A Theory of Social Categories

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Abstract

The study of ethnicity, race and nationalism lacks theoretical cohesion because its three central constructs are tied to the circumstances of time and geographical space; they are culture-bound. Their limitations can be reduced if they are seen as three items in a larger set of social categories. A synthesis of existing knowledge is presented in the form of 16 propositions about the genesis of social categories, both physical and cultural, and the significance attributed to them. Changes in the significance of social categories are illustrated by reference to recent immigration into the United Kingdom from outside Europe. The study of ethnicity, race and nationalism might be better integrated if future sociological research investigated the circumstances in which behaviour is structured by social categorization and when it is not. To be culture-free, that research will have to uncover determinants that underlie the consciousness of the individuals involved.

Keywords

categories, ethnic origin, intersectionality, nation, race, reference groups, trade-off

In many parts of the world humans on occasion behave differently towards those whom they regard as co-ethnics. It should therefore be possible to devise a conceptual framework that facilitates the comparison and explanation of ethnic relations in different localities, provided it takes account of the overlap between ethnic relations and certain other kinds of social relation. The editors of the Annual Review of Sociology for 2009 commissioned a review of sociological writing about ‘ethnicity, race and nationalism’ (Brubaker, 2009). It is interesting that they should have considered this writing to constitute a single field of study because in the past the three sub-fields have often been considered separately. In bringing them together, the editors have posed a challenge, for their unified field lacks theoretical coherence. This may be due to the problematical character of its central expressions: ethnic group, race, and nation.

Many explicitly comparative studies have compared racial and ethnic relations in different countries, often focusing on the analysis of conflict. In so far as they have stressed ways in which behaviour is determined by social structures, they have utilized a...
top-down perspective. The present essay attempts to synthesize existing knowledge in
this field in the form of 16 propositions. It seeks to demonstrate the potential of a bottom-
up perspective, highlighting the interaction between agency and structure. The presenta-
tion of knowledge in propositional form has the advantage of giving critics something
specific with which to argue. To illustrate how certain of these propositions can be
applied, existing knowledge about phases in the interaction between ethnic minorities
and the ethnic majority in Britain is reformulated. In small measure, this presents famil-
 iar knowledge in a new light. The promotion of theoretical coherence will depend upon
the sharpening of culture-free constructs; this has methodological implications.

At the outset, it should be noted that there are difficulties with the words race and
ethnic. More than 50 years ago Maurice Freedman (1955: 388) observed that ‘In the
study of race relations the student has crossed his pons asinorum when he has learned to
define his races afresh for each new situation he is called upon to discuss.’ The criteria
for counting people as ‘Chinese’ in Southeast Asia varied from one country to another.
The pons asinorum (or bridge of asses) is the critical test of ability imposed on the inex-
perienced or ignorant. The critical test for the student of race relations, according to
Freedman, was recognition that definitions of race as a social category were fashioned by
circumstances, and therefore varied from place to place.

Freedman’s conclusion applies also to uses of the word ethnic. In the US census of
2010 separate questions asked ‘is this person of Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin?’ and
‘What is this person’s race?’, reflecting culture-bound conceptualizations of race and
ethnicity unacceptable in most countries. In Europe distinctive minorities within states
are described as ethnic or national. Comparable minorities in India are identified by
proper names (e.g. ‘Punjabi’); they could be called ‘ethnic’, but nothing additional is
explained by doing so. The conceptualization of demographic diversity in other Asian
countries strengthens the conclusion that if ethnic group is used as a classifier, then, as
with race, the way in which it is used can be traced to the perceptions of the politically
dominant section of the population.\(^1\)

In its history and its current use, the word ethnic is not always differentiated from the
word national. International law uses the expression ‘ethnic or national origin’ without
indicating whether there is any difference of meaning. The first writer to consider differ-
entiating them may have been Max Weber. In 1904 Weber spent some four months in the
USA and he seems to have adopted German-Americans as a paradigm case for his concep-
tion of ethnic as opposed to national communities. The identification of German-
Americans with the German nation had weakened because they had become ‘so thoroughly
adjusted to the new country that return to their homeland would be intolerable’ (Weber,
1968: 388). Therefore he presented them as an ethnic group rather than a national group.

At the heart of Weber’s draft was his view that both ethnic groups and nations were
constituted by the belief of individuals that they shared a common descent. Being unable
to find any regularities in the relation between the existence of these beliefs and the cir-
cumstances in which individuals found themselves, Weber concluded that ‘if we define
our terms exactly’ the concept ethnic group ‘dissolves’, and that in this respect it resem-
bled the ‘vexing’ concept of the nation. That concept in turn led away from any typology
of groups and instead directed the scholar towards political power and the link between
nation and state. It looks as if Weber became exasperated because he could not
reformulate ethnic group and nation as culture-free concepts for the analysis of causal relationships of the kind he was to set out in his *Kategorienlehre* of 1918–20 (1968: 389, 397, C).

Every person can acknowledge one or more ethnic or national origins. As Steve Fenton (2003: 68) has observed, ‘the problem … is not the word “ethnic” but the word “group”’. Brubaker (2004: 8) has similarly criticized ‘groupism’, by which he means ‘the tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts and fundamental units of social analysis’. The conceptual problem is even greater when the recognition of ethnic origin is generalized by reference to *ethnicity* as if this were an independent factor that influences the behaviour of humans in many regions of the world. Some of these difficulties may be eased if the focus is moved from the concept of a group to that of a category. Of the three constructs, the ethnic is the most central.

**Sixteen propositions**

In some societies, particularly smaller ones, no differences of ethnic origin may be recognized, and in these societies there can therefore be no differential behaviour on the ground of such a distinction. When, in other societies, someone treats others differently on the basis of their presumed ethnic origin or origins, he or she recognizes, even if unconsciously, the existence of an ethnic category. Recognition that certain others are different is expressed in the use of a proper name. This may highlight a difference in regional or national origin (e.g. ‘Asians’, ‘Indians’), a religious difference (‘Hindus’, ‘Muslims’), a presumed racial difference (‘Blacks’, ‘Whites’). These others are given places in the folk classifications embodied in ordinary language. Folk classifications are sometimes inaccurate (Banton, 1997: 7–14). If they are to compare ethnic relations in different countries, social scientists need a classification and a nomenclature that does not vary from place to place or from one time period to another. In identifying the processes that lead to the creation of such categories, and the relation of any ethnic categories to other categories, they need to develop classifications suited to their purpose.

To explain why humans sometimes behave differently towards persons not of the same ethnic origin as themselves, it is necessary to begin by identifying the features with which this differential behaviour is associated. This suggests, as a first proposition, that human individuals have distinctive characteristics. Some are physical, such as those of sex, stature and the variation in skin colour that can be measured with a photospectrometer. Some are cultural, including the significance attributed to physical characteristics, but mainly to those of descent, including those of ethnic origin.

The association is effective only if it is socially recognized. This leads to a second proposition: that the attribution of significance to such characteristics results in the creation of social categories. If the characteristics are treated as signs of social entitlement, social norms have been established. In all but the simplest forms of human society individuals are graded in terms of socio-economic status and where there are phenotypical differences these are given value in that scale. There is a widespread cultural preference for a lighter skin colour, independent of the skin colour of the population in question; it has been ascribed to sexual selection on the part of higher-status males (van den Berghe and Frost, 1986: 88–9).
Implicit in the conception of a category is a third proposition that is better made explicit: that *individuals share characteristics with other individuals*, so that the characteristics become bases for ascribed roles. Since the sharing of characteristics is not limited to one generation, this leads to the fourth proposition, that *phenotypical characteristics are transmitted from one generation to another*, though there may be variation of colour within a family.

Implicit in the third and fourth propositions is a fifth, that *social relations are multidimensional*. The statement that humans *sometimes* behave differently towards certain others acknowledges that they do not always behave differently. Whether they do so may depend on the roles that the parties are playing. Social relations are the relations between individuals, but they are conducted on the basis of different social *relationships*; these are relations between roles. In many social relationships one party’s role confers greater power. Proposition five incorporates differential power as a consequence of role relationships; it does not treat power as a separate dimension of social relations.

Differential behaviour can occur only within a social relationship. The two parties have expectations of one another. Each party adjusts his or her expectations to take account of signals about the other party’s expectations. Even if only two persons are present, each will be aware of the expectations of other members of the categories involved. They negotiate the basis on which to interact. If one party will not accept the other’s presentation of self, the negotiation fails.

During socialization the individual is inducted into a pre-existing network of kin, neighbours, and acquaintances. Networks vary in their density; for example, kinship relations are more important in some societies than others, so that the ties between individuals are denser. Common residence inspires norms of neighbourliness and the creation of cross-cutting ties such that individuals who oppose one another in one relationship are allies in another. Socialization is also influenced by the demographic environment. People become accustomed to living with others physically and culturally similar to themselves, or to a particular mix of persons physically and culturally different. Proposition six states that *the familiar demographic environment becomes normative*. Any departure from the expected experience is regarded as deviant. This is the source of ethnocentrism.

The action of humans in behaving differently towards certain others is a form of collective behaviour. This gives rise to a seventh proposition: that *common characteristics become the bases for collective action*, either to defend shared privilege or to challenge less favourable treatment. Furthermore, the multidimensionality of social relations reflects the associations between social categories. Proposition eight states that *categories are interrelated in different degrees*. They may be closely related (e.g. an ability to speak a particular language may be tied to a corresponding ethnic group); or there may be only a loose statistical association (e.g. between a particular ethnic origin and the category of persons who travel by public transport).  

Then come two closely related propositions. The ninth states that *the significance attributed to any particular characteristic is determined by the society’s relation to its ecological environment*. Thus, for example, pastoral societies in which human groups move around together with their animals according to seasonal variations in the availability of pasture are composed of groups defined by patrilineal descent. No other characteristic could provide a comparably effective organizing principle. The tenth proposition
states that the significance attributed to any particular characteristic is also culturally determined. There are societies – like plantation economies – in which manual labourers (possibly slaves or indentured workers) are controlled by a relatively small number of landowners and their agents. The workforce can be controlled more easily if there is an ideology of biological difference between the social categories (the classic example is Plato’s thesis that it would be easier to rule his ideal republic if the members of the various categories had been brought to believe that God had made the rulers of gold, the auxiliaries of silver, and the farmers and craftsmen of copper and iron). If descent were used as a characteristic for assigning individuals to fixed categories of this kind it would not provide an organizing principle for a progressive society seeking to make best use of individual talent.

A characteristic may be used either to create a distinctive category or to order a person’s position in a social scale. In traditional Hindu society, differences of descent were used to create strict categories of caste. In mediaeval Europe they were used to create estates. In parts of modern Europe a difference of descent divides Roma (or Gypsies) from gaje (or non-Roma); elsewhere, many status categories have been replaced by scales of socio-economic status. In some countries differences in skin colour have been used to create a colour line (in which individuals are divided into distinct social categories of differential entitlement). A colour line draws a boundary, often a relatively hard one. In contemporary European societies differences in skin colour are more often used to create a colour scale (in which individuals are ranked by socio-economic status with complexion as one of the constituent elements that is taken into account). Any indication that a person is of distinctive ethnic origin may similarly be used, along with other characteristics, to assess a person’s status or suitability for some role.

The tenth proposition recognizes that human individuals are socialized into their natal societies, learning the importance of cooperation, and thus of different kinds of relationship with others. Each individual becomes familiar with a particular social order and a particular demographic environment. These orders are rarely static. As the social world expands, so the sense of a person’s duty to his or her neighbour is affected by an expanding conception of who counts as a neighbour.

The ninth and tenth propositions help explain why more significance is generally attributed to one characteristic than another. For example, they explain why, in a given pastoral society, and in given circumstances, more significance is ascribed to patrilineal than to matrilineal descent, and more significance is ascribed to descent than to any variation in physical appearance. There may be none of the differences of costume, speech and education that can be important to the calculation of socio-economic status in industrial societies.

When a child is born, he or she is categorized as the son or daughter of particular parents, as a relation of persons defined as kin, and perhaps as a member of a descent category. To state, without qualification, that he or she is socialized into a natal society is to assume that this society is homogeneous. Many are not. There may be differences associated with class, or status, or differences that result from migration and encounters between persons of different origin. Inequalities are inherited, so that the child is ascribed roles reflecting differences of socio-economic status; these are of particular relevance in relations with persons outside the family unit.
The historical record furnishes instances, like those mentioned in a previous paragraph, in which social inequalities have been maintained for long periods. A category of persons may be brought within a social unit in a subordinate category (e.g. as slaves) and kept subordinate by the enforcement of social boundaries. Proposition eleven therefore holds that the close association of categories can be a means of maintaining social inequalities between sections of the population.

Differential behaviour associated with differences of ethnic origin typically occurs in social encounters brought about because one person wants something from someone else. The first person may claim or request something of the other in fulfilment of an obligation defined by the roles they play. Thus, a customer might enter a store and offer to buy something. There are circumstances in which the shopkeeper could lawfully refuse to sell the item to this particular customer. A sequence of this kind is exemplified in the twelfth proposition, that roles define rights and obligations in specific relationships.

Encounters differ. Two people might come together without either wanting anything in particular from the other. An encounter between two members of a small-scale society in which ‘everyone knows everyone else’ will differ from an encounter in the impersonal settings of a large industrial city. When two persons interact in a small-scale society, all the relationships to which each individual is a party are potentially relevant to their behaviour. There is an important change when, as happened in the construction of feudal societies, members of a such a society became subject to an overlord to whom they had to pay tribute or tax; the lord had the power to declare that all other obligations were irrelevant to the fulfilment of this one.

Others do not have any such power. It has long been recognized that how people behave towards others depends upon how they define the situation. As prefigured in the fifth proposition above, the first party might open an encounter by treating the other person as if the two of them were parties to an ethnic relationship. The second party could reject this. The interaction could come to an end, or one party might have the power to impose his or her conception of the relevant obligations. Or the two parties might negotiate the basis on which they would continue to interact. The thirteenth proposition is therefore that the relevance of social categories depends upon the parties to social relations and their capacity to define the basis of their interaction.

As, in history, social units get bigger, more and more encounters are between individuals who do not know one another personally; in more and more instances they interact relatively impersonally, that is, in one relationship only. They display greater social distance. Nevertheless, even within industrial societies, the playing of one role may be constrained by the other relationships of that person, or by other persons with whom he or she is associated. A shopkeeper may be cautious in discussing controversial matters with customers lest, from feelings of irritation, they take their custom elsewhere. The wife and children of a clergyman or a policeman may be constrained by his occupational position.

The increase in the scale of social relations extends to the creation of the nation-state as one of the most important of social institutions. It adds a new social category to the list, nationality, and a new dimension to social relations, namely the civic dimension. The state may be the political expression of a pre-existing national consciousness or it may be a political unit (such as a former colonial dependency) that is recognized as a state and...
seeks to develop a national consciousness. A fourteenth proposition affirms that many actions by state institutions serve the ends of particular interest categories.

In modern times, one polity is distinguished from others primarily by its constitutional laws. These bring together the recognition of natural (or presumed natural) characteristics, cultural characteristics and political norms, declaring what characteristics shall determine rights and obligations in particular circumstances. It leads to a fifteenth proposition, that shared sentiments are given effect in the processes of law-making and law-enforcing that provide foundations for the definition of social roles and reward conformity with social norms. Legislating is one way in which bottom-up and top-down processes are reconciled. If new laws are wanted, they have to be drafted in a manner consistent so far as possible with existing laws. This gives rise to the principle that political change is path-dependent. Prior legislation and institutions channel the opportunities open to governments that wish to make changes.

States enter into treaties with other states. One of the 20th-century’s greatest achievements has been the use of treaty-making to establish a legal foundation for the conception of universal human rights. The sense of a person’s duty to his or her neighbour has been expanded so that, potentially, it covers all fellow-humans. In some circumstances social relations can have a human rights dimension.

A sixteenth proposition then holds that categories are under pressure, such that, if they are not maintained, they change. Partly because of political processes, such as those associated with state institutions, the significance of one category relative to other categories varies over time. The gender category is a case in point. In many societies the nature of the gender dimension has changed greatly in the past century. If categories are to persist, they have to be reinforced by the norms of everyday behaviour. The historical record shows that an ethnic minority may take control of a country (e.g. the Norman Conquest of England), that for one or two generations there is ethnic conflict, but four generations later the ethnic categories may no longer be of much significance.

More recent examples of change fill out the picture. In the former Yugoslavia, Serbs, Croats, and others, often lived together in the same villages. Sometimes they intermarried. Consciousness of ethnic difference was low. Then, when conflicts escalated elsewhere within the Federal Republic, relations changed. Many inter-ethnic marriages were broken. Ethnic identification became important to the personal security of individuals. After the dissolution of the Federal Republic and some population movements, ethnic consciousness could decline again. Provided personal security is guaranteed, the norm of neighbourliness can trump any norm of alignment with co-ethnics (Bakke et al., 2009). It has been conventional to conceive of ethnogenesis as a process by which a set of individuals come to conceive of themselves as a people, but it would be more accurate to speak of ethnoacclivity and ethnodeclivity as processes by which the significance attributed to ethnic identification rises and declines. From a sociological standpoint it is as important to account for the absence of ethnic identification as for its presence.

These 16 propositions can be accounted part of a theory if they help explain an initial observation. Since the observation can inspire different kinds of question, there can be different kinds of explanation. One kind entails comparison. Why should the significance of ethnic difference vary between societies? Other kinds relate to the normative significance of ethnic difference. If, in a particular society, there is an expectation of
differential behaviour, it might be possible to explain historically how that norm came to be adopted, and, possibly, changed. An explanation of the relation of that norm to social institutions might constitute a functional explanation. An analysis of the circumstances in which the norm was enforced, and the sanctions for neglecting it, might explain the observed behaviour of persons.

Reference categories

The processes by which ethnic categories change can be very evident in situations of immigration. Members of the receiving society attribute a particular significance to the ethnic origin of the immigrants, who have then to adapt to it. They are likely to attribute their own significance to the differences in question. Much depends on the institutions of the receiving society. The UK is a monarchy and most of its residents are subjects of the Queen. France, Germany, the US are republics, and their residents are divided into citizens and non-citizens. The French constitution can recognize no intermediary between the citizen and the state. Citizenship is relatively easily acquired. The German outlook has been governed by a nationality law that defined as Germans all those descended from people who lived on what counted as German soil in 1913; it has been more difficult for those not of this descent to acquire citizenship. Until recently the UK, France and Germany have not seen themselves as countries of immigration, unlike the US, in which even persons of indigenous origin see themselves as part of a nation of immigrants. These contrasts illustrate the principle of path dependence mentioned in connection with proposition fifteen. Any ‘integration’ has to be within the constitution of the receiving country.

The notion of what it is to be British, or French, or German, etc., provides the standard against which members of the ethnic majority judge others. The immigrants, in turn, judge the receiving society according to the extent to which its members live up to their proclaimed values, but they also interpret their experience in terms of the expectations they bring with them. Expectations are manifested in what Robert Merton (1950) called reference groups. He employed the word ‘group’ to designate what is technically a category. One of the key ways in which interaction between members of the majority and the minorities leads to new attitudes is the change in reference categories.

The first generation of post-1945 West Indian settlers in Britain came from societies with long experience of migration to North America, sometimes as seasonal migrants, sometimes as would-be settlers. So they were in close accord with the political movements of African-Americans. They came to Britain in search of opportunity, not knowing how long they would stay. As colonials, they had high expectations of ‘the mother country’. The US, the British monarchy, and white society generally, were therefore important reference categories for them.

Up to about 1958 the West Indian settlers benefited from the colonial connection. White Britons believed that they also benefited from that connection, and that because of it people like ‘colonial students’ were temporary visitors. About 1958 three changes came together. It became apparent that many of the West Indian newcomers were settlers rather than migrant workers. Most of Britain’s remaining colonies were becoming independent. Immigration from New Commonwealth countries in South Asia was increasing.
As a consequence, white attitudes towards New Commonwealth immigration became much more restrictive (Banton, 1983b). Whites no longer perceived any benefit in the colonial connection.

‘The West Indians,’ it was said, ‘were the least prepared of all the immigrant groups for their reception … and the least equipped to meet antagonism. Their expectations were so high; the reality so different’ (Rose et al., 1969: 420). Most had to contend with racial discrimination. They followed the progress of the civil rights movement in the US and learned from its strategies. One lesson was that of ‘black pride’, and that the polarization of black and white, by counting as black everyone who was not white, could create a maximal constituency. Before the 1960s were out, black West Indians were proclaiming that they were ‘here to stay’.

South Asian immigrants to Britain had different reference categories.

If to many West Indians Britain was the mother country, to Pakistanis it was a foreign land whose language, customs and religion, and way of life were totally alien to them. Their loyalties were to their own new nation, to their region, to their village, and above all to their kin. They came to England asking nothing of their hosts except to settle for a little while, work, and earn for their families at home … (Rose et al., 1969: 440)

That new nation was to divide in 1971 when Bangladesh became independent. The immigrants of Indian national origin were very diverse. Some were Sikhs, some Hindus. Some came from agricultural areas, some were middle-class urban professionals. Some could not countenance marriage outside their jati or sub-caste. Their reference categories varied accordingly.

For some migrants from South Asia, as analysed by Katy Gardner (e.g. 2008) in her studies of migration from the Sylhet area of Bangladesh, ties with the villages of origin remain strong. Someone in the village who marries a person with the right to reside in Britain may, in turn, be admitted to residence there. Within a self-segregating immigrant minority the homeland community constitutes an important reference category and the native population of the country of settlement a less important reference category than in minority communities that do not keep so separate.

Those persons of South Asian origin who were ‘twice migrants’ (Bhachu, 1985), had the experience of living as immigrants in East Africa, where the different Asian minorities often compared their progress relative to that of other migrant communities. By far the most successful were the Ismailis, who, while remaining a very separate community (Dahya, 1996), have been able, because of their economic progress, to associate with middle and upper-class white Britons in ways that would be unthinkable for the Sylhetis in London’s East End. Some minorities are very conscious of their progress relative to other minorities.

The immigrants from South Asia, and their descendants, remain very critical of certain features of contemporary European society. They condemn the flaunting of sexualitv, the drunkenness, drug-taking, gambling, and incivility. They deplore the frequency of divorce, the lack of respect for elder members of the family, and that the aged are placed in special homes rather than being cared for by relatives. They ask, if there is to be integration, does it mean that they have to drop their standards in these respects? Whose reference categories are to prevail?
Experience in the UK is therefore in line with experience elsewhere. Whether members of an ethnic minority are migrant workers or immigrants influences majority attitudes towards them. If the members of the minority are settlers, they more readily adopt majority reference categories. Majority attitudes towards members of ethnic minorities vary, in that less distance is displayed towards those who, like the migrants from the West Indies, adopt the ways of the majority, than is displayed towards those who, like some South Asians, want to maintain separate communities.

In his Swiss research, Wimmer (2004: 12) found considerable variation in the reference categories used. The Italian and Turkish immigrants dissociated themselves from newer arrivals (especially those from ex-Yugoslavia and the developing world) even more than did the Swiss. The system of categorization embodied a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate immigrants. Furthermore, the children of Italian immigrants had developed a conception of themselves as following a more spontaneous and pleasure-oriented way of life than that of the Swiss. This qualifies, but does not negate, the expectation that in the second and subsequent generations, members of a minority are increasingly likely to compare their experiences with those of their coevals in the ethnic majority rather than with people in the country from which their forebears emigrated.

Changes in reference categories are reflected in changed valuations of shared ethnic origin relative to other characteristics. As members of the majority become better acquainted with members of minorities, either from personal experience or from impressions conveyed by the mass media, they are likely to attach less significance to ethnic characteristics relative to other characteristics. As immigrant settlement progresses, therefore, many of the initially hard boundaries between ethnic categories change to soft boundaries (Banton, 1983a: 125–128). Boundaries are hardest when categories are closely associated, as stated in proposition ten (e.g. the native population perceives the immigrants as differing in appearance and speech and religion and customs). They are softened by the weakening of associations between categories. The driving force is the priority persons attach to their personal advantage in specific situations (e.g. one person wishes to buy something and the other wishes to sell it). In some circumstances, best illustrated in the political sphere, there is a process of (possibly unconscious) bargaining. For example, representatives of a national political party seek the votes of members of an immigrant minority. They modify their policies to attract these votes. Members of the minority compare what different parties offer them. In such ways, boundaries are weakened.

The other identifications which are likely to gain increased relative significance are of two main kinds: civic and personal. The distinction reflects the division between the public and the private spheres. The civic dimension is manifest in the obligations of citizenship, but is wider than just citizenship. All residents in a country are under obligations to obey the laws, which include the liability to pay taxes, and the like. These obligations are supposed to override any consideration of ethnic difference. Some are now international, and others applicable throughout Europe. The prohibition of discrimination on grounds of race or ethnic origin is intended to remove any ethnic boundary in the public sphere. The laws define rights and provide for their protection.

The personal dimension is manifest in the bonds between family members, neighbours, workmates, and friends. The laws for the prohibition of discrimination do not regulate personal relations of this kind, so persons may lawfully be excluded from
membership in informal groups. Social research has established that when persons become personally acquainted with others, particularly in equal-status relations, and in actions directed to shared objectives, any tendency to define the other party as belonging in a different ethnic category is reduced. Wimmer’s research in Switzerland offers evidence of this and supports the conclusion that a central task for social research is to discover more about the causes of changes in relative values.

Religious faith is for many people a major source of reference categories. For example, research workers in the Netherlands conducted long interviews with 21 young Muslims who identified themselves with the Salafi school of Islam. Some of them concentrated on their faith in a way that excluded political activity; their ideas were closely associated with those of the ruling elite in Saudi Arabia. Others were very concerned about political developments in the Netherlands. Yet others, the jihadis, thought that revolution was needed to remedy the condition of Muslims in the wider world (Buijs, 2009).

**Methodological considerations**

The increase in the scale of social relations leads to the creation of state institutions which both create new social categories and weaken old solidarities. The recognition of human rights is an acknowledgement of individual rights (though some of these rights may be shared). When individual rights are protected, individuals may have less inclination to engage in collective action (as envisaged in proposition seven). Individual interests expand and collective interests are subjected to closer regulation. Generalizations about ethnic mobilization have too readily assumed that shared culture can be transformed into collective action, that shared culture trumps individual interest, and that ethnic groups are homogeneous (Habyarimana et al., 2009; Hempel, 2009: 463). Research has to account not only for what happens, but for the failure of individuals to act in other ways, in modes of behaviour that may never have occurred to them. This will often entail an analysis of underlying interests. The theory of social categories cannot be developed by interviewing individuals about their understandings of how others are different because these will be culture-bound. Theoretical advance will have to observe the distinction between *emic* and *etic* constructs (see Lett, 1996) and will require the use of experimental methods, albeit of a simple kind.

To decide whether someone belongs in a category, and to decide whether that person is to be treated differently, may in logic appear to be two separate decisions, but in practice they are usually one. Consider the famous experiments directed by Muzafar Sherif (1958) at summer camps for boys in the early 1950s; they showed that, when divided into rival teams, the boys first perceived members of the other team as competitors. The competition gave way to a conflict that became so acute the first experiment had to be halted. At a second camp, similar hostilities were generated, but the organizers then engineered a common predicament. Once the relationship changed, the boys came to perceive the others as cooperators in achieving a common objective (conceptualized as a superordinate goal). Changed relationships led to changed categorization.4

In other research, Tajfel (1970) conducted a series of experiments to discover the minimal conditions which (as he saw it) gave rise to ‘discrimination’. The subjects of the
experiment were young male apprentices who were shown slides of pictures by Klee and Kandinsky and asked to indicate which they preferred. They were then led to believe that they had been divided into teams according to their preference for the one artist or the other. Next they completed a task in which they were allocated small sums of money, and in which they could follow alternative strategies. One was that of maximizing joint profits, in which members of their own team got most money but members of the other team (identified only by a code number) did equally well. Another strategy was that of maximum difference, whereby the subjects obtained less for themselves but were able to ensure that those apparently in the other team received even less than they did. As subjects came to understand the nature of the task, they increasingly preferred the strategy of maximum difference. ‘Discrimination’ could be produced by simply telling the young men that they had been allocated to different categories even though the categories themselves were of no social significance. It would seem that all that is needed to produce social alignment and competition is the belief among subjects that they share membership in some sort of team, even one randomly created. Similarities between people contribute to social alignment by serving as cognitive cues to the creation of social categories and do not create bonds by themselves.

Tajfel described these as experiments in inter-group behaviour. This goes too far. The subjects believed that they had been placed in some sort of team, and responded accordingly. They did not know who were their fellow team members and the ‘teams’ existed only for the duration of the experiment. Membership in a social group has to be more significant than that. Tajfel’s experiments were into inter-category behaviour. To describe the resulting behaviour as ‘discrimination’ also goes too far. The behaviour produced was not discrimination in law. Assignment to what the subjects thought was a team led them to treat more favourably those they believed to be fellow team members even at a small cost to themselves.

Studies of actual behaviour have advantages, because what people say they would do in prescribed circumstances does not reliably predict what they do in actuality. However, in attitude research it is easier to manipulate the variables for examination, and such manipulation is the essence of the experimental method. When subjects are asked how they would behave in an imagined situation, a key requirement is that the experimenter should not introduce any social categorization. A subject can be given a photograph, or told the name of another person, and asked how he or she would behave towards that person in a given situation. The experimenter can than infer whether the appearance or the name evokes categorization and differential behaviour.

Does the subject assign the other party to a particular category? Which one? And why this rather than another? Categories such as those of ethnic origin, gender and religion have been instanced. They can be compared with categories like fellow-citizen, neighbour and workmate. Studies in Malaysia asked whether a subject would define certain situations as requiring conformity to a norm of alignment with a co-ethnic, or whether they would set this aside in favour of their personal advantage, either in terms of money or identification with someone of higher social status, or whether they would observe a norm of social obligation to a neighbour or workmate (Banton, 2000). The underlying hypothesis was that subjects can draw satisfaction from complying with different norms, or from personal advantage. They may trade off the satisfactions of personal gain against those of
norm observance. Modern market economies are based on financial incentives; they weaken traditional forms of social categories and loosen the association of categories.

The main weakness of this sort of technique in its present state is its reliance on the description of imagined situations. A small change in description could result in very different responses. The underlying variables have not yet been identified with sufficient precision.

Subjects may treat another person differently because of the way they categorize that person. They may also treat that person differently because they are aware that their peers would categorize that person in a particular way. Studies of housing preferences in the US in the 1950s discovered that many whites might be willing to move into a neighbourhood where some of the residents were black but not into one in which there were equal numbers of blacks and whites. For whites, the ‘tipping point’ seemed to be about 30 per cent. Blacks had different preferences. Their tipping point might be somewhere else on the scale. The existence of such tipping points is a general phenomenon, not limited to black–white relations, to the US or to housing. A preference as to ethnic mix can affect the choice of schools and other facilities.

Conclusion

Any review of sociological writing about ‘ethnicity, race and nationalism’ is confronted by the difficulties which arise because none of the three words has the clarity of meaning of key words in longer-established traditions of inquiry. If they are to uncover determinants of racial, ethnic and national relations of which the parties are not necessarily conscious, sociologists have to develop analytical, culture-free, or etic constructs distinct from the culture-bound, or emic, constructs of ordinary language (as in the differentiation of categories of analysis from categories of practice in Brubaker, 2004: 31–2).

Interactions between New Commonwealth immigrants and the settled population in the UK have developed in distinctive sequences of which most participants will have been unaware. Whereas the concept of reference categories helps identify some causal relations underlying those changes, the constructs ethnic group, race and nation enter the picture only as elements in ordinary language descriptions, often for policy purposes. Ethnic group is employed in the classification of the population; race is a term needed for the implementation of anti-discrimination law; national identification becomes relevant in connection with events in the country of origin.

Changes come about because every human is assigned to, and identifies with, many social categories; each identification entails costs and benefits. The interrelation between categories presents a generalization of what is currently known as intersectionality. The relative importance of categories changes as individuals trade off advantages associated with one form of social alignment for that of another. The most important commonality linking studies of ‘race, ethnicity and nationalism’ theoretically lies in the relation between agency and structure. The 16 propositions advanced in the article have all reflected the interaction between individuals as socialized members of various collectivities and the circumstances of time and geographical space. Men and women either act on their own account to attain their ends or in concert with others in collective action. The structures they create then influence the alternatives open to their successors. This
perspective recognizes that individuals often have multiple origins and opens opportunities for moving beyond ‘groupism’.

Notes

1 For example, according to Article 160 of the Constitution of Malaysia, ‘“Malay” means a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to Malay custom’.

2 British law recognizes the expression racial group as ‘a group of persons defined by reference to colour, race, nationality or ethnic or national origins’. It does not recognize the expression ethnicity. The possible confusion associated with notions of ethnicity was illustrated in a landmark case before the UK Supreme Court, R v JFS School [2009] UKSC 15, concerning the rules of eligibility for admission to a Jewish school. At para 203 of his judgement Lord Hope envisioned the case of someone brought up by non-observant Jewish parents who had themselves been brought up by non-observant Jewish parents. He stated that to the Office of the Chief Rabbi such a person ‘is Jewish despite his complete lack of Jewish ethnicity’. Lord Hope used ethnicity as a synonym for participation in Jewish religious life. He reified it.

3 In Northern Ireland the categories Catholic and Republican, and the categories Protestant and Unionist are closely associated. These two sections of the population, like Jews and Sikhs, to that extent constitute ethno-religious or political-religious categories. As noted above, the government of Malaysia defines ‘Malay’ as a religio-linguistic-ethnic category.

4 From Sherif’s evidence that cooperative activities in pursuit of what were termed ‘superordinate goals’ could dissipate a conflict, some have concluded that prejudice is most easily reduced when individuals pursue common goals. This is indeed vital to successful team work. Nevertheless, the main force reducing prejudice is neither equal-status contact, nor shared goals, but the need for cooperation in the pursuit of separate goals. In Britain, if members of the majority seek medical attention, they find that many of the medical staff, especially in hospitals, are of non-European origin. Patients want the services of doctors and nurses, irrespective of ‘race’, ethnic or national origin. Members of the minorities need the cooperation of majority members in very many situations. They get it for the same reason that Adam Smith observed, ‘It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from regard to their own interest’.

5 Tajfel (1981: 254) was not concerned with the objective nature of social categories but with social categorization, which he defined as ‘a social process of bringing together social objects or events in groups which are equivalent with regard to an individual’s actions, intentions and system of belief’.

References


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