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## 'Race', Racism and Ethnicity: A Response to Ken Smith

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**K**en Smith argues that while objections to the concept of 'race' are widely accepted within sociology, the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) study, *Ethnic Minorities in Britain* (Modood et al., 1997), seems to use a concept of ethnic group that makes it indistinguishable from 'race'. This is because, he says, we believe: that an ethnic group can include physical appearance as a distinguishing marker; that there are important boundaries that separate ethnic groups; and that ethnic group membership can be based on the 'objective' criterion of family membership rather than simply chosen by the individuals concerned. He suggests that our 'racializing' of ethnicity indicates that we are studying a form of collectivity that has been captured by Weber in his notion of 'status groups'.

We agree with Smith's perspective on 'race'. His paper seems to us an unnecessary rehearsal of already well-accepted arguments. But we reject the suggestion that our work is 'racist' in the pernicious sense that Smith claims. His own views about ethnic groups are muddled – in particular, he offers no firm alternative theoretical or practical approach to the definition of ethnicity on which our analysis might have been based. Finally, we agree that Weber's work on 'status groups' is relevant to contemporary research on ethnicity but we do not accept that it is the only legitimate way to study the phenomena in question.

### **Ethnic Minorities in Britain**

The Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities was designed to be of use and value to researchers, policy-makers, advocates of reform and others who may

have quite different theoretical approaches (and possibly none). It was important that the study should not be too dependent upon a specific theoretical approach or 'school'. We were primarily concerned with collecting data that would support or challenge generalizations about contemporary Britain, and left for another occasion, or for others, the implications of the findings for various theoretical positions. We were not, however, theoretically rudderless. Indeed, our approach challenged what might be called the dualistic division of the population into black and white that, at least till recently, has characterized both the theoretical and empirical sociology of 'race' in Britain. And the survey provided, for the first time in Britain, measures of ethnic identities and cultural affiliations that can be used to develop a more sensitive delineation of ethnic groupings from a variety of theoretical perspectives.

The most relevant theoretical assumptions made in our work, in relation to Smith's criticisms, were:

- 1 Race, meaning the actual existence of biological categories superficially distinguished by 'colour', has no scientific validity and no explanatory value in social science.
- 2 But 'racism' and 'racialization', meaning the categorization of people on the basis of their 'race', or 'ethnicity', that leads to, amongst other things, racial discrimination and attacks, is nevertheless a social fact in contemporary Britain.
- 3 Ethnic minority groups at a particular time and place are shaped by racism, or by the attitudes, behaviours and structures of dominant groups, as well as by their own adapted heritages, collective action, reaction to exclusion, relations with other minority groups, and so on. 'Ethnicity, including the development of group features such as religion, is "interactive" – shaped partly by its original heritage and partly by racism and the political and economic relations between groups in Britain' (Modood et al., 1997: 9).
- 4 It follows that the differences – past, present and future – between minority groups are likely to be as sociologically and politically significant as any common factors that mark off these groups from the rest of the population. So, it is important to ask questions that reveal this, or at least allow the proposition to be tested. This requires the identification of 'sub'-population groups (Asians, Caribbeans, etc.), and ideally in a way that is compatible with categories used by other researchers and the census.

These four assumptions mean that we were studying what we call 'racialized ethnicity' in contemporary Britain. The assumptions are quite large and so are bound to have major implications for any study, but they operate at a very general level. Their interpretation and elaboration can be varied, contested and expressive of a theoretical diversity, which they leave open. They do not amount to a theory of race and ethnicity. They are consistent with many, though not all, theories and, most importantly, the survey can be used by a diversity of analysts.

We took it for granted that the groups we were studying are not biological groups, but nevertheless 'real' social phenomena. The act of studying them does not 'construct' them: they are part of the basic facts of British society (and, with some differences, some other societies too) and their study is a well-established activity. As we showed, the existence of these groups (and the relevance of 'colour' to their definition) was readily identified by their members. They are 'given' to us by British society and an on-going research stream. We made it clear, of course, that we were not studying all possible groups that fell into this category (Modood et al., 1997: 13). We were also aware that there was some evidence – subsequently confirmed – of racialized treatment of groups within the white category, for example, against the Irish (Hickman and Walter, 1997; CMEB, 2000). For these reasons we gave serious consideration to the inclusion of a large and representative sample of Irish as well as of African people, but were unable to procure the resources to do so.

This then was the purpose of our study and some of its assumptions. We turn now to Smith's discussion.

## 'Race'

While our assumptions 3 and 4 are briefly stated and empirically filled out in the course of the rest of the book, our first two assumptions about 'race' and 'racism' are not stated directly. This is largely because since the 'UNESCO Statements' on 'race', especially the third statement of 1964, it has been widely held that genetics cannot substantiate the idea of discrete 'races' and the concept has no scientific validity (Montague, 1972; see also Montague, 1964). This has long been a dominant view in British social science (though not necessarily medical and biological sciences, see Nazroo, 1997 and 1998) and is virtually undisputed today. In his review of progress in the study of 'race' over the last 50 years, Banton argues that while the idea that 'race' is a social construct has been progressively deepened and empirically elaborated in recent decades, it was present among sociologists as early as the 1950s (Banton, 2001: 174–5). *Ethnic Minorities in Britain* offered no view on the reality of 'race' as a biological or genetic entity, and did not need to. So, why does Smith assert that we deploy a biological concept of 'race'? It is because, when briefly stating features which distinguish ethnic groups in Britain we include physical appearance; and he worries that if we use this criterion in allocating individuals to groups, the groups must therefore be 'racial'.

We completely reject the suggestion that we deployed a biological concept of race. Smith's argument that 'where physical appearance is included in the definition of a group ... the conception of such a group is indistinguishable from that of a [biological] 'race' (p. 403) is false and unsubstantiated. We mention physical appearance as a possible marker amongst others, not an essential condition, depending on the context and the particular form an ethnicity may take. We did not use physical appearance on its own to assign individuals to

specific groups. Indeed, we separated out South Asians, who to many people look alike and who even many researchers lump together, more systematically than had previously been done. The so-called 'boundary problem' of trying to establish group boundaries on the basis of physical appearance, that Smith believes that we have to overcome, simply does not arise.

But we do not retreat from the view that physical appearance can be a marker of ethnicity. Indeed, it clearly contributes to picking out people who in Britain are thought (by themselves, and by others) to be members of ethnic minorities. Our choice of groups is not derived from a biological theory, but from our object of study, namely a social context in which some people are identified as 'Asian', 'black', 'Caribbean', 'Indian', etc. 'Racism', or more precisely, 'racialized ethnicity', is for us a fact of British society. We make it clear, for example, that skin colour is relevant only in some countries. If we were studying ethnic conflict in Northern Ireland, or Belgium, or Bosnia, or Rwanda, 'colour' would not necessarily be a primary line of demarcation. A focus on 'colour' therefore is contingent and specific to our context, not essential to any theory of what makes a group of people an ethnic group (Modood et al., 1997: 13; cf. Modood, 1997; Berthoud, 1998; Nazroo, 1998; CMEB, 2000: Ch. 5).

The concept of 'race' and the phenomena of racialization and racism have, then, no intrinsic, merely historical and contingent, connections with biology or its social-ideological uses (Modood, 1997). This enables us to see that there is a palpable racialization of Muslims currently going on in Britain and elsewhere. This is so despite the fact that avowed racists (see the BNP website <http://www.bnp.org.uk>) and the public discourses more generally make no appeal to a theory of genetics. It is Muslim religion, civilization, community, etc., not genes that are being vilified, distorted, analysed, etc. Yet, this notion of Muslim is clearly dependent upon 'physical appearance', even if the net is cast too wide (of the two racist killings of 'Muslims' in the US on the weekend following 11 September 2001, one of the dead was a turban-wearing, bearded, brown-skinned, Asian-looking Sikh man).

## Ethnicity

So, the first two problems that Smith attributes to us – selecting on the basis of physical appearance and the consequent 'boundary problem' – are non-problems. His third objection is to our use of family origins as a criterion of ethnic group membership. He believes that the use of objective criteria violates the idea of ethnicity, which is about cultural affiliation, and so 'must *always* be defined in terms of self-assigned group membership' (p. 407, emphasis in original).

We would be the last to deny the importance of subjective identification to ethnic group membership, and our survey probed this aspect of membership more than any other survey has done. But that is not the same as saying ethnicity is reducible to individual choice. Indeed, even Smith does not consistently

hold this view. For, while on the one hand he accuses us of ignoring self-identification, on the other he takes the arbitrary view that where a given population that is known to have much else in common has more than one religion or language, then it cannot consist of one ethnic group – regardless of what members of that population might think. He says that ‘we have every reason to think that people from the Caribbean are *not* members of a single ethnic group’ (p. 403, emphasis in original) without citing any evidence about self-identification. Rather, he chooses to cite differences in religion, language and – interestingly, in the light of his criticism of our book – place of birth (p. 405). Again, he denies that British Pakistanis, Indians or Bangladeshis could be ethnic groups without offering any evidence about self-identification, but simply because categories like Pakistani are a ‘nationality’ (p. 406). Indeed, he overlooks the evidence from our own survey that most people whose parents came from India, Pakistan or Bangladesh identified themselves as members of so-named ethnic groups. His method of assigning ethnic group membership reaches absurdity when he asserts that Hindus cannot be Bangladeshis (or, as he would prefer to call them, Bengalis) because the majority of Bangladeshis are Muslims (p. 406) and that Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese must be seen as ‘*two* ethnic groups culturally speaking and *one* status group’ (p. 413, emphasis in original). All these judgements, it must be emphasized, arise not from a clamour for independent ethnicities among the people concerned, but because of Smith’s own view of who is and is not an ethnic group.

Regardless of these inconsistencies, Smith’s initial insistence on making individual subjectivity the sole criterion of ethnicity is false to the character of ethnic groups and drains them of much of their meaning. First, ethnicity is not just a matter of personal subjectivity. We could not call a group an ethnic group unless it included some sense of collective subjectivity, that is, some sense of an existence of group and a sense of identification; but this is not reducible to choices by discrete individuals. A person’s saying that s/he belongs to an ethnic group does not make him or her so. Others from that group, though not necessarily all members, have to accept that s/he belongs. Moreover, given what we said earlier about interactivity between membership and the wider social context as constitutive of ethnicity, the perceptions and behaviours of non-members may be relevant too. If someone is respected or reviled because of his or her ethnic group membership, then the opinions of others are inevitably built into that identity.

Smith may not intend to rest everything on self-identification; perhaps he means that culture is necessarily self-chosen rather than ascribed by others. But people do not choose their language; and few people choose their religion, any more than they choose their class. Among those who come to make a deliberate choice about religion, many conclude that they are agnostics or atheists. Do agnostics cease to be members of their ethnic group? Do they become members of another ethnic group or cease to have an ethnicity altogether? Some atheists say they are Pakistanis, even while acknowledging that most Pakistanis think that Islam is central to Pakistani cultural heritage and identity. Language is

connected to ethnicity in equally complicated ways; for example, it is possible to imagine that English could become the dominant language amongst British Pakistanis (as it is already among Caribbeans) without hypothesizing the disappearance of Pakistani ethnicity in Britain.

Smith's suggestion that ethnic group membership must be self-elected and depends upon a single dominant cultural characteristic such as religion or language is not merely self-contradictory; neither half of that proposition is correct. So, how should researchers determine which individuals are members of an ethnic group. Someone's claiming and wanting to be a member will be a factor, but by itself it is unlikely to be decisive. The individual's behaviour is relevant. So are ancestry and parentage. Descent is highly significant. It is difficult to say what an ethnic group is if it is not a descent or heritage group. For example, it makes sense to say that the Québécois in 2000 are culturally a very different people to the Québécois in 1950 in the way they have adapted their heritage, but it is a nonsense to suppose that most of the Québécois in 2000 are not descendents of the Québécois in 1950.

Accordingly, we believe that our use of survey respondents' family origins, as well as self-chosen ethnic identifications, answers to questions about cultural opinions and behaviours, and experience of racial discrimination and harassment, were all relevant in providing a profile of ethnicity. We sought both subjective and objective data and used both to analyse the specific texture of the relevant ethnicities and how they might be changing. We used family origin as a primary criterion to select our sample; we were also interested in what ethnic, racial and national labels people used to describe themselves. In fact, this was an original and integral part of our study. Empirical research required us, though, to have a bottom-line criterion. We had to operationalize the concept of ethnic group and had to bring in some degree of closure where it might not always have existed. Anyone who has engaged in empirical activity will readily understand this imperative.

We displayed an analysis of place of origin by group membership, as chosen by the respondent, from which it can be seen that there was very little divergence (Modood et al., 1997: Table 1.1, p. 15). If there had been many cases where the self-ascription was at odds with the answer about family origins, we would have had to review our criteria and sort out the puzzle. But we showed that there is a high level of acceptance of some key census-type categories in contemporary Britain. Our preference for family origins over self-assignment as the decisive criterion in assigning primary group membership was so that we would have a unit of analysis for a population group that would enable us to see how that group was faring in the 1990s compared with, say, the 1970s. If some people who would have been categorized as, for example, Pakistanis, in the 1970s were taken out of the Pakistani sample in the 1990s because they now called themselves Mirpuris, then it is clear that findings about, say, the higher levels of home ownership amongst Pakistanis in the 1990s could be a product of changes in group allocation. Seeking a stable population group not only allowed us to make more accurate generalizations about social mobility, it

also allowed us to gauge identity currents and changes in self-identifications within groups. If the method is used in future studies we will be able to further track changes; we would not have been able to do so if historically contingent self-labelling had been the decisive criterion of group categorization.

We believe therefore that there is theoretical justification, operational necessity and a fruitful yield in our using family origins in allocating individuals to a specific minority group. In empirical research, something comparable happens in the case of all of the other social groupings Smith mentions. Social groupings have ultimately to be identified by objective indicators: gender (sex), disability (impairment), life-course (age), social class (occupation). Note particularly, that the first three are all biological criteria being used as proxies for socially constructed groupings.

In *Ethnic Minorities in Britain* and elsewhere we have been particularly sensitive to allow space for group agency and group identities. *Ethnic Minorities in Britain* has been praised by, amongst others, ethnic minority people who feel that it has displayed the rich mix of cultural orientations and identity debates that exist in what used to be thought of as a homogeneous 'black Britain', as well as by those who say we have empowered them by collecting and analysing data that shows how certain groups are more disadvantaged than anyone had thought (and the opposite too). In both cases, we have enabled 'voice' where there was silence. So, Smith's remarks about our 'racist' methodology which includes drawing parallels with how the Nazi state imposed Jewishness on people are wide of the mark and might be regarded as offensive.

## Status Groups

Besides the criticisms discussed above, Smith also makes a positive suggestion. He is appreciative of our definition of racialized ethnicity (pp. 411–12), but argues that while we capture a genuine phenomenon, it is best understood not as ethnic groups, but as Weberian 'status groups'. Smith here appears to intend endorsing a Weberian analysis in preference to a Marxist analysis (such as adopted by Miles), or the racist analysis he accuses us of adopting. However, he does not develop his point theoretically, beyond suggesting that: 'for a status group to assume the particular form of an "ethnic group" ... something else is required, a shared common culture' (p. 408), and restating his belief that the empirical identification of such a status group is entirely dependant on self-identification with a 'common community' (p. 408). The latter point is, as Smith recognizes, inconsistent with the Weberian notion of status group and the role that the social estimation of 'honour' may play in this. Surprisingly he does not deal with this head on (see, for example, the way in which he addresses the point in his conclusion, and the ambiguous way in which he treats ethnic group as a subset of status group throughout). A Weberian approach to the analysis of ethnicity has, of course, been adopted and developed by others (for example, Rex and Moore, 1967), though as Smith does not offer a reference to any



detailed study, we are unable to evaluate what the use of ‘status groups’ might mean in practice. What we can say is that if it were used empirically, it would require an approach to measurement very similar to that adopted in *Ethnic Minorities in Britain*, regardless of Smith’s emphasis on self-assignment. This underlines our point that the approach to measurement used in *Ethnic Minorities in Britain* is compatible with a variety of theoretical perspectives on ethnicity.

## Conclusion

Smith’s discussion seems to be over-blown. The criticisms, as they apply to *Ethnic Minorities in Britain*, are in the main non-problems. The discussion of ‘race’ that accompanies it adds nothing new to the literature, and on ethnicity Smith is self-contradictory, theoretically mistaken and ignores the need for objective indicators in quantitative research. His suggestion about using Weber’s concept of status groups is interesting, but it certainly does not supersede the varied ways in which racialized ethnicity in Britain is currently being studied.

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