Racing diversity
Ethnicity, euphemisms, and ‘others’

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How does diversity articulate with ethnicity and race? Where and what are the borders, and how are they delimited? Where does one start and the other stop? Are there overlapping spheres? This chapter attempts to address these questions, giving examples of the ways in which these terms are used in popular discourse, and offering some anthropological ideas about how to approach these questions.

Countless trees have been felled in the quest for producing debates about and definitions of “ethnic,” “ethnicity,” and “race.” Anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, demographers, and novelists, to name a few, have all got their feet wet (and often muddy) trying to address the questions raised by these problematic and often shifting, inconsistent terms.

Over the last couple of decades, much of the anthropological literature on race approaches it as a social construction, albeit one that has very powerful consequences in everyday life. Whiteness, for example, is a “structural position conferring privilege and power” (Frankenberg in Hartigan 1999: 185). Similarly, it is seen as an “organising principle in social and cultural relations” (Lipsitz in Hartigan 1999: 185). The same definitions could easily be applied to “ethnicity.” Comaroff (1996) writes of ethnicity in terms of the structuring of inequalities. But we could posit the same for race, and processes of racialization.

We know that ethnicity and race play out differently in different historical, geographic, and social contexts. The ethnic or racial hierarchies of one place are not necessarily those of another. Sometimes this is due to differences in the way social class is organized. This very fact leads us to the conclusion that the categories themselves are far from fixed, and any attempt to pin them down ultimately results in reifications that are not particularly useful to think with. Instead, one way to explore this is by thinking of the terms and concepts to which they refer as attempts to deal with different notions of difference and the process of perceiving and creating marked and unmarked categories.

But is this the same as diversity: a seemingly neutral term, implying variety and difference? What does this – diversity – imply when grappling with ethnicity and race? It might be useful to consider the equation: race : ethnicity :: multiculturalism : diversity.

It is arguable that once race assumed a veneer of political incorrectness, ethnicity arose to euphemize the same referent. Often the two are used interchangeably, both in academic writing.
as well as in popular everyday speech. Likewise, with the increasing criticisms of multiculturalism, diversity seems to have replaced it in colloquial usage.

When considering notions of markedness that underlie the processes of ethnicization and racialization, does this then transpose to diversity, but meaning instead an absence of markedness, where diversity simply is an observable neutral descriptor? Or, is diversity merely the latest of a series of concepts crafted to deal with the discomfiture of multicultural markedness?

A brief genealogy

In the USA, once the assumptions informing the assimilationist melting pot theories were seen to have failed, the discourse then shifted to civil rights, integration, and hyphenated identity politics. Following this, multiculturalism moved into center stage, with ethnicity as the side-show. Now, with the advent of diversity, is it a coincidence that the diversity industry is emerging (arguably as a conceptual loss leader) at the same time that multiculturalism is widely deemed to have failed? Has diversity become the politically more correct iteration of multiculturalism, sidestepping ethnic awkwardness?

Ethnic awkwardness arises when folk theories of ethnicity, conforming to classifications that are ostensibly referential, slide into social science discourse. Taxonomically anomalous, the laundry list approach always left much to be desired when reproducing the rigid and ultimately circular ethnic models: “to be an ethnic group there must be these 11 shared characteristics . . .”; because one is an ethnic x, y, or z, one is therefore a, b, or c. Barth’s watershed moment, a generation ago, inspired a spate of scholarship. It has been taken on board by many, but not all who deal unselfconsciously with what is simply “assumed” to be “ethnic” – particularly not all the diversity theorists. Barth’s (1969) insight was that the “cultural content of ethnic consciousness may be a product, rather than the constitutive basis, of ‘ethnic group organisation’” (Barth 1969: 11). Thus, for our purposes, the process of ethnicization rather than the reified ethnic group is often what is absent in the diversity discourse.

When considering these terms along with the ideas and ideologies that generated them, we cannot help but reflect on questions of identity and otherness. For is this not the common denominator of these amorphous, contradictory, elusive concepts? In other words, these conceptual debates actually revolve around the implicit threat to a putative homogeneity (see Williams 1989); the responses came to be labeled ethnicity and its successor, diversity.

Diversity, Inc.

A simple online search reveals the almost random plethora of events, programs, policies, publications, and images of diversity – even a diversity scorecard. All of them share one key element: the underlying value is that diversity is “good.” Many mission statements about diversity treat it as an aspirational public good, and see it as forward-looking and progressive. But what is the “it”? To misquote Gertrude Stein, is there any there, there? Moreover, there usually is an assumption that we all implicitly know what it is; this is as convenient as it is sloppy, since rarely is it defined in any consistent way. Take, for instance, the claim of a large US university (the University of Washington) on its diversity policy: “ . . . diversity is integral to excellence. We value and honor diverse experiences and perspectives, strive to create welcoming and respectful learning environments, and promote access, opportunity and justice for all.”

Echoing the closing words of the USA Pledge of Allegiance (“with liberty and justice for all”), by substituting opportunity and access for liberty, we learn that diversity is integral to
excellence. Since no one could dispute the desirability of excellence, by a syllogistic property
diversity is, therefore, equally and indisputably desirable. The statement affirms that diverse
experiences and perspectives are honored and valued. These lofty words are followed by
descriptions of the array of programs falling under the diversity rubric.

The first image illustrating the university’s diversity is of Native Americans building a
longhouse, to become a “learning and gathering place for Native American students, faculty and
staff.” Scrolling down, in search of other diversity programs, a confusing set of categories appears.
Apparently diversity comes in many shapes and sizes: it is the provision of internet technology
for members of the university community with disabilities; social work students are supported in
another diversity program, in their efforts to fight oppression and work to build social justice; the
diversity “dream project” is part of bridging social and economic class disparity, as university
students are paired with low-income high school pupils to help prepare them for their dream of
attending college; women, minorities, and people with disabilities are targeted by the diversity
programming in engineering, aimed at encouraging these under-represented groups in
science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Furthermore, rounding out the diversity
programming are the Native American Law Center, the Global Health and Justice Project, and
a handful of others.

When considering these worthy projects, one is hard-pressed to derive a coherent defini-
tion of diversity based on these juxtaposed programmatic initiatives. Still, is it possible to identify any
sort of common denominator that informs the university’s Chief Diversity Officer’s strategy, and
the Diversity Blueprint the Diversity Office produces? I would suggest that the subtextual
denominator connecting all of these is a negative definition; in other words: those who are not
from the able-bodied male heterosexual white (presumably WASP) upper middle-classes.

This becomes clear when examining the areas the university’s diversity fund-raising
efforts target. Specifically, they solicit private donations to support a range of programs to
support “underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities,” and to promote “cultural, racial and
ethnic diversity.”

As such, it is at this juncture that race and ethnicity emerge into the diversity equation. Race
and ethnicity are implicated further when we examine the ways diversity is conceived and used
by businesses, managers, and employers in a wide range of industries and institutions. In this age
in which identity politics is often taken for granted, many institutions now self-consciously aim
to incorporate diversity – variously defined and deployed – into the workplace.

An in-depth study of the diversity business in higher education was carried out by Sara
Ahmed (2012) in Australia. Among other things, she found that diversity programs often obscure
as much as they reveal about institutional practices and ideologies. Furthermore, the mere act of
incorporating diversity programs in an institution, in some cases “proves” the absence of racism.

The ultimate contradiction

On the one hand, we assume that many share the aspiration to a race-blind society, sometimes
expressed as “post-racial.” This would mean, presumably, that race would no longer be the key
social demarcator it is today in many contexts. It would further mean that at the workplace, race
is ignored, that individuals qua individuals are considered and that their abilities are recognized
along with their multilayered and unique sets of attributes. On the other hand, with the advent
of the diversity industry, people are told that they must acknowledge race and take it into
consideration at holidays and festivals, in making hiring and firing decisions, promotions, and so
on. How can we have it both ways? As a character in a US sitcom put it: “So I am supposed to
celebrate your difference while at the same time totally ignoring it, right?”.

Thus, the relationship between marking, celebrating, and objectifying difference, on the one hand, and the overcoming of it, on the other, is an ongoing tension not easily resolved or resolvable.

The USA spends 400–600 million dollars annually on diversity training experts, the consultants who teach the concept and practices servicing the eight billion dollar per year diversity industry. One tool that the diversity specialists often use is the Diversity Wheel.

**Diversity Wheels**

When businesses get into the business of diversity, often they make use of what is known as a Diversity Wheel. The Diversity Wheel, designed by Marilyn Loden and Judy Rosener in 1991, was an attempt to make explicit the social characteristics of personal identity. Their initial Diversity Wheel has been copied, expanded, and adapted countless times. The original comprised two concentric circles. The smaller, inner circle was split into six sections: race, ethnicity, age, gender, physical abilities/qualities, and sexual/affectional orientation. The outer wheel contains these characteristics: work background, income, marital status, military experience, religious beliefs, geographic location, parental status, and education (Johnson 2006). The two circles were meant to represent innate attributes (inner circle) versus acquired attributes (outer circle) of the individual, along an implicit axis of privilege versus lack thereof – or even oppression (ibid.).

The underlying purpose is to make explicit not only how the different components converge to produce one’s place in a social hierarchy, but also how individuals are perceived by others. It is meant as well for those using the Diversity Wheel to understand and reflect upon how they perceive and treat others and how their behavior may or may not be guided by the possession or lack of specific characteristics – or combinations of characteristics – indicated on the wheel. It is hoped that, by making these objectified elements explicit, people will be able more easily to transcend prejudice and bias.

There are a number of problems that an anthropologist might have with this approach to diversity. First, what are assumed to be assigned, inherent qualities in some cases are not at all, but represent identity attributes that can be chosen and changed. Next, the process of objectifying people through these categories risks reification, where procrustean beds of identity traits come to define individuals, locking them into stereotypes in the name of diversity training.

Some critics claim that diversity training simply does not work. Peter Bregman (2012) in the *Harvard Business Review* bases his criticism on years of working as a trainer in the field, most often with human relations departments. In the USA, in this age of proliferating litigation along with a rights-based culture and identity politics, institutions need to be mindful of lawsuits charging them with discrimination violations of a variety of sorts. Bregman claims that much of the “diversity training” is really aimed at preventative lawsuits, teaching managers in particular what they may and may not say. In other words, it is a prophylactic damage limitation exercise, bordering the realm of free speech and self-censorship. Another aspect of diversity training, he proposes, is “to create an inclusive environment in which each member of the community is valued, respected, and can fully contribute their [sic] talents. That includes reducing bias and increasing the diversity of the employee and management population.” (Bregman 2012).

In other words, when tools such as the now ubiquitous Diversity Wheel sort and spin people into categories as a way of demonstrating diversity, instead they may have the opposite effect of reinforcing the categories, and thus confirming prejudices. One way to understand prejudice is as the belief in the power of categories; as Bregman puts it: “People aren’t prejudiced against real people; they’re prejudiced against categories. ‘Sure, John is gay,’ they’ll say, ‘but he’s not like other gays.’ Their problem isn’t with John, but with gay people in general.” (ibid.).
In other words, the category of gay-ness is the problem, not the individual who affiliates with the category. It recalls the well-intentioned claim that “some of my best friends are . . . [fill in the blank]” as a conversational get-out clause confirming the speaker’s lack of racism, anti-Semitism, or homophobia.

Diversity, then, runs the risk of being at once too narrow and too broad. Its narrowness occludes the embedding of the individual into multilayered contexts, into a subjectivity that might not conform to the wheels or other ascribed categories. The breadth of its deployment is equally problematic, in that it does not sufficiently challenge stereotyping (and even prejudices), nor does it necessarily allow for idiosyncrasies of individuals. Diversity workers sometimes find themselves trapped into conceptual gridlock; too much terminological and categorical traffic blocks potential movement and the free flow needed for intersubjective understandings.

John and Jean Comaroff (2009) discuss the ethnocommodity produced by the commodification of culture in various ethnic incarnations. For example, commodifying responses to ethnotourism, in some cases, offers the sole possibility of ethnic groups to re-incorporate, to define themselves, to identify as a unit, and even to survive. This notion can be extended vis-à-vis diversity, but instead of a direct “diversocommodity,” a diversity linked to a legal regime, a diverso-legality, where the diversity industry has arisen to respond to the new legal classificatory regime emerging out of the affirmative action impulse over the last few decades, as well as a political correctness stemming from identity politics.

Indeed, vigorous legal arguments have been put forth to support the diversity-affirmative action nexus. Orentlicher’s (2005) work does precisely this. Taking several high court decisions about affirmative action and analyzing them, he demonstrates not only the legal basis, but also the more fundamental ideological – even constitutional basis – for diversity in the USA in spheres extending far beyond higher education. Including the realms of federal politics as well as finance in the defense of the value-added attributes of diversity, this surely describes one of the broadest arrays of meanings and practices of diversity.

Final thoughts and Diversity Month

“White folks are white; other people have race” – The American Anthropological Association’s (1998) statement about race expressed the conviction that “racial beliefs constitute myths about diversity in the human species.” As anthropologists well know, the power and persistence of myths cannot be understated. A cynic might speak of reification of the power and effects of the diversity industry as an anti-racist myth, convincing those believers who share in it of the political correctness of the given institution, thanks to a diversity policy.

How to escape the asymmetry implied by the quotation above? Just as “others have race,” some “others” have ethnicity. These observations lead to further questions, from tokenism to taxonomy, that remain to be answered. Do or can quotas define diversity – or cure its problems? Do wealthy gay men diversify an institution in a way that the white heterosexual male underclass does not? And, we are left with questions about racial and ethnic classifications. The task remains for diversity theories and practices to be put in place in a way that would allow the beneficiaries to move beyond the categorical straightjackets and prejudice, the racism and the celebratory objectifications.

In an article about a “super-diverse” neighborhood in London, Wessendorf (2013) questions the differences between groups that subscribe to the “ethos of mixing” in public and associational space and those that do not. Fascinating in that here the “ethos to mix” appears to be the unmarked norm, it is the non-mixers (in this case ultra-orthodox Jews and young hipsters) who
are marked. While leading predominantly separate lives, there nevertheless is a degree of frequent cross-cultural interaction among all but the two non-mixing groups. Though the article avoids defining diversity, it does propose a “commonplace diversity” in this complex urban environment. Perhaps a model of a trajectory for diversity studies, here is a case where convergence – albeit limited – of differences are unmarked and unremarkable. A noteworthy example of grass-roots diversity, needless to say, the mixing ethos has occurred without expensive training.

While writing this essay, an email intruded onto my screen, announcing February 2014 as UCL Diversity Month. Mine is not the only university that sponsors such events; countless institutions promote annual initiatives such as “diversity month” or “diversity week.” Most of them celebrate “difference” along with diversity. What are we meant to understand by the lectures, music, films, and discussion groups about women, LGBT, the disabled, Muslims, immigrants, and minorities? One lecture on offer is called “Why isn’t my professor black?”

As taxonomically inconsistent, as crudely objectifying and as tokenistic as it all might sound, no doubt it is better than not having it at all; indeed, our historical moment requires such events. Perhaps they need to be seen as a step toward the day that it will no longer become necessary to make hyper-visible that which will be taken for granted, when ethnicity/race/gender/etc. markedness loses its stigma, and ultimately fades into elective subjectivities.

On another note, diversity weeks and diversity months recall Tom Lehrer’s old song parodying “National Brotherhood Week,” whose final verse is: “Be nice to people who are inferior to you. It’s only for a week, so have no fear. Be grateful that it doesn’t last all year!”

Notes

1 I would like to thank Czarina Wilpert for taking the considerable time to brainstorm around these ideas with me. Her insights are always valuable, challenging and enlightening.

2 See Brackette Williams’ brilliant review article in Annual Reviews (1989) for an in-depth analysis of these issues.

3 This is heavily influenced by and indebted to John and Jean Comaroff’s (2009) Ethnicity, Inc.

4 Fox TV’s Andy Richter Show, cited in review of Peter Wood (Derbyshire 2003).

References


