003; Vestel 2004). However, in addition to immigrants and their children, and people who identify themselves as members of particular ethnic minorities, there is a growing number of children of mixed parentage, many of whom may also face racism because of their "visual difference", or their name, which may expose their transnational roots (e.g. Gilbert 2005; Ifekwunigwe 2004; Parker & Song 2001). Racism has become an important topic also in literature on transnational and "transracial" adoptions (e.g. Dorow 2006; Hübinette & Tigervall 2008, 2009; Rooth 2001).

In everyday discussions, especially in the case of immigrants, questions of racism are often turned to questions of cultural differences or cultural competence. Rather than these questions, I have focused on the everyday experiences of children and young people who may face racism even in the face of their legal status as Finns and their cultural competence. Such a focus allows the assessment of different manifestations and workings of racism. My informants were selected from among two groups: Finnish children who have one biological parent with an immigrant or foreign background, and children from other countries who were adopted into Finnish families. These young people have lived all or most of their lives in Finland, they are Finnish citizens and they know Finnish culture as well as their peers do, but still their Finnishness and their right to belong is often questioned by the surrounding society. Focusing on everyday encounters involving this kind of differentiation allows the examination of both open racism and racializing discourses and practices.

The theoretical framework of my study combines perspectives, discussions, concepts and methodological ideas from anthropology, sociology and social psychology, as well as from cultural studies, feminist studies and postcolonial studies.² I locate my research also within the field of critical childhood studies, where children's positions in social power rela-

² My epistemological and methodological choices were grounded especially in feminist epistemologies (e.g. Harding 1987) and in the "Writing Culture" debate (Clifford & Marcus 1986; James & Hockey & Dawson 1997) and their impact on the ethnographic tradition (see also Cerwonka & Malkki 2007). These discourses share many premises which have been significant in my work: issues of how and whose voices and lives are captured and represented; the emphasis on the political and ethical aspects of conducting research; the demand for critical reflexivity; and issues of how the researcher herself is positioned and implicated.

tions and their agency are emphasized (e.g. Alanen 1992; Christensen & Prout 2002:481; Graue & Walsh 1998:55–69; James & James 2004:214). I wanted to explore children's possibilities to negotiate their experiences of racism, and encounters in which racism restricts some children's agency.

In order to identify racism and its consequences in any given society, a multidisciplinary approach is needed (Goldberg & Solomos 2002:2). A multi-faceted design inevitably leads to broad definitions of racism. Contrary to those definitions in which racism is understood only as intentional discrimination, I have used racism as a very broad concept, referring to ideologies, discourses and practices and also to their consequences. Concepts, and the definitions we associate with them, vary according to time and place, further contributing to the elusiveness of racism as a concept. Even in Nordic countries there are some differences in how the notion of racism is understood.³ In the context of this research the concept of racism covers both the old race theories (ideas of the existence and hierarchies of races) and those racializing discourses and practices by which these doctrines and other essentialist ideas of peoples and cultures are produced and reproduced. Even though racism is not always intentional, the idea of power relations is also important here. Racism is about some people having the power to use racializing and essentializing ideas of different people and cultures against some other people. The consequences of racism can be identified on social and cultural levels (for example, in the unequal distribution of goods and services, in racializing discourses and representations of peoples and cultures), in face to face interaction in everyday encounters (see e.g. Ahmed 2002), and on a subjective level as racialized identities.

Fieldwork and data

Finding and approaching young people for the focus group was facilitated by my personal and professional networks as an adoptive mother, a former refugee worker and an anti-racism activist. Many participants said that my personal involvement, which I made clear when I approached people, was the reason for their acceptance of my invitation to participate in the project. Still, there were some young people to whom it took many months to

³ How racism is defined and understood in Norway e.g. Gullestad 2004; in Sweden e.g. Sawyer 2000; Hübinette & Tigervall 2009 and in Denmark e.g. Schierup 1994.

make the decision. A young woman (18 years old, father from South America) explained her hesitation when we finally started the interview: "The topic of your research is very interesting, but I was afraid of what would happen to me if I started to remember all those things (referring to many years of being bullied at school/AR)."⁴ A young man (19 years old, adopted) came to apologize to me for missing three appointments. He said that he wanted to come but he just could not bring himself to, because these things were so personal, and they hurt so much.⁵ I had planned to interview more young children. However, given how difficult it is for them to talk about their experiences of racism and exclusion, and particularly due to ethical considerations, I decided to use other methods and data: retrospective data, young individuals' memories of their childhood and interviews with parents. The fieldwork, carried out between 2000 and 2007, was comprised of participatory observation, discussions, email correspondence and interviews with young people and parents, as well as participation in anti-racism activities.⁶

Negotiating the boundaries of the field, as well as my own roles during the fieldwork was necessary. During the years of fieldwork I was never able to leave the field, and questions of racism were part of my personal and family life too, because my own children belong to the focus group. Being in the field, as a researcher and as a "white" mother of "non-white" children, encompassed different kinds of interaction, interventions and emotions, which all affected the nature and the quality of the data (see Rastas 2004a; cf. Adler & Adler 1997). For almost two years I kept a "mother's diary" in which I documented events related to different forms of othering (see Hall 1997), racialization and open racism in the lives of my children and of my family. The diary illustrates how racism can be an everyday issue also for "white" parents of "non-white" children, something we are forced to process more or less every day. Doing field work at home involved not only writing down negotiations between us, as parents,

⁴ Interview, 11.6.2001.

⁵ This event occurred in winter 2002. The young man talked for three hours about his life, but did not want to be interviewed. Therefore, I did not make notes of our discussion. He approached me years later, in 2006, saying that he considered the topic of my research important, and granted me permission to use everything he had told me as data, as long as his anonymity was guaranteed.

⁶ The volume of data was very large, which is typical for ethnographic studies. Diaries and other field notes, several folders of different kinds of documents, cultural products of all kinds, hundreds of pages of email correspondence with dozens of people, more than 50 interviews, most of them taped and transcribed etc.

and our children, but also documenting our children's "inner negotiations" (cf. Østberg 2003) by focusing on how they talk about their roots, their "difference" and their life as "non-white" Finns.⁷ In addition to home-based observations, I spent time studying environments at different sites, including schools, day care centers, playgrounds and youth clubs.

My efforts to construct and follow an anti-racist research agenda (see Rastas 2008) brought a participatory research dimension to the project. Engaging in different activities and speaking in public about racism in Finland proved to be a valuable method of constructing new data. Many of my field activities elicited considerable feedback, not just from my informants and other people who have faced racism, but also from school teachers and other professionals who work among children. Understanding their ideas of racism in Finland was important, since those ideas, and other prevailing discourses on racism construct an important context in which victims of racism negotiate their personal experiences. Many school teachers, for example, were either oblivious of racism in the schoolyard, or, in cases where they were informed about racist incidents, simply regarded the victims of racism as "too sensitive".⁸

In ethnographic research, ethical questions are an essential part of the whole research process, not only questions that can be formulated in advance. To ensure that I made the right choices, for example regarding the terms I used, or the choice of the final research questions, I tried to keep in contact and maintain a dialogue with my informants during the whole process. Many of my interviewees and other informants read and further elaborated or commented on my texts.

During the interviews I conducted both with children and young people and with their parents, the following themes were discussed: their ideas of belonging to Finland on the one hand and to the other country/nation/culture on the other hand, encounters where their Finnishness had been questioned, their experiences of othering and racism, and their thoughts about racism and multiculturalism in general. Individuals' experiences of racialization and racism, as well as their means of negotiating racial meanings attributed to them, were dependent on several factors: their age, their gender, their previous experiences of racism, support avail-

⁷ However, quoting this data was not possible, since my own children also have the right of anonymity.

⁸ From my fieldnotes, numerous references. Since 2000 I have been training hundreds of teachers, and also in these courses many teachers have said that in their opinion some children and especially some parents are "too sensitive".

able from other people, the way questions of racism were understood in their everyday environments, and on how the person her/himself was positioned in racialized relations. I was able to address these differences, and examine the many situational elements related to racializing categorization and the production of racialized identities. Since the interviewees represented different age groups,⁹ their stories, combined with my field notes, also allowed me to pay particular attention to how categorization is implemented and negotiated in diverse age groups. Many stories told in the interviews were memories of childhood, so part of the data is retrospective. The ethnographic approach employed during the process made available a lot of background information needed in the analysis of individual interviews and the stories included in them (see Rastas 2004b, 2005).

Children's and adolescents' interviews (n=22) were chosen as the starting point for the analyses. The methods used in the analysis of the interviews were based on discourse analysis and a narrative approach. The point of departure in the analysis was stories of "strange encounters" (Ahmed 2000); meetings in which individual interviewees had already been recognized as strangers and where, at the same time, the figure of the stranger was processed. The first phase in the analysis was to identify those stories of encounters in which other people had perceived my interviewees as different. I made lists and categorizations of different kinds of situations and activities in which their "non-Finnishness", or "less-Finnishness" and their racialized difference were constructed. The list of "the dimensions of differences" was long: from being stared at in public places, or being forced to give answers to "stupid questions", to racist violence; from being treated differently (sometimes even better than their peers), to being excluded and rejected.

The analysis of the interviews, along with the knowledge produced during the fieldwork, produced more questions to deal with and to study than I could focus on, thus requiring a process of refining and selection. My criteria for choosing topics for more detailed analyses were:

1. Issues which seemed to be important from my informants' perspectives.
2. Issues which were also theoretically interesting. By this I mean questions which can be discussed on a theoretical level, especially questions which were ignored or which somehow challenged what had been said be-

⁹ Of those young people I call interviewees 12 were girls and 10 boys. 3 of them were children under 12 years of age, 10 were between 12 and 18, and 9 were young adults from 20 to 31 years.

fore in studies of racism, and/or in discussions on racism in Finnish society.

3. Questions which I was able to deal with. The nature of my data did not allow particular kinds of questions, or generalizations. Also, ethical considerations prevented me from focusing on some phenomena.

4. Questions which seemed to be relevant also when it comes to my efforts towards the anti-racist research agenda. I did not want to produce only descriptions of racism but also create texts as support tools, including ideas and arguments, to help my informants and other people in their every day fight against racism.

Experiencing and negotiating racism

Most of my informants had experienced bullying at school, and had been harassed in public places. Some had also been subject to racist violence. Stories about the experience of being stared at in public places were also common. While from an adult perspective being stared at may not be considered such a traumatic experience, for children, growing up knowing and feeling other peoples' racializing and often even hostile gazes creates a particular kind of environment for them (Rastas 2002).

Even in the everyday lives of those who said that they had not experienced much racism, "race" matters. They all knew, including those who had avoided racist violence, that for them Finland is not such a safe society as it is for their white Finnish-born peers. They told me how they avoid particular places in the evenings and at night and how they try to avoid meeting skinheads. They had learned that even when people look friendly, something may happen. They have to be prepared to deal with questions, which may be well-meaning or seemingly innocent, but which nevertheless let them know that they are seen as being different, and through racist stereotypes. "It's really annoying. They always have to ask those questions, people who don't know me. When they get to know me it's easier, but first, they always have to ask" (a 14 years old girl, father from South America).¹⁰ Blatant stares and "Where do you come from?" questions are all part of the processes whereby these children's racialized identities are constructed.

¹⁰ Interview, 14.2.2001.

The idea of the innocence of children is very strong, not just at home but also among professionals who work with these young children at day care centers and at schools, but there is a lot of racism even in very young children's reality. We do not necessarily see it, partly because we, adults, do not want to admit it. A 16 year old boy (father from the Middle East) recounted: "When I was at the day care centre before I went to school, there were some of the cruelest children I've ever met. Small kids can be so harsh."¹¹ Despite his observation, this boy, like many others interviewed, played down the incidences of racism in his life. He had been assaulted by skinheads when he was only 10 years old, and he had frequently been the target of racist slurs in his home town. Another young man (21 years, father from South America), who also said that he did not have many experiences of racism, nevertheless commented: "It still makes me sad, every time I remember some people from school, and what they said to me."¹² Children learn, even before they start attending school, that "race" can be turned against some people. At day care centers and children's playgrounds there is a lot of name-calling, and in children's in-fighting racial slurs are also used. Sometimes adults do not see racism in the world of small children because they do not identify children's racializing categorizations. Children do not use adult words. Racializing categorizations among children and young people, and their means to negotiate these categorizations, was one of those questions I wanted to focus on in detail (see Rastas 2005).

School can be a living hell for some children, solely because of racism. Most stories about school were stories about how disappointed my informants were with their teachers, who did not see racism at school, or did not want to do anything about it. There were also racist teachers. A child who faced racism at school was usually left alone. S/he could not expect help from her friends either, in case these friends belonged to the majority. A mother of an 8 year old girl (adopted from China) sent me a letter in which she wrote: "Another small girl, who she herself belongs to the Roma minority is the only one who defends my daughter. The teachers don't seem to understand at all, and those Finnish children who do not themselves engage in bullying are so passive, they never defend my daughter." There are many such stories in my data. Because of the color-blindness and passivity of those friends in the "white" majority, sharing

¹¹ Interview, 9.3.2001.

¹² Interview, 18.6.2001.

experiences of racism could only occur with those who had had similar experiences. This sometimes led to the formation of momentary “communities” and solidarities. Immigrant children, refugees and the Finnish Roma were mentioned many times in stories about sharing, as people who did understand (Rastas 2004b).

Gender has a lot to do both with individuals’ experiences of racism, and with their means to negotiate their experiences. And it is not only gender, but the way gender and ideas of different nationalities and ethnicities are intertwined. A boy who “looks Asian” may be spared from sexual harassment, while a boy who “looks African” is often seen through those sexist stereotypes which can make some children look frightening in the eyes of some people. Even very young girls (11-12 years old) whose other roots are Asian or African are often seen as adult women and are subjected to sexual harassment. A 16 year old girl (father from Asia) told how “every time I go downtown with my cousins, who are still quite young, people think that I am their mother. It does not happen to my friends.”¹³ The youngest interviewee of those, who told me that sometimes other, “grown up people” are scared of them, was a ten year old boy adopted from Africa.

When children grow up, youth cultures, and their relations to racism, seem to play an important role also in the everyday lives of children with transnational roots. Skinheads and other racist subcultures were mentioned in almost every interview as threatening and as something my informants could never identify with, while for example, being able to identify with hip hop culture seemed to contribute extra social and cultural capital for some young people. Choosing hobbies and choosing clothes were, for many of my informants, also about negotiating their roots and their belonging. A 12 year old boy, adopted from Africa, pondered on his future as a professional ice hockey player: “It’s my favourite hobby, it would be nice to be a professional, but there are no dark-skinned ice hockey players in Finland. I sometimes wonder if there are any in the US, and if they would accept me.”¹⁴ Another informant, whose father is from Asia, told me how she really wanted to shock people with her clothes, explaining: “They stare at me anyway.”¹⁵

Particular discourses (of race, of family, of different nationalities and cultures and so on) also force some people to negotiate their relations to

¹³ Interview 1.3.2001.

¹⁴ Interview 11.2.2001.

¹⁵ Field notes 18.9.2005.

particular places and cultures. Various representations of “the other country” in the media, in school books and in jokes force these young people to think about and negotiate the different meanings of their roots. Very negative representations of a young person’s birth country may result in her hiding her (other) roots in some situations, where possible. A 16 year old boy, whose father is from the Middle East, confessed: “All my friends think that my dad is from the US. I’m not going to tell them the truth.”¹⁶ Young adults whose fathers were from Japan, told me that, unlike in their childhood, Japan is now considered “cool”, which makes life much easier for Finnish-Japanese children today.¹⁷

In spite of their stories in which many forms of othering and racialization can be identified, many informants said that they had not experienced racism. Small children talked about bullying instead of racism, which was a strange concept for many of them, but also teenagers, who knew the general meanings of the word, seemed to avoid it when they talked about their personal experiences.

Why don’t young people talk about their experiences of racism?

The question of why is it so difficult for children and young people to talk about racism, and especially about their personal experiences, became one of those questions I had to examine in more details (see Rastas 2004b). If children do not talk, they are left alone with their experiences, which can be very traumatic, and it definitely does not help them to cope with their experiences. The role of a victim is often stigmatizing. For many young people it is important to be like the others. Denying or trying to forget negative, traumatic experiences may sometimes be used as coping strategies. However, there are also many social and cultural factors which may prevent children from talking and sharing.

Most informants said that when they were children they were afraid that things would get even worse if their parents interfered. Children seemed to be sure about this. However, young and grown-up informants, who said that they also used to think that way, also added that parents should, in fact, do something. In their stories, parents’ and other adults’

¹⁶ Interview, 9.3.2001.

¹⁷ Field notes, several references.

interventions were talked about in approving, sometimes even respectful tones, while those adults, especially teachers, who had ignored racist incidents, were criticized (Rastas 2004b).

Sometimes parents' and other adults' behavior prevents children from talking about their experiences. When a well-meaning parent says "Don't mind the other children", a child may think that she has to accept the situation. Parents and teachers often say "Just join the others" or "The other kids don't mean any harm".¹⁸ If the child knows that the others do not want her/his company, and that they do, in fact, mean harm, s/he finds it useless to report matters to adults who refuse to listen or to understand. "Don't tell me that he does not necessarily mean harm when I know he does, because he calls me by that name only when we fight", a seven year old boy apprised his mother.¹⁹ Well-meaning parents, in trying to help their own child, may also themselves lean on racist strategies, by saying things like "Just tell them that *you* are not a refugee!", or "But *you* are not a nigger, you're blond", instead of telling them that there is nothing bad about being a refugee, or that no-one should be called names such as "nigger".²⁰ Reinforcing differences between different racialized and oppressed groups does not help children. It only makes it more difficult for them to forge alliances that could be important in their everyday struggles against racism.

Prevailing discourses related to racism, narrow definitions of racism, and claims that racism is not a big problem in Finnish society (cf. Gullestad 2004 in Norway), can also make it impossible for young people to talk about their experiences. If you are not allowed to name your experiences as racism, how can you talk about them, or about racism in general? The analysis of the use and the alleged meanings of the N-word (in English "negro" or "nigger", depending on the context, in Finnish "neekeri"), which was the most common racist insult both in my interviewees stories and in my field notes, revealed something about this phenomenon (see Rastas 2007b). The way the word is explained as a "harmless" word in Finland, makes it difficult for individuals, especially for children, to fight against racism. In order to do that they should be able to talk about colonialism, and about how racist representations are produced and reproduced, and how particular words may work against some people (see also Rastas

¹⁸ Numerous references in my fieldnotes.

¹⁹ Field notes, 12.3.2005.

²⁰ Field notes, written after a summer meeting for adoptive families.

2005:153–160). What is difficult even for adults may be impossible for children.

Conclusions

While the focus of this study is on Finnish society and racism in Finland, research done in other countries shows that children's experiences of racism are very similar in many other European and Western societies. The biggest differences are probably in my informants' possibilities to negotiate their experiences. In Finland, racism is not discussed as much as in some other countries, and the common definitions of racism are very narrow, referring only to open, intentional racism. Compared to children who live in societies in which there are more and larger ethnic and racialized minorities, many of my informants lack those supportive communities in which they could share their experiences and learn to talk about them. Also, the lack of concepts that could be used in descriptions of racialized relations and hierarchies in Finland call for further research. As long as words referring to racialized difference have predominantly pejorative meanings, and there are no established words for political, collective racialized identities, victims of racism lack words with which they could talk about themselves and their experiences (see Rastas 2005).

For those, who are subordinated in racialized social relations, the meanings of racism are not limited to experiences of open, intentional racism they may face. They have to be prepared to be seen and treated differently wherever they go. They have to learn to live with other people's color-blindness and everyday language peppered with racist slurs and expressions. They also have to learn to deal with various racist representations in media and other cultural products that remind them of how "people who look like me" are seen and valued in our society. Although many Finns would claim that such things "have nothing to do with racism", these experiences nevertheless continue to make my informants everyday lives different and more complicated compared to their peers who are positioned differently in racialized relations.

In my work I tried to underline children's agency, but in having to admit that their strategies to resist and fight against racism are severely limited, I was led to consider adults' responsibilities. In the words of one of my informants: "Kids cannot do much. Only adults can, because they

have the power.”²¹ Listening to children and not denying or trivializing their experiences is a start. But how can children talk about their racialized difference and the many meanings of racism in their everyday lives if there are no words available?

Finding people with whom they can share their experiences is especially important to those for whom identifying with a single ethnic group may be difficult or even impossible. My informants share something with many immigrants: they want to be able to belong to where they are, feel at home and have a good life. At the same time, they want to maintain, re-establish or create their ties to particular other places, peoples and cultures. In this sense, the interpretation of “cultures” extends beyond their other parent’s or birth parents’ countries or ethnic groups (see also Olwig 2003), to include cultures created in diaspora, or which are products of diasporic consciousness, shared experiences of racism and identity politics. These cultures are not necessarily transmitted only in families, but also among peers. Having access to other minority cultures to discuss racism is important for its victims, but inadequate, since they should have the right to feel at home also in “our culture”. We, who occupy the privileged positions in racialized relations, also have to see and understand the limitations of narrow definitions of racism. Only then we can start to identify the many workings and consequences of racism, and learn to talk about them with children.

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²¹ Interview 18.6.2001.

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