

The Paradox

In 2002 the American Sociological Association (ASA) formally noted:

Some scholarly and civic leaders believe that the very idea of ‘race’ has the effect of promoting social division and they have proposed that the government stop collecting these data altogether. Respected voices from the fields of human molecular biology and physical anthropology (supported by research from the Human Genome Project) assert that the concept of race has no validity in their respective fields.¹

This may have been a reference to the statement issued by the American Association of Physical Anthropologists that declared, among other things, that ‘there is no national, religious, linguistic or cultural group or economic class that constitutes a race.’²

The ASA statement continued: ‘Growing numbers of humanist scholars, social anthropologists, and political commentators have joined the chorus in urging the nation to rid itself of the concept of race.’ One scholar was quoted as saying that ‘identifying people by race only deepens the racial divide’. The ASA thereby recognized an intellectual challenge. Scholars in several different fields were asking the ASA to help supersede an obsolete expression earlier advanced for the identification of certain kinds of biological difference.

The Association was in a fix. There was an intellectual issue and a political issue, for it was urged to respond to a proposal to forbid the California state government from collecting information on race and ethnicity.³ Understandably, the political issue was given priority because a professional association can take a vote on a proposal of this kind, whereas an intellectual issue is better addressed by debate in academic books, journal articles and seminars.

So the Association issued an official statement on the ‘Importance of Collecting Data on Race’. It maintained that such data should be collected because they were needed for the monitoring of social policies in the United States. There was no reference to ethnicity or to

any 'racial divide' other than that between blacks and whites. The Association did not seize the opportunity to remind interested persons that, as a party to the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the United States had, since 1994, been under a treaty obligation to monitor and report to the Secretary-General of the United Nations about any inequalities affecting racial and ethnic groups within its population.

The position adopted by the ASA was paradoxical in that it combined two contradictory elements: a recognition that race no longer had any validity in the academic field within which it originated together with a defence of procedures which implied the opposite.

Its response was reactive, neglecting the opportunity to comment on the basis on which population data are collected. The US census of 2000 had introduced an important change when (in Question 6) it asked, 'What is this person's race? Mark one or more races to indicate what this person considers himself/herself to be'; this was followed by fifteen tick boxes. This momentous change, however, had come about by accident! A former director of the Census Bureau has reported that it was an 'anomaly' that had been left on the form 'inadvertently'.⁴ The same question was then repeated in 2010. The old 'one-drop rule' required that many persons be classed as either black or white, and that a single drop of black 'blood' made that person black. Today, in the United States, there are many persons who value more than one line of descent and do not wish to be identified by one alone. How their wishes are to be respected, and data on the national population to be collected, is a political decision to be taken by the federal government and other authorities (including the Office of Management and Budget). The ASA, as a non-political body, could have offered its advice on the alternative possibilities. Instead, its statement endorsed the existing procedures.

The usage that the ASA defended was one peculiar to the United States. It addressed, not the concept of race, but the practice by which blacks in that country were identified by the one-drop rule; this is a peculiar mode of classification that is not applied to any other social category in the United States and is unknown outside that country. If some other mode of classification was sought, what should it be? In censuses within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland people have been asked, 'What is your ethnic group?' and offered choices that used words like 'white' and 'mixed'. This last word is questionable, for everyone's ancestry is in some degree mixed. Some

persons may not identify with an ethnic group for any purpose other than that of completing the census form. The reality is not one of 'groups', but of social categories. The practical challenge confronting the ASA was the greater because the ordinary English-language vocabulary encourages categorizations like 'mixed' even though they are misleading and can be offensive. Since this particular contrast implies that the unmixed are purer than the mixed, it is morally objectionable as well as scientifically indefensible.

For several reasons the intellectual challenge was, and remains, more difficult than the political challenge. One of them is that states have obligations under international law that require them to use the words 'race' and 'racial'. The perception of a conflict between scientific knowledge and public practice has arisen because scientists and legislators have different objectives and use different vocabularies in order to attain them. The scientists say, in effect, that 'once some of our predecessors thought that race might be a useful concept in biology; now we know that there is no place for such a word in our vocabulary'. The legislators say, in effect, that 'we know that the word race has misleading associations that we hope to dispel by educational measures, but at the present time its use is necessary to the discharge of our international and domestic obligations'.

It is instructive to reflect upon the paradoxical aspect of the ASA statement because it casts light on a general intellectual problem confronting the contemporary social sciences. It will be argued here that the only way to resolve the paradox is to distinguish two kinds of knowledge, practical and theoretical. In them, the most important words are used in different ways because they serve different purposes. For this reason, the argument has to be philosophical as well as sociological. It challenges today's sociologists to reconsider some of their fundamental assumptions. They will not easily be persuaded that there is such a paradox, that it calls for resolution, or that this is the only way to resolve it.

Yet in some respects the argument demands only a reorientation of what has been known for more than a century. The British perspective may differ slightly from that in the United States because British universities often have separate departments for the study of sociology and for the study of social policy. There is active interchange between the two fields, sometimes in the form of an exchange between pure and applied sociology, and when it comes to writing about 'race', many sociologists continually prefer to address social policy issues

even though the sociological theory applicable in this field needs their attention.

A prime example of how pure social research advances beyond applied research is Emile Durkheim's famous study of the causes of suicide. It demonstrated the value of distinctively sociological inquiry. In the course of his study Durkheim referred no less than sixteen times to the work of one of his predecessors, Henry Morselli. Many readers would be astonished to discover how much Durkheim's book owed to Morselli's forty-nine numbered tables, quite apart from the unnumbered ones. Durkheim's thirty-two tables recapitulated Morselli's sequence, updating and occasionally elaborating his tables. The two authors considered the same possible contributory causes: climate, seasons, time of day, population density, mental illness, sex, race, religion, occupation, marital status, etc. They employed the same method of eliminating postulated causes.

The difference between them is that Morselli's impressive book was prepared as a contribution to social policy; it concluded that the 'social calamity' of suicide might be mitigated by giving 'force and energy to the moral character' and by achieving a better 'balance between individual needs and social utility'. Durkheim's intent was signalled by his subtitle, 'A Study in Sociology'. He elaborated a new and exciting set of ideas well summarized in an article by Barclay Johnson on 'Durkheim's One Cause of Suicide'.⁵ By his analysis of the indicators of social integration, Durkheim uncovered a causal variable of which the individuals were not conscious. Morselli's book, though translated into English and German, has been forgotten. Durkheim's book, despite its occasional errors, has been a continuing inspiration to psychiatrists and to policy makers concerned with questions of social cohesion and integration. It is a basic text in sociology. A study that was not directed to short-term concerns has proved of profound value for the long-term.

The distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge helps resolve some of the misunderstandings that arise when the same word is used with different meanings. The study of social policy has to be rooted in the prevailing body of practical knowledge because its recommendations have to be addressed to policy makers and to the general public. It has to use ordinary language and to allow for the difficulties that can arise from its ambiguities. Thus words like 'anti-Semitism', 'Islamophobia', 'multiculturalism', 'race' and 'racism' are currently vital to the designation of kinds of social relations that people wish to

promote and the attitudes they wish to oppose. Such words are used with many different meanings; their significance changes over time.

It is relatively easy to find a research problem in the field of public policy because the mass media highlight matters of public concern every day. Many sociologists choose to address policy issues, often those that have a particular reference to forms of inequality. In the United States they have focused on changes in the relations between immigrants and those already settled, against a background that stresses the imperatives of a democratic society. In the United Kingdom much teaching and research has analysed the regulation of immigration and the processes of settlement. Ordinary language suffices for most such studies.

Other sociologists try to answer specific questions chosen as part of a general exploration of the underlying causes of social behaviour, looking at features common to humans everywhere, and at what distinguishes one society or one historical period from another. In this they resemble economists, who similarly search out commonalities and differences in varying kinds of markets, and psychologists, who examine characteristics of the human mind and the differences between the behaviour of humans and other kinds of animals. At the heart of the mainstream approach in any social science is the conception of an explanandum, an observation or research finding for which an account is sought. A theory helps the researcher to advance such an account in the form of an explanation (the explanans). However, many of the academics who have written about 'race' and 'ethnicity' have started from current English-language meanings of these words instead of from the intellectual problems that have to be resolved.

The researcher is more likely to make an original contribution to knowledge if he or she has found (or been given) a good problem on which to work. They are not easy to find. Though a Ph.D. candidate is expected to review the relevant literature outlining the work of predecessors and identify one or more traditions of inquiry, even successful candidates have been heard to say that 'it was only when I was writing my dissertation that I got a clear conception of what my problem was'. Different traditions prioritize different questions, so that if there is no agreement on the explanandum there can be no agreement on which is the best solution to the problem.

A good research problem is one that can lead to a reliable and interesting result. If the explanation is to have the vital quality of cogency, its terms have to be defined, and no term can be acceptably defined

without agreement on the purpose for which a definition is wanted. This is the source of the difference between ordinary (or practical) language and theoretical language. In ordinary language, a definition has to facilitate communication in contexts in which fine distinctions or possible ambiguities may not be important. To ascertain the meaning of an ordinary language word, the inquirer looks it up in a dictionary and selects the most appropriate of the alternatives offered. In the development of theoretical explanations, it is the nature of the explanandum that decides which concepts and which definitions are useful to achieve a result. Concepts have to be fit for purpose, and the explanandum embodies the purpose.⁶

Ordinary language conceptions, being limited to particular times and places, have been called folk concepts; they have been contrasted with analytical concepts that seek to transcend any such limitations. However, a simpler formulation of the same distinction is one drawn by American anthropologists when they contrast emic and etic constructs. An everyday example of the difference is that when a patient goes to a doctor for treatment, he or she reports his or her symptoms in ordinary language using emic constructs. The doctor makes a diagnosis, drawing upon technical knowledge expressed in etic constructs. According to one encyclopaedia, emic constructs are accounts expressed in categories meaningful to members of the community under study, whereas etic constructs are accounts expressed in categories meaningful to the community of scientific observers.⁷

The emic/etic distinction identifies two kinds of vocabulary. In sociology, some expressions are candidates for inclusion as concepts in an etic vocabulary, such as reciprocity, relative deprivation, social mobility, socio-economic status, and so on, for their users strive to make them culture-free.

Much academic writing about race has concentrated on the potentially misleading features of the ordinary language – or emic – conception concerned with practical knowledge, and has neglected the distinction between explanandum and explanans. The chief intellectual problem is to account for human variation, physical and cultural; that is the explanandum. When addressing this problem, the notion of race has to be evaluated as part of an explanans, and its value within the body of theoretical knowledge that attempts to account for human variation has to be assessed.

There are therefore two kinds of answer to the question of what we now know about race and ethnicity. An answer in terms of practical

knowledge would set out current knowledge about the meanings of these words and how they can be used for the formulation and implementation of public policy in one or more specific countries at the present time. It would not regard the conceptions of race and ethnicity as problematic. An answer in terms of theoretical knowledge – such as is offered in this book – must maintain that our knowledge of the present-day situation is deepened if we know how we have come by this knowledge, for it teaches lessons about how our knowledge has grown and continues to grow. It also explains why some lines of argument, though popular in their time, have been proven wrong. In particular, it considers whether the expressions ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ are fit for purpose: do they satisfactorily identify the behaviour that calls for explanation? An answer in these terms offers knowledge in greater depth.

The founding fathers of sociology set out to uncover underlying causes of social behaviour and proposed new concepts (like Durkheim’s concept of anomie). They aimed to promote the growth of objective knowledge, that is to say knowledge that possesses the quality of cogency; such knowledge exists in a body of propositions that have to be accepted as valid by everyone who has a serious interest in the matter, including those who, because of their political commitments, are apprehensive about the possible implications of particular propositions.

One of the abiding problems of philosophy is that of the relation between things and words. The growth of theoretical knowledge depends upon a relation between the two that differs from the growth of practical knowledge. This opens a door to a resolution of the 2002 paradox. To set out this argument, it is necessary first to trace the history of how the paradox has arisen; then, second, to uncover the philosophical issues that underlie it. This demands, in chapters 1 and 2, summary histories of the sources of current conceptions of race and the many meanings the word has acquired, first in biology and then in social life. Some readers may be surprised by the contention that any history the word has in biology is only as a claim to explanatory value advanced at the beginning of the nineteenth century but demolished by its end. After the middle of the century, as Charles Darwin implicitly acknowledged, the popular meaning dominated use of the word. Chapter 2 has therefore to indicate the political moves that gave it such a special meaning in the United States. From the mid-twentieth century it has to do this against a backdrop of international law and

politics, where the word 'race' has become increasingly important, as is outlined in chapter 3.

The reaction of many US sociologists in 2002 was to maintain that race, as 'a principal category in the organization of daily social life', was something quite separate from the possibility that it might be a biological category. Maybe it was separate for them, but that was no answer to the charge that its use in the United States promoted social division. Their argument that 'race as a social construct ... is central to societal organization' reinforced an over-simple belief about the relation between a social and a biological category, and it legitimated administrative practices that some of their members must, on political grounds, have considered in need of reform. The 'social construct' argument does not resolve the paradox. The only way to dismantle it, according to this book, is to build on the distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge.

Does this still matter? While this book was in preparation, a volume appeared from Princeton University Press under the title *Creating a New Racial Order: How Immigration, Multiracialism, Genomics, and the Young can Remake America*.⁸ It was hailed by Henry Louis Gates, of Harvard University, as showing that 'racial order remains one of the most reliable ways of organizing our past and present as Americans'. Why should he write 'racial order' rather than 'social order'? Why should the authors, and their respected colleague, assume that 'racial' is the adjective that most correctly identifies the division they deplore? They recycle an obsolete and pernicious mode of thought.

The argument of the pages that follow is that one of the main tasks of social science is to discover better explanations of the social significance attributed to human physical differences, comparing the significance attributed to various phenotypical differences with other kinds of difference, both physical and social. As part of this task, it is necessary to consider how effective prevailing ideas of race and ethnicity are in accounting for those differences, and whether they can be improved upon. If they are in any way defective, how is it that they have they come into general use?

The main story has to start in the United States. In the nineteenth century whites in the US South referred to slavery as the 'peculiar institution'. This book contends that the popular but ill-considered conception of race that is bound up with the one-drop rule has become the new peculiar institution; it is peculiar both in being restricted to the United States, and peculiar in the sense of being strange or odd.

Important though the public statements of professional bodies may be, the abiding challenge is to produce better explanations. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the ways in which sociologists have struggled with the use of race in ordinary language to structure social relations, and with the claim that a concept of racism might facilitate better explanations. Because of the country's history, the word 'race' in US English is loaded with a huge burden of varied meanings. It signifies much more than the same word does in UK English or in the corresponding words used in other European languages. Many sociologists, like those who prepared the 2002 ASA statement, have employed the ordinary language word instead of concluding that, for social science purposes, it needs to be replaced by a family of concepts that identify more accurately its analytically important components.

These doubts about the sociological value of the ordinary language notion of race reappear in the queries about the sociological value of ordinary language conceptions of ethnicity. These are rehearsed in chapter 6. Major problems remain that academics cannot solve by simply thinking harder, or by reanalysing existing knowledge. New research is needed, of a kind informed by a better understanding of the philosophical issues. Some possibilities are therefore discussed in chapter 7, leading through to the conclusion.

Notes

1. Retrieved 8 November 2012 from <http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/sep-toct02/indextwo.html>.
2. AAPA Statement on Biological Aspects of Race, point 10. Retrieved 13 August 2012 from <http://physanth.org/association/position-statements/biological-aspects-of-race?searchterm=race>.
3. Proposition 54 in the California ballot of 2003.
4. Kenneth Prewitt, *What is Your Race? The Census and Our Flawed Attempts to Classify Americans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 135.
5. Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, English translation edited by George Simpson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952 [1897]). Henry Morselli, *Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics*, English translation (London: Kegan Paul, 1881). Barclay Johnson, 'Durkheim's One Cause of Suicide', *American Sociological Review* 1965 30(6): 875–886. Integration has been a central concept in recent discussions of the reception of migrants in European countries, but as yet sociologists have been unable to find any sociological concept that advances beyond Durkheim's conception of integration. Some students of migration write about 'migrant integration' as if the social integration of migrants differs from the integration of everyone else.

6. Max Weber also drew a distinction in kind between two vocabularies. He maintained that in contrast to historical writing (which must use constructs with multiple meanings), sociology must seek univocal constructs, each with but one meaning, and be *eindeutig*. See *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der Verstehenden Soziologie*, 5th edition (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1972), 9–10. Insofar as the difference between the two kinds of vocabulary poses a problem, the simple solution is to recognize the two forms of knowledge. Weber offered a more complex solution. It was in order to achieve *Eindeutigkeit* that he advocated the development of ‘ideal types’. Many contemporary sociologists would recognize his ideal types as models. The full significance of Weber’s distinction is not brought out in the *Economy and Society* translation of Weber’s book.
7. James W. Lett, ‘Emic/Etic Distinctions’, in David Levinson and Melvin Ember (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 2 (New York: Holt, 1996), 382–383. Alternatively, see <http://faculty.ircc.edu/faculty/jlett/>.
8. Jennifer L. Hochschild, Vesla Weaver and Traci Burch, *Creating a New Racial Order: How Immigration, Multiracialism, Genomics, and the Young Can Remake Race in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).