Racism and Young Girls’ Peer-group Relations: The Experiences of South Asian Girls

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Abstract: This article draws upon data from an in-depth ethnographic study of 5 and 6 year old children in an English multi-ethnic, inner-city primary school. It focuses on the significance of ‘race’ within young girls’ peer-group relations and the ways in which the social dynamics that underlie those relations provide the context for understanding the particular nature and form that racism takes among the girls. This is done through a focus on the experiences of South Asian girls within the group. Within this, the article has two main aims. First, it aims to contribute to the literature within the sociology of education by extending the existing research focus on racism within teacher/pupil interactions to include an understanding of racism as it manifests itself among the children’s peer-group relations. Second, in adapting and applying Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of capital and field, the article also offers a contribution to the literature within the sociology of ‘race’ and ethnicity by suggesting one potentially fruitful way in which racism can be understood within specific social contexts.

Keywords: Pierre Bourdieu, children, education, gender, racism, South Asian girls

The issue of ‘race’ has gained increasing prominence within the sociology of education over the last decade. A number of important and pioneering ethnographic studies of secondary schools in the United Kingdom have highlighted the significance of ‘race’ within teacher–student relationships. Much of the early work focused attention on relations between teachers and African Caribbean students. It highlighted the way in which teachers’ own racialised assumptions about the ‘aggressive’ and ‘threatening’ nature of African Caribbean males often appeared to lead to a complex self-fulfilling prophecy where African Caribbean male students tended to be over-disciplined and, as a result, became disaffected with schooling (Fuller 1980; Furlong 1984; Wright 1986). A later study by Mac an Ghaill (1988) represented an important development in relation to this work in that he stressed the differing forms of racism within the school and the variety of responses to this from minority ethnic students. More specifically, while his research confirmed the type of racialised processes affecting African Caribbean males mentioned above, he also drew attention to the very different experiences of South Asian male students. Interestingly, while they were also found to adopt challenging and disruptive
behaviour at times, they were often overlooked by teachers and their expressions of masculinity therefore rendered ‘invisible’. This, Mac an Ghaill (1988) argued, can be understood by the differing racialised perceptions that the teachers had of South Asian males as ‘diligent’, ‘hard working’ and ‘eager-to-please’, which tend to provide the lens through which their behaviour is re-interpreted as not serious and non-threatening. However, it is precisely this ‘invisibility’ that has also been found to reduce the attention and support given to South Asian students and thus subtly impede their educational opportunities (see Troyna 1991).

Moreover, Mac an Ghaill significantly drew attention to the gendered nature of African Caribbean and South Asian students’ responses to schooling. In particular, he found that the female students tended not to overtly confront and resist the types of racialised processes outlined above but would adopt a more subtle form of ‘resistance within accommodation’, where they maintained a commitment to educational achievement but showed little respect for the teachers or the school. Since Mac an Ghaill’s (1988) work, a number of other studies have significantly developed these core themes and drawn attention to the increasingly diverse forms of racism in secondary schools and the variety of student responses to them (Gillborn 1990, 1995; Mirza 1992; Sewell 1997). Moreover, more recent work has also tended to confirm the existence of such processes relating to teachers’ relationships with African Caribbean and South Asian pupils within the primary school (Wright 1992; Nehaul 1996; Connolly 1995, 1997b).

However, one of the consequences of this central focus on teachers and their relationships with students is that the influence and effects of racism among the students themselves remains a relatively under-researched area in both primary and secondary schools. One of the notable exceptions to this has been the study by Troyna and Hatcher (1992), which focused on 10 and 11 year old children in mainly white primary schools in England. They offered a number of important insights into the way in which white children came to develop racialised beliefs and also the factors that led to racist incidents. With their focus on mainly white schools, however, Troyna and Hatcher were limited in the extent to which they could explore the impact of ‘race’ on the interactions between children of differing ethnic groups and, moreover, the impact that the teachers’ racialised behaviour may have had on the children’s peer-group relations.

This article attempts to address this gap by assessing the nature and extent of racism among the peer-group relations of 5 and 6 year old girls by focusing on the experiences of South Asian girls and their positioning within the group. It locates this analysis within the contexts set by the types of broader racialised processes found among the teachers and the school. It draws upon data from a year-long ethnographic study of a multi-ethnic, inner-city English primary school. The particular methods and methodology used in the study are outlined and discussed. In offering a detailed account of the nature and influence of racism within the
specific contexts set by the school and the young girls’ peer-group relations, the article also aims to offer an important insight into some of the specific social processes through which racism and racialised relations are reproduced and developed. To do this, the article draws upon and adapts the concepts of field and capital found within the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In showing how these concepts can be used to understand the social dynamics that underpin racism, the article also attempts to demonstrate the broader utility of the notions of capital and field in studying racism and racialised relations more generally. Before turning to the present study, therefore, it is useful to begin by outlining the broader theoretical perspective offered by the concepts of capital and field and locate this within the wider literature on the sociology of ‘race’ and ethnicity.

**Defining racism**

Over recent years within the sociology of ‘race’ and ethnicity, the certainties that once underscored definitions and analyses of racism and ethnic relations have largely given way to a literature that is far more tentative in the claims that it makes. The older theories that tied racism to a specific set of beliefs and/or clearly identified those who were its principle beneficiaries and ‘victims’ have been replaced by an analysis that increasingly recognises the complex nature of racism and its diverse, contradictory and contingent forms (Cohen 1988, 1992; Rattansi 1992, 1994). The emergence of the concept of the ‘new racism’ has made an important contribution in shifting the focus away from definitions of racism based purely around beliefs in racial/biological inferiority to ones which emphasise culture and difference (Barker 1981; Gordon and Klug 1986). Moreover, the work of writers such as Cohen (1988, 1992) has played an important role in tracing the historical developments of racism and racialised relations and has drawn attention to the way in which the racial boundaries that mark out ‘us’ and ‘them’ are not closed and fixed but are open, fluid and in a constant state of change. Different social groups have become racialised at different times and in varying ways and levels of intensity. The discourses that underpin the racialisation of any given group have also been shown to evolve and change over time and from one context to the next in any particular period.

One of the principle ways in which this growing acceptance and exploration of the complexity and contradictions that underscore racism have taken place has been through attempts to understand and theorise the relationships between ‘race’ and other systems of power and subordination, most notably those of class and gender. The early Marxist writings on racism have done much to stress the context-specific nature of racism and to ask questions about its relationship with class structures (see Solomos 1986). The seminal work of black feminist writers such as hooks (1981) and Davis (1981) have also done much to stimulate debate about the inter-connectedness of ‘race’, class and gender and have encouraged a greater sensitivity in later writings to
the contradictions and contingencies that arise within expressions of racism as it is transformed through its articulations with class- and gender-based systems (see Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Brah 1996; Mirza 1997). These theoretical developments have also been matched, in recent years, by a growing number of ethnographic studies that have come to highlight and explore the complex nature of racism (see, for instance, Keith 1993; Back 1996; Bhopal 1997).

Given the above discussion, it is not surprising to find that it has proven difficult to define the concept of racism clearly and to delineate those attitudes, behaviours and broader social processes that can be identified as racist. Perhaps one of the more fruitful definitions to have emerged over recent years is that provided by Miles (1989) in his development of the concept of ‘racialisation’ (Reeves 1983). In this, Miles is concerned to focus on racism as an essentially open and fluid process rather than as a given set of beliefs and practices. He thus defines the process of racialisation (Miles 1989:74) as: ‘a representational process whereby social significance is attached to certain biological (usually phenotypical) human features, on the basis of which those people possessing those characteristics are designated as a distinct collectivity’.

There are a number of points to stress in relation to this definition. First, it signals a shift away from viewing racism as simply relating to skin colour. While this may well remain one of its most predominant forms, the definition recognises that a range of ‘signifiers’ can be used in the identification and racialisation of particular social groups. These may often be physical features, whether real or imagined, but may also include more cultural and/or behavioural traits which are thought to be innate as with anti-semitism and anti-Irish racism. Second, once a group is signified (whether this is by reference to skin colour, religion or national identity) a whole set of second-order characteristics is then usually assigned to that group as a consequence. Black skin as a signifier, for instance, draws attention to a whole range of second-order characteristics that the person is also perceived to have, such as being volatile, sporting and highly sexualised (sic). In this sense, as Reeves (1983:22) has argued, while skin colour can be used to signify a distinct collectivity, ‘the difference marked by colour can also be explained in terms of geographical, cultural, class or other factors. Categorising and explaining are two separate processes’. Third, these processes of racialisation may adopt direct and indirect forms. As Miles (1989:84) explains, the latter refers to a situation whereby ‘an explicitly racist discourse is modified in such a way that the explicitly racist content is eliminated, but other words carry the original meaning’. A contemporary example of this would be debates about immigration controls which, while they may no longer explicitly refer to minority ethnic people, they still primarily signify them because of the way that initial concerns about immigration were constituted (Reeves 1983).

Finally, while Miles identifies the process of racialisation as essentially an ideological one, it would be wrong to restrict it to the realm of ideas. Clearly, there is a complex dialectical relationship between ideas and practices such that the
signification of certain groups at any particular period will not only be grounded in the specific social relations that exist but will also come to inform and shape the development of future social relations, institutions and processes. As such, and this is an important point to bear in mind in relation to the present study, all those beliefs, behaviours, practices and processes that contribute, either directly or indirectly, to the racialisation of certain groups can be designated as racist. As will be seen shortly, for the young girls’ peer group, it is not just overt racist attitudes and discriminatory and exclusionary practices that constitute racism, but all of the more subtle ideas and processes, however indirect and unintentional, that tend to maintain and reproduce the racialisation of (in this case) South Asian girls.

**Bourdieu’s concepts of capital and field**

We have seen in the brief outline of developments within the sociology of ‘race’ and ethnicity that there is now an increasing emphasis on the complex, contradictory and contingent nature of racism as has been reflected, in turn, in the development of concepts such as that of racialisation in order to define what is meant by the term. It is clear that racism can take on many different forms and that these forms will develop and change over time and from one situation to the next in any given period. One of the principle lessons to be learnt from the literature outlined above therefore is that it is meaningless to attempt to discuss and understand particular expressions of racism without reference to the specific contexts within which they take place. However, there remains a need for a set of conceptual tools that can facilitate this understanding and, more specifically, aid our understanding of the differing contexts within which racism emerges. More specifically, in relation to the present study, such conceptual tools need to be able to explain how the particular context provided by the young girls’ peer-group relations has become racialised and how this context, in turn, has come to inform and shape the particular experiences of South Asian girls. It is here that the concepts of capital and field within the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990) present significant potential in helping to address these questions. It is therefore worth briefly outlining what is meant by these two terms and how they relate together before discussing their applicability to the present study.

According to Bourdieu, we can best understand social development and change as taking place through the ongoing struggles that exist over a range of scarce goods and resources (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). However, these goods and resources are not simply economic but also take on social and cultural forms. In recognising this, Bourdieu conceived of four basic types of capital: economic capital in the loosely Marxist sense; cultural capital, which consists primarily of what is perceived to be legitimate knowledge and behaviour; social capital, which relates to the prestige and influence gained through relationships and/or connections with significant others;
and *symbolic capital*, which in essence represents the status and honour that is associated with the acquisition of one or more forms of capital once they have been perceived and recognised as legitimate by others (Bourdieu 1987:3–4).

These differing forms of capital are rarely ever fully separate and distinct but are often deeply inter-related and partly transposable. As Bourdieu outlined in his early work on education, for example, economic capital enables a person to send their children to private schools and so learn and appropriate certain valued forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Moreover, the acquisition of both economic and cultural capital enables a person to develop valued relationships with other powerful people (social capital) and thus acquire certain positions within society that are associated with particular aspects of symbolic capital and so on.

To understand the specific relationships that develop as individuals and groups compete over particular forms of capital, Bourdieu introduced the concept of ‘field’. A field can best be understood as a ‘field of forces’ (Mahar *et al.* 1990:8) and is primarily defined in relation to the particular forms of capital present. It consists of the sum of those social relations and differing positions of power that have emerged in relation to competition over the acquisition and control of specific capital. As Bourdieu (1993:73, with emphasis in the original) explains:

> The structure of the field is a state of the power relations among the agents or institutions engaged in the struggle, or, to put it another way, a state of the distribution of the specific capital which has been accumulated in the course of previous struggles and which orients subsequent strategies …

The boundaries of any particular field in terms of the nature of the capital present and who and what are drawn into its domain are not fixed but are strongly contested by those within the field (Wacquant 1989). Moreover, because of the different forms of capital that exist, we can conceive of a wide range of distinct fields; each organised around particular forms of capital. Rather than attempting to set out and define every possible field of relations, Bourdieu developed the concepts of field and capital to be applied flexibly and in specific research contexts. Thus, how and which particular fields are to be defined and studied will depend upon the particular focus of the research.

While Bourdieu’s work has tended to privilege class and economic capital in his analysis (see, for instance, Bourdieu 1984), there is no reason why the concept of capital cannot be expanded to include gendered and racialised forms. As will be seen shortly within the context provided by the young girls’ peer-group relations, the acquisition of particular forms of social, cultural and symbolic capital associated with femininity can bring certain girls status and thus power within their group. Similarly, while ‘being African Caribbean’ may well result in processes of exclusion and subordination within the economic and political sphere, within certain social contexts (i.e. fields), such as youth culture, for example, it can afford an individual significant degrees of cultural capital (see Hewitt 1986; Jones 1988; Back 1996).
Clearly, from this last example, there will exist many different forms of capital whose significance can never be guaranteed. Rather, particular forms of capital will be distinctly valued within certain fields but will be devalued and/or used to signify subordinate status in other fields. It is precisely this diversity in the forms of capital and their associated fields that aids our understanding of the multiple and contradictory nature of any individual’s identity as they move from one field of relations to another.

The utility of these two concepts lies in their ability to help differentiate between differing social contexts (via the notion of field) and to identify and understand the principle social dynamics that underpin these differing contexts (via the notion of capital). This provides the analytical basis from which we can begin to understand why such fields of relations become racialised and, with reference to the specific forms of capital present, to explain the particular nature and form that racism adopts within this context. This will now be illustrated through a focus on the way in which racism has impacted upon a particular field constituted around young girls’ peer-group relations in a multi-ethnic, inner-city primary school. As highlighted at the beginning of this article, not only is the case study intended to model a potentially fruitful way of approaching the study of racism within particular social contexts, but it is also intended to contribute to the broader literature within the sociology of ‘race’ and education by extending the present analysis of racism as expressed through teacher/pupil interaction to incorporating an understanding of racism as found among the pupils’ peer-group cultures.

Following a brief outline and discussion of the particular methods and methodology underpinning the present research, the case study will be divided into three parts. First, some of the key aspects of the field created by the girls’ peer-group relations and the associated forms of capital of relevance to the present study will be identified and outlined. Second, the broader racialised processes produced and maintained through interactions between teachers and the children will then be discussed. Finally, the particular ways in which these broader racialised processes have impacted upon the girls’ peer-group relations will then be outlined. As will be shown, the particular ways in which African Caribbean and South Asian girls have become racialised can be understood in terms of the dominant forms of capital present within the field.

**The present study**

This research draws upon data gathered as part of a much broader ethnographic study of a group of 5 and 6 year old children from three reception/year 1 classes in an English inner-city, multi-ethnic primary school (see Connolly 1998). I attended East Avenue Primary School² for a year and a half (between January 1992 and June 1993) for three days per week on average, following the classes around the
school and observing and interviewing the children during the formal parts of the school day as well as at playtimes and lunchtime. In attempting to place the children’s own perspectives at the heart of the analysis, I conducted a total of seventy-three group interviews with the children. These usually took place in a separate room within the school and were largely informal and unstructured. They provided the space within which the children were allowed to raise and discuss any issue that they felt to be important. My role in these interviews was essentially one of a facilitator where I confined my questions to very general ones concerning what the children had done that day or what they liked to play. This was usually enough for the children then to develop their own lines of discussion. My interventions following these initial questions were simply to seek clarification from the children and/or encourage them to elaborate upon what they had said.

Understandably, research of this kind raises a number of important ethical issues and these are discussed in more detail elsewhere (see Connolly 1996). There are two issues that I want to address briefly here. The first relates to the potential for such interviews either to encourage the children to think in terms of ‘race’ and/or tacitly to condone the racist attitudes they may express. With this in mind, I purposely did not introduce the issue of ‘race’ or racism into the discussion but let the children raise it ‘naturally’ during their conversations. Moreover, so as not to appear to condone the racist attitudes that some of them expressed during the interviews, I would always make a point of asking the children to justify what they had said and/or ask them such questions as whether they felt it was a ‘nice’ thing to say. This approach enabled me to gain an understanding of the complex and contradictory nature of the children’s perspectives, and the types of justificatory frameworks they employed, while also signalling to them that I did not agree with or condone what they said.

The second ethical issue to raise briefly at this stage relates to the notion of informed consent. As regards the children, given their ages, it would have been difficult to explain to them precisely that the focus of the research was on the nature and influence of racism in their lives. Indeed, if the interviews were to begin with such an explanation, in whatever form, it would tend to place the subject of ‘race’ in the minds of the children. Not only would this possibly be interpreted as an invitation to the children to engage in racist discourses but it would also inhibit the ability to gain an understanding of the significance of ‘race’ in their lives and the particular situations and contexts within which it emerges ‘naturally’ within their conversations and interactions. As a consequence, the children were simply told that I would like to talk with them about what they like to do, who they like to play with and the things they get up to in the playground. No child was ‘forced’ to come for an interview but all children were asked if they would like to come and were told that they did not have to come if they did not want to. Not surprisingly, the curiosity of most of the children and/or the desire to do something different meant that none of the children refused to be interviewed during the time of the fieldwork.
As regards the informed consent of the school and the teachers involved, this was gained via my attendance at a meeting of the school governors and then at a staff meeting of the teachers. During both meetings I explained the nature of the research and the methodology to be used as fully as possible. I emphasised that I was primarily interested in the impact of ‘race’ in the children’s lives and what their attitudes and views were. I stressed that I would not introduce the issue of ‘race’ directly with any of the children and nor would I appear to condone any racist comments should the children make any. I explained that my general approach would be just to observe and talk to the children about their general views and interests and see whether the issue of ‘race’ emerged.

Once I had gained the support of the teachers and governors, I spent a full term in the three sample classrooms before commencing any interviews with the children. This not only enabled me to gain an appropriate understanding of the nature of classroom life and to develop a rapport with the teachers and children but it also provided the opportunity to gain the informed consent of the parents as well. During the semester, I talked to the parents (usually at the beginning and end of the day when they had come to drop off and collect their children) about the research and explained its aims and purpose as I had explained it to the teachers and governors. I also explained the nature of the interviews that I intended to conduct and was able to answer any questions the parents had. Overall, the parents were very supportive and none of them raised any concerns about the research nor did they refuse to allow their children to be involved. Indeed, as the research progressed, over a third of the parents were more than happy to be interviewed concerning their own perspectives and experiences regarding the local school and estate and their views on multiculturalism and ‘race’ relations.

Finally, there are two further points concerning my general methodological approach that I need briefly to mention here. The first relates to the difficulties I faced, as an adult male, researching young girls’ peer-group relations. The very nature of the girls’ friendship networks, located as they were in more private and intimate groupings (Grugueon 1993), made it almost impossible for me to gain access to them (see also Jenkins 1983). This was exacerbated by my own initial focus that was subconsciously dominated by a concern with the boys and social relations in the more central and public spaces in the school and playground. It was only towards the end of the fieldwork that I came to appreciate the importance of the more private and intimate friendship groupings that the girls had developed. The data used and discussed in this article, therefore, are inevitably partial and only offer an account of those more public aspects of the girls’ peer-group relations. Second, my presence as an adult male and my role in interviewing the young girls obviously also had an effect upon what the girls chose to say and do. Their appropriation and use of discourses on boyfriends and on love and marriage may well be partly understood as attempts to challenge my authority as an adult by the introduction of adult themes and/or as
reflecting what the girls felt it was important to say in my presence. However, while this obviously needs to be borne in mind when interpreting the data below, there are two points that can be made in response to this concern. First, there is the ability to triangulate what the children say in the context of the interviews with what they do in the playground and how they relate among themselves. It was clear, from observations of the children’s behaviour and the games they most frequently played, that these themes centring around (heterosexual) relationships were not simply raised in interviews with myself but played a significant part in their general peer-group relations. Second, while the nature and tone of the conversations that the children held in my presence may well have been exaggerated at times, they still offered a clear insight into the girls’ general level of knowledge and understanding of boyfriends, love and marriage and the importance they ascribed to these. Nevertheless, the above two points relating to my partial access to the young girls’ peer-group relations and my influence on their actions and behaviour as an adult male do raise important points about the interpretation of the data to follow and will be borne in mind when interpreting the data in this article.

The field of feminine peer-group relations

As outlined above, there were many different fields of relations in which the girls were located at East Avenue Primary School. The size and scope of each field would inevitably vary in relation to the particular forms of capital to which it related. At one level, for example, there were clear and distinct forms of cultural, social and symbolic capital associated with education. The field of relations that organised itself around these was primarily located at the level of the school as a whole, where teachers inevitably played a central role in prescribing the core nature and form of that capital. Being located at this level, this educational field therefore drew in both boys and girls within the school, who would similarly attempt to develop and maintain those forms of capital that could demonstrate their educational success and thus bring them status, both with their teachers but also, importantly, among their peers. The ability to read and write, for example, could be regarded as cultural capital in this respect. At another level, however, there were also other, distinct fields to be found among the children’s peer-group relations. Most obviously, these included the two principle fields organised around masculine and feminine forms of capital, respectively. In relation to the present article, it is the field of relations organised around specific forms of feminine capital that is of primary concern in providing the necessary context for understanding the development and influence of racism among the girls’ peer group.

To understand the nature and dynamics of this field, therefore, we need to begin by outlining the core forms of capital present. In doing this, however, it is important to stress two points. First, this will inevitably be only a partial representation of the
specific forms of feminine capital present given my restricted focus on the more 
public aspects of the girls’ behaviour and relationships. There will be other forms of 
feminine capital that are acquired and played out in the more private and intimate 
spheres of school life among the girls that are not covered here. Without an 
understanding of these other forms of capital, it is therefore impossible to state the 
relative prominence or importance of the particular forms to be outlined below. 
Second, there is a danger in focusing on these specific forms of feminine capital that 
the girls may be represented in a rather unidimensional and stereotypical way. It is 
important to stress, therefore, that this is by no means the only field of relations within 
which the girls are located. Their overall identities will be much more broadly defined 
and complex than could possibly be implied here as they also construct their identities 
around other forms of capital found outside of this particular field of feminine peer-
group relations, such as that associated with educational success, as touched upon 
above. Nevertheless, the forms of feminine capital to be outlined below are significant 
and provide the necessary context for understanding some of the particular ways in 
which racism is expressed and played out within the girls’ peer group.

One key aspect of feminine cultural capital that the girls struggled to acquire and 
demonstrate was knowledge of (heterosexual) relationships and the gender 
differences that related to this (Epstein 1997). The particular forms of cultural capital 
relating to this were commonly expressed through competent involvement in role-
playing games such as ‘mummies and daddies,’ ‘mummies and babies,’ ‘shops’ and 
‘nurses and doctors’. Such games enabled the girls to explore and display their 
knowledge and understanding of gender relationships. Moreover, one of the key 
ways in which girls could demonstrate this aspect of their ‘femininity’ was through 
the acquisition of a boyfriend. In this sense, the ability to boast of having a boyfriend 
could be seen as a significant form of social capital among the girls (Grugeon 1993; 
Hatcher 1995). The ability to parade knowledge and/or claim experience of 
boyfriends, love, intimacy and marriage therefore provided significant ways in which 
many of the girls attempted to gain status and influence among their female peers. 
This is illustrated in the following conversation with Lisa, a 5 year old white girl:

PC: What other boys are in your class? Peter [African Caribbean boy]? Do you play with 
Peter?
Lisa: Yeah – I’m going to marry him! … We’re going to marry each other! … Well, I want 
to marry two boys …
PC: Who’s the other one?
Lisa: Devan [also African Caribbean].
PC: Devan and Peter? But he [Devan] was kicking you …
Lisa: Yeah, but he’s stopped that now and he’s my friend.
PC: What other boys? Pritul [South Asian boy] – do you play with Pritul?
Lisa: No! … Well, Pritul wants to marry Lyndsey!
PC: Does he? Why?
Lisa: Because they love each other – they went to each other’s house.
The prominence of these particular forms of social and cultural capital associated with boyfriends and (heterosexual) relationships more generally could be found in the significant amount of time that some of the girls devoted to playing the types of gendered role-play games touched upon above and, moreover, in their attempts to work out and analyse who was ‘going out’ with who. This emphasis was also quite ritualised among these girls through one of the more popular games that they played, called ‘Orange Balls’. The game involved quite a large group, usually between eight and ten, of girls and with many more watching. A girl was picked from within the group and the rest of the girls huddled together out of earshot of that girl and picked a boy’s name. They would then dance in a ring around her and sing the following:

Orange balls, orange balls, here we go again bum! bum!
Orange balls, orange balls, here we go again bum! bum!
Stamp your feet if you hate him,
Stamp your feet if you hate him,
Stamp your feet if you hate him,
e-i-e-i-oh!
Cross your heart if you love him,
Cross your heart if you love him,
Cross your heart if you love him,
e-i-e-i-oh!
Michael [or whatever name is chosen] says he loves you,
Michael says he loves you,
Michael says he loves you,
e-i-e-i-oh!

Orange Balls therefore represented a very public game where girls would explore particular relationships between themselves and other boys. Much of the game involved a careful analysis of how the girl who had been chosen responded to the boy’s name and whether this response signalled that she was interested in that boy or not. It therefore provided the basis whereby existing forms of feminine capital associated with knowledge and/or experience of boyfriends were expressed and consolidated and thus somewhere girls could either demonstrate their existing cultural and social capital and/or struggle to acquire it. Moreover, the public nature of the game provided an avenue through which more collective tastes could be developed and reinforced. Interestingly, during one particular episode, the girls had chosen Jayesh, a South Asian boy, when playing the game and appeared not only to take great delight from the adverse reaction of the girl that was ‘on’ but also from running over to Jayesh and teasing him about how that girl ‘fancied’ him. This use of South Asian children as representing the Other in terms of attractiveness will be returned to later in this article.

For now, however, this last point also draws attention to the inevitable role played by the notion of ‘attractiveness’ in mediating the acquisition of particular forms of
feminine cultural and social capital. Most basically, the ability to claim social capital through the acquisition of a boyfriend involves the ability to attract him in the first place. The cultural capital associated with fostering and maintaining an attractive appearance can be seen, for example, with Debbie, a 6 year old white girl, who explained to me once: ‘I’m going to have my hair cut right round here and have it curly a bit. When I have my hair done Stephen’s [a boy of the same age from another class] going to really like me.’ This was also a theme running through the following conversation with three South Asian girls. It is interesting how Stephen, again, provides the focus for Aisha’s attention:

PC: Why don’t they play with Poonam and Beenal, Aisha? Why are the boys nasty to them?
AISHA: Er, their hair’s not long!
PC: Because their hairs’ not long?
AISHA: Yeah.
BEENAL: Mine’s long!
PC: Beenal’s har’s long.
AISHA: Yeah, but she does plaits and I hate plaits and boys hate plaits like that! And boys like this [touching her own hair] and a hair band.
PC: How do you know they like that? Who said they like that?
AISHA: Stephen in our class yesterday.
PC: Did he? What did he say?
AISHA: He said I was very, very nice.

It is within this overarching concern with being attractive that some girls developed a keen interest in clothes, jewellery and make-up, which, in turn, invests a significant degree of cultural capital among those girls able competently to display knowledge and/or use of such things. Aisha, for example, had brought into school some of her mother’s face cream one day and had gathered a relatively large group of girls around her as she attempted to apply it to her own face and allowed a select group of friends also to try it. On other occasions she would bring in lipstick and jewellery with the same effect.

Racism and the field of feminine peer-group relations

So far, I have outlined and discussed particular elements of the girls’ peer-group relations and the forms of cultural and social capital that are present. It needs to be stressed again that this is not meant to be a representative nor an exhaustive discussion of the field. Rather, I have drawn attention to just one particular strand – discourses on (heterosexual) relationships and boyfriends – to provide the context within which we can now turn, in this section, to develop an understanding of some of the ways in which racism comes to be reproduced and expressed within that field. In a similar vein, therefore, the discussion of racism that follows is not exhaustive but merely represents one particular aspect of its appropriation and salience within the
girls’ peer group in relation to these broader concerns with relationships, boyfriends and attractiveness.

Moreover, it needs to be stressed that, in the space available, we can only highlight the more general discourses on ‘race’ that have developed among the girls and how these feed into and reproduce a range of exclusionary practices relating to South Asian girls. In doing this, no claims are being made about how effective these exclusionary practices have been nor how they have influenced the experiences and behaviour of particular South Asian girls. Indeed, as argued elsewhere, the African Caribbean and South Asian girls at East Avenue were extremely socially competent and relatively successful in the ways they responded to and chose to conform to and/or resist their general discursive positioning within the field (Connolly 1998). In simply setting out the broader discursive frame in relation to the influence of ‘race’ therefore, it is important that it is not read to imply any type of uniformity in relation to its effects on the South Asian girls within the peer group. Furthermore, in organising the following analysis around South Asian girls, this should not be read as implying that this social grouping was immutable or fixed. While there existed a rather distinct broader discursive frame relating to South Asian girls, this did not play itself out in any direct or unequivocal way in relation to the girls themselves either in respect of their own senses of identity or in their relations with others. Rather, the racialised boundaries that were drawn around South Asian girls were much more contingent, open and contradictory than the broader racialised discourses to be outlined below would suggest.

**South Asian girls within the field**

The position of South Asian girls within the field created by the girls’ peer-group relations can be understood in part by the more general racialised and derogatory discourses that took place within and beyond the school concerning the perceived ‘alien’ and ‘inferior’ nature of South Asian people (see Back 1996; Connolly 1998). This perception tended to be reinforced at times by some of the teachers who would treat the South Asian girls in a rather patronising manner that might back up the other children’s beliefs that they were dependent and incapable of looking after themselves. This is illustrated in the following incident in the classroom where the teacher, Mrs Scott, had just been talking to the mother of Reena (a South Asian girl) about Reena’s staying for school dinners for the first time. Her mother had just explained to Mrs Scott that Reena was a little apprehensive about having to stay and wanted her mother to stay with her. While the children were all sat on the floor and with Reena’s mother present, Mrs Scott called Reena to the front and said:

**Mrs Scott:** [to Reena] What is it that’s upsetting you? Is it playing out after dinner or what? [No answer, Reena just stands there looking a little apprehensive.] Or the dinner? What is it? [Still no answer. Mrs Scott looks to the mother.] They
choose what they want, they walk along and choose. [Looking back to Reena] Why do you want your mummy to come along at dinner time? You don’t know? … Do you play with somebody after dinner? Who do you play with? [No answer].

[Mrs Scott turns to whole of class] Sit down everybody! Does anybody play with Reena at dinner time? [Stephanie and Sonia put hands up] Oh do you Stephanie? Thank you! You do, do you? Oh good girl, Sonia!

MOTHER: … There are girls from other classes; you know Kamaljeet and Deepti? [Two girls from the juniors] They play with her.

MRS SCOTT: Oh I see, yes, I do, they’re very nice!

MOTHER: They play with her.

MRS SCOTT: Well, the thing is, she should try to make friends in here.

MOTHER: That’s what I’m telling her; she should try/

MRS SCOTT: /Listen girls you must try to look after Reena because she’s VERY quiet! And she doesn’t talk to anybody very much. Poonam will look after her won’t you? She’s friendly! and Beenal

MOTHER: [to Reena] They’re all so friendly look!

MRS SCOTT: And Sonia. This is the danger actually. Mrs, erm, Woods wrote in her report that she works on her own and doesn’t talk to people.

MOTHER: Yeah, that’s the dang/

MRS SCOTT: /That’s the danger, because when you go out you’re lonely … [to Reena] Who would you like to sit with today? [Points to Poonam] Poonam! Well you go and sit over there and Poonam will look after you.

Not only did the above incident tend to reinforce the view of South Asian girls being passive and dependent but it also reproduced the perception that they ‘stick together’ in Mrs Scott’s assumption that Poonam will look after Reena.

The construction of South Asian girls as ‘inferior’, together with the general expectation of them being culturally different and ‘alien’ was one reproduced by some of the other girls at the school. This is illustrated in the following discussion where a group of girls noticed some posters featuring South Asian women on the walls in the room where they were being interviewed:

CHARLENE: They’re all Indians! [Pointing to pictures on the wall.]

MELANIE: No – some of ’em are white people, some of ’em!

CHARLENE: That baby is – but they’re all Indians. Urrr, I don’t like Indians!

PC: Why?

MELANIE: Urrrrhh! They’re Pakis – I don’t like Pakis!

PC: Why don’t you like Indians then?

CHARLENE: … I don’t like Pakis!

MELANIE: Urrrrhh! I don’t like Indians!

MELANIE: Paki-Paki-Paki!

PC: Is that a nice word – saying ‘Paki’?

CHARLENE: Nah.

PC: No?

MELANIE: No!
PC: Why isn’t it a nice word?
CHARLENE: Because it’s naughty.
PC: Naughty? Why is it naughty?
MELANIE: I don’t know! Now shut up!

Moreover, this general discourse was also shared by some of the boys who, interestingly, also came to construct South Asian girls as the Other in relation to attractiveness and girlfriends – in a similar way to that in which the girls came to construct South Asian boys as highlighted earlier. This is illustrated in the following argument that took place among a group of boys. Interestingly, the argument began with Paul teasing Stephen that he went out with Annette who was an African Caribbean girl respected by these boys for her perceived ‘boisterousness’ but who was therefore not regarded as particularly ‘feminine’.

PAUL: Annette does love you! Annette does go out with you!
STEPHEN: I bet! Is that why … Alright then, if Annette goes out with me then Nazia goes out with Daniel!
PAUL: You have two girlfriends – Nazia, Kelly [African Caribbean] and her, Annette.
STEPHEN: And I know, and I know you go out with Rupal, Rakhee and [saying last name slowly and pulling face] Neelam!
DANIEL: You’ve got a Paki girlfriend!
STEPHEN: Who?
DANIEL: That one there with that dot! [on another poster]
PAUL: [laughs].
STEPHEN: You go out with Neelam!
DANIEL: And so do you!
STEPHEN: You go out with all the girls in our class!
DANIEL: You go out with all the Pakis! [laughs]
STEPHEN: I said you go out with everyone in the whole world, mate!
DANIEL: So do you [laughs]!
STEPHEN: How can you say I do when I’ve already said you do!
DANIEL: You do!
STEPHEN: You do!
DANIEL: You go out with all of the Pakis, I go out with all the whites [laughs].
STEPHEN: You go out with all of the Pakis! Because I, do I look like a Paki though – you do! You go the Mosque mate where all the Pakis go!

[General laughs]

In a similar way to that which Brah and Minhas (1985) found with students in secondary schools, these South Asian girls appeared therefore to have been positioned as ‘sexual rejects’ by the boys. Because of their perceived cultural difference and their construction as passive and socially incompetent, they had come to represent the Other in relation to attractiveness. This was also a process that was reproduced among the girls within the field of feminine peer-group relations who tended systematically to exclude South Asian girls from their games and activities. As touched upon earlier, this exclusion can, in part, be understood by the girls’ being
The purpose of this article has been two-fold. First, it has attempted to make a contribution to the literature within the sociology of education by extending the focus of racism in schools to the children’s peer-group relations. As has been outlined above, the teachers’ tendency to characterise South Asian girls as quiet and passive as found in a number of other studies, has tended to provide an important influence on the ways in which racism then comes to inform and structure relations among the children. However, it has also been argued that the specific ways in which the children’s peer-group relations became racialised can only be understood with reference to the particular and pre-existing nature and dynamics of those relations.
In attempting to understand how the specific contexts provided by the girls’ struggles over ‘being feminine’ influenced the particular nature and form that the racialisation and exclusion of South Asian girls took among the girls’ peer group, the article has also attempted to make a contribution to the literature on the sociology of ‘race’ and ethnicity.

This second main aim of the article can be seen in the adaptation and application of Bourdieu’s concepts of capital and field to the study of racism and racialised relations. In relation to the present study, such concepts have been shown to aid our understanding of the particular ways in which South Asian girls have been excluded by their female peers. More generally, it has been suggested that, in the increasing recognition of the context-specific and contingent nature of racism, these concepts can potentially help to identify the particular contexts (through the notion of field) within which racism expresses itself and the specific social dynamics present within these contexts (understood through the concept of capital) that then tend to influence and shape the particular nature and form that racism takes in that context. As also suggested, while not possible here, such a framework also allows for a more detailed and holistic analysis of the manifestations of racism at a number of different levels (i.e. fields) within the social formation and how these tend to articulate with one another (see Connolly 1998).

As mentioned earlier, however, the specific conclusions drawn in relation to the case study on the young girls’ peer-group relations need to be interpreted cautiously. The case study is not intended to be seen as representative nor as offering a comprehensive account of the girls’ peer-group relations. Rather it only focuses on one particular aspect of the more public elements of those relationships. Moreover, the girls’ focus on (heterosexual) relationships and boyfriends in particular within group interviews may partially reflect the influence of my own presence as an adult male. However, the fact that such themes tended to underscore many of the girls’ games and activities within the playground tends to suggest that these themes do represent one significant aspect of their peer culture, however much they may have been exaggerated by the girls in interviews.

In addition, because of this partial focus on only some specific elements of the girls’ peer-group relations, the present study has also therefore only been able to highlight one particular aspect of the ways in which racism derives from and impacts upon these relations. Clearly, much more work is required to highlight the many different forms of capital that are valued and sought after by the girls, both within the public and more private aspects of their relations, and how racism relates to these. Moreover, because of the limitations of space, the article has only been able to offer an understanding of the broader racialised processes and practices that are evident within the school and among the girls’ peer group. There is no discussion here in relation to the agency of the girls and the very different and diverse ways in which the South Asian girls responded to these broader processes, the degrees to which they
chose to conform and/or successfully resist them and/or the contingent nature of the racialised boundaries drawn in terms of South Asian identities. This is clearly evident within the data above where Aisha, for example, appeared able to resist the broader racialised processes that attempted to exclude South Asian girls from discourses on (heterosexual) relationships and boyfriends and, in contrast, tended to engage quite prominently in these. Rather than representing a quite deterministic account, therefore, all that is offered here is an understanding of the racialised contexts within which these girls have to struggle with and negotiate their social position and identities. The diverse and contradictory ways in which they have done this is beyond the scope of the present article and is discussed elsewhere (see Connolly 1998).

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NOTES
1. ‘South Asian’ is used here, and throughout the study, to refer to people whose families have descended from India, Pakistan or Bangladesh. It is recognised that such a definition is problematic in that it draws together people with very different ethnic, religious and/or national identities. In relation to the present study, however, it is a definition that will suffice for two reasons. First, the children were overwhelmingly Gujarati-speaking and, for those in the three sample classes, nine out of the thirteen South Asian children who started the academic year were Hindus. Second, and more significantly, as far as the school staff and other children were concerned, they were seen as ‘all the same’ [sic] and were therefore forced to negotiate their sense of identity within a similar set of discourses on ‘race’.
2. The name of the school and local area, together with those of the children and teachers, have all been changed to ensure anonymity.
3. This initial focus on the boys can be understood in a similar vein to that which Thorne (1993) found in relation to how she came to see the girls in her own ethnographic study of an elementary school. In this, Thorne found that her observations of the girls tapped into deep memories of her own childhood experiences of school (pp. 24–5).
4. A more detailed discussion of the problems associated with interpreting data gained from such interviews can be found in Connolly (1997a). See also Matthews (1997).

REFERENCES


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