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# Key Concepts in Race and Ethnicity

NASAR MEER





# Key Concepts in Race and Ethnicity

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Key Concepts in

# Race and Ethnicity

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To all my family, and most recently Rashida Clarke Meer (b. 2011)  
who arrived early to meet Khizer Mohammed Meer (1927–2012)



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# Introduction

Please Read this First!

## WHY A NEW BOOK ON RACE AND ETHNICITY?

The study of race and ethnicity is a dynamic field. For some readers this will be self-evidently the case. Why? Because human populations and the social relations they constitute are constantly developing, and so our conceptual language needs to meet the challenge of valid description. But the task for social scientists is much greater than may at first appear. In order for our analyses to be meaningful they also have to be reflexive. In our case this means that we need to think critically about the intellectual *frames* through which we have come to understand what we name as racial and ethnic differences amongst and across populations. Meeting this challenge is important. Not doing so invites the risk that we can ignore how – through our concepts – we sometimes help constitute those social relations we wish to study.

As a teacher and researcher in race and ethnicity studies, it has become clear to me that while the status of some concepts has been so significant that they have helped structure the field (e.g. blackness, ethnicity, integration, race, race relations), and while others are much more novel (e.g. hybridity, intersectionality, mixedness, transnationalism, whiteness), the status of established and novel concepts does not necessarily reflect an incremental development in our learning. To put it another way, more recent concepts do not necessarily describe more recent phenomena. So while there are several introductory books on race and ethnicity, one of the strengths of this collection is that it is able to illustrate how it may equally be the case that our conceptualisation of ‘new’ phenomena is only now able to register something that may have long been in evidence. This is not to say other things remain the same (on the contrary) but instead that few other introductory collections seek to offer the analytical range of this book – not merely in describing but also critiquing with real world examples.

What the book tries to do therefore is move a little beyond the conventional inventory of core categories by additionally surveying and interrogating those concepts which for too long have been left out of our repertoires (e.g. equalities and inequalities, health and well-being, political participation, post-colonialism). The collection is more than a historical corrective, however. Several of us working in this field have noted that the place of religion as minority identity, one that is shaped by processes of racialisation, must also be brought under scrutiny. This realisation is reflected in this book (e.g. antisemitism, Euro-Islam, Islamophobia). Other concepts have been knocking at the door but often refused entry as they complicate existing configurations. These are included too (e.g. interculturalism, recognition, secularism, transnationalism).



Some concepts were initially placed together to avoid artificial breaks, but in fact it was decided that it would be more useful to split them into several concepts. For example, mixedness is discussed separately from hybridity (as an example of racial formation), while post-colonialism is considered separately from Orientalism (even though there is a profound relationship between the two). In organising it this way I have thought long and hard about the approach, testing it with my students and established scholars in the field. The consensus was that the discussion would be of greater benefit if it were able to offer a fuller and more focused account. I agree with this view and have tried to offer distinct concepts throughout but have refrained from making artificial breaks. The underlying intellectual question this invites, however, is what constitutes a concept in the fields of race and ethnicity?

### CARVING NATURE AT ITS JOINTS

It is sometimes said that concepts in the Platonic sense should ‘carve at the joints’ (Phaedrus 265d–266a, in Plato, 1989). By this it is meant that the given properties that make up any concept should not be arbitrary or selected at random, but should instead reflect the organisation of repeated phenomena. The task of any researcher is to separate the segments at the appropriate points, just like a butcher carving up an animal at the ‘joints’ instead of randomly across the social field (or indeed carcass). This assessment begins to set a ‘concept’ apart from merely a ‘term’.

This does mean that a term is without any analytical depth. On the contrary, as Cantwell-Smith elaborates (1996: 16), a term too can come to be ‘a significant index of how we think. Also, more actively, it is a significant factor in determining how we think.’ The point is that while a term and a concept can offer interpretative order to our understanding of the social world, a concept offers us something weightier, something thicker. Of course there is a much deeper theoretical argument that can help us to locate the place of a concept, one that is related to ways in which we can conceptualise language and text, in a manner that has profound implications for social scientific inquiry. This cannot properly be summarised here but, briefly, we might point to a tradition of scholarship that is influenced by the later work of the analytical philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953), and especially the idea that we should understand language as a coherent (though diverse) set of games that are governed by common rules. The rules bear resemblance to one another and emphasise the ways in which human agents ‘are intentionally speaking according to their mentality and consciousness’ (Garling, 2013: 18). Here local context is important (e.g. in terms of the rules of the game) but in a way that is different from a second tradition, known as structuralism, which also views language as a system which can be studied according to the rules that are deemed to *structure* it. Owing much to the work on linguistics by Ferdinand Saussure (2006 [1916]), this tradition views ‘words as not mere vocal labels or communicational adjuncts superimposed upon an already given order of things. They are collective products of social interaction, essential instruments through which human beings constitute and articulate their world’ (Harris, 1988: ix).

For people influenced by the first tradition, the focus tends to be on the 'players'. For those influenced by the second tradition, the prevailing focus is on the 'rules'. The challenge for a social scientific concept is that it has to be alive to both of these concerns. John Brewer (1982: 392) once described the task as follows:

What makes a concept sociologically significant is that the classification of empirical reality it institutes is one which succeeds in capturing without distortion ... Unfortunately this offers a range of possibilities. The word 'concept' ... is a blank cheque: its potential value depends on its use.

This excellent observation is useful in a number of respects. First, it reminds us that even a theoretical concept, one which claims utility in helping to explain the social world, must bear some relationship to empirical phenomena. This need not lead eventually to positivism; for it may lead us to consider a variety of 'data' including biography. As such each of the concepts in this book does just that. From antisemitism to whiteness there is either reference to historical record or live data against which the discussion of the concept can take shape. Second, Brewer points to the chameleonic quality of concepts where similar (perhaps the same) concepts may be adopted variously in the service of different arguments (Smith, 2010). This is not to say that knowledge is relativistic, but that it is socially constructed and so there can be a politics to its appropriation. The debates over concepts of new antisemitism, Euro-Islam and interculturalism show different forms this politics can take. This assessment perhaps raises another question concerning the nature of the relationship between subjectivity and research. For while this book does not set out to discuss concepts with anything like a narrative inquiry approach that would have very little distance between the subject and the inquiry, neither has it adopted a very positivistic approach that decouples social contingency from political issues. This is an important point that has a number of implications discussed below.

## IDENTITY AND DISPERSION

Before we can turn to the issue of reflexivity and the role it assumes in this book, we need first to understand something of how the concept of identity is being understood here. For instead of restricting this to a single entry, identity is dispersed across all the concepts in this book.

Zygmunt Bauman (1995: 22) has argued that identities necessarily have 'the ontological status of a project and a *postulate*'. He continues: 'To say "postulated identity" is to say one word too many, as there is not nor can there be any other identity but a postulated one' (ibid.). This is not the same as saying that identities are a fiction. What it means, and as will be explored at length in the discussion of nationalism, is that all identities are imagined and often amount to an unfinished conversation, as the discussion of recognition theorises and

the concept of blackness and Muslim subjectivity illustrates. Either way, identity is not something that can reasonably be contained within a short discussion. To some extent this is remarkable when we recall that identity is a concept that has been *imported* into the social sciences.

If we step back from its social scientific usage, we can note Hawthorne's (2004: 99) description that identity, in its simplest sense, reflects the relationship 'that each thing has to itself and to nothing else'. This he traces to traditions of thinking about identity in mathematical forms, something that Calhoun (1994) broadens out when he situates the provenance of identity within 'a technical origin in philosophy, beginning from the ancient Greeks, as well as in mathematics and biology. Aristotle pursued identity in terms of the relationship between "essence" and "appearance", or between the true nature of phenomena and epiphenomenal variations' (quoted in Sicakkan and Lithman, 2005: 3). What is interesting is that even following its migration into the social sciences, identity has not until relatively recently enjoyed the centrality it does today. This has changed partly because of a wider set of methodological developments in the social sciences, including the cultural turn and elevation of the *subject*. As Hall (1992: 275–6) has written, this reflected

the growing complexity of the modern world and the awareness that this inner core of the subject was not autonomous and self-sufficient, but was formed in relation to 'significant others', who mediated the subject values, meanings and symbols – the culture – of the world he/she inhabited. ... Identity in this sociological conception, bridges the gap between the 'inside' and the 'outside' – between the personal and the public worlds. The fact that we project 'ourselves' into these cultural identities, at the same time internalizing their meanings and values, making them 'part of us', helps to align our subjective feelings with the objectives places we occupy in the social and cultural world.

The cultivation of a critical and visible study of race and ethnicity has been central to developing this understanding, something that has not been universally welcomed. Consistent with his critique of diaspora discussed later, Rogers Brubaker (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 1) deems the social sciences in thrall to identity, something that he concludes has regressive outcomes:

the social sciences and humanities have surrendered to the word 'identity'; that this has both intellectual and political costs ... and tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity).

Part of Brubaker's complaint is that identity has become a ubiquitous explanation rather than something in need of explaining. In other words, social sciences conflate categories of *practice* with categories of *analysis* (or indeed explanans with explanandum). Key here is how the study of race and ethnicity often emphasises the importance of group identities. A thoughtful example is Guttman's (2003: 2) observation that 'group identities help individuals have a more secure sense of self



and social belonging', not least the ways in which it allows 'disadvantaged minorities to counteract inherited negative stereotypes, defend more positive self-images, and develop respect for members of their groups'. This is partly the role we can observe ethnicity as playing in terms of self-definition. This does not mean that ethnic and racial groups have singular identities; the discussion of hybridity shows why this is increasingly rarely the case. The objective instead is to register, as Young (1995: 187) describes, the ways in which 'as products of social relations, groups are fluid; they come into being and fade away'. In this respect we often find that 'group identity may become salient only under specific circumstances' since 'most people in modern societies have multiple group identifications, moreover, and therefore groups themselves are not discrete unities' (ibid.).

One route or means of overcoming this tension is to differentiate between conceptualising people's identities and processes of identification. This appears to allow social scientists to understand how social and political processes help forge identities, individual and group. To Sicakkan and Lithman (2005: 2) 'the term "identification" enables one to conceptualise identity both in terms of individuals' own chosen choices of identity references and of other persons' identity attributions. That is, individuals can both identify with and be identified as "something".' The important point here, as we learn when we explore the concepts of race and ethnicity, is that processes of identification are rarely straightforward issues of choice for they often comprise a response (often a challenge) to prior processes of categorisation. There is a political implication to this, which is explored through the works of Modood in the discussion of multiculturalism, but which also has implications for how we go about inquiry, and it is to this that we now turn.

## REFLEXIVITY

In an interesting discussion of religion, Garling (2013: 18) has recently reminded readers that 'the formation of a category or concept itself should be the focus of empirical research, rather than just criticising its (mis)use within power relations'. For our purposes, a way of reading this is to state that the formulation of concepts presented here has not pursued a conscious line of normative coupling or detachment. Given the kinds of issues and the examples that the topic is enmeshed in, however, a certain degree of sympathy is clearly apparent throughout the book. For instance, it draws attention to a political problem, namely the frequent disadvantage of racial and ethnic minorities, and it does not pretend that we should be happy about this. So by identifying a 'problem', a normative perspective is already in operation. Not approaching this topic entirely neutrally, however, is the standard of all work on race and ethnicity. By that it is meant that while researchers undertake work with rigour and deploy standards of self-criticism and external criticism, it is clear that terms like racialisation contain both a 'positive' and a 'negative'.

Yet it is unusual to hear that a researcher 'likes' racialisation. Hence, while the concepts here are a-symmetrical it makes sense to say that racial inequality is a bad thing and we should do something about it. This is consistent with Taylor's (1989) description of the research field as more like a slope on which political concepts