Ethnic group

Peter Ratcliffe   University of Warwick, UK

abstract   This article explores the conceptual and methodological problems associated with the concept 'ethnic group', and argues that it shares certain ontological flaws with the scientifically discredited concept 'race'.

keywords   essentialism ◆ ethnic group ◆ primordialism ◆ 'race'/racism ◆ religion/faith ◆ situational ethnicity ◆ symbolic ethnicity

Overview of theoretical approaches

Any discussion of the concept 'ethnic group' clearly needs to begin with an exploration of the nature of ethnicity. This section demonstrates that there are many differing (and conflicting) ontological approaches to understanding 'ethnicity'. It then explores the relationship between ethnicity and 'ethnic group', arguing that this raises major theoretical and methodological problems. Finally, it explores the tensions between 'ethnic group' and the highly contested notion of 'race'.

What is 'ethnicity'?

In a brief essay, it is possible merely to sketch out some of the key debates within the rich, and extremely voluminous, literature on this subject. Those who wish to explore the topic further would be advised to start with some of the excellent readers on the subject (for example, Glazer and Moynihan, 1975; Guibernau and Rex, 1997; Hutchinson and Smith, 1996; Rex and Mason, 1986) and more recent texts such as Jenkins (1997) and Fenton (1999, 2003, 2010). These will in turn guide the reader to some of the classic texts on the nature of ethnicity, most notably perhaps those by Fredrik Barth (1969), Richard Schermerhorn (1970), Clifford Geertz (1973), Donald Horowitz (1985) and Benedict Anderson (1993).

Of the 'founding fathers' of sociology, it was Max Weber who paid most attention to the concept. He used the term ethnic group to connote those human collectivities which 'entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization or migration' (Weber, 1968: 389).

A key feature of this definition is the overt reference to phenotypical variation. Likewise, much more recent commentators such as Horowitz (1985), who deployed the term in an ascriptive sense, saw the core features of ethnicity as common origin, *skin colour*, *appearance*, religion and/or language. Schermerhorn, in his seminal work *Comparative Ethnic Relations*, defined the term ethnic group as 'a collectivity within a larger society [who] have real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood' (Schermerhorn, 1970: 12). Clarifying the term 'symbolic elements', he says that these can include 'kinship patterns, physical contiguity (as in localism or sectionalism), religious affiliation, language or dialect forms, tribal affiliation, nationality, *phenotypical features*, or any combination of these' (emphasis added).

This raises a series of difficult theoretical issues for later in this article, in particular the relationship between ethnicity/ethnic group, 'race' and nation. Recent geopolitical concerns have also brought to the fore the thorny question of the centrality of religion and faith to ethnicity. What most analysts agree upon is that the processes underlying this cluster of concepts (if not the specific terms themselves) have an

enduring quality. For example, Hutchinson and Smith (1996: 3) open their edited collection with the following proposition:

> Though the term 'ethnicity' is recent, the sense of kinship, group solidarity, and common culture to which it refers is as old as the historical record. Ethnic communities have been present in every period and continent and have played an important role in all societies.

So what are the implications of these competing definitions for how sociologists view ethnicity and the related concept 'ethnic group'? They can be said to provide a direct pointer towards the first major conceptualization of ethnicity, an approach known as *primordialism*. It places a major emphasis on what Schermerhorn (1970) and Bulmer (1986) referred to as 'memories of a shared past'. In other words, people feel a sense of belonging and kinship through a perceived shared history. Schermerhorn argues that 'Each society in the modern world contains subsections or sub-systems more or less distinct from the rest of the population' (1970: 12).

The shared history to which he refers both defines who *is* a member of a given 'ethnic community' and who is not. So, in certain circumstances, it could be said that one can define oneself not so much by who one is but by who one is not. Almost by implication, therefore, the notional, putative 'boundary' between, say, two different ethnic communities may harbour the potentiality for ethnic conflict. This is especially the case, Horowitz (1985) argues, if these communities share a distinct spatial location such as that constituted by a state. When structured along socially and culturally pluralist lines, a society, state or nation is always likely to fall prone to such fissures in the body politic (Kuper, 1974).

Primordialism suggests that ethnicity and ethnic identity may in essence be frozen in time, that once an ethnic collectivity has been formed it remains so. In this model, inherent conservatism and the retention of tradition are likely to become integral to a system of *boundary maintenance* (Barth, 1969; Wallman, 1986); the defence of 'we' against 'the other'. By inference, groups maintain not only their identity but their perceived material interests (as a group). But this assumes (1) that people have a clear sense of their separateness, and (2) that they interpret putative ethnic difference as a negative factor in sociopolitical terms, in other words that the problems wrought by social 'difference' are perceived to override the benefits of 'diversity'.

As Bayar (2009) points out, primordialism has become extremely unfashionable among contemporary social theorists. His paper is an attempt to defend this more traditional approach against what he labels '*constructivism*'. The latter encompasses a wide variety of very different social ontologies, the essential common feature of which is a rejection of the idea that ethnicity is essentially impervious to external forces. He defends his position by arguing (2009: 1640) 'that (a) ethnic identities persist even in sub-Saharan Africa and the US and (b) the attributed significance of assumed kinship has psychological and sociological bases'. In a more pragmatic vein, he then goes on to argue that his 'article advocates that the assumption of fixed ethnic identity facilitates ethnic studies in a more parsimonious way than constructivism has been able to match'.

Many studies, such as that by Horowitz (1985), focus on the essential elements, and indeed determinants, of conflict. Conflict can be regarded as far more likely in a situation where ethnicity and ethnic identity are manipulated by external forces. There are many examples to draw upon from recent history, where ethnic mobilization is used as a basis for furthering the political ends of powerful interests and their associated ideologues (McKay, 1982). In this way, for example, Serbian nationalists in the late 1980s fabricated a historical memory of a 'Greater Serbia' as a means of mobilizing local populations against Croats and Bosnian Muslims who had, over time, become spatially, and indeed socially, integrated. Not only had they been long-term neighbours in towns and villages across the region, they had also frequently intermarried (Bennett, 1997; L Cohen, 1995; Davidovic, 2001; Ratcliffe, 2004). This takes Anderson's (1993) idea of the 'imagined community' to a further level in that people's existing construct of who they are (in ethnic terms) is potentially amenable to distortion for political ends.

Bayar (2009) contends, however, that one must be wary of overly simplistic and deterministic interpretations of 'ethnic group' formation via external agency. Referring to the Rwandan genocide towards the end of the last century, he challenges the widespread contention that the distinction between Hutus and Tutsis was constructed by Belgian colonialists. He argues (2009: 1644) that a historical analysis of the region suggests that these 'two groups had maintained their distinct identities for more than three centuries before the colonists arrived' (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998; Van den Berghe, 1981).

This does not, of course, negate the more general argument that colonial exploitation can have a significant role in manipulating historical divisions where this is perceived to be in the interests of the colonial power in question. The lessons of history

suggest, of course, that such differences/divisions do not necessarily lead to conflict in the longer term. Peaceful coexistence in such plural societies (Smith, 1965) is clearly an alternative historical trajectory. Ethnic diversity and difference between people who share a spatial location may foster a healthy degree of role complementarity (cf. Durkheim's notion of 'organic solidarity'). Historical differences may indeed become increasingly blurred over time and one possible trajectory is what Glazer and Moynihan (1975), and many others (especially in the US), have termed the 'melting pot'; in other words a process characterized by a movement towards assimilation and even acculturation. This is broadly how Robert Park (1950) framed his theorization of the 'race relations cycle'.

More importantly, it is clear from the literature that ethnicity is not a static entity; nor is it easy to grasp conceptually. As we have already seen from the variety of definitions used by eminent sociologists, it exhibits a complex, multidimensional character in that it is a fusion of culture, historical experiences/memories, kinship, religion/faith, phenotype and so on. Furthermore, some argue that ethnic collectivities can be, and are, made and remade over time. Fenton (1999), following Eriksen (1993), elucidates a number of 'ethnicity making situations' stemming from a variety of shifts in historical social formations. Pivotal here is the incidence of social conflict, war and migratory movements (the latter also encompassing imperialist ventures).

The one thing that all of these characterizations of ethnicity have in common, however, is that they all assume that, at any given time, we can identify and define distinct ethnicities and ethnic collectivities. This is not the case for those who see ethnicity as '*situational*' (Okamura, 1981). Those who hold this view argue that we inhabit a more complex world, where individuals have more than one form of attachment in ethnic terms, meaning that ethnicity is not simply multidimensional (Baumann, 1996) but is also fluid (even within a single social formation/historical juncture). Young people of Indian or Pakistani origin but now settled in Europe may, for example, appear to follow 'traditional cultural norms' in the context of home and family while at the same time adopting a street persona that is much more closely allied to that of contemporary African Caribbean or African American youth (and, crucially, accompanied by 'ethnically mixed' social networks). The big question is what this means in terms of ethnicity and 'group' membership (Back, 1996). Does this mean that their sense of belonging is changing or is it, as many of the elders from these South Asian communities would have it, that it is a temporary and superficial flirtation with contemporary lifestyles and fashions?

Arguably, religion and faith are, for many, central to who they are in ethnic terms; a position perfectly consistent with the view of ethnicity expounded by the theorists whose definitions (of ethnicity) were outlined above (most notably Horowitz and Schermerhorn). Even those who shun religion in the context of a secular state are necessarily influenced by the values of that society: in other words, secularism, as conditioned by the values of that societal context, is embedded in one's ethnic identity. There are other situations, however, where religion and faith essentially define an individual's sense of belonging. At the risk of overstating the case, this could almost be 'religion *as* ethnicity'. The obvious cases would be found in certain great world religions such as Judaism and Islam. Especially among more devout believers, their core identities are in an obvious sense supranational (in the latter case, encapsulated within the notion of a [global] *ummah*). This means that a Muslim, say, would tend to see her/his belongingness as first and foremost defined by Islam, and only secondly by her/his cultural, societal and historical context (conceived broadly, i.e. applying to both 'primordial' and more contemporaneous situations).

Following decades characterized by increasing, and increasingly complex, levels of global migratory movements, the ethnicity literature has shifted in focus somewhat. This is particularly true of the last two decades. Following the work of James Clifford (1992), Robin Cohen (1997) and many others, there has been a much greater emphasis on the structural positioning of *diasporic and transnational communities*. Accompanying this has been a rise in interest in the work of Bhaba (1990), with his focus on the nature and significance of 'home'. The key issue rests on the extent to which people share attachments to more than a single nation and to different historical and cultural contexts. In this way, belonging is more diffuse, if not fractured. The plentiful availability, at present, of relatively affordable international travel (and of course, rapid electronic communication) enables transnational links with family and kin to be maintained relatively easily. (This provides a clear illustration of the argument that social agency, as well as structural forces, plays a major role in the construction and maintenance of ethnic identity.)

These arguments move the analysis on from the static conceptions of ethnicity based on the idea of people being 'between two cultures' (Anwar, 1979; Watson, 1977). This tended to pose cultural positionings as problematic, or even pathological, as it portrayed the social actor as victim of conflicting forces rather than active agent. The theory suggested

that an individual was 'caught' between two (or more) oppositional forces, rather than seeing multiple social and cultural ties (often transnational) as a source of strength (both individually and collectively, i.e. for the 'community' and wider society).

One final interpretation of the role of ethnicity in society was elucidated in a seminal essay by Herbert Gans in 1979. Here, he introduced the idea of '*symbolic ethnicity*', conceived of as 'a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country; a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior' (1979: 9). In this way, an interest in the events in the 'home country' is retained, especially when major political upheavals affect those with whom they share a certain 'allegiance'; this being illustrated, for example, by American Jewry's relations with Israel, and that of Greek and Turkish migrants in the US (or elsewhere) with their compatriots in Cyprus at the time of the civil war on the island in 1974. Gans predicted that symbolic ethnicity would be the dominant form of ethnicity in later generations of migrants. In other words, an element of assimilation, and even acculturation, can be accompanied by a sincerely felt commitment to special cultural symbols from the 'home country'.

It will become clear from what follows that ethnicity is probably best viewed as rooted in historical and cultural relationships but is not immune to change in ways that have to do both with changing structural forces (broadly conceived) and individual agency or, more properly, the dialectical relationship between the two.

Does the existence of ethnicity imply that it is meaningful to talk about 'ethnic groups'?

This may, to many, seem an odd question to ask given some of the earlier discussion. But, to say that ethnicity is an ontologically meaningful concept does not per se lead to the conclusion that the same can be said for the idea of an 'ethnic *group*'. Herbert Gans, for example, questioned this assumption, in arguing that 'As secondary and primary assimilation continue, and ethnic networks weaken and unravel, it may be more accurate to speak of ethnic aggregates rather than groups' (1979: 16). A similar conclusion, admittedly via a different route, was reached by Rogers Brubaker (2002) in a seminal article entitled 'Ethnicity without groups'.

In contrast, the Hutchinson and Smith statement quoted earlier would lead us to believe that the ethnic group, or community, can be viewed as a 'real' tangible entity; so would the proponents of primordialism, whether in its hard or soft variants. The arguments put forward by Eriksen (1993) and

Fenton (1999) would also point in this direction, but with one extremely significant qualification. In their view we can delineate a number of discrete kinds of 'ethnicity making' scenarios which lead to the formation of groups with common material interests. Primary among these scenarios would be colonial and imperialist expansion, the subordination of migrant/minority (or 'minoritized') groups at different historical junctures and the structural positioning of contemporary migrants/minorities, whether predominantly 'economic' in nature or 'political' (as in the case of refugees and asylum seekers). In this view, the forces of regulation qua structure are the major drivers behind ethnic group formation. Where this differs from the primordial view is that it allows for ethnic groups not only to be 'made' but also '*remade*'. In other words, in the course of history material relationships are formed that provide a basis, or catalyst, for the generation of new social formations.

At the heart of much of the ethnicity literature is a concern for levels of ethnic conflict. The central characteristic of these is the assumption of *group* conflict. An obvious example would be the impressive survey of ethnic relations in different countries by Horowitz (1985). The same can be said of the voluminous literature on pluralism and plural society theory (Kuper and Smith, 1969; Smith, 1965). The principal focus of much of Smith's work was the structural position of (ethnically determined) minorities, in particular whether they had equal access to the polity or were subject to what he termed 'differential political incorporation'. Kuper (1974) then elaborated on this analysis by talking about different forms and degrees of pluralism. Social pluralism, for example, recognized the significance of spatial patterns, and in particular (ethnic) segregation, in generating internally cohesive groups.

If, as suggested above, faith can be a central or even primary dimension of one's 'ethnicity', this imputes a group-like quality on the part of the latter. At the very least, we can identify a collectivity that shares key characteristics by virtue of a common adherence to a particular faith. This would not in most cases be sufficient to justify categorization as an 'ethnic group', however, given historical and cultural variations within this wider collectivity.

The earlier argument stressing the importance of the interplay between structure and agency in the construction of an ethnic group also presents potential difficulties for those who argue for the relative durability and fixity of 'groups'. Agency often takes an individual rather than collective form and, indeed, may result in configurations that differ from (what are believed to represent) existing ethnic group patterns (Modood et al., 1994, 1997).

Critical realists such as Carter (2000) cast doubt on certain forms of ethnic categorization on the grounds that there are many differing ways that the social world can be 'sliced'. They do not, however, dispute the underlying claim that, in theory, 'real' groups do exist. Their concerns, as will be pointed out below, are more to do with the causal efficacy attributed to those groups, once delineated.

There is one group of theorists, however, who would wish to deny the existence of distinct ethnic groups. Poststructuralists and postmodernists argue that to do so would be to fall into the essentialist trap (Rattansi and Westwood, 1994; for a critical assessment, see Malik, 1996a, 1996b). Their view leads to a prioritization of 'diversity over difference', in other words seeing ethnicity as something which is diffuse and therefore not amenable to distillation into a number of discrete categories.

Is there a sociologically meaningful relationship between 'ethnic group', 'race' and nation?

Assuming that we can talk meaningfully about 'ethnic groups', there is one key issue that needs to be resolved at this point; namely the relationship between these groups and 'races'. As we saw earlier in the article, major social theorists from Weber through to Horowitz and Schermerhorn saw biological factors, reflected in phenotypical variation, as a key component of ethnicity. (The latter also saw 'nationality' as a core element.) It is important to return to these debates here as they continue to provoke heated debate between social scientists. There are three principal issues:

- 'Ethnic group' is often deployed as a synonym, or even a euphemism, for 'race'.
- 'Race' is, in ontological terms, a highly contested concept – though not uniformly so – across the literature.
- What is the precise nature of the relationship between ethnicity and nation/nationality?

'Race' has a long and chequered history in the scientific and social science literature. Originally deployed as a way of referring to certain kin relationships, its modern roots can be traced back to the 18th century and the work of the Swedish botanist Linneaus (1767). With the development of Enlightenment thinking came the view that it was possible to categorize the world's population into a number of distinct (biological) types. Then Cuvier, in 1805, posited the existence of three such races: 'white', 'yellow' and 'black'. Crucially, these were also viewed as being ordered hierarchically. The key issue was that the distinction between groups was concep-

tualized in terms of phenotype. More than this, the assumption was that phenotypical variation was intrinsically related to the possession of certain natural abilities (Van den Berghe, 1967). The end result of this line of thinking was the development, in the late 19th century, of the eugenics movement and ultimately in the 20th, the horrors of Nazi science. The idea that certain putative 'races' had superior intellectual abilities also underpinned the debate on the relationship between 'race' and IQ (Eyesenck, 1971; Herrnstein and Murray, 1994; Jenson, 1969).

It was for these reasons that Montagu (1942) famously described the concept as 'man's most dangerous myth'. He, along with many others, have argued consistently that 'race' has no legitimacy as a scientific concept (Montagu, 1964), being based on the false assumption that it is possible to delineate unambiguously between various categories of *Homo sapiens* on the basis of physical characteristics. Yet it remains a prominent idea in the public consciousness. More that this, although within European social science it has largely disappeared, or been problematized (as indicated, conventionally, by the use of inverted commas), in the US this is by no means universally the case.

In fact, but for some US scholars, notably critical race theorists such as David Theo Goldberg and others (see Essed and Goldberg, 2001), the norm is for race (minus inverted commas) to be deployed when drawing a distinction between 'white' Americans and African Americans, and for ethnicity/ethnic group to be reserved for other segments of the US population. As I have argued elsewhere (Ratcliffe, 2004), this appears to stem from the historical specificity of the US: in particular, the enslavement of African Americans on American soil, the subsequent enactment of Jim Crow laws and what has often been seen as the virtual caste line between 'white' and 'black' in the US (Davis et al., 1941). The implication is that ethnicity and ethnic groups may be more permeable than 'races'.

What this debate perhaps illustrates more than anything else, however, is the power of the concept of 'race' in the public mind. Rather akin to a Kuhnian paradigm, it remains in widespread use, even in sections of the social scientific community (see, for example, Carter and Dyson, 2011) despite its authoritative detractors over many decades. As Eriksen (1993) rightly points out, it is quite proper subject matter for sociologists precisely because of this fact. In so far as people behave as if races exist, there are significant cultural and material effects to be addressed.

In Europe, doubts about its ontological status and/or concerns about its evident toxicity have often merely promoted an elision of the term with ethnic

group. More significantly from a sociological perspective, 'race' may be seen to have acquired a rather different, and fluid, empirical content. In short, for some writers it has become a 'floating signifier' (Rattansi and Westwood, 1994) by taking on board many of those characteristics formerly associated with ethnicity. More specifically, culture has superseded biology as a naturalized essence. Taguieff (1985) famously pointed to new forms of racism, which he termed 'differentialist', that had 'cultural difference' at their ideological core.

In many ways, the key point here is that 'race' or 'ethnic group' in this sense is essentially ascriptive in nature rather than actively constituted by those to whom the associated labels are designed to apply. This is an ethnicity/'race' that is socially constructed (from without). Empirical categories thus become one way in which social actors come to 'learn' (or unlearn) who they are (Mason, 1990; Ratcliffe, 2013).

In the same way that 'Nationalism is sometimes associated with xenophobia and racism, sometimes with movements which defend the rights of oppressed peoples' (Guibernau, 1997: 133), the concept of nation can be exclusionary or inclusive. It can also differ radically depending on whether the nation is coterminous with the state, or whether (as in Guibernau's case study of Catalans' relations with the Spanish state) it is one of the 'nations without states'. To some, 'nationalism … invents nations where they do not exist' (Gellner, 1964: 169); to others, as we saw earlier, it 'imagines' them (Anderson, 1993), or reimagines them, as in the case of Yugoslavia noted above.

The relationship between 'nation' and 'ethnic group' is also extremely complex and cannot be developed in any detail here. Perhaps the best way of characterizing this, however, is to point to its dialectical nature (i.e. that they in a sense 'feed off' each other) and also to the fact that different aspects of ethnicity come to the fore depending on societal context. In the case of the Quebecois, for example, language combined with a distinctive history and culture to act as a powerful cohesive force behind this particular 'nation without a state' (Breton, 1988; Keating, 1996).

Empirical measures of 'ethnic group'

The above provides a, necessarily brief, flavour of key debates dominating the ethnicity literature. Equally important, but rather less often discussed however, is the relationship between theoretical constructs of ethnicity and ethnic group and their empirical referents. This is regrettable as the latter are pivotal to analyses dealing with such population subgroups, a point that applies equally to ethnicity research that eschews quantification, such as that evidenced by the vast ethnographic literature. Ethnic group categories form the essential structure and bedrock of empirically grounded arguments, and it follows that the theoretical adequacy of these is crucial to subsequent propositions.

The existence of an ethnic category suggests that those so labelled share key characteristics; in this case a cultural heritage and, to a point, a common set of material/social interests and networks: otherwise they would not constitute a 'group', merely a putative human aggregate or collectivity (Ratcliffe, 2008, 2013). However, this is clearly tantamount to essentializing ethnicity.

When it comes to official data on ethnic groups, very different approaches are taken. The Republican ideals enshrined in the French constitution, for example, militate against the official recognition of difference in this respect. Despite the serious conflict on ethnic/class lines in the deprived suburbs of Paris in 2005, the furore generated by the adoption of the veil by many young Muslim women (and the subsequent banning by the state), and the strong following of Jean Marie Le Pen's Front Nationale, an openly anti-immigrant and racist party, there remains no official recognition of ethnic/'racial' inequality or inter-communal tensions. Many other countries also take the view that to collect such data might be divisive: others do so but under the label 'race' and/or ancestry (see Morning, 2008).

Some, such as the Netherlands, rely on national registration data for measures of ethnicity. Others, such as the UK, US and Canada, collect such data in national censuses. The question then becomes not merely what do we mean by ethnic group but also what exactly are the key motives behind the measure (Ministry of Labour, Finland, 2005). If, as is conventionally the case, the focus is on assessing inequalities linked to discrimination and racism, a key organizing rationale behind the categorization system is likely to be phenotype. This type of measure is inappropriate, however, if the interest is on sociocultural needs and aspirations (Ratcliffe, 2008, 2013). Analysts, social commentators and, importantly, policy-makers nevertheless tend to behave as if it were an appropriate measure of the latter.

Finally in this section, there are two critical issues not addressed thus far:

The politics of official data generation
Official data tend to emerge from a social process involving numerous actors: various government departments, local government and a variety of other stakeholders (academe, independent research

institutes, NGOs, the third sector and so on). What is often not appreciated, however, is the significance of external lobbying by those demanding recognition via group categories. This 'identity politics' has threatened the integrity of the question in some societies, most notably the US, where the number of categories are now making the question ever more unwieldy and the results more difficult to interpret (Bell, 2008). Identity claims also sometimes lead to the inclusion of a question on ancestry (e.g. Canada), a suggestion briefly mooted, but rejected, by the government committee concerned with planning for the 2001 census in Britain.

One key aspect of the politics of representation rarely acknowledged in the literature concerns the material impact of the categories themselves. Once reified, the essentialized categories literally become part of how we 'see/perceive', and subsequently define, ourselves in a swathe of substantive fora. Ethnic managerialism associated with a bureaucratized multiculturalism then concretizes the boundaries between putative 'groups' (Ratcliffe, 2013).

The impact of social change in an inter-censal period

In a world where significant population movements are becoming both ever more common and complex, in the process generating what Vertovec (2007) characterizes as 'super-diversity', the task of assessing changes in ethnic group composition is an extremely challenging one. Official measuring instruments such as the population census tend to lag behind these change processes. In addition, given that a major function of such instruments is to monitor social change, each successive measure needs to retain a high level of compatibility with the previous measure. In the UK, for example, evidence of increasing levels of mixed-heritage marriage led to the addition in 2001 of a 'mixed' category, duly subdivided into various group labels compatible with (i.e. amenable to being mapped onto) those used 10 years previously.

This presents a major problem for sociologists not only in itself, but because the majority of other formal data-gathering exercises adopt the same measure (once again driven by the logic of data comparability). Researchers would do well, therefore, to bear in mind that such data should be used with great care (quite apart from the perils of essentialism).

Assessment of research to date

So, what does this brief summary of the theoretical literature and research on ethnicity and ethnic group lead us to conclude? There are probably five major points here:

- From a focus on history and cultural tradition as core formative agents in the generation of ethnic groups (the primordial position) the balance of the literature has shifted to a position that sees these groups as much more fluid and malleable.
- The position taken by Eriksen and Fenton was that in a number of historical contexts (most notably colonial and imperialist exploitation, war and political struggle, and large-scale migratory movements) ethnic groups can be made and/or remade.
- The situational view of ethnicity adds another dimension to the debate by questioning the solidity of such groups even at a single historical juncture. This presents a much more fluid, multifaceted/multidimensional and even fractured picture of 'we' and the 'other' (in ethnic terms).
- Herbert Gans suggested that ethnicity may in successive generations become essentially 'symbolic', meaning that one's ethnic attachments eventually play a relatively minor role in an individual's life view. Thirty years on, however, his theory seems of relatively restricted relevance. It is difficult to envisage exemplars outside the developed world and, given current trends in global identity politics, even then it would only fit the contemporary positioning of certain more politically powerful minorities.
- More recently, especially under the influence of the 'postmodern turn' and the rising popularity of poststructuralist thought, there has been a rapid increase in both ethnographic and theoretical work in the 'cultural studies mode' (for examples of the latter, see Gilroy, 1993, 2001, 2004). (This is, of course, in many ways simply a reflection of the way in which sociology as a discipline has developed in the past few decades.)

We also noted that there appears in general to be little relationship between the theoretical debates about ethnicity and ethnic group formation and empirical work on the subject. Formal 'ethnic group' constructs, as utilized in large-scale research exercises such as national censuses, are essentially heuristic devices that 'slice' populations in ways that match certain policy and political agendas but with little regard for the social, historical, religious or cultural context.

Explanatory accounts, especially those within the quantitative mould, then run into severe problems because of the lack of fit between these constructs

and the measures that researchers would wish to use. This is a common problem in secondary analysis (Dale et al., 1988) but should provide the stimulus for researchers to be more imaginative in the use of additional variables on religion, geographical origins and generational position. More care also needs to be taken in assessing the specific role that ethnicity plays in 'explaining' empirical variations.

Annotated further reading

Anderson B (1993) *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.
    This key work questions the ontological status of 'shared memory' as an integral feature of ethnicity. In particular, it argues that hazy shards of memory can be mobilized, and given meaning, by external structural forces and social agency.
Barth F (1969) *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co.
    A classic text that explores the nature of 'ethnic group' formation, maintenance and change, focusing in particular on the processes involved in negotiating the boundaries between putative groups.
Eriksen TH (1993) *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Pluto.
    This work provides a series of key insights into the conditions under which ethnic groups are created or formed, and are in turn *trans*formed, by external structural forces and shifting social formations.
Gans HJ (1979) Symbolic ethnicity: The future of ethnic groups and cultures in America. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2(1): 1–20.
    Although, by its very nature, a relatively brief summary of a particular perspective on the nature of ethnicity, this paper was massively influential (hence its inclusion in an annotated bibliography dominated by weighty academic tomes). Its contention was that in the contemporary polyethnic world many people of minority ethnic origin outwardly displaying all the features of an assimilated (or even acculturated) group would nevertheless tend to retain a strong sense of difference based on a 'symbolic' contact with their religious, cultural and national origins.
Horowitz D (1985) *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
    This seminal work presents a detailed analysis of the nature of ethnic affiliations and their role in ethnic conflict. The real strength of the book lies in its clear systematic comparative approach. As the author says in the 'Preface', it 'explores systematically and comparatively the politics of ethnic group conflict in severely divided societies'.
Hutchinson J, Smith AD (eds) (1996) *Ethnicity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
    The real strength of this volume lies in its encyclopaedic coverage of many of the most important and influential commentaries on ethnicity and ethnic group. For readers of this article, and, in

particular, those who are meeting these ideas for the first time, it provides a great introduction to the subject.
Ratcliffe P (2013) 'Ethnic group', the state and the politics of representation. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 34(4): 303–20.
    This essay extends discussion of a number of the key themes debated in the current article, in particular the contested processes that underpin the generation of official data on 'ethnic group' and the sociological and political issues associated with the use of such data.
Rex J, Mason D (eds) (1986) *Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
    Whereas the Hutchinson and Smith collection features excerpts from classic works and more recent papers, this volume brings together the most important theoretical approaches to the study of ethnic groups. These range from Marxist and Weberian accounts to those, for example, grounded in social anthropology, plural society theory and sociobiology. A further plus point lies in its exploration of the links between 'race' and ethnicity.
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    No annotated bibliography on this topic could ignore the work of Richard Schermerhorn. This classic work constitutes a model of academic rigour and focuses on the wide-ranging comparative analysis of the relations between dominant and subordinate ethnic groups.

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Peter Ratcliffe is a leading UK academic who has worked on issues of race, ethnicity, migration and integration for the past three decades. He is Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick and director of the Centre for Rights, Equality and Diversity. He is also director of the UK National Focal Point for the RAXEN network managed by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). In 2006, he was elected president of the International Sociological Association's research committee on Racism, Nationalism and Ethnic Relations.

Peter's major publications include *Racism and Reaction: a profile of Handsworth* (1981), *'Race', Ethnicity and Nation* (ed. 1994), *Social Geography and Ethnicity in Britain: Geographical Spread, Spatial Concentration and Internal Migration* (ed., 1996), *'Race' and Housing in Bradford* (1996), *Breaking Down the Barriers: Improving Asian Access to Social Rented Housing* (2001) and 'The Use of Public Sector Procurement to Enhance "Racial" Equality in Employment' and 'Working for an Inclusive Britain' (with Michael Orton, 2003). More recently, he has authored *'Race', Ethnicity and Difference: Imagining The Inclusive Society* (2004). His major report for the UK government on the 'managing diversity' and the 'community cohesion' agenda was published in July 2006. [email: peter.ratcliffe@warwick.ac.uk]

résumé   Ce texte examine les défis conceptuels et méthodologiques que présente le concept 'groupe ethnique' et suggère qu'il partage certaines faiblesses ontologiques observées pour le concept 'race', lui-même discrédité au plan scientifique.

mots-clés   essentialisme ◆ ethnicité situationelle ◆ ethnicité symbolique ◆ groupe ethnique ◆ primordialisme ◆ 'race' ◆ racisme ◆ religion/foi

resumen   Este artículo explora los problemas conceptuales y metodológicos asociados con el concepto 'grupo étnico' y argumenta que éste comparte ciertas deficiencias ontológicas con el concepto 'raza', el cual se encuentra científicamente desacreditado.

palabras clave   esencialismo ◆ etnicidad simbólica ◆ etnicidad situacional ◆ grupo étnico ◆ primordialismo ◆ racismo ◆ 'raza' ◆ religión/fe