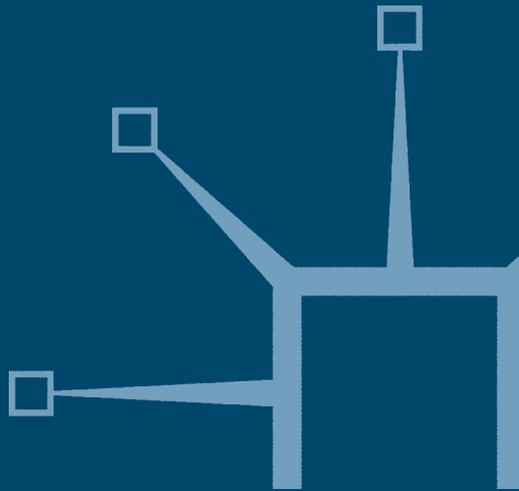


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Ethnicity, Gender and Social Change

Edited by
Rohit Barot, Harriet Bradley
and Steve Fenton



ETHNICITY, GENDER AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Also by Rohit Barot

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DURKHEIM AND MODERN SOCIOLOGY

ETHNICITY: Social Structure, Culture, Identity (*forthcoming*)

Ethnicity, Gender and Social Change

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Rethinking Ethnicity and Gender

Rohit Barot, Harriet Bradley
and Steve Fenton

One of the most notable recent developments in sociology has been the increased attention to ethnicity and gender as key aspects of social relations. The study of these two dimensions has developed separately, as two distinct sub-disciplines; but in the past ten years there has been an emerging awareness that in concrete social contexts ethnicity and gender are intimately involved. The experience of ethnicity is gendered and gender relations are ethnically distinct. The exploration of exactly *how* ethnicity and gender intersect in particular situations has become a popular topic for new research, especially among younger researchers. It is fitting, then, that in 1995 the Bristol University Centre for the Study of Minorities and Social Change chose for its annual conference the theme of 'ethnicity, gender and social change'.

The chapters in this book, which derive from some of the papers given at the conference, are in the main devoted to presenting some findings from this type of new research, exploring the interplay of ethnicity and gender in very specific social settings and dealing with specific ethnic populations. This reflects our belief that the best sociological insights derive from close and careful empirical study, and that conceptual work must be grounded in such study. However, in this introduction we seek to locate the research findings against a background of broader theoretical and conceptual developments.

The discussion reflects our varied interests and intellectual starting points, as a social anthropologist interested in cultures and ethnicity, a sociologist of gender and a sociologist of ethnic relations. We start with a short sketch of the growing interest in ethnicity as a concept and then consider how best to utilize the concept. Next we consider the coming together of ethnicity and gender as topics of study. How does ethnicity influence gender relations? How is the experience of ethnicity shaped by gender? Finally, we give some brief consideration to the methodological implications of these conceptual developments and conclude with some reflections on processes of change.

THE SHIFT TO ETHNICITY

Over several decades ethnicity has been emerging as a key term in social sciences, superseding the use of tribe and race as important concepts in social anthropology and sociology. As decolonization brought independence to African nations, the anthropological concept of 'tribalism' became unacceptable to the African elites. In colonial anthropology, the word tribe had acquired negative associations of primitive backwardness that applied to simple, pre-literate and technologically less advanced groups in Black Africa. In studying the social structure of African societies, anthropologists turned to the concept of ethnicity which was seen as being more neutral than the word tribe. From the 1950s onwards it became a common anthropological practice to reconceptualize 'tribes' as 'ethnic groups' with distinctive cultures and organization. The period of decolonization in Africa and Asia coincided with two critical junctures of civil rights struggle in the USA: the 1954 Supreme Court decision and the de-segregation process; and the emergence of powerful civil rights and Black Power movements. First integrationist and nationalist Black leaders, then in subsequent decades Chicanos, women and gay people, began to campaign for their cultural and political rights. As these populations and groups organized themselves politically, social scientists began to apply the concept of ethnicity to describe the process of group formation and the use of cultural symbolism as a source of identity for groups and individuals.

In Britain, Abner Cohen's influential 1969 text about the relationship between the Yorubas and Hausas, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa* became an important focus for the study of what Cohen described as 'political ethnicity'. Cohen not only influenced other anthropologists to research the 'ethnic phenomenon' but also encouraged them to apply the concept of ethnicity to metropolitan situations. He himself undertook a study of the Notting Hill Festival in London, arguing that the festival had come to symbolize Caribbean identity in Britain, and explored the relevance of ethnicity to the culture of British stockbrokers. In the USA, publication of Glazer and Moynihan's *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (1975), was one mark of American interest in ethnicity; James Watson's introduction to *Between Two Cultures: Migrants and Minorities in Britain* (1977), took up Glazer and Moynihan's proposition that ethnicity is a more fundamental source of stratification than property-based class relations, a theme that has been developed in subsequent exploration of the relationship between class and ethnicity (Gilroy,

1987). As the use of the term ethnicity and ethnic group gained ground, debates about the very nature of ethnicity began to centre upon the concept of primordialism, and the notion of 'situational' and 'instrumental' ethnicity (for a discussion see Eriksen 1993, Chapter 3). The concept of primordialism had its origins in Shils's (1957) distinction between primordial and civic ties, applied by Geertz in a seminal essay on the newly independent nations of Asia and Africa (Geertz, 1993). While 'primordiality' stressed the given-ness of social ties and identifications, the concepts of 'situational' and 'instrumental' ethnicity stressed the shifting relevance of ethnicity according to social context and the interest base of ethnic identifications. Ethnic groups themselves often present a primordial argument about their existence but a systematic historical examination of the group in question may show that a particular set of economic and political circumstances determine ethnic identities. Roger Ballard's work (1993), provides an excellent example of the processes promoting the crystallization of ethnic identity among the Sikhs in the Punjab.

When Fredrik Barth published *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* in 1969, theories of stratification and inequality were much more influential and the question of equality and welfare a more common concern than is the case in the 1990s. But the 1990s provided a new impetus to the study of ethnicity, one source being the re-ordering of the political map of Europe. With the end of communism and disintegration of the Soviet Empire, the apparent new interest in religious and linguistic identifications among former Soviet populations (Tishkov, 1997) has led many social scientists and historians to speak of a resurgence of ethnicity in modern politics.

Just as the anthropologists had used tribe and tribalism in Africa to explain the formation of social groups, American and British social scientists had used the now challenged concept of 'race' to explain what came to be known as 'race relations' in the USA and Britain and other English speaking countries such as Australia and New Zealand. A series of UNESCO conferences had questioned the notion of race as a biological entity which could influence the mental and social make up of a population through genetic inheritance (UNESCO, 1975). However, scholars in the USA and the UK continued to use 'race relations' as a formal designation as the British contributions of Michael Banton (1967, 1983) illustrate. Robert Miles developed a comprehensive analysis and criticism of the approach which he termed the 'race relations problematic' (Miles, 1982). His central argument was that race was not a scientific concept and therefore it was a methodological error to treat it

as a sociological reality of the same kind as class. What really mattered was not the question of race but racism – an ideology of innate superiority that brought about discrimination, exclusion and marginalizing of particular categories of individuals. In the context of this debate in the 1980s, many scholars chose to talk about racism rather than ‘race’ which is put into quotation marks to signal its unacceptability as a sociological fact. Fenton speaks of sociology undergoing an ‘emancipation from the concept of race’ (Fenton, 1996, p. 141). The demise of ‘race’ as an analytic term does not, of course, mean its disappearance from popular and political discourses and in the USA the term ‘race’ also retains a central position in academic discourse.

None the less, with the growing use of the term ‘ethnicity’ both in social anthropology and sociology, social scientists had a choice of using ethnicity and ethnic relations or ‘race’ and ‘race’ relations for their field of inquiry. In the UK, one of the earliest organizations concerned with research in race relations was the Institute of Race Relations, a designation that still bears the mark of the earlier history. The Economic and Social Science Research Centre established at Bristol University in 1971 (subsequently transferred to Aston and then to Warwick), was called the Research Unit in Ethnic Relations, later renamed the Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations. To some extent, social scientists and policy makers were making a transition from ‘race’ to ‘ethnicity’ and from ‘race’ relations to ethnic relations – a transition that the contributions to this book reflect.

However, as we indicated above, it was not a simple case of replacement of race by ethnicity. What happened was that ethnicity as a concept began to gain currency in conferences and academic institutions. Courses with the title of Ethnic Relations began to appear at institutions of higher education. One of the issues that sociologists and anthropologists took up was the question of the connection and relationship between race and ethnicity. Influenced by Barth’s concept of boundary maintenance, Michael Lyon constructed a scheme to explain the connection between race and ethnicity with reference to boundaries (Lyon, 1973). He argued that race was a boundary of exclusion and ethnicity was a boundary of inclusion. The dominant majority imposed the boundary of exclusion while the minorities created a boundary of inclusion. He illustrated this scheme with two examples. According to him African Caribbeans provided a case of a boundary of exclusion, being denied their rights and full participation in the White society and having been stripped of their original African culture, while he saw Gujaratis as providing a boundary of inclusion, which they created through their own

language, religion and aspects of their social organization. The scheme was not without its problems. It assumed that African Caribbeans did not have a culture of their own and implied that British Gujaratis were not subject to a boundary of exclusion. None the less, Lyon's contribution introduced a clear distinction between race and ethnicity of a kind that had not existed hitherto in literature.

Subsequently, a notion of race related to biology and ethnicity related to the question of culture was deployed in the literature. However, these distinctions have not necessarily brought about consistent use of race and ethnicity in the literature in the USA or the UK. Academics, politicians and commentators use ethnicity to mean different things at different times. In addition, race and ethnicity appear conflated, if not confused, in many discussions which are not entirely free from the earlier legacy of writing on race and culture. Most recently, ethnicity has emerged in a parallel fashion to the concept of community in sociological theory as a dynamic term that embodies many different meanings. As Abner Cohen (1974) has argued, ethnicity may best be used as a signal of the relationship between the symbolism of identity and its deployment in political mobilization and the political process.

Moreover, as some contributions to this book show, in the study of any group or category where an attribute of ethnicity is an important dimension, it is unsatisfactory to treat ethnicity purely in its own terms. It is conceptually important that the research examines whatever is 'ethnic' in the context of a wider set of concepts such as class, racism and gender. More recent writing on the topic appears to address itself to such multidimensional concerns. For instance, Anthias and Yuval-Davis go some way towards addressing the question of ethnicity, 'race' and racism in terms of nation, gender, colour and class (1992). Some of the contemporary writing identified as the 'new sociology of ethnicities' (Hall, 1992; Bradley, 1996) tends to focus on a multiplicity of factors and complex dynamics that influence the position of ethnic minority populations in any particular European location.

RECONCEPTUALIZING ETHNICITY

Thus, concern with ethnicity and concern with gender intrude upon sociology in two forms: first, as a set of *specific* concerns (ethnic relations, gender relations) and second as the infusion of *general* sociological understandings (for example, of class, power, inequalities) with a belated awareness of the ways in which all or most social relations have

ethnic and gender implications and dimensions. It is difficult empirically and even more difficult theoretically to embrace this whole set of questions simultaneously; yet most sociologists have now become aware that a too exclusive focus on class relations is a way of *not* seeing. In such circumstances, how may we begin to reconceptualize ethnicity and its intersection with gender? We wish here to highlight three trends: the social constructionist approach to ethnicity; the rethinking of the erroneous category of race in terms of a discourse of racism; and the view of ethnicity as operating in specific contexts.

We begin with a recognition of one of the principal developments in the field of ethnicity in the last two decades: the growing awareness that earlier studies of 'ethnic groups' bestowed an undue concreteness on this phrase, implicated not so much in the term 'ethnic' as in the term 'group'. The notion that people belonged to easily identifiable groups and that these groups were properly called ethnic (rather than being 'races') allowed the possibility of a study called ethnic relations, which concerned relations between groups or between individuals of different groups. The existence of groups was itself seen as relatively unproblematic, these being groups differentiated along the lines of ancestry (kin, region, country of origin), shared culture and language.

The shift of emphasis comes in the recognition that the boundaries of groups, the very definition of groups as socially constituted in a concrete sense, and the way in which people represent themselves as bearers of culture and as having a shared ancestry, are all problematic and subject to change, whether the change is long and slow or short and dramatic. Groups or identities are socially constructed, shaped and re-shaped, and their content (the 'cultural stuff' as Barth (1969) described it) is subject to constant revision. Indeed the shift is in part away from an unduly concrete notion of groups towards a conceptualization of ethnicity as a dimension of social relations, relations which are simultaneously structured around principles other than ethnicity. Thus as Eriksen summarizes, 'ethnicity is not an attribute of groups, it is a dimension of relationships' (Eriksen, 1993, p. 12).

This does not mean that we have to abandon utterly the term 'groups' although there will be occasions where other phrases are preferable. The relative stability of some definitions of the boundaries of populations, both by those inside and outside the boundary, gives sufficient permanence to make the idea of groups plausible. The boundaries of White and Black in the USA were sufficiently stable for three centuries for us to speak credibly of the USA's White and the USA's Black population. In the 1990s it remains possible to speak of White and Black

populations but the USA's system of ethnic classification is now much more complex and the cultural content immeasurably more contested.

A further sense in which the term 'group' or equivalents (for example, network, association, community) have a basis in social life (and not just as a system of classification), is when they refer to a substratum of ties and obligations that are primarily or partly ethnically defined. Among migrant populations in the urban centres of their new country, obligations and reciprocities are sustained in the daily lives of the migrant workers. At the same time a certain collective identity takes shape in the new setting which has its origins both in the internal processes of mutuality and daily life of the migrant population, and at the boundary of their intersection with the indigenous population. That is to say ethnicity is a socially reproduced system of classification, but not *merely* a system of classification.

As we indicated in the previous section, the second bouleversement in the study of ethnicity, or what is still sometimes called 'race' and ethnicity, is the recognition that 'race', being in its historical contours a discredited term, cannot form part of the analytic language of sociology. This naturally entails the conclusion that equally the term 'race relations' is either so imprecise or so confounded by its reliance on a term of scientific error that it can no longer serve any useful purpose. None of this means that racism is not real; it is in part constituted by the persistence in political and popular consciousness, of the discredited conception of race. The sharpness and force with which racism persists is the principle reason why we cannot simply substitute for a discourse of race and racism a discourse of ethnicity, even though there is much to be said for Wallman's dictum that 'phenotype is [but] one element in the repertoire of boundary markers' (Wallman, 1986, p. 229). The historical association of the term 'race' with colour or appearance and the fact that colour and appearance continue to function as socially constructed dimensions of group definition and ideology seem to be the reasons why people still speak of 'race' and certainly of racism. The two discourses (of race/racism and of ethnicity) appear destined to co-exist with respective differences of emphasis but a wide terrain of overlap. Certainly the logic of Wallman's argument is that racism could be subsumed under the general heading of ethnicity and ethnic boundary making. There is, however, more to it than that.

It is possible to draw up a list of the dimensions of group boundary definition or, to put it another way, of the way in which systems of classification are socially reproduced. One dimension is represented by the answer to the question 'who is doing the classifying?'; a second and

related question is, 'are the categories of group definition chosen or imposed?'; a third asks, 'what are the bases of group classification – alternatively (or of course in variously weighted combinations), appearance type, culture, religion and ancestry?' Finally we can raise the question, 'are the definitions rooted in experience as against blanket categories of classification?'

With respect to social systems of oppression based on racism the answers – in the discourse of race and racism – would be: a dominant group creates and implements the classification; the categories are imposed on subordinated populations; the bases of the system of classification are principally colour and appearance type, and they are blanket systems of classification not, at least in the first instance, rooted in the experience of the classified populations.

By and large in the context of the discourse of ethnicity the answers would be: a population or group creates its own system of classification, albeit unmistakably by dint of relations with others; the categories are, therefore, chosen rather than imposed; the bases of classification are principally culture, religion, language and ancestry; and equally they are related to collective and individual memories and current lives, in the system of obligations and mutual ties which are daily sustained – they are rooted in experience.

This set of distinctions is based upon conventions and practices in much of the current literature. Despite the apparent neatness, it is important to acknowledge that there are many complexities and contradictions when we begin to apply the models to specific examples of boundary construction. It is rare, for example, that a system of classification is exclusively based on appearance, even though the USA and South Africa represent outstanding examples of binary Black/White systems. None the less, this approach is useful, we suggest, to begin to distinguish discourses of racism and ethnicity.

A third development we wish to endorse is that ethnicity, as a socially reproduced system of classification and as a set of social ties, takes place within wider contexts, the most important of which are political and economic. These political and economic contexts may be conceptualized as macro-social (structural), meso-social (institutional) and micro-social (face-to-face, 'private') spheres.

In the macro-political sphere we are interested in the disposition of ethnicity in nation-states, in regions and at a global level. Ethnically identified groups are found as minorities both dominant (Afrikaaners and English speaking Whites in apartheid South Africa) and non-dominant (French Canadian in Canada, Catalans in Spain) within

nation-states. In many nation-states there is a majority population which is ethnically defined and in some cases the majority ethnicity is identified with the nation; there is a political claim that equates the nation and the majority ethnicity. In countries such as Germany this ethnic identity is expressed also in immigration laws and in the granting of citizenship so that there is a presumption in favour of ethnic Germans (*ius sanguini*) over persons in-migrating and even born in Germany of non-German parents (*ius soli*). Citizenship and immigration controls are commonly the site for the definition and sustaining of ethnic and national identities at this macro level. Ethnicity is commonly contextualised within the economic system in the form of an ethnicized division of labour and class structure. The ever widening circles of an internationalized migration of workers means that new diasporas are in constant formation. In many but not all circumstances these migrant worker groups take on an ethnic minority status in their new country. Chapter 1 by Annie Phizacklea also illustrates the salience of gender in these evolving patterns of migration.

Indeed, there are many points of contact between the conceptualization of ethnicity set out above and the understanding of gender. Both ethnicity and gender may, at least in part, be understood as social constructions subject to shifts in social definitions which may respond to social and economic changes or reflect the cultural politics of classification. The hopeful aspect of this is that – for those who cannot rest contented with current definitions – what has been constructed can always be deconstructed.

But there are also important differences in the way in which ethnicity and gender may be mobilized in social organization. Ethnicities or ethnic groups may not always be communities – hence the importance of the distinction between category and group (Jenkins, 1997). But ethnic groups *may* be communities – that is they may become groups by having a real basis of shared life, grounded in region or locale, reproduced through kinship and the social reproduction of cultural forms, and possibly entailing a whole division of labour, shared economy and internal class system, whether or not it is effectively part of a wider system of class and the division of labour. In, for example, much of rural North Eastern Malaysia, Malay ethnicity is socially reproduced under these kinds of conditions. There is no equivalent sense in which a gender forms a community although of course men and women may organize in a more or less systematic way to defend identified gender interests, as in the numerous feminist movements which have historically developed or more recently the ‘men’s rights’ groups which have been formed to