What is race today? Scientific, legal, and social appraisals from around the globe
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The ambiguities of "race" in UK science, social policy and political discourse

George T.H. Ellison[1,2], Peter J. Aspinall[3], Andrew Smart[4], Sarah Salway[5]

1) CAT, University of Johannesburg, South Africa
e-mail: g.t.h.ellison@leeds.ac.uk

2) Leeds Institute of Cardiovascular and Metabolic Medicine, and Leeds Institute for Data Analytics, University of Leeds, United Kingdom

3) Centre for Health Services Studies, University of Kent, United Kingdom

4) Department of Sociology, Bath Spa University, United Kingdom

5) School of Health and Related Research, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

"Race" and science in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom (UK) has a thriving scientific community, much of this based at well-funded public universities with considerable academic freedom to pursue its own interests, both esoteric and applied. Many of these Universities, alongside a number of privately funded and charitable institutions, now boast dedicated centres devoted to the study of human variation across the biological and social sciences, including: the Applied Genetics and Ethnicity Research Group at the University of Nottingham; the Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity at the University of Manchester; the Centre for Ethnicity and Racism Studies at the University of Leeds; and the Centre for Racial Equality Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Much of this work involves the use of 'racialized' classifications and categories (i.e. those using criteria or terminology commonly associated with traditional 'race-based' taxonomies, such as skin colour or continental ancestry). Some of this research uses the geographical and social patterning of genetic variation to examine past demographic events (such as a recent study of individuals whose four grandparents were all born within 80km of each other in the UK – a study that claimed to have identified "17 different types of Briton", and generated substantial national media attention; Leslie *et al.*, 2015). Elsewhere, large-scale genetic studies have been initiated specifically to examine genetic determinants of health amongst UK minority groups (such as the 'East London Genes and Health' study, which involves 100,000 people "of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin… link[ing] genes and health records to study disease and treatments"; www.genesandhealth.org). More commonly, within epidemiology and the applied social sciences, racialized classifications and categories have been used to document substantial variation in health, and in access to opportunities, goods and services implicated in the 'embodiment' of disadvantage and discrimination (i.e. the biological differences inscribed by poverty, inequality and discrimination; Ellison, 2006).

There are also those UK-based scholars for whom the scientific investigation of human variation is, itself, the subject of enquiry. Their research offers important insights into the scientific beliefs and practices of those responsible for generating the data through which theories of human difference are examined and assessed

(including: Wade, 2014; Gibbon *et al.*, 2011; Smart *et al.*, 2008; Skinner, 2007; amongst others). Certainly, much has been learnt in the wake of the genomic revolution from studies of scientists examining the nature, causes and consequences of human biological variation in the UK (and elsewhere). These studies largely confirm that the scientists involved share somewhat similar opinions regarding the meaning and utility of 'race' as those in society at large. Very few would publicly disagree with the mainstream view that (as Craig Venter put it at the conclusion of the Human Genome Project in 2000) "the concept of race has no genetic or scientific basis". Yet most UK-based scientists continue to use 'racialized' classifications and categories as convenient, salient and necessary tools for sampling and analysing genetic, phenotypic and social variation amongst humans – even though they recognize these to be crude, problematic and politically sensitive (Smart *et al.*, 2008). This apparent contradiction is poorly understood, both within and beyond science; and the paradox of scientists studying entities they claim have "no scientific basis" can be perplexing to those unable to distinguish between the false *idea* of 'race' and the very real *effects* of 'race'-based ideology on the lived experiences and wellbeing of racialized groups.

UK scientists have long sought to engage with the quandaries that accompany the desire and need to use 'race' in the natural and social sciences. The scholars Morris Ginsburg and Julian Huxley made important contributions to the landmark 1950 UNESCO 'Statement on Race', in the preparation of which Ashley Montagu (a British-born naturalized American) was instrumental as rapporteur. This Statement sought to balance anthropological interest in human variation with a disdain for any hierarchical interpretation or application thereof. More recently, the *British Medical Journal* made one of the earliest attempts to standardize scientific practices for reporting on "ethnicity, race and culture" (Ellison & Rosato, 2002). Similar attempts at standardising the ways in which 'race' and racialized categories are used and reported in science have been repeated in other science publications (both in the UK and elsewhere; Smart *et al.*, 2008). While the extent of their impact is questionable (Smart *et al.*, 2006) they do seem to have encouraged a preference for using 'ethnicity' over 'race' amongst UK scientists (Ellison & Rosato, 2002) – 'ethnicity' being operationalized as a concept that incorporates many of the traditional quasi-heritable criteria used to classify 'race' (such as phenotype and ancestral origins) into a more holistic measure of the 'biosocial' or 'biocultural' characteristics employed in the demarcation of social identity (characteristics that include a range of non-biological, cultural customs and practices). However, as we describe later, this may also simply reflect: the development and use of ethnicity-focussed questions in successive UK censuses; the acceptability and salience of these questions to research participants; and the wider utility of the classificatory schemes involved and the data these generate.

In the context of genetics and biomedical research, it may therefore be that the growing use of 'ethnicity' in preference to 'race' reflects a recognition amongst geneticists that contemporary classifications of social identity based around 'ethnicity' are more meaningful to participants, and are therefore more useable, than classifications based on 'race' (Genetics Working Group, 2005). However, for many of the questions that geneticists are interested in answering it may also be that, in the UK, social identities operationalised using ethnicity-focussed questions offer the *only* available tool in the absence of routinely collected measures of biogeographical ancestry, historical migration and assortative mating. Nevertheless, several critics have pointed out that the use of ethnicity- (rather than race-) based classifications and categories does little to address the wider concerns associated with the use of 'race' in science. This is because the concept of 'ethnicity' is itself infused with traditional race-based criteria and terminology (Outram & Ellison, 2010), as are other concepts and terms used to characterize biogeographical populations (such as ancestry and heritage; Nash, 2005). Moreover, there remains the risk that research

findings disaggregated using categories labelled as 'ethnic groups' are just as susceptible to re-interpretation and mis-interpretation as those disaggregated by categories labelled as 'racial groups'. Indeed, such findings continue to be (mis-)cited as evidence for innate biological or sociocultural differences along racial or ethnic lines by those keen to promote the essentialisation of such differences as innate (Skinner, 2007).

For these reasons, the debate surrounding the use of 'race' in science has reached something of an impasse within the UK. The commonplace operationalization of racialized 'ethnic' categories tends to circumscribe debates about 'race' so that its role (and the role of racism) is often underacknowledged, denied or ignored. At the same time as we have seen, there is substantial scientific support for, and popular interest in, studies that investigate the genetic sub-structure of the UK population, both in its own right and as an important (and ostensibly indispensable) component of applied biomedical research. Elsewhere, particularly in studies of social inequalities in health, debates about the meaning of 'race' tend to be set aside in favor of pragmatic questions about interventions and services that might address these inequalities (Salway *et al.*, 2013). However, both population genetic research and social inequalities research risk invoking theories of 'race' through the use of racialized 'ethnic' classifications and categories, and as a result of the biological nature of the differences with which many such studies are concerned.

These issues speak to persistent uncertainties regarding what the term 'race' can (and does) mean, and what role it can (and should) play in respectable scientific enquiry and discourse (Outram & Ellison, 2010). Moreover, scientific and popular critiques of racialized scientific practices that interpret these practices as (potentially or inherently) racist, together with attendant efforts to regulate and constrain scientific practice in this regard, may be having a number of unintended consequences on practitioners of science. In particular, there are concerns that these critiques and constraints discourage scientists from examining racialized categories, and from sharing their own understanding and professional experiences of 'race' and discrimination (Salway *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, there is also some evidence to suggest that concerns about 'race' in science are increasingly dismissed as "political correctness (gone mad)" by some scientists for whom the utility of racialized classifications and categories appear self-evident (Malik, 2009).

To many within and beyond academia, much of the debate surrounding the use of 'race' in science is not only perplexing; it is also at odds with the experiences of those living in contexts where racialized identities have very real salience and very real consequences. Whilst it is true that some (scientific *and* social) conceptualisations of 'race' are deeply flawed and thereby 'unscientific', the wider scientific utility of social identities based on 'race' indicate that the impact of these conceptualizations invites and demands enquiry at (almost) every turn. It is for this reason that M'charek *et al.* (2014) argue that all scientists should reflect on their use of racialized categories and develop a better understanding of how this might contribute to wider processes of racialization.

"Race" in UK law and state bureaucratic practices

Along similar lines to the apparent contradictions inherent in contemporary scientific practice, there have been longstanding ambiguities in the use of 'race' in UK law and state bureaucratic practices. 'Race' retains a continuing presence in UK public life through its use in the Race Relations Acts (notably: 1965, 1976, and 2000) and the consolidating Equality Act 2010. In turn these Acts have spawned other legislation that appear to preference 'race', notably Section 95 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991, and the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006. In law 'racial groups' are defined by: race itself; colour; nationality (including citizenship); as well as ethnic or national origins. A person may have membership of more than one such group, and courts accept that a 'racial group' may also be defined *solely*

by a discriminator's perception of, or incorrect assumptions about, that group. Jews (since 1980), Sikhs (since 1983), Romany Gypsies (since 1989), and Irish Travellers (since 2000) have all been classified in British case law as constituting 'racial groups' (albeit *for the purposes of* the Race Relations Acts), but not Rastafarians (1993) nor other religious groups – although religious belief is now itself one of a number of 'protected characteristics' under the Equality Act 2010.

Over the years these legislative frameworks have also created an organizational and bureaucratic apparatus that has further entrenched the term 'race' in public and civic life. These include, for example, the Race Relations Board (1965-1976), the Commission for Racial Equality (1976-2010), various local Race Equality Councils, and duties under the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 for some public authorities to create 'race equality policies' and 'race equality schemes' (the latter now largely replaced by arrangements that apply to all groups with 'protected characteristics' as designated by the Equality Act 2010). The Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 also required public authorities to promote "good relations" and "equality of opportunity between people of different racial groups".

In the arena of official statistics, the terminology of 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic group' has been more central, although 'race' has never been far from view. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been responsible for the decennial census in England and Wales, including the development of the 'ethnic question' therein. Many field trials for this question were undertaken between 1975 and 1989 using the title "race or ethnic group". Yet when the classification scheme was first used in the 1991 Census, it was under the main heading of "ethnic group"; while the instructions accompanying the question referred to both "ethnic or racial group" and "ancestry". In such practices, just as in contemporary scientific classifications, 'ethnicity' is defined in a way that simply incorporates and subsumes traditional 'racial' criteria, as is evident in the following statement from the ONS (2003): "ways of measuring ethnic groups … include country of birth, skin color, national/geographical origin, racial group, and religion… ethnicity includes all these aspects, and others, in combination". Moreover, most of the categories used in the 'ethnicity questions' of the 2001 and 2011 censuses adopt terminology that once again reflects traditional race-based criteria (e.g. 'White'; 'Black'; and 'Asian'). Nevertheless, in other respects the census question is increasingly overtly and exclusively framed as being concerned with 'ethnicity' rather than 'race'. For example, in 2001 and 2011 the question asked: "What is your ethnic group?". In 2001 this question was followed by an instruction to tick a box "to indicate your cultural background" which, in 2011, became "to best describe your ethnic group or background".

As a result of UK legislation, and socio-political concerns about social inequalities along racial and ethnic lines, the census ethnic classification scheme is now routinely used to both define and describe social inequalities, and to monitor disadvantage and discrimination. Government Departments, Local Authorities, and other public bodies have generally adopted the census questions as the 'gold standard' for collecting such data, effectively following the ONS's lead in privileging 'ethnicity' over 'race'. For example, the UK National Health Service's (NHS) standardized approach in its 'Data Dictionary' prescribes the use of predefined 'ethnic categories' based on the 2001 Census classification, with over 40 NHS datasets now adopting this practice to collect such data. This has not, however, delivered seamless standardization. Record linkage studies across different datasets and surveys have revealed substantial discordance – in part reflecting differences in ascertainment, in part reflecting local variations in data collection practices (Saunders *et al.*, 2013).

Meanwhile, there remain nuanced differences across Government Departments in their use of 'race' in official documents and publications. Searches undertaken on government websites in 2008 found that 'mixed race' substantially outperformed 'mixed parentage', 'mixed origins', 'dual heritage', and 'mixed heritage' in the Home Office and the Department of Communities and Local Government. 'Dual heritage' and 'mixed

heritage' were the most commonly used terms in the Department of Children, Schools and Families, and compliance with this terminology was required in the research reports they commissioned (Aspinall, 2009). And although the Ministry of Justice publishes a regular bulletin entitled: "Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System", this predominantly uses ethnicity-based census categories to stratify the various measures contained therein. Likewise when, in August 2016, the Prime Minister's Office initiated an extraordinary "Race Disparity Audit" – described as "an audit of public services to reveal racial disparities" – the accompanying press release referred to "ethnic minorities" and "minority backgrounds", and suggested that the aim of the audit was to provide "data on disparities in treatment and outcomes in public services for all races/ethnicities". A subsequent round of consultations sought expert advice on how the 'Audit might help to address both "disparities or data gaps" and "'myths' about race groups" – consultations that also sought to identify "the potential risks or misinterpretations about presenting statistics on race disparities in health… and potential misuse or misinterpretation" of such data.

These examples reflect substantial variation in the use of 'race' and 'ethnicity' in different bureaucratic contexts within the UK. In legal and government discourse, the terminology of 'race' remains most prominent, but not to the complete exclusion of 'ethnicity' and related concepts (such as heritage, origins and identity). In official statistics, the terminology of 'ethnicity' has been pre-eminent, yet 'race' remains ever present within some of the definitions, much of the terminology, and many of the criteria used. This suggests that, within the UK's state bureaucracy, there is a degree of substitutability between the underlying concepts, and substantial pragmatism and flexibility about how these concepts are operationalized in practice. As such it seems likely that the inconsistent use of 'race' and 'ethnicity' within contemporary UK science mirrors the way these terms have been applied – haphazardly, interchangeably yet pragmatically – within legal statutes and state bureaucratic practices.

Has the tide turned against 'anti-racism' in UK public and political discourse?

Despite the inconsistencies and potential ambiguities evident in the use of racialized categories in UK scientific practice, legislation and government bureaucracy, there are nonetheless many in the public sphere who recognize their utility in monitoring the extent and impact of disadvantage (both historical and contemporary). Since racialized classifications of social identity draw upon the very same criteria as those determining exposure to discrimination and 'structural violence', their use to reveal disparities in attitudes, living conditions and well-being offer prima facie evidence that racism can be implicated as a likely cause. For some (such as Sharia Awan, writing recently in 'The Blog' for the Huffington Post), the UK's racialized categories appear essential for revealing disparities in access to, and uptake of, goods and services from public and private providers. Many of these providers have a legal duty to address such disparities, yet few display any aptitude or success in doing so (Salway *et al.*, 2016). Racialized categories have also been instrumental in documenting the extent of racially-motivated violence in the UK, notably the surge in reported incidents that occurred in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 Referendum on continuing membership of the European Union.

There are, however, signs of the tide turning against what can broadly be characterized as 'anti-racist' discourse and related policies in the UK. A "white backlash" against 'multiculturalism' was evident in the UK before the turn of the millennium (Hewitt, 2005), and the idea that 'anti-racist' or 'multiculturalist' policies are socially divisive (Hart, 2014) has become mainstream in UK political and public discourse. Critics of such policies argue that these have resulted in the proscription of what are legitimate grounds for disagreement and dissent. For example, Clarissa Tan (writing in the Conservative-leaning Spectator magazine in 2014) argued that racism is not one of the "major problems" Britain faces.

Instead, Tan believed that the country's unnecessary and growing preoccupation with "race awareness" was likely to "cause division rather than inclusion". The resulting political sensitivity surrounding the term 'race' can, Tan argued, create an environment in which associated issues (like immigration and identity) cannot be discussed "properly… because anyone who wants to raise the subject is labeled as bigoted or racist". Moreover, Tan suggested that 'silencing' such discussion can risk "alienating a class from British politics and driving people to support genuinely racist parties." This trope has been a mainstay of Conservative Party political campaigning for over a decade, as evident in a controversial 2005 general election campaign poster that declared: "It's not racist to impose limits on immigration". It was also a view espoused by 'Vote Leave' campaigners on their way to winning the 2016 Referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union; and one that former Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, did little to dispel in his off-camera (though on-microphone) description of a constituent as "a bigoted woman" after she had voiced concerns over immigration during the 2010 general election.

Malik (2009) has identified complex and unwritten rules governing the choice and use of race-related terms in scientific, official and public discourse. Part of this complexity relates to the efforts of scientists, policy makers and politicians to develop and adopt the language required to sensitively discuss, yet robustly address, the historical legacy of racist science. But these rules are also easy to characterize as "political correctness (gone made)" when the concept of 'race' is rejected as having "no genetic or scientific basis", yet continues to be used to codify the investigation of social relations along racialized lines. Indeed, when such rules remain elusive, opaque and the preserve of 'experts' or 'the establishment' they run the risk of alienating the public at large. They also run the risk of creating a political atmosphere in which efforts to tackle racialized prejudice, discrimination and inequality are themselves framed as part of the very problems they seek to address.

UK scientists (and policy makers) appear to have done little to win the argument that the "'myths' about racial groups", made real through social prejudice, warrant special attention to redress the injustice of discrimination and inequality. To those whose livelihoods and social identity are threatened by race-related demographic change, the proscription of dissent has led to a rejection of race-sensitive policies and of state-sanctioned, (self-)censorship of race-based anxieties, fear and distrust. The turning of the tide against science-driven race-conscious policies in the UK make it clear that it is not enough to persuade and influence policy-makers. It is also the responsibility of scientists to explain their arguments and integrate these within a broader understanding of the competing social pressures and aspirations of those whose lived experiences are at odds with the explanations and solutions science offers. These include those who cannot understand how race can be dismissed as having "no genetic or scientific basis" given how racialized categories are used in science and social policy, and those for whom race is inextricably caught up with anxieties surrounding immigration, sovereignty and identity.

In this, scientists will need to reclaim 'political correctness' as the means by which uncomfortable, unsettling and pernicious ideas *can* be discussed and debated, openly yet sensitively, rather than as a rebuke with which to belittle, besmirch or silence the uninitiated or unconvinced. Scientists must themselves be wary of dismissing concerns over their continuing use of racialized categories as 'political correctness (gone mad)' (Malik, 2009); and instead do more to recognize these concerns as evidence of the tangible risks their work poses for the wider processes of racialization (and its pernicious consequences).

As such it might be prudent to conclude by asking not what role racialized science in the UK has or might play in shaping social attitudes, understanding and practice, but the extent to which racialized science might respond to prevailing social concerns in terms of the questions it considers relevant (and important) to address, and the tools it uses to address these. For

example, the continuing use of genotypic and phenotypic characteristics to infer social identity/ancestry remains so imprecise that the risks this poses to the reification of 'race' as genetically meaningful appear keenly balanced against any tangible scientific benefits. Likewise, now that direct measurements of genetic heterogeneity have rendered racialised categories redundant as crude proxies of such heterogeneity, might science not benefit from using the former instead of the latter in such research? In as much as UK science has any role in *leading* public opinion and public understanding, it cannot do so if it remains within the cloistered corridors of the academy and Whitehall, and fails to consider how its practices might influence the beliefs and attitudes of the people it serves.

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