White Power, Racialized Regimes of Truth, and (In)Validity

Ali Meghji, Department of Sociology
University of Cambridge, UK
am2059@cam.ac.uk

Abstract

In this article, I consider how dominant sociological conceptions of validity reproduce the racial status quo. I argue that sociology has its own racialized regime of truth, which marginalizes research that is critical of the racial status quo, and denies such research any validity. I explore this, first, from a historical perspective, focusing particularly on how Du Bois' critical work was denied validity by his contemporaries (while other scholars' research reproducing structural racism was welcomed with open arms). I then focus on the present, examining how race critical research is often recast as 'mesearch', and consequently denied validity in a way that disproportionately affects scholars of colour. I then reflect on the problem that we need validity to do ethical research, but so long as the racialized regime of truth shapes what is valid, race critical sociology will continue to be marginalized. I finish the article by considering how this marginalization exemplifies Toni Morrison's idea of 'racism as distraction', where race critical scholars must overcome a validity deficit. Our work is automatically assumed to not be valid, and we have to struggle to have it recognized as such.

Philosophy and Validity, Sociology and Truth

There is a tension between philosophical approaches to validity and sociological approaches to truth. Philosophy teaches that an argument is valid when it is impossible for all the premises to be true and the conclusion false (Marcus, 2018). However, sociology teaches that truth and falsity are more than matters of correspondence, and are embedded in networks of power (Du Bois, 1898). Thus, in contrast to the abstract philosophical approach, sociology shows that validity is embedded in networks of power, and thus often serves to reproduce the status quo. As such, it is important to recognize that while sociologists may think that our discipline is the critical discipline, it is shaped by a 'regime of truth'.

In this article, I consider how dominant sociological conceptions of validity are shaped by a 'racialized regime of truth', which marginalizes race critical research as non-science (and nonsense). Thus, since the beginnings of sociology through to the present day, research that critiques the racial status quo is denied validity. In this article, I analyse this invalidating of sociological research by starting with a discussion of W. E. B. Du Bois and Black sociology, showing how in sociology's beginnings, the research that reproduced the racial status quo was deemed valid, while more critical approaches in racism studies were denied this validity. I then proceed to show how this dynamic carries into the present day, reflecting on Toni Morrison's notion of 'racism as distraction'. Here, I draw on my experiences of the reception of my work on the Black middle class to show how race critical research has a 'validity deficit' and that scholars operating in this research area must work much harder than their colleagues to prove the validity of their research. I conclude by arguing that in order to get to a stage where we can have a working conception of validity that allows for race critical research to be construed as valid, we need to dismantle sociology's epistemological commitment to White supremacy – that is, the discipline's racialized regime of truth.

Regimes of truth

The notion of a 'regime of truth' was articulated by Foucault (1994: 131), when he claimed:

> […] each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth – that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

Central to Foucault's (1994) argument was a recognition that societies have a system of truth production, with various institutions, practices, and people serving as legitimate truth producers. As with most of Foucault's work, there is little mention of racism, and no citations of previous theorists with similar ideas.

Addressing these gaps within Foucault's approach, I theorize the 'racialized regime of truth'. This racialized regime of truth is responsible for ordering which institutions, which people, which arguments, and which types of knowledge are accepted as 'true' on racial matters. First and foremost, the racialized regime of truth works to reproduce the racial status quo. It functions to legitimize knowledge and ways of thinking that reproduce the racial order, and to exclude or marginalize knowledge and ways of thinking that are critical towards the

racial order. My argument is that this racialized regime of truth is not just 'out there', but it is fully functioning within sociology, and it works to deny validity to research that is critical of the racial status quo. Indeed, this is a process that sociologists have been struggling with since the discipline's creation.

Du Bois, Black sociology, and racialized regimes of truth

Du Bois, for instance, regularly lamented how his contemporaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries denied the validity of critical research. Du Bois' critique was twofold. Firstly, Du Bois (1898) points out that many social scientists were so convinced of the natural inferiority of Black people that they did not see the study of racialization and racism as a valid area for sociological investigation. Secondly, Du Bois (1898) argued that the social scientists who were studying 'race' were doing so in ways that reproduced racism. In *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois (1967 [1899]) refers to these people as 'car-window sociologists'. Critiquing these sociologists, Du Bois (1898: 13–14) argues that:

> [...] we reverently receive a column of figures without asking who collected them, how they were arranged, how far they are valid and what chances of error they contain; we receive the testimony of men without asking whether they were trained or ignorant, careful or careless, truthful or given to exaggeration, and, above all, whether they are giving facts or opinions.

Continuing this critique, Du Bois (1898: 14–15) concludes:

> It is so easy for a man who has already formed his conclusions to receive any and all testimony in their favor without carefully weighing and testing it, that we sometimes find in serious scientific studies very curious proof of broad conclusions.

This critique laid out by Du Bois (1898) highlights the first side of validity and the racialized regime of truth. Du Bois shows how much research on Black Americans was merely an exercise in White confirmation bias; the 'valid' research was the research that reproduced racism. However, the issue of validity then became even further exacerbated. In response to the lack of critical research on Black Americans, Du Bois co-founded the Atlanta School of Sociology in the 1890s (Wright II and Calhoun, 2006). This Atlanta School was dedicated to the sociological study of social problems affecting Black Americans – not only was it the first empirical sociology institute in the US, but it was also the first to make methodology sections a prerequisite for all papers (Wright II, 2016), and the whole 'laboratory' was dedicated to producing anti-racist research which would challenge the racial status quo (Du Bois, 1990 [1944]).

Nevertheless, given that it was critical to the racial status quo, the work produced by Du Bois and the Atlanta School was never seen as 'valid' social science by the mainstream (Wright II, 2016). Indeed, even now we are taught that the first school of empirical sociology was the Chicago School, with Robert Park being the pioneer of sociological methods. Of course, once we appreciate how the racialized regime of truth works, this makes perfect sense. While the Atlanta School was showing how racism constrains Black Americans, and the various measures that can be taken to ameliorate these conditions (Du Bois, 1968), the Chicago School developed a 'race relations paradigm' which instead saw Black Americans as a social problem of the state, with White racist violence being rationalized as a natural by-product of encountering 'different' people (Frazier, 1947). Given the racialized regime of truth, we ought not be surprised that seminal work critiquing the racial status quo has been forgotten, while work reproducing the racial status quo is construed as essential to the development of sociology. Furthermore, with the rise of quantitative social science in the twentieth century, many mainstream sociological studies merely treated 'race' as an independent variable, which allowed for sociologists – including those working in the 'race relations paradigm' – to espouse 'valid' arguments around Black inferiority, further squashing the potential for critical scholarship to be taken seriously (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008).

A Century On and We're Still Not Valid

The question then turns to whether the situation is any better now, a century on from Du Bois' mission against uncritical scholarship. The answer is that sociology is still shaped by a racialized regime of truth, and this regime still results in race critical studies being denied validity. In fact, the racialized regime of truth has been one of sociology's constants since its inception. Thus, in the early days of the discipline, Du Bois' critical work was seen as invalid sociology; however, there were also prominent Black feminist sociologists, including Cooper (1990 [1892]) and Wells (2014) whose work was even further marginalized to the extent that it was not

just seen as invalid sociology like Du Bois' work, but it was not seen as sociology at all. Nearly one hundred years later and Patricia Hill Collins (1986: 26) makes the same point when she critiques how sociology's 'white male insiderism' pushes Black feminist standpoints to the margins of the discipline, making Black women 'outsiders within'. Moving on another half a century and we see critiques of 'white sociology' (Bhatt, 2016; Meghji, 2019), 'methodological whiteness' (Bhambra, 2017), a 'possessive investment in white sociology' (Brunsma and Wyse, 2018), the 'White rule in sociology' (Bonilla-Silva, 2019), and the discipline's 'white logic, white method' (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). As such, it is quite clear that those of us within critical race (or race critical) studies are well aware of sociology's ongoing racialized regime of truth.

This contemporary racialized regime of truth prevents much race critical research from being accepted as valid by mainstream sociologists, and consequently devalues the sociological contributions of many race critical scholars (many of whom are scholars of colour). In fact, it is often because much race critical scholarship is produced by scholars of colour that the validity of such research is denied. Through sociology's racialized regime of truth, such research is converted into me-search; mainstream sociologists see this work as scholars of colour simply researching their own lives or 'people like them'[17] (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). Through this devaluation of race critical research, mainstream sociology separates the 'sociology of race' or 'critical race studies' into its own subdiscipline where they hope it cannot infect the rest of the discipline (Virdee, 2019). While there may now be more institutional space for the sociology of race than there was in Du Bois' time, and indeed even than when Collins was critiquing White male insiderism, a constant remains: sociology's racialized regime of truth still pushes race critical research to the disciplinary margins, to a position of invalidity.

Theoretical and Interpretive Validity

One of the key issues in this respect is that even liberal, well-intentioned approaches to validity in sociology make it very difficult for race critical research to be accepted in the mainstream. We can see this, for instance, in the rise of analytic induction, where validity is construed as the accuracy of one's research and yet remains a property that we work towards rather than one that we fully realize (see Katz, 2015).

At the heart of the analytic induction paradigm is the idea that the concept of validity can be taken out of its quantitative association with 'generalizability' and reoriented towards qualitative research. Through this redirecting of validity, we get the doubled notions of interpretive validity, that is, how accurately the researcher interprets their participants' narratives and ethnographic observations, and theoretical validity, that is, how accurately the researcher goes from what participants do (for example, a student throwing a pen at a teacher), to the wider class of which these actions are representative (for example, student resistance to authority) (Maxwell, 1992). I do not wish to argue that this doubled conception of validity is useless, and that qualitative researchers ought to ignore it. In fact, working towards both interpretive and theoretical validity is an essential practice for ethical research.

My focus is on a more systemic form of critique. Namely, both interpretive validity and theoretical validity are concepts that we work towards in our research, but the extent to which one's work achieves theoretical and interpretive validity is defined by the wider scholarly community. This is one of the main reasons why we have peer review, and, indeed, it underlines much of the reason for making one's data publicly available – so that others can holistically see how you came to your research findings (see Contreras, 2019; Khan, 2019; Lamont, 2009). A problem thus arises in that if one is publishing race critical work that challenges the status quo, the wider scholarly community will likely dismiss this work's theoretical and interpretive validity. The problem, therefore, with this approach to validity is not the definition of validity itself, but the fact that theoretical and interpretive validity can be, and are, shaped by the racialized regime of truth.

Of course, the problem is then exacerbated by the fact that much race critical research is qualitative, as we often use qualitative methods to provide 'counter stories' to the status quo (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). In virtue of critiquing the racial status quo through qualitative research, whole sections of sociologists, sociological thought, and research are either being denied validity or forced to work especially hard to prove that our work as valid. In this regard, I want to finish this article by reflecting on one instance in which this racialized regime of truth, which structures how one's theoretical and interpretive validity is judged, has affected my own research.

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[17] Of course, as Ray (2016) puts it: 'White scholars do mesearch all the time. In many disciplines, that is simply called the canon.'

Racism as Distraction, and the Epistemological Arm of White Supremacy

As a qualitative researcher exploring how racism affects Black middle-class people, every single one of my peer-reviewed articles has had at least one reviewer say something along the lines of 'How common was this to your participants' experiences?' Again, this claim itself need not be problematic – it reflects a 'healthy scepticism', as one reviewer once rightfully put it to me. However, there is a specific dimension to racism that turns the question of 'How common was this to your participants?' into a (sometimes unintentional) derogatory stance towards one's research. Especially now that post-racialism is hegemonic, accusations of racism are often met with disbelief (Meghji and Saini, 2018). Given this post-racialism, when reviewers critique my work by asking about its 'generalizability' to the overall sample, it seems to reproduce the structure whereby my participants' experiences and navigations of structural racism are simply denied. This was particularly apparent to me when the British Sociological Association were working with me on a press release about my work, where I was questioned about my study's thirty-two participants:

> Can you say what proportion of the thirty-two said they felt uneasy at being stared at or confronted by security or other such discriminatory behaviour? […] If you're able to say roughly what proportion of your interviewees had attended some kind of cultural event and been made to feel uncomfortable […] roughly how many felt that way solely because they were the only black people in the audience (and for no other reason), and how many because they were stared at or questioned, or overhead remarks, etc.?

Underlying this questioning we see the logic of the racialized regime of truth, and its shaping of interpretive and theoretical validity. Namely, this racialized regime of truth creates a logic by which if only a minority of participants have an experience construed as 'racist', then it does not merit sociological investigation – it is not a 'valid' finding. It shifts the 'burden of proof' onto the oppressed rather than aiming towards a critique of the people and structures responsible for this oppression. This shows exactly what Toni Morrison (1975) was critiquing in her notion of 'racism as distraction', where the racially subordinate must constantly prove and refute racist tropes:

> The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.

Expanding on Morrison's (1975) work, racism often means that the racially subordinate must consistently prove that racism exists; we have to constantly defend our experiences from structures and people who downplay the continuing significance of race(ism). This fight against the distracting nature of racism is no different in sociology. Within sociology it is through these community-defined concepts of truth, accuracy, theoretical and interpretive validity that we see the distracting, devaluing nature of racism. The problem is not the concepts themselves, but the fact that they acquire their meaning through a racialized regime of truth. Sociologists critical of the racial status quo are playing a losing game, because while sociology is supposed to be the most critical of academic disciplines, its dominant epistemology is more reproductive than radical. This is precisely the case with the concept of validity. On the one hand, retaining a concept of validity is absolutely essential for ethical research. Yet, on the other, the validity of race critical research will only be recognized once we manage to move beyond the discipline's racialized regime of truth which itself shapes the kinds of research methods, questions, and findings that are deemed valid to begin with. On this note, I end this call to battle sociology's epistemological commitment to white supremacy – the discipline's racialized regime of truth – with a reflection from Bonilla-Silva (2019: 18), who puts it far better than me:

> I know most White sociologists believe we do not have serious racial issues in sociology, or worse, think that whatever problems we have are caused by sociologists of color. Doubters should check the data […] White sociologists must get serious about race matters even if doing so hurts […] The question before us then is this: will we face our racial issues and work to create a truly inclusive and multicultural sociology, or will we continue believing like Pangloss that ours is 'the best of all (sociological) worlds'? I sincerely hope we choose door number one.

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