

Ethnic Identities: Choices and Constraints

The continuing significance of ethnicity

In recent years, there has been a great deal of attention, both academically and popularly, to the meanings, experiences, and politics surrounding ethnic identity. “Ethnicity” and notions of cultural difference and marginality are “in,” as shown by the proliferation of studies concerning ethnic identity from the 1990s onwards (Sharma, Hutnyk, and Sharma 1996). In part, this is due to the fact that the racial and ethnic landscapes of many Western societies such as the USA and Britain have been undergoing major changes in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The 1990 US Census revealed that nearly one in every four Americans is of African, Asian, Latino, or Native American ancestry (Omi and Winant 1996: 474). In Britain, the size of the ethnic minority population has grown in the last decade. There were an estimated 4 million ethnic minorities in mid-2000, or 7.1 percent of the total population. This compares with 3.1 million, or 5.5 percent of the total population in 1991 (Scott, Pearce, and Goldblatt 2001).¹ Furthermore, in 1998, the *Guardian* newspaper featured a front-page heading heralding the emergence of “beige Britain,” in light of the significant growth of mixed race relationships and individuals (Parker and Song 2001a). These major demographic changes have impacted upon the ways in which we understand concepts such as ethnic identity and race.

But what are ethnic identities, and why have they remained important? The answers to these questions are by no means simple or straightforward. There is no one universally accepted definition of ethnicity used by academics or by ordinary people. According to Martin Bulmer (1986: 54): “An ‘ethnic group’ is a collectivity within

a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements which define the group's identity, such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance. Members of an ethnic group are conscious of belonging to the group." One important aspect of this definition is that it is a group's belief in its common ancestry and its members' perception and self-consciousness that they constitute a group which matter, and not any actual evidence of their cultural distinctiveness as a group.

There has been much debate about the basis and meanings of ethnic attachments and allegiances. A "primordial" understanding of ethnicity suggests that it exists naturally, due to common heritage, and is basically an extension of blood ties (Geertz 1963). According to Pierre van den Berghe (1978), much of ethnic identity is predetermined at birth, and is not actively chosen or acquired over one's lifetime.

However, many recent analysts of ethnicity have argued that ethnicity has no natural or objective existence as such, and have stressed its socially constructed, rather than primordial, nature (see Barth 1969; O. Patterson 1975; Wallman 1978; Hein 1994; Lal 2001).² Primordial views of ethnicity are now largely criticized for positing a culturally essentialist view of ethnicity, in which the characteristics and cultures of ethnic groups are seen as static and unchanging. As Yancey, Ericksen, and Juliani (1976) have argued, ethnicity is emergent, and ethnic groups can change their boundaries and criteria for membership. According to "situational" theorists of ethnicity, ethnic solidarity and ethnic attachments are not constant or guaranteed, because they can fluctuate over time (Wallman 1978; Nagel 1994). Ethnicity can be activated in particular times and situations by material and other interests; that is, people can use their ethnic affiliations and ties as resources in a variety of contexts, in response to current needs, or in terms of competition with outside groups (A. Cohen 1974; Yancey, Ericksen, and Juliani 1976; O. Patterson 1975).

The exploration of ethnic identities is of prime importance today, because ethnic identities are not simply and gradually eroding in significance, as some analysts in the past predicted. Whether in the case of the enduring ethnic identities of immigrant populations or the various nationalist movements which are motivated by strong feelings about a group's ethnic distinctiveness (Calhoun 1994), such as manifest by the Quebecois secessionist movement in Canada and the "ethnic cleansing" that occurred in the former Yugoslavia, there is much, varied evidence of the importance of what we call "ethnic identity" and "ethnicity." If anything, ethnicity and ethnic differentiation

have been resurgent throughout the world (Banton 1997; Cornell and Hartmann 1998).

In *Economy and Society*, Max Weber (1968) predicted that ethnicity would decline in the context of modernity, which he saw as marked by the rationalization of human action and organization; ethnic attachments were considered “communal” and were not expected to thrive in modern societies, which would gradually displace such putatively traditional relationships. American theories of assimilation were based on the experiences of White European immigrants to the USA. Over the centuries, the USA had absorbed immigrants from various parts of Europe, and they had gradually gained their rights and become accepted into the wider society, in spite of the significant nativist hostility and prejudice they had encountered upon their arrival (see Warner and Srole 1945; M. Gordon 1964). Thus, while Italian, Irish, Polish, and German immigrants, to name a few, initially encountered scorn and prejudice, successive generations of these White immigrants were gradually accepted as bona fide Americans (see Alba 1990; Waters 1990). Based on the experiences of White European-ancestry immigrants to the USA, the straight-line assimilation model predicted that non-White immigrant groups and ethnic minority groups would also be able to assimilate into the mainstream fabric of America, once they had learned the English language and adopted American ways of living and behaving. It was believed that this, in turn, would contribute to the reduction of discrimination and prejudice against them. In this way it was believed that such groups’ ethnicity would gradually wane in significance (M. Gordon 1964).

However, many empirical studies now make clear that a straight-line theory of assimilation does not apply to the case of many non-White immigrants or ethnic minority groups in either the USA or Britain. For instance, African Americans tended to be excluded in considerations about assimilation, which were modeled on the experiences of White European immigrants (Glazer 1993). African American culture was perceived to be pathological, thus preventing African Americans from entering into the mainstream culture and values of the USA (see Myrdal 1944). Theories of assimilation were also criticized for treating immigrant individuals as the passive objects of the “host” environment, rather than as active agents who can creatively adapt and negotiate their ethnic identities.

There is increasing evidence that there is no uniform linear process by which successive generations of immigrant groups are integrated into the wider society; nor is there any conclusive evidence that their ethnic identities are necessarily diluted in a straightforward way over time. In contrast with the straight-line model, the segmented

assimilation model argues that many post-1965 immigrants may achieve economic and social mobility through the retention of their immigrant cultures and community ties (Portes and Zhou 1993). Furthermore, embracing one's ethnic identity may be associated with higher self-esteem and the ability to deal with discrimination (Chavira and Phinney 1991). Many analysts on both sides of the Atlantic claim that ethnicity continues to be not only a central aspect of minority peoples' identities, but also a fundamental basis for divisions in most contemporary societies.

Ethnic distinctiveness has endured even when identifiably distinctive cultural practices associated with particular groups have declined (Cornell and Hartmann 1998). For instance, most third- and fourth-generation descendants of Armenian immigrants to the USA do not regularly engage in culturally distinctive practices which would be considered "Armenian," but, nevertheless, have tended to uphold a strong sense of their Armenian heritage (Bakalian 1993). Significantly, although these American-born Armenians do not use the Armenian language in their everyday interactions, or eat Armenian food on a regular basis, or necessarily partner with Armenian people, they still feel Armenian. This example reveals that what it *means* to be Armenian is subject to change, and is re-created and reinvented over time. Ironically, in the case of many White Americans of European heritage, the fact that they have assimilated so well has meant that many of them wish to claim a European ethnic ancestry, such as Norwegian or Italian, which makes them feel distinctive and special – and not just "ordinary" Americans (Waters 1990).

However, unlike most White ethnics, many ethnic minority people are often attributed not only ethnic, but also racial, labels and images by others – whether or not these labels and images accord with their own ethnic and racial identities. Central to the process by which ethnic minority people are labeled and categorized is the notion of "race" and the processes involved in racialization.

The intertwining of race and ethnicity

We have briefly examined what is meant by ethnicity. But what is race? The concept of race has tended to refer to a biologically (and genetically) distinct subpopulation of a species (Cornell and Hartmann 1998). In Western societies such as Britain and the USA, notions of race and of racial difference were premised upon classification systems which posited the relative superiority and inferiority of particular groups, with White people considered the superior race. According

to this way of thinking, race was associated with distinct hereditary characteristics, so that differences in intelligence and sexuality, for instance, were to be understood to be racial in character (Cornell and Hartmann 1998). Based on a racial classification system which emphasized inherent differences between the races, White people's concerns about racial mixing, especially concerning the putative contamination of the White race (see Stonequist 1937), were widespread in both the USA and Britain throughout the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries (Furedi 2001). While the existence of race used to be legitimated on pseudo-scientific grounds, it is now recognized as the arbitrary grouping of dissimilar people based upon phenotypical differences such as skin color and hair type (King 1981; Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin 1984).

Although the terms "ethnicity" and "race" are sometimes used interchangeably and together, some analysts have offered analytical distinctions between the two: Pierre Van den Berghe (1978), for example, makes a clear-cut distinction between the two terms. "Race" is said to be "socially defined but on the basis of physical criteria," whereas an ethnic group is "socially defined on the basis of cultural criteria." In a more sophisticated formulation, Martin Bulmer (1986) notes that "ethnicity" is a more "inclusive" term than "race," because while "race" is predicated (however spuriously) on biological membership of a particular group, ethnic groups are generally seen as having more fluid and blurred boundaries (Wallman 1978). This is because members of ethnic groups can change the boundaries of ethnic group membership – since they are socially constructed and negotiated boundaries.

However, the apparently neat and sensible distinctions drawn above start to blur when we consider that, like ethnicity, race is a social construct without an objective existence of its own – race too is a form of "imagined grouping" (Goldberg 1992). Even people's perceptions of other people's physical markers, and the determination of which racial categories they belong to, are subjective. In this way, racial categories such as White, Black or Asian have no enduring meanings. Moreover, some of the groups identified in the past as races – for instance, Jewish people – are now commonly referred to as ethnic groups (Sollors 1989). A number of analysts have argued that, as a social construct, race has no fixed meaning, and is constructed and transformed sociohistorically through competing political projects (see Omi and Winant 1994; Goldberg 1990).

Accompanying the delegitimation of biologically based beliefs about racial differences has been the wider usage of the term "ethnicity." However, just as race can be reified, understandings of ethnicity can

also suffer from reification and static, essentialistic characterizations of particular ethnic groups (Gilroy 2000). The reification of ethnicity results from the belief that ethnic groups are somehow endowed with a given set of cultural values and practices – rather than conceiving of ethnicity as something which is continually in process, negotiated, renewed, and subject to a variety of social, economic, and political forces (Steinberg 1981).

The neat analytical distinction between race and ethnicity tends to overlook the slippery and often blurred boundaries between the two terms, and the contingent and changeable ways in which ethnic and racial identities can be experienced, attributed, and claimed. Thus, while I use the terms “ethnic identity” and “ethnicity” in this book, this usage is meant to incorporate the complex intertwining of race and ethnicity. In many American and British discussions of race and ethnic identity, it is actually very difficult to disentangle these two terms, because the meanings and images associated with each tend to bleed into the other.³ In order to achieve a complex understanding of what we call “ethnic identity,” in multiethnic societies such as the USA and Britain, we cannot neatly and completely jettison the notion of race (see chapter 8).

Racial assignment

The seeming omnipresence of race and racial consciousness in many social interactions is difficult to ignore. As Vilna Bashi has pointed out in relation to the USA, “one does not choose between ethnic labels and racial labels. Individuals have *both* ethnic and racial identities, *at one and the same time*” (1998: 962). Bashi continues: “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” (1998: 966). Here, the author notes that people possess both ethnic and racial identities, but suggests the primacy of race and racial categorization in the experiences of non-White ethnic minorities in the USA.

Although the notions of race and racial categories, as a scientific basis for differentiating between human beings, have been largely refuted, this has not resulted in the expulsion of this idea from our minds or from academic and political debates and discourses. This is because of the enduring social and political power of race and racial designations in contemporary societies. However arbitrary or nonsensical racial categories may be, our perceptions and understandings of race continue to fundamentally shape people’s lives and interactions

in contemporary multiethnic societies. Race has a real existence to the extent that, although the meanings associated with it differ across societies, it is part of our common parlance and a marker used by both ordinary individuals and institutions alike.

This is especially evident in the ways in which people attribute racial, as well as ethnic, characteristics and identities to each other. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) have argued, race, in addition to sex and age, is one of the first things that is noticed about someone. Upon seeing someone for the first time, we may consciously or unconsciously categorize them in racial terms. For instance, in Britain, one might immediately register the entrance of someone who appears to be "Asian" (meaning of South Asian origin), though we may or may not have any conception of this person's ethnicity or religious background. Although this Asian person may consider herself to be second-generation Pakistani British, her specific ethnicity may not be recognized or legitimated in many of her interactions with others.

Although there is a growing tendency in Britain to pejoratively distinguish Muslims from other Asians (as the British National Party leader Nick Griffin has done in the aftermath of the riots in the Northern cities in the spring and summer of 2001), Asians are still often regarded in racial, as opposed to ethnic, terms. Racial categorizations of people can sometimes, though not always, "trump" or override ethnic designations. That is, people's ethnic identities may be subsumed within broader racial identities which are imposed by others. For instance, West Indian immigrants in the USA may find themselves labeled Black, first and foremost because the White majority may not recognize their ethnic identities as Jamaicans or Trinidadians, but rather see them in racial terms, as Black people. While many Black Jamaicans, Trinidadians, and Haitians think of themselves in these specific ethno-national terms, they can also be highly aware of being seen as Black in many social contexts in the USA. As argued earlier, we cannot always or easily separate race and ethnicity, because people's ethnic identities are often informed and shaped by the ways in which they are racially categorized.

Various analysts have argued that racialized minority groups experience "racial assignment" (Cornell and Hartmann 1998). That is, in most White majority societies, minority groups have tended to be arbitrarily placed in racial categories, vis-à-vis the dominant White group. Racial assignment by the wider society involves a form of "othering," which objectifies and essentializes subordinate groups in relation to a limited set of characteristics (Bhabha 1990a). In this way, the power to mark and classify certain groups is a significant exercise of symbolic power (Hall 1997).⁴ As a result, a number of

analysts have observed that members of many ethnic minority groups are often limited in the assertion of their desired ethnic identities (Waters 1990, 1996).

Central to the process by which ethnic minority groups are labeled and categorized by others is the institutionalization of race and racial difference (Dominguez 1998). The existence and institutionalization of seemingly natural racial categories belies the fact that race and the recognition of racial categories reflect a system of power which constructs and gives meanings to racial groups on the basis of recognized physical differences (Banton 1997; R. Miles 1989). Under South Africa's apartheid regime, the South African government officially recognized four races: White, African, Colored, and Asian (Cornell and Hartmann 1998: 22). This institutionalization of four races determined a stratified order in which White South Africans were the privileged elite, and the Africans were the poorest, most disadvantaged group, despite the fact that the Africans were the numerical majority in the country.⁵

As in South Africa, in both the USA and Britain, the historical use of racial categories has been arbitrary and changeable, and they have been employed in such a way as to convenience and privilege the dominant (White) population. Non-White ethnic minorities are especially subject to forms of racial assignment because, while most White people in the USA and Britain represent the norm, which requires no racial marking of them as human beings, race acts as a marker which tends to differentiate and essentialize ethnic minorities in a denigrating fashion.

Exercising ethnic options

In comparison with non-White people subject to forms of racial assignment, Mary Waters (1990) has argued that many White people in the USA possess an array of "ethnic options." Earlier generations of immigrants to the USA, such as the Irish and those from southern and eastern parts of Europe, such as Italians, were denigrated and regarded as distinct, unassimilable races. However, in the contemporary USA, groups such as Italian and Irish Americans are seen (along with those of English, Scandinavian, or German backgrounds) as belonging to a White race (Waters 1990; Lieberman 1988; Steinberg 1981). For most White Americans, their European ethnic heritage is no longer central to their sense of selves or to their everyday lives. Rather, White Americans think of themselves primarily in national terms, as Americans.

According to Waters, the adoption of ethnic identities by Americans of European descent, such as Irish Americans or Italian Americans, is optional, because they are able to invoke their ethnicity when, and in the ways, they wish. In other words, White Americans' ethnicity is purely symbolic (Gans 1979), and its celebration is without real social costs. For instance, White Americans of Irish heritage may like to celebrate St. Patrick's Day, or frequent an Irish bar, but their Irishness does not figure centrally in their lives. They can enjoy and be proud of their Irish heritage, but this is episodic and, for the most part, superficial (Waters 1990). Richard Alba (1988), who has characterized Italian American ethnicity as being in the "twilight" of ethnicity, and Zenner (1988), who has argued that Jewishness is largely a matter of individual preference, have made similar arguments about the directions of White American ethnicity. That is, ethnicity is not something that influences these groups' lives unless they want it to.

Such an argument could be extended to the case of many White English people, who, if they wish, may invoke other European heritages, such as French, German, or Scandinavian ancestry. Like their White American counterparts, White English people can simply claim an English or British identity, which draws upon a dominant understanding of English and British nationality. Unlike the USA, however, Britain is characterized by specific nationalist movements by White minorities (such as the Welsh, Irish, and Scottish), who assert distinctive ethnic heritages and identities (Jenkins 1997).

Nevertheless, in both countries, ethnicity for many White Americans and Britons (and especially White English) may be said to constitute a "passive," as opposed to an "active" identity (Bradley 1996). In contrast with most White people, members of non-White minority groups are likely to experience their ethnicity as an active identity because, as Bradley notes, "active identification often occurs as a defence against the actions of others or when an individual is conscious of being defined in a negative way. Active identities are promoted by the experience of discrimination" (1996: 25-6). Using this distinction between active and passive identity, many racialized minorities are constantly aware of (and made to feel) their ethnic identities in a variety of social situations, whether it be walking into a predominantly White lecture hall or simply walking down the street.

The experiences and meanings of ethnicity can differ substantially for members of various groups; ethnicity is not uniformly important or a fundamental part of everyone's lives. A distinction which Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann make is useful here: "A comprehensive

or 'thick' ethnic or racial tie is one that organizes a great deal of social life and both individual and collective action. A less comprehensive or 'thin' ethnic or racial tie is one that organizes relatively little of social life and action" (1998: 73). In the case of Italian Americans in the USA, ethnicity today is experienced as a relatively "thin" identity because, although it may be celebrated and significant in some respects, it doesn't tend to fundamentally structure their lives today (1998: 74).

Waters has argued that non-White minorities cannot exercise ethnic options in the same way as White Americans, because racial identities are constantly imposed upon non-White minorities.

The symbolic (white) ethnic tends to think that all groups are equal; everyone has a background that is their right to celebrate and pass on to their children. This leads to the conclusion that all identities are equal and all identities in some sense are interchangeable – "I'm Italian-American, you're Polish-American. I'm Irish-American, you're African-American".

(Waters 1996: 449)

Waters concludes that "all ethnicities are not equal, all are not symbolic, costless, and voluntary" (1990: 160). For racialized minorities such as Asian Americans and African Americans, their identities, and their lives more generally, are significantly shaped by their race and their national origins. While White Americans of European descent can be said to celebrate "individualistic symbolic ethnic identities," racialized groups are faced with a "socially enforced and imposed racial identity" (Waters 1996: 449). While racialized groups must constantly contend with stereotypes of themselves, White people tend to be represented in White culture as being complex, changing, and infinitely varied individuals (Dyer 1997).

However, the suggestion that ethnic minority people possess few or no ethnic options needs further exploration and thought. In this book, I critically explore the idea that ethnic minorities, broadly speaking, are able, although in limited ways, to exercise ethnic options. While it would be difficult to deny the structuring force of dominant racial discourses and stereotypes as they are applied to many ethnic minority groups and individuals, Waters's analysis is perhaps too categorical in polarizing the ethnic options of White people and those of racialized ethnic minorities. What need more exploration are the diverse ways in which ethnic minority groups and individuals negotiate and work at asserting their desired ethnic identities.

Assertions of ethnic identity and choice

How do ethnic minority groups challenge undesirable regimes of representation or assert ethnic identities of their choosing? Not only are representations of groups constantly subject to change because of shifts in meaning, but members of groups vulnerable to racial stereotyping can invert or manipulate the associations and meanings of particular ethnic identities. For instance, in Hanif Kureishi's novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1991), which chronicles the experiences of Kareem, the teenage son of a White English mother and an Indian father in suburban Britain, Kareem's father develops an avid interest in Buddhism. As a bored civil servant by day, he dons a turban by night and adopts a Buddhist pose with his English friends and neighbors who come to observe his "Buddhist" practices. What unfolds is that Kareem's father knowingly provides a performance of Indianness. This performance of being both Indian and Buddhist is all the more outrageous because his father is no Buddhist, but rather raised as a Hindu; that is, he adopts the persona of what he thinks White Britons conceive of as a "real" Indian. This example suggests that people can "play" with the stereotypes they encounter.

Ethnic minority groups (and the individual members of these groups) are active in re-creating and reinventing the meanings and practices associated with themselves. Much of the recent research on ethnicity underlines its socially constructed and highly politicized nature; for instance, analysts such as Werner Sollors (1989) and Joanne Nagel (1986) have referred to the "invention of ethnicity" and the "political construction of ethnicity," respectively.

In addition to Waters's notion of ethnic options, other recent scholarship on ethnic identity, such as that on mixed race people, has highlighted the idea of choice and of choosing ethnic identity (see Leonard 1992). For instance, the historian David Hollinger has argued for a "postethnic" perspective, which emphasizes the importance of individuals' voluntary affiliation with ethnic groups, rather than racially prescribed categorizations of people: "A postethnic perspective denies neither history nor biology, nor the need for affiliations, but it does deny that history and biology provide a set of clear orders for the affiliations we are to make" (1995: 13).

There is now more interest and emphasis on the *active* ways in which people may shape and assert their own ethnic identities, and the strategic ways in which they invoke their ethnicity. For instance, some analysts such as Ann Swidler (1986) have talked about how cultural practices and resources provide a kind of "tool kit" of

symbols, stories, and rituals which can be used by individuals in a variety of ways, including their efforts to solve a range of problems they encounter. Social psychologists also point to the use of “social creativity strategies,” which involve the development of new forms of intergroup comparisons that will create positive, rather than negative in-group identity (see Murrell 1998: 196). And although the choices around ethnic identity are limited, and are structurally bounded, there is a recognition that choices are still made. According to Joanne Nagel, “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” (1994: 154). The notion of being able to choose one’s ethnic identity is a useful tool for examining the ways in which minority groups and individuals negotiate and participate in these processes.

Much theorizing on ethnic identity in the past has been problematic because of the emphasis upon lineage and one’s past and origins. What is striking about much of the new work on ethnic and racial identities is the insistence upon the present, and the changeability of identity formations through time – for example, over one’s lifetime, and in different geographical spaces and contexts – despite the often long shadow of the past.

Influenced by postmodernism, the themes of assertion and choice concerning ethnic identity are timely, given both the discrediting of old paradigms and the emergence of new scholarship which stresses the situational, contingent, and changeable aspects of identity formation and maintenance (Back 1995). According to Stuart Hall, for instance, “Cultural identity . . . is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’. . . . Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past [it is] subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power” (Hall 1990: 225).⁶

While the postmodernist stress upon choice and the conceptualization of people’s identities as relatively free-floating have been welcome in terms of dismissing static and essentialist notions of identity, there has not been enough consideration of the dynamics which both open up and constrain people’s identities – hence my focus upon assertion and choice, and the ways in which such choices are negotiated by a multitude of factors at work in the larger society.

It is widely understood that a complex and changing spectrum of racial exclusion and prejudice, which is based upon the recognition of racial and ethnic differences, still exists in White majority societies such as Britain and the USA (Solomos and Back 1994). Various forms of exclusion and discrimination, rather than ebbing away, are

persistent, albeit constantly changing, and are important in shaping ethnic minority people's sense of their ethnic and racial identities. While there is no one accepted definition of racism in either Britain or the USA, there is fairly wide agreement that racist acts and ideologies take multiple forms and are constantly mutating over time (Goldberg 1990).⁷

Many analysts have observed the emergence of "cultural racism" (Barker 1981). Rather than invoke politically incorrect views of biological superiority and inferiority as the basis of racial difference, it is now much more common for people to marginalize or exclude ethnic minorities by invoking the notion of cultural difference (e.g. Margaret Thatcher's stated fear of being "swamped by people with a different culture"). This is done by using narrowly drawn discourses of nation and patriotism. For instance, some years ago, Black British cricket players' allegiance to their British team was questioned in a sports magazine because they were Black. The questioning of their loyalty and commitment was aptly captured in the headline to an article about the ensuing controversy: "Please try harder" (*Guardian*, 4 July 1995). As Paul Gilroy has argued in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* [the British flag] (1987), being Black *and* British is often conceived of as being mutually exclusive. Ethnic identities are thus importantly, though not exclusively, informed by experiences of racial prejudice and discrimination.

Nevertheless, the recognition of the power of racial categories and designations should not result in the belief that ethnic labels and identities are simply blotted out by the master status known as race. Although ethnic minority people are subject to often denigrating experiences associated with racial categorization, racial assignment is actually key to understanding the formation and *assertion* of ethnic identity: racial meanings and discourses, in this sense, inform (though not exclusively) people's understandings of their ethnic identities and of who they are more generally (Cornell and Hartmann 1998).

Experiences of racial discrimination and stereotyping over time can result in the reinforcement of ethnic identities (Ogbu 1990; Jayaweera 1993). But an understanding of the formation and maintenance of ethnic identities solely in terms of racial exclusion and denigration is overly deterministic. As important as they are, experiences of racial discrimination do not tell us everything about the ways in which ethnic identity is experienced by people; it is much more complex than that.

By focusing on the concepts of agency and choice, I do not mean to suggest a simplistic, unfettered, and individualistic understanding of choice. I use the term "agency" to emphasize the interaction between

micro-level (an individual's actions, for instance) and macro-level (the wider society) processes (Giddens 1984). Individual agency impacts upon social structure and processes, and vice versa. Actors are able to create projects or find solutions to deal with structures that constrain their choices and intentions (Ortner 1996). Such an approach avoids the pitfalls of conceiving of either an unfettered actor or an actor without agency, who is simply a product of her subject position in social life.

The following chapters examine groups' ethnic options, which are negotiated collectively, and the ways in which individual members of groups go about asserting their ethnic identities vis-à-vis their coethnics and the wider society. The notion of negotiating ethnic identity is useful in making sense of the real limitations and structures which bear on such processes, and the politicized interaction between groups and individuals in the determination of their own and others' ethnic identities. By emphasizing the negotiation and assertion of ethnic identity, we are also reminded that even relatively disadvantaged ethnic minority people are active agents who participate in the shaping of their own ethnic identities.