Racial categories matter because racial hierarchies matter: a commentary

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Abstract

New racial categories emerge with the progress of history, as new names reinterpret the existence and chronicle the insertion of demographic subgroups into a population. The analysis of categorical change is hardly unimportant work. However, we as researchers would be lax in our analyses if we did not understand that as racial categories change, so do racial hierarchies. To know what a group calls itself is only part of the story. Knowing the cultural, sociological and political meaning of the name, and how the category fits into a racialized – that is to say hierarchical – social structure, is just as important, if not more so.

In May 1997 a conference was held in London to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. There, Nazli Kibria presented a paper which used theory and ethnographic data to discuss what she called the 'dilemmas' that Asians in the United States face in embracing the Asian American racial label. Kibria also conceptualized the creation of the Asian American category as 'racial positioning'. She indicated that Asians somewhat uncomfortably accepted and sometimes instrumentally used the 'model minority' image that the white American media attached to Asian Americans beginning in the 1980s (Takaki 1989). With her idea of the racial dilemma, Kibria acknowledged the contradictions that obtain as a group recreates and embraces an identity that the oppressors in the racial hierarchy created and associated with negative characteristics and denunciatory stereotypes.

In discussing Kibria's paper, I presented a three-part critique of the work. One part focused on her inattention to the hierarchical nature of racialized categories. This was evident from her description of the Asian

American racial project (Winant 1994). She suggests that Asians are positioning themselves outside the category 'Other', but also outside the category 'White'. True, racialization is a positioning process, but this positioning takes place within a racial hierarchy. Originally, she did not represent 'white' as a power position in a racial hierarchy. Instead, she equated whiteness with the 'centre' of the racial structure of the US. She failed to acknowledge that privilege is associated with whiteness, and disadvantage and disfavour with non-whites. Since the racial system was a seemingly non-hierarchical system of racial categories, Kibria's positioning concept was a confusing one. The revised study (published in this issue) reflects her new understanding of racial hierarchies and the power relations derived in the positions thereof. In showing the centrality of positioning, she captures the dynamic aspect of racial phenomena, while appreciating the extent to which they are embedded in power relations (Winant 1994; Omi and Winant 1996; Bashi and McDaniel 1997).

My second criticism of the original conference paper focused on the fact that she insufficiently accounted for how the model minority as a category is socially constructed. Kibria claims hers is a social constructionist analysis. This methodology requires looking at racial categories as a politically contentious, historically contingent set of boundaries of classification, where the delimiters have social meanings that are (most often) attached to phenotype and culture. Kibria indicated that the immigrants she interviewed to some degree accepted, embraced and used instrumentally the model minority characterization for themselves, but in that draft she did not show that this model minority concept is a myth (Takaki 1989, see ch. 12). The model minority idea is a politically and historically contingent social construction and, as such, cannot be spoken of as an essentialist quality that adheres automatically to the Asian American category. This oversight, too, is remedied in the revised paper.

Third, I argued that Kibria failed to distinguish between processes of racial category construction internal and external to the group itself. The processes in shaping and building racial categories are socially and politically different, depending on whether the impetus comes from social groups *within* the category or if the pressure for boundary keeping and definitions comes from *without*, that is, whether the racialization process is one in which a category is imposed by white people in power positions in the racial structure. When the construction of a racial category comes from outside the group, the categorization process is an example of the exercise of power held by the oppressors in the racial hierarchy. However, when those so labelled change the terms, representations and meaning of racial categories, they are usually competing for power in the hierarchy, and these efforts are examples of attempts at changing the existing racial hegemony (Winant 1994).

A growing number of scholars are using qualitative and quantitative research methods to study racialization processes. Mary Waters has

studied ethnicity and race among whites and blacks in the United States (Waters 1991; 1994; 1996). Other scholars have focused upon racial designations among Latinos (Rodriguez and Cordero-Guzman 1992; Portes and MacLeod 1996). My comments here focus on the issue of racial categories as part and parcel of racial hierarchies. I think this is a point worth emphasizing, because, although Kibria remedied this problem in her revision, others who study racialization sometimes write as if the implications of the racialization process are unrelated to a group's incorporation into a hierarchical, that is, stratifying, socio-economic system.

Cornell and Hartmann (1998) spend much of the introduction, the first and second chapters of their book defining race and ethnicity and explaining the differences and similarities of the two concepts. The distinctions they make between race and ethnicity are extremely valuable. The authors explain that race is a classification that is typically assigned or externally imposed, while ethnicity is internally asserted. Second, they note that race is a product of the meeting of distinct peoples, prompting classifications comprehensive in the ways they divided Europeans from others. Third, they note that race is a power relation, and fourth, that racial designations imply physical, biological, aptitudinal, moral, and/or other kinds of inferiority − while ethnicity has none of these connotations. However, after spending much effort to delineate the two concepts, they proceed in the rest of their book to treat race and ethnicity as if they are sociologically similar. For example, they suggest that there may be a process of group 'self-construction' in racial positioning, and that this characteristic is 'what makes some races at one and the same time ethnic groups. . . . When a racial group sets out to construct its own version of its identity, it makes itself both race and ethnic group at once' (p. 30). In the remaining chapters, as they write about the social construction of identity, they suspend their own acknowledgment that race is a hierarchical power structure while ethnicity is not.

Other researchers, too, either neglect to address the hierarchical nature of race in their analyses of categories and identity or simply conflate race and ethnicity altogether.

Joane Nagel, for example, suggests that people choose among a whole range of possible *ethnic* identifications. She writes:

Since ethnicity changes situationally, the individual carries a portfolio of ethnic identities that are more or less salient in various situations and *vis-à-vis* various audiences. As audiences change, the socially-defined array of ethnic choices open to the individual changes (Nagel 1994, p. 154).

Nagel argues that ethnic identity and ethnic culture are shaped by structure and agency, noting that the choices open to the individual are not

infinite, but instead are structurally bounded. However, she confounds many identity concepts that admittedly influence one another yet are socially distinct: that is, ethnicity, race, colour consciousness within racialized groups and nationalism. Waters, too, characterizes ethnic identity as emanating from ethnic choice, based on the respondent's understanding of his or her cultural origins; she, too, conflates race and ethnicity (Waters 1991; 1994). In her more recent writings Waters indicates that there are differences between race and ethnicity when she states that whites have more and different ethnic options relative to blacks (Waters 1996). However, even if in 1996 she does not characterize 'black' as an *ethnic choice* (as she does in the 1991 and 1994 articles), she still sees blackness as an ethnicity.[1]

Portes and MacLeod (1996) are another case in point. They declare the answer to the question 'What shall I call myself?' to be a choice between a specific ethnicity and a pan-ethnic label, and characterize this choice as a matter of culture. They write that

> Our data . . . indicate a telling convergence of several psychological dimensions. Thus, though the state, the school system and society at large may insist on labeling [second generation immigrant] children by a one-size-fits-all label, [Hispanic,] it is clear that the more advantaged and more ambitious among them do not see this identity as desirable. They have opted instead to retain their parents' nationality in hyphenated form or to force their way symbolically into the mainstream, banking on the unaccented English and the absence of observable physical traits (Portes and MacLeod 1996, p. 545).

But they must mean by this that the children in their sample, who opt for the label American in a problematically worded survey question, are indistinguishable from physical traits that are indicative of whiteness, and in this sense have a symbolic sense of ethnicity through which they are able to ignore racializing labels like either 'black' or 'Hispanic'.[2]

In that sense, Kibria's work makes an important theoretical and empirical advance. She construes the creation of 'pan-ethnic' labels as not simply a matter of a group substituting one kind of ethnic label for another in a normal Americanizing experience, but instead characterizes this process as a *racializing* process. One does not choose between ethnic labels and racial labels. Individuals have *both* ethnic and racial identities, *at one and the same time*. To be clear, 'pan-ethnic' labels like Asian American and Hispanic are racialized labels. Their addition to the system of racial categories in the United States moves us from a bipolar bimodal hierarchy (white/black or white/non-white) to one that has more than two levels (for example, white/Asian/Hispanic/black).

In the original conference paper Kibria presented ethnographic evidence from the original document that well supported the theoretical

points she makes here. Unfortunately, she has removed that evidence from this revised version. The words of the respondents themselves were valuable to understanding how Kibria came to her analysis. Her use of respondents' own words as evidence of immigrant adaptation to new racial structures in destination countries, and the social constructionist approach that she uses to analyse this process, are important contributions to the study of what Winant calls *racialization*. 'The concept of racialization signifies the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group' (Winant 1994, p. 59). Winant notes that Asian Americans as a group are a new racial subject formed in the late 1960s, the result of the bridging of Asian ethnic subgroups (Chinese, Japanese, Filipino and Korean Americans, among others) into a pan-ethnic collective. The creation of a new pan-ethnic group is one example of the racialization process.

> The *racialization* of Asian ethnic groups was paralleled by the racialization of other groups, notably Latinos and Native Americans. Such panethnic activism was inspired by the civil rights movement and anticolonial nationalist movements in Asia, Africa. Somewhat ironically, the very movements that sought an end to racial discrimination at home and colonial rule abroad also fostered an increased political awareness among formerly fragmented ethnic groups that they constituted a larger, racially defined entity (Winant 1994, 60, emphasis in original).

Thus, racialization is a political process through which groups recreate racial categories and find ways to insert themselves into the existing racial structure. However, that categorization process presupposes the existence of a racial hierarchy into which the new categories are inserted. Because this process involves the creation of new meanings, groupings and associations between the hierarchy and the categories it comprises, a society's racial hierarchy by definition must change along with the racialization process. Thus, racialization is at the same time a process that reifies race even as it revolutionizes our thinking about race. It is a process that ignores or denies ethnicity and forces people into racial identities (Bashi and McDaniel 1997).

Often, however, sociologists write as if the opposite is true, that is, they use 'the ethnicity paradigm' to talk about race, which assumes that 'race is but one of a number of determinants of ethnic group identity or ethnicity' (Omi and Winant 1994, p. 15). Racial categories tell us about racial hierarchies. As racialized groups reaffirm or transform racial self-definitions, they potentially reform or revolutionize the extant racial hierarchy. To be succinct, even as insertion or racial positioning reconstructs the racial hierarchy, it also changes that hierarchy.

Kibria's article makes a good case for seeing the development of the

category 'Asian American' as a process of racialization. I shall only briefly describe the racialization process coincident with the use of the 'Hispanic' label. There is some controversy surrounding this point. Even though we, as researchers, understand that Hispanics come in many 'colours', we also know that the term is being used more and more as a racial label in the United States. The published research necessary to evaluate this hypothesis is scanty, but evidence exists to support this assertion. In their study of Puerto Rican racial identity, Rodriguez and Cordero-Guzman (1992) show that given an open ended question asking them to identify their race, most of their respondents answered with a Spanish identifier rather than choose either black or white to describe themselves. Their respondents also indicated a belief that North Americans would identify them as a member of a 'Spanish' race, again rather than simply dividing Puerto Ricans to fit them into the traditional black/white dichotomous racial hierarchy of this country's quite recent history. Moore and Pachon (1985) assert that it is generally accepted that 'Hispanics have become a *national* minority (p. 2, emphasis in the original). However, 'Very few Hispanics would choose a collective term of self-designation (either "Hispanic" or "Latino") even though this may be the term by which the rest of the nation generally knows them' (p. 13). This lack of embrace for the racialized 'pan-ethnic' term distinguishes the Hispanic from the Asian case, although Moore and Pachon indicate that 'some of this attitude is changing' (p. 13).

Ethnic and racial systems of categorization are related but operate under completely distinct relations of social and economic power (Bashi and McDaniel 1997). Racialization is a process of racial formation, that is a 'sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed' (Omi and Winant 1994, p. 55). The methodology of studying racial formations, or racialization in particular, is clear if one follows the directives of Omi and Winant. One must study both social structure and cultural representation, for race is both. It is neither a simple matter of cultural expression or choice, nor is it a set of categories solely determined by and coincident with structural positioning. That is, race in the United States − as distinct from ethnicity − is not simply a matter of what one calls oneself. As Rodriguez and Cordero-Guzman write:

> The US conception of race with its emphasis on genetic or biological inheritance privileges a static conception of race. One is and always will be the race into which one was born, one is one's blood. This conception also disallows or ignores more contextual definitions (Rodriguez and Cordero-Guzman 1992, p. 526).

The history of the US is one which is not limited to, but certainly includes, the purposeful mixing of different ethnic groups of foreign

origin in the hope of gaining increased social control over labour. This occurred in the slave trade, where persons of disparate tongue and culture were determinedly put together so that they were unable to communicate and rise up against their oppressors. Similarly, the history of Asians in North America involved the determined inter-ethnic mixing of subpopulations from the Asian continent in the hope that labour organization would not occur even as inter-ethnic conflict prepared the soil for group competition and inter-ethnic strife (Takaki 1981, see especially ch. 1).

If those same subgroups come together in some other historical moment to call themselves by the same name given them by the dominant culture (with its decidedly nefarious intent in mixing the groups in the first place), and if they come to embrace the name and give it a positive connotation, that is evidence of the important power that race and racialization have. Racial structures have a power of transformation that is much like the power of a pressure cooker: both break down tough organic material to make it pliable; both are sites where things meld and are recreated into something else altogether.

Sometimes the change that occurs with racialization is reformist, sometimes revolutionary. More important than the political leaning is the impetus for racializing change. In matters of racial and ethnic identity, it matters who does the identifying. Is the process one by which an identity is externally imposed (and outside the category of 'white' it generally is in its origin), or is it a formerly imposed identity that is being reinterpreted, redefined and embraced? Thus, one must distinguish between the internal and external processes by which racialization may occur. It makes a difference who is doing the categorical defining, and who is policing the boundaries of these definitions. It comes down to a question of power: who holds it, where the power-holders see themselves and others in the existing hierarchy, where they think they *should be* in the racial hierarchy (that is, the meaning or racial positioning), and how they use their power to realize those norms. Do the norms of the less powerful differ or not? Do those less powerful have an alternative vision that can usurp the racial power structure or do they behave in ways that hold it in place?

Why do people so different come together and see themselves as a group? I make note of two types of catalysts. First, there are galvanizing historical moments. It may be an oppressive moment (slavery or internment, beatings of Rodney King or Vincent Chin), or a revolutionary moment. Second, is the slow pull of the effect of demography. 'Racial' cohorts are born into their own historical time, and either accept or reject their label and the social status attached to that label. (Think of the receptiveness for Malcolm's call to embrace 'blackness' over being Negro, or Jesse's call to claim territorial origins over phenotype by advocating that US blacks rename themselves 'African American'.)

Racial categories emerge from and comprise a racial hierarchy, and our changing categories provide a breadcrumb trail showing what we accept and reject about race as a normative hierarchical ordering of human beings, and where we see ourselves in that ordering. The growth of white ethnic choice in the United States is a recognition that whiteness is constructed of particular ethnic groupings, the labels of which are denied to persons who are phenotypically non-white yet may have the same heritage as those who are socially permitted to call themselves Irish, Italian and other ethnic categories normally considered white. But the embrace of ethnicity among whites is also a potential means of confusing the discourse about racial hierarchy and white privilege.

The consolidation of racial categories, for whites and non-whites alike, has always involved a process of denying, or ignoring particularized ethnicities. Hickman argues that this was the case with Irish immigrants to Britain who as a group were made to be white under a process she calls 'forced inclusion' (Hickman 1998). Winant and many others have argued the point that Africans left the continent with ethnic identities that were stripped from them along with their freedom (Winant 1994). Bashi and McDaniel (1997) suggest that immigration to the United States has provided the fuel for a process of racialization that maps ethnicities to particular races, such that ethnic identification becomes a nearly automatic process of insertion into the American system of racial hierarchy. Even as black immigrants from the West Indies and other parts of the Caribbean may not know their new American racialized identity, they learn it soon after their arrival (Bryce-LaPorte 1972; Rodriguez and Cordero-Guzman 1992; Bashi 1996). However, even as they begin to accept new, racialized identities, many first- and second-generation immigrants understand that maintaining ethnic (family and social network) ties can be socially and economically advantageous (Bashi 1997; Song 1997).

Racial identities are obtained not because one is unaware of the choice of ethnic labels with which to call oneself, but because one is not allowed to be without a race in a racialized society. Race is a sociocultural hierarchy, and racial categories are social spaces, or positions, that are carved out of that racial hierarchy. The study of racial categories is important, because categories change labels and meanings, and we may monitor changes in the racial hierarchy by monitoring changes in the meaning and manifestations of racial categories.

The mapping out of racial hierarchies is an important exercise. Our work on racial categories is *far* from done. The naming and meaning of racial categories are continually changing, and it is worthwhile documenting that change. However, the chronicling of 'what we call ourselves now' is not the end, but only a means to an end, or several possible ends. The end I wish to emphasize here is that as we produce new research on the emergence and consolidation of new racial categories, we have the

opportunity to move towards a new understanding of the racial hierarchy into which these categories are being formed.

Acknowledgement

Notes

1.   Waters writes: 'In some sense then, as Blauner (1992) has argued, you can see Black students coming together on campus as both an "ethnic" pull of wanting to be together to share common experiences and community, and a "racial" push of banding together defensively because of perceived rejection and tension from Whites. In this way the ethnic identities of Black students are in some sense similar to, say, Korean students wanting to be together to share experiences. And it is an ethnicity that is generally much stronger than, say, Italian Americans' (Waters 1996). Waters cites Robert Blauner, 1992, 'Talking past each other: black and white languages of race', *American Prospect*, (summer), pp. 55–64.

2.   Portes and MacLeod (1996) do not give the numbers for the ethnic origins of the children in the sample, but one might guess they were largely Cuban and Mexican (plausible, since the survey was made in south Florida and southern California, and not in New York City, where Puerto Ricans and Dominicans predominate). In the main text they write, 'One of the questions in the survey asked respondents how they identified themselves, and gave them an array of illustrative national or ethnic designators' (p. 533). In their footnote numbered 2, which is attached to this last quotation, they write: 'The question reads: "How do you identify, that is what do you call yourself" (Exs, Black, American, Cuban, Haitian-American, Asian, Latin, etc.)'. No closed categories were provided thus making respondents write their answers (note 2, p. 545). Given that they report an array was provided, I interpret this as saying that respondents had to 'fill in the blank' with a possible response, rather than check off an item on the list. If respondents are largely Cuban and Mexican, and if they were given the 'illustrative national or ethnic designators' listed above, these groups are unlikely to choose Black. In fact, Cubans in Southern Florida may be most likely to identify as white, if they are asked to choose a racial identifier. Then, the next 'best' choice in this list of racial, ethnic, and national identifiers − for a person who identifies as white or non-black − is 'American'. Neither 'Hispanic' nor 'white' are options on the list provided in the endnote. Thus, it is not so surprising that the 'more advantaged', that is to say, white identified children in the sample call themselves 'American', or by their parents' ethnic identifiers, than Hispanic or Black, given the way this question seems to have been worded and the cities where the samples were taken.

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