Honorary Whiteness: The Psychology of Racial Cognitive Illusion

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Abstract
Experiences whether personal or collective, sometimes evoke a psychological satisfaction of being superior to others. This could be due to inappropriate perception or some prejudice. When misperception takes a systematic and permanent form, it becomes an illusion. Several scientific works imply possible racial cognitive illusions. In this work, I treat honorary whiteness as a diminutive way of referring to some categories of human beings. Honorary whiteness is an ideology based on the belief of being superior to others on the basis of colour. It is the practice of acting white or like European in order to gain some benefits or for some interests. This attitude pervades the political, economic, legal and social life of human beings. Hence, this research initiates the urgency to revisit the discourse on racial superiority and how it informs some cognitive misrepresentations of human biological givens. I examine the above theme with the aim of explaining honorary whiteness, racial cognitive illusion and finally, explore the psychological perspectives in view of proffering innovative solutions on racial cognitive illusion.
Keywords: Archipelago, cognitive illusion, honorary blackness, honorary whiteness, racial discrimination.

Introduction

The recognition of differences in human beings has led to injustice in treating people. Some people have suffered prejudice of all kinds because of their age, sex, level of education or even health condition. The worst discrimination is based on race. Racial discrimination occurs when there is any exclusion, restriction or segregation of people based on the colour of their skin. International actions against racial discrimination and conventions on the elimination of all racial discrimination (BANTON, 1996) have probably given rise to honorary white status. I presume that honorary white status includes racial discrimination. Discrimination simply means to draw an unfair or injurious distinction in such a way that widely accepted values and procedures are violated (SIMPSON & YINGER 1985, 23). It presents an inferior opinion about a particular group to justify dehumanising treatment against them. However, honorary white, a "system of social relation" which seems to give value to everyone irrespective of colour gives the impression of racial intolerance. Honorary white absorbs the best non-white into the White group and raises the status of non-white.

The privilege of "honorary white" status does not resolve the idea of inequality but rather a systematization of racism. Over time, this has developed into a racial cognitive illusion. The complexity of human perception and treatment of information call for closer examination of the psychological perspective of why some people think they are better than others and why others want to renounce their natural identity in order to assume another cultural identity.

Contrary to the pretensions of honorary white status, the "honorary black" status is strongly manifested in the fight led by Stephen Biko and Frederick Douglass. Biko tried to valorise Black people and envisaged a society that there is no racial categorisations because it is arbitrary and oppressive (APARTHEID MUSEUM 2007) Douglas proposed "Black power" by emphasizing that it begins from the consciousness of one's dignity (BROMELL 2021, 24). This is the collective power of all the Blacks - the power of the cohesion and solidarity of Blacks against all foreign values and domination. That consists in affirming my dignity and making others conscious of my dignity. In other words, dignity is fundamentally relational. Honorary black is therefore the self-affirmation of Black dignity and the effort to make others respect it.

The preceding argument reveals that honorary white and honorary Black are two opposing points of view. They are behaviours which are articulated on racial cognitive illusions. Honorary white may be the effect of racial cognitive illusions and target a group of people to deprive their legitimate human rights. The same cannot be said of honorary Black which is an effort to defend the value of Black people. First of all, this research holds that the idea of "honorary white" does not resolve the problem of racism. The historical foundations of honorary white reinforce the meaning given to "white" and "black", and "race". Second, I examine racial cognitive illusion as a way of understanding the importance of each term in the development of racial discrimination. Lastly, I state the psychological perspectives with the objective of evaluating the benefits/conflicts of racial cognitive illusion. This also entails proffering innovative solutions to the crises of racial identities.

Honorary white

"Honorary white" also called "model minority" or "honorary Europeans" is a notion/practice that places expectations on people of other race to channel them to a specific area of success (ZHOU 2007, 66). For this reason, people make effort to accede to the honorary white status by gaining prestigious positions in society through education, increasing their level of income and by seeking higher occupations (RITTER 2015, 406). The desire and eventual competence in specific areas such as science and engineering qualify a person to have the esteemed white position irrespective of race. This makes people develop the idea that to be accomplished in life, one has to acquire white status. This way of behaving attaches less importance to diversity and fails to appreciate the nobility of people of other race and occupations.

Historically, the disproportionate relations between colonisers (Whites) and colonised (Blacks or indigenes) played a great role in developing honorary white and eventually racial cognitive illusion. To this day, most Blacks are conditioned to believe that Whites are superior. "Although the colonial period is over, its rationale remains running within the social relations, structures of power, social division of work, production of knowledge and identities. This process has been called 'coloniality'" (NOGUEIRA 2013, 24). Coloniality as an epistemological concept suggests that people living in some geographical areas are more developed and intelligent than others. This implies that White should colonise Blacks.

Several racial theorists such as Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Comte de Buffon, Charles Darwin, Immanuel Kant, and Samuel Morton have tried to explain the differences in race. Blumenbach's collection of human skulls throughout Europe (2018, 7), "the germs-and-endowments theory" popularised by Kant (2013, 44) were to become grounds for racial discrimination. Although Blumenbach did not make any racial distinction between human beings but his work became the central point of racists' arguments. His emphasis was on the unity of human beings but his genetic approach was given a different interpretation. This is different from Kant who used "the germs-and-endowments theory" as justification for the lower humanity of Africans. Distinctive germs and endowments made it possible for human beings to be able to adapt to all kinds of climates. Even though Kant was more categorical on the influence of climatic factors in racial categorisation, his propositions on Blacks made him a racist.

Some philosophical thoughts amplified the existing racial theories and concepts such as "black" and "white". Those philosophical thoughts are classical reflections dating back to the Enlightenment era about Africans or high melanated people. Armchair philosophers, from John Locke, David Hume, Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, etc made it a habit to speculate about the inferiority of Africans. Kant claims that the 'negro' who is darkly coloured is not only labelled to have a darker brain than Whites, but that the heat of the sun on the epidermis might have coloured the blood, the semen, the bile and the principal fluids of his body (2013, 102). By implication, Black people are not capable of achieving success due to the climatic condition of their geographical location. Hegel affirms that Africans are completely wild and untamed and that there should be no consideration of reverence and morality for them, their culture and religion (2001, 111). That is to say, there should be no consideration for their humanity. The discourses of these philosophers created a mental distortion of White people and gradually produced a false knowledge and perception of people of other races, such as: Whites have higher culture, art and science. In Europe, the effect of their scientific works culminated in the Jewish Holocaust that occurred in the 19th century (Blumenbach 2018, 7).

Contrary to the claims or propositions of racial theorists and armchair philosophers, the biological basis for racial differentiation seems more appealing. According to this perspective, organic composition of a person and environmental factors are responsible for racial differences. Philosophical reflection failed to use this argument to establish racial diversity. In other words, all human beings are the same, but their biological compositions vary. Climatic factors could also be responsible for the difference in the skin colour of people. Apart from the biological composition of man and climatic factors, it is important to examine how the meaning attached to terms such as white, black and race have contributed to racial cognitive illusion.

Terminologies linked to honorary white
There is a need to examine the terms "white" and "black" because the very meaning of honorary white devalues people and even proposes the desire to ascend to a superior identity. Terminologies such as 'white' and 'black' may be offensive because they are implicitly based on a racist mindset. This problem is accentuated by the significance given to white and black. Black colour was given a negative image. It was directly linked to darkness, to occult, to death and even to devil. Blackness is associated with dirt, evil (JONES 2013, 1112), and obstacle to success (RITTER 2015, 412). Some associate black with poverty, laziness, immorality, criminality, and ignorance. Whereas white, whiteness, lightness or fairness are synonyms to or connote purity, innocence, intelligence, honesty, industry beauty, (JONES 2013, 1111-1112), moral and technological superiority (LI & NICHOLSON 2021, 4). The signification given to black and white could possibly create the idea or attitude of hierarchy and prejudice against Black people.

The problem with the term "white" requires a profound examination. It is a term which means different things to different people. It denotes those who historically have benefitted from light-skin privilege. It could be understood as "an arbitrary label having more to do with privilege than biology" (ZHOU 2007, 64). In this sense, it is a set of practices that function in order to protect and maintain privilege, or even an experience of privilege (LINDNER 2018, 44; NOGUEIRA 2013, 25). Over time, the opportunities and concessions given to white became part of the human perception of reality to the extent that being White means precisely not being able to see, perceive, recognize or accord respect to Black people. It is good to specify that in the USA, whiteness is strictly related to the ethnic and genetic origin of each person. In Brazil, being white relates to appearance, status and phenotype; in South Africa, phenotype and origin are important demarcations of whiteness (NOGUEIRA 2012, 25**).** The sense attributed to Whites as people of "wealth, status and class" could be exaggerated because there are Whites who are criminals, poor and who reflect all the qualities falsely attributed to blackness. The caste system in India where a "lineage" or a group is believed to possess hereditary qualities (O'HANLON 2002, 17) is a good illustration of how Blacks are considered impure, people that should take lower positions in the economic, political and social life. David Mosse states:

> Caste is often best understood as attachment, performance, or 'composition' (…), is a matter of self as well as association; it is personal as well as political. Caste is both a mode of domination and a means to challenge that domination. (MOSSE, 2012 96-97)

Race is another term used to undervalue people and to propose to them a better-quality personality. Race is not simply a discourse, but a practice which produces certain knowledge of the superiority of Whites over Blacks (MAGUBANE 2001, 3). It is an ideology based upon outward judgments. The term race has diverse meanings. From the social point of view, race is the distinction between the nobles and the masses; from the point of view of civilization, it is considering the European culture and people as founders of the new civilisation (SIMPSON & YINGER 1985, 27). From the South African experience of governance, race is the distinction "between 'Native' and "Coloured," between 'recognised Indians' and others of Indian descent" (SIMPSON & YINGER 1985, 28). I consider these definitions of race as judgmental in their approach. The biologists' and anthropologists' use of the term (race) is more acceptable. They believe it is a genetic concept (SIMPSON & YINGER 1985, 30).

It is important to note that racist attitudes led to racial categorisation of people. Racial categorisation played an important role in the promotion of inhuman practices such as oppression, exploitation, colonisation, murder, torture and dehumanisation of human beings (MAGUBANE 2001, 4). The 18th century social Darwinists and eugenicists proposed concepts of racial hierarchy that have profoundly influenced how race is understood to work across science, politics and the society at large. This means that where one is born, level of education, social status or even skin colour is sufficient to establish a gap among people (SEN & WASOW 2016, 501). These social phenomena raise fundamental questions on the concept of human value and our humanity. They provoke the desire to seek an elevated position in the society and a disposition, a tendency or a situation where those who are in the lower echelon look forward to occupying a very privileged place in society.

Kwesi Tsri made a distinction between the symbolic and the categorical use of the term black. In his opinion, the symbolic use of the term "black" gradually led to the categorical use of the term "black" (2015, 1). He argues that the symbolic use of the term goes back to the ancient Greek myths and literature where black was given negative connotations and white positive connotations. Black was also used interchangeably for both Ethiopians and Africans (TSRI 2015, 2). The use of black to describe Ethiopians who had burn-face or sun burn-face by authors such as Snowden (1971), Thompson (1989) and Hannaford (1996) paved way for the categorical use of the term black. The categorical use of black is the fact of transferring all the symbolic significations of black to a subject (precisely Africans because of the dark colour of their skin). In this case, the symbolic use of black becomes a derogatory term for Africans in order to minimise them. In spite of the negative connotations of black, the symbolic use did not imply any racial discrimination. This explains why Tsri advocates that the categorical use of the term black for Africans should be abandoned (2015, 1). His

plea goes against the entire struggle to valorise Africans such as the Black Consciousness Movement by Biko (APARTHEID MUSEUM 2007), the Negritude Movements and explains the impossibility of changing the symbolic use of the term black.

Mode of operation of honorary white

The mode of operation of honorary white aims at selecting the best for the white group. This consists in giving conditions under which Blacks can occupy an intermediate position in the racial hierarchy and be perceived as White (SHIAO 2017, 790). This establishes three categories of people: the Whites (who are very important), the honorary white (which is an intermediate group) and the Blacks (who are not important). The prejudice against Blacks stirs them to take the honorary white status and those in the intermediate group to aspire to become full Whites without "achieving" full acceptance as "Whites" (LI & NICHOLSON 2021, 2).

"Othering" and "Evil other" are other effective modes of operation used in creating mental or cognitive inferiority. "Othering" and "Evil other" structure the mind of people and their behaviour negatively. On the one hand, "othering" attributes inferior qualities to others, countries, foreigners and stigmatized groups or other minorities in view of showing how unimportant they worth (LI & NICHOLSON, 2021, 4). On the other hand, the "evil-other" is an attitude which consists in tagging others as evildoers who want your downfall (LI & NICHOLSON 2021, 7). This particular way of behaving awakens in Blacks the feeling to become White.

Racial cognitive illusion

Racial cognitive illusion consists in having a negative belief about others based on distorted information about what they represent. It is important to know that the human mind works not only on information, but on representations of information. The significance of information or their representations are treated in the mind. In this case, the colour of skin can trigger the treatment of information about people from a particular racial group. The origin of racial cognitive illusion could be attributed to the desire to obtain specific information about a person. Such information includes: the identification of a person, colour, culture, ethnic group, language, name, place of birth, nationality, tribe, gender, level of studies, what he does in the society, where a person lives, etc (SEN & WASOW 2016). When the collection of information is done with racist perceptions about people, it could result in false details about the inferiority or superiority of people. This constitutes what I call racial cognitive illusion. I describe racial cognitive illusion as a situation where some persons discriminate others, injustice is perpetrated and certain rights are denied based on the knowledge of people's backgrounds. Racial cognitive illusion is not only a mental activity but also observable behaviours which underestimate the worth of others. In psychology, Implicit Association Tests (IAT) can be used to measure mental thoughts and behaviours in order to determine the degree of racial cognitive illusion.

According to Lieury, "psychology concerns all mental processes and behaviours enabled by the brain" (2017, 5). The mental processes concern perception and memory which can be regrouped under the term "cognition". There are many definitions of cognition depending on one's school of thought. From the point of view of cognitive psychology, it is the process of acquisition and treatment of information. From the functional psychological viewpoint, cognition is conceptualised in terms in behaviour (BAYNE *et al.*, 2019, 209). The above descriptions of cognition are very important in understanding how acquiring and treatment of information can affect the perception of Black people. The source of information could be erroneous or biased. Prejudice, one's state of mind, socio-economic, political as well as historical factors could also affect the treatment of information about Black people. Errors in judgment could be due to cultural background, belief and personal/collective experience.

Cognitive illusion (also known as cognitive bias or a heuristic) is a common thinking error which involves emotional reasoning, fortune telling, mind reading, overgeneralising, personalising, polarising and shoulding (DUBORD 2011, 799-800). Over time, what used to be ordinary opinion and normal judgments about others could develop to strong belief. The point of view associated to a particular person could be generalised, leading to a negative representation of people from a given culture, ethnic group or race.

It is good to note that illusion is different from *error* and *bias*. Error and bias are distortions that could be caused by oversight or negligence. On the contrary, illusion is an extreme form of error, bias or both, that assumes a particular direction or shape (TAYLOR & BROWN 1988, 194). From this perspective, it is possible to say that illusion is an ingrained negative perception about people who have black skin due to historical experiences, opinions or beliefs. As a stable form of error, illusion can potentially affect behaviour, discourses, action of people in a racial way.

I consider Teun A. Van Dijk work on "Cognitive Context Models and Discourse" (1997, 203-208) fundamental in understanding racial cognitive illusion. He describes how mental processes pass into discourse (writing, speaking) and its impact on the attitude of people concerning people of other race. In the same perspective, cognitive laboratories incorporate techniques adapted from usability and think-aloud studies. The latter are essentially qualified as response process validity (GERTNER *et al.* 2016, 26). In other words, they are tests through which mental processes are externalised through words, writings and behaviour. Through individual interviews or focus groups on a research purpose (for example, Blacks), respondents could voice their own opinions and perceptions about them. Particular importance is placed on cognitive process by which opinions shape, for instance my knowledge about Blacks. Concretely, the decision or judgment which is the result of the different framings of the same research problem is due to different mental processes (KAHNEMAN & TVERSKY 1996, 583).

Psychological effects of honorary white
It is important to evaluate the psychological benefits/conflicts related to honorary white. The implication is enormous both for victims and perpetrators. While victims (mostly Africans) suffer self-esteem, the perpetrators (Whites) are also affected intellectually because they cannot experience themselves in their own culture. The victims are treated differently according to situations or circumstances. They could be treated as White under one law, as non-White in terms of at least three other laws, and, in a fourth law, they might be treated as both White and non-White (KAWASAKI 2001, 55). Such inconsistency in the application of the law is formulated according to skin colour. This is capable of creating a mental or emotional effect of being "forever foreigner" (ZHOU 2007, 68).

The feeling of being "forever foreigner" could lead to the development of the imagination that the law, juridical institutions or justice system will be biased when punishing crimes, or that Black offenders get harsher legal punishment could degenerate into anxiety disorder. The latter is an automatic, unconscious effort to manage deep anxiety capable of interfering with personal, professional and sexual lives. This situation could provoke the development of "heightened vigilance", which is "a state of psychological arousal in order to monitor, respond to, and attempt to protect oneself from threats linked to potential experiences of discrimination and other dangers in one's immediate environment" (WILLIAMS 2018, Web. N.P). Research reveals that African American boys are more exposed to race-related vigilance than girls. "A study of Baltimore adults found that Blacks have higher levels of heightened vigilance than whites" (WILLIAMS 2018, Web. N.P).

Likewise, Trina Jones relates the story of Michelle whose mother became despondent as she grew up because she was becoming dark as a result of having spent much time under the sun as a child. Her hopelessness is based on the idea that "dark brown girls are not beautiful or appealing (at least in society's eyes)" (2013, 1107-1108). Similarly, dating a black person was thought to lead someone to become part of the collective black group, and possibly lessen their social and cultural capital (RITTER 2015, 411). The situations described above make people to develop low self-esteem and to seek honorary whiteness status.

The repercussion of being Black or having an honorary white status is that Blacks internalise unfair acts due to racism to the extent of not perceiving the phenomenon as discrimination. Concretely, this means accepting dehumanising practices. It is also an illusion for Blacks to think that others are good and that they are supposed to bear the burden of being low in the society (NOGUEIRA 2013, 23).

The implication of "honorary whiteness" for the perpetrator could be detrimental or beneficial. On the positive side, Anna Lindner shares the result of Peggy McIntosh's investigations on how Whites exercise their privilege: "Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative average and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow 'them' to be more like 'us'" (2018, 50). Concretely, this idea is manifested in the various supports given to African countries. This relationship between "lord-giver" and "servant-receiver" maintains the latter in a situation of always ready

to receive without making effort to be independent. On the negative side, the "fantasy of the exception" makes those who rise to power through honorary status to repress or magnify parts of their identities (YOUNG 2009, 179). They may join the privileged group which absorbed them to exclude others because of the security and pleasure they gain, or seek greater access to privilege.

Propositions and innovative solutions

It is an illusion to think that taking honorary white status is the solution to negative opinions about Blacks. Honorary whiteness is a contradiction in terms. That is why priority should be on the humanity of all people in spite of culture, colour of skin, ethnic group or race. There are instances of people who pursued specific higher education, became very rich in order to feel like White and be accepted as White but who were never accepted as White (RITTER 2015, 406; ZHOU 2007, 67). Racial cognitive illusions can be reduced by aligning our ideas, activities on the ultimate goal of philosophy – the humanisation of mankind. Below are three propositions which I also consider as innovative solutions to the problem of honorary white and honorary black.

First, from the point of view of philosophy, it is important to develop philosophical reflections on the uniqueness of each racial group. I begin with the aesthetic theory which seems indispensable in resolving the problem of honorary black and honorary white and all forms of racial discrimination. This theory is derived from archipelagic way of thinking. Archipelago is "a geographical form that invites significant productive thinking about island relations" (STRATFORD 2013, 3). People think of islands as geographical entities that are isolated, and the people who live in them as different. Archipelago is a framework which provides reasons why we should not only think about, but with. Archipelago is invoked in contrast to the structure between land and water, and between island and mainland. Here, archipelago "represents a decentralized model of the relation between islands, as well as ideas" (JUNG 2020, 244). It brings out the relation, links, and connections among islands in order to explain aesthetic. This is not a normative theory of beauty that follows an established rule but the bizarreness of conceiving beauty. This theory can be transposed to the quality of relationship between Black and White. In this case, emphasis is not placed on the superiority of White over Black, neither do Blacks affirm their value in contrast to White. The existence of each person (whether Black or White) makes up the beauty of humanity. A high level of cohesion in the society depends of the positive appreciation of the bizarreness of human differences.

Secondly, from the socio-political perspective, the idea of Roman *civitas* and Greek *polis* reinforces the divide between Blacks and Whites. The Roman "*civitas* is a gathering of people with different origins, while the Greek *polis* is a community of people who come from the same place, (foreigners did not have the right to participate in the political life of the polis) (AURELI 2008, 95). While the former gives room for wider participation of people in the affairs of the state, the latter impose restrictions or conditions on the degree of participation of foreigners. Unconsciously, the emphasis on "Black community," either by whites or Blacks (through solidarity groups) seems to prevent the actualisation of Roman *civitas*.

This is because it distinguishes Blacks from the rest of the people, and creates a separate identity within a whole. In opposition to the Greek *polis,* I propose an *infra*-political system which seeks for the integration and unity of all. This system is derived from the Roman infra *urbs,* which is a space of connection and integration. This can be an imaginary place where Blacks and Whites recognise and appreciate the essence of their humanness.

Thirdly, the negative attribution to Black follows a thought pattern such as: jumping to conclusions, personalisation, black and white thinking, labelling, etc. While Whites may jump to conclusions that they are better than Blacks without sufficient evidence, Blacks may assume blames for the unfair treatment against them due to colour. Negative thought patterns about white supremacy or black inferiority could be replaced through cognitive distancing, *mantras,* focusing on the present, writing things down and breathing (COWARD 1982). A person with a racist's thought pattern can correct it with an alternative scenario in his brain such as: Black people are human beings like me, or by uttering certain phrase or hymn to help block out extraneous thoughts like: "I love Black people, Black people are good". Individuals as well as groups could apply the above thought patterns in order to replace racist behaviour and reach a deeper level of consciousness of humanity.

The above propositions (aesthetic theory, *infra*-political system and replacement of negative thought patterns) seem to be in agreement with Tsri's argument that "the use of the term Blacks for Africans should be abandoned". That is to say: "the celebration of blackness is not fully detached or separated from anti-blackness" (JUNG 2020, 246). In other words, instead of struggling to give value to Blacks like Biko did, effort should be made to underscore the beauty of the variety of human existence. Therefore, extremist views of white superiority and the value of Blacks should be replaced with the idea of the indispensability of the variety of human race in order to radiate the beauty of the human person.

Conclusion

The honorary white status establishes a society of class and the *modus operandi* envisages a situation where those placed on the lower category could aspire to the upper position of honour. Honorary white does not promote the equality of all people and the humanity of all; it is a form of racism. Briefly, the concept of honorary white stigmatises Blacks, sticks an inferiority complex on them and conditions them to hate/lose their natural identity. Honorary black may emphasize the value of Blacks to the extent of also hating Whites. These two extremes are to be replaced by behaviours which promote humanness.

In order to realise the condition of being human, terms such as black, race, white, which highlight the reality of human difference and the superiority of Whites over Blacks should be used in proper contexts. In connection with this point, the efforts of Tsri to trace how "black" is used as a derogatory term for Africans is worthy of commendation. This is very important in correcting some racist theories and philosophical thoughts which formed the basis for racial cognitive illusion and discrimination against Blacks. The essence is to avoid the reoccurrence of racial domination, the practice of slave trade, etc.

Prejudice against Blacks and people of colour could be corrected by advocating the humanity of all people in spite of their colour, ethnic group or race. This can be achieved through the archipelagic way of thinking, the instauration of Roman *infra*-political system of organising the society and the replacement of negative thought patterns about Blacks.

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