Ethnicity and stratification

Getting you thinking

JANE ELLIOTT, a junior school teacher in the USA, began her crusade against racism and discrimination one day after the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr in 1968. She wanted her students to experience actual racism, so she told the blue-eyed students they were smarter, nicer, cleaner and deserved more privileges than the students with brown eyes. The day became a life-changing experience for the children and for Elliott. On the second day of the experiment, Elliott reversed the situation. What she discovered was amazing. Whoever was on top was not only better-behaved, but also more likely to learn. One dyslexic boy even learned how to read for the first time.

Elliott believed that all people are racists, whether they choose to believe it or not. She was frequently interviewed on TV chat shows as her experiment quickly caught the media's attention. 'I am a racist,' she said. 'If you want to see another racist, turn to the person on your right. Now look at the person on your left.'

Elliott stressed that the world didn't need a colour-blind society, but rather a society that recognizes colour. She said people are conditioned to the myth of White superiority. 'Differences are very valuable', she said. 'Start recognizing them and appreciating them.

They are what make up our world.'

The experiment is commonly used today to raise awareness of discrimination issues with students around the world. The following comments were made by an older group of Dutch students in 1998:

'Today, I have learned what it is to be seen by others as a minority. I did not expect that it would be so humiliating! In the end, I really had the feeling that I was a bit inferior. I was against racism and discrimination already, but now I understand what it really is.'

'I was one of the blue-eyes today, and I did not find that funny. I felt greatly discriminated against because we (the blue-eyeds) had to shut our mouth and stand still. The brown eyes were treated well. I really understand that people who are discriminated against must feel very angered, like I felt today. It was very much worth it.'

'When you feel day by day what I today as a blue-eye felt (especially in the beginning of the day) then your life is rotten... Racism is so very easy to do. Before you realize it happens. As a person, you are powerless, it makes more sense to revolt together.'

Source: Magenta Foundation (a web-based antiracist educational organization based in the Netherlands) © 1999 Amsterdam. www.magenta.nl

1 Why does Jane Elliott believe that all people are racists?

2 Is it racist to treat people differently on the basis of characteristics over which they have no control?

3 Should people have to control their social or cultural characteristics to conform to the requirements of the dominant culture?

4 To what extent can it be argued that it is racist to treat all people in the same way?

Your discussion may have concluded that racism has several dimensions, and that it is racist both to treat people negatively on the basis of their perceived physical or cultural differences and, ironically, to ignore such difference. Both aspects can also be seen to operate when examining racism sociologically.

It is important to understand that the terms **'race'** and **'ethnicity'** are potentially problematic for a number of reasons. First, the concept of 'race' was once used to suggest biological differences between groups, but has since been discredited in that sense and abandoned in favour of the term 'ethnicity' or 'ethnic minority'. However, Kenyatta and Tai (1999) argue that the concept of 'race' is a superior concept because it focuses attention on power differences, economic exploitation, inequality and conflict. They argue that sociological discussions of 'ethnicity' tend to be focused on culture, religion and identity rather than inequality. However, with regard to

inequalities in employment, education and health, most sociological literature focuses on differences between the ethnic majority, i.e. Whites, and ethnic minorities. This chapter will generally do the same.

The term 'ethnic minority' is also problematic. There are literally hundreds of different ethnic groups living in the modern UK. However, the sociological literature tends to focus on those who make up about 7 per cent of the UK population, i.e. people from Asian backgrounds who make up about 5 per cent of British society and people from African-Caribbean backgrounds who make up about 2 per cent. However, the terms 'Asian' and 'African-Caribbean' are also problematic. The term 'Asian' does not refer to people from the wider Asian continent – rather it refers only to those people who are from or related to people from the Indian subcontinent, particularly India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, although a large number of Asians came to the UK in the 1970s from East Africa, particularly Uganda and Kenya. Chinese people, therefore, are treated as a separate category. However, the term 'Asian' disguises national, regional and, particularly, religious differences and conflicts between Asian groups. Many sociologists believe that insufficient attention is paid to the specific origins and experience of people of Asian origin in the UK. As Bhopal et al. (1991) point out:

<< The term 'Asian' is applied to people who have come to Britain from many different parts of the world, most notably India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, and from peasant or urban middle class backgrounds; they are also differentiated in their religion, language, caste, kinship obligations, diet, clothing, health beliefs, and birth and burial practices, and yet there is an inbuilt assumption through the use of the term that they all share a common background and experience.>>

The term 'African-Caribbean' is also fraught with problems. People from African-Caribbean backgrounds originally came from a dozen or so islands that were ex-colonies of the UK and scattered across thousands of miles of ocean. These islands have their own very distinctive and cultural identities and consequently people from them have very little in common apart from the colour of their skin and perhaps support for the West Indies cricket team.

Another problem with using terms like 'ethnic minorities', 'Asians', 'Blacks', etc., is that they imply that people from these backgrounds are recent immigrants and that they have very little in common with British culture. However, it is important to understand that we are now on the third generation of people in the UK from Asian or African-Caribbean origin. Most people from these backgrounds are young British citizens rather than recent migrants.

Finally, the term 'Muslim' has recently taken on an emotional meaning for White people because of the appearance of Islamic terrorism in the UK. This emotional response may have reinforced divisions between the White population and the Muslim minority. However, Samad (2006) notes that such divisions disguise the fact that most Muslims share a great deal in common with White people – especially working-class Whites – in terms of educational attainment, uncertain labour market futures, social exclusion and marginalization.

Racism

Miles (1989) has argued that a key factor in the fact that ethnic-minority groups are more likely than Whites to be found at the bottom of the stratification system is **racism**. This is a system of beliefs and practices that exclude people from aspects of social life on the grounds of racial or ethnic background.

Racism can be seen to have three key elements: **prejudice**, **racial discrimination** and institutional discrimination.

Prejudice

Racial prejudice is a type of racism that is expressed through opinion, attitude or fear rather than action, i.e. many prejudiced people do not act upon their beliefs (although some do). Prejudice is a way of thinking that relies heavily on stereotypes or prejudices that are usually factually incorrect, irrational, exaggerated and distorted. These are used to legitimate hostility and mistrust towards members of ethnic groups who are perceived to have negative characteristics.

According to Heath and Rothon (2003), the authors of the 2003 British Social Attitudes survey, in 1983, 35 per cent of adults described themselves as prejudiced against people of other races. This rose to a peak of 39 per cent in 1987 before falling steadily to 25 per cent in 2000 and 2001. However, in 2002, the proportion claiming to be racially prejudiced jumped to 31 per cent, the highest figure since 1994.

Connolly and Keenan (2000) in a survey of Northern Ireland found that a quarter of all their respondents were unwilling to accept either an African-Caribbean, Chinese or South Asian person as a resident in their local area. Similarly, over two out of every five people also stated that they were unwilling to accept a member of any of these three groups as a close friend. Fifty-four per cent of respondents stated that they were unwilling to accept a person of South Asian origin as a relative by way of marriage.

In 2006, a Channel 4 survey, 'How racist is Britain?', into the attitudes of 1000 White Britons towards people from different cultures found that the vast majority (84 per cent) said they were not prejudiced at all and only 1 per cent admitted to being 'very prejudiced'. However, the survey found that people subscribe to very contradictory views on race. Many of the sample were very prejudiced on some issues and very suspicious of unfamiliar cultures. On the other hand, they were also extremely tolerant, e.g. many of them were antiracist and welcomed diversity. The oldest and youngest parts of the sample were the most open-minded about mixing with ethnic-minority people. The most racist were members of the 45 to 65 age group.

Prejudice is part of a society's culture and passed from generation to generation through agencies of socialization such as the family and mass media. Rothon and Heath note that increasing levels of education are responsible for Britain being less racially prejudiced compared with 30 years ago. Their evidence suggests that educated people are the least likely to be racially prejudiced. Less than one

Focus on research

Adam Rutland (2005)
The development and regulation of prejudice in children

Rutland (2005) tested 155 White children aged between 6 and 16, assessing their responses to stories to discover the extent of their conscious and unconscious racial prejudice. The children were then split into groups according to how acceptable they thought it was to discriminate against Black children. Some children were told that they were being videotaped and that the material would be kept as a record of their answers, whilst others were shown that the cameras in their rooms were not working. In subsequent tests, children who believed they were being recorded and would be judged on the views they expressed toned down their racist opinions and presented more positive reactions to Black people than they had before. In Rutland's words, 'this suggests that they were controlling their explicit ethnic bias in line with what is generally regarded as acceptable. Racially prejudiced White teenagers are simply very skilful at repressing their attitudes'

Previous research has suggested that children show signs of racial prejudice as early as 3 years of age, that these attitudes peak around the ages of 7 and 8 and decrease in adolescence. However, Rutland's study indicates that rather than becoming more enlightened and tolerant in their racial attitudes, racially prejudiced White teenagers are simply very skilful at hiding their racial prejudice when they feel it is in their interests to do so.

Dr Rutland points to the impact his research should have on the work schools need to do to manage relationships between White and ethnic-minority students if they are to be more successful in eliminating racial discrimination among them.

Source: Rutland, A. (2005) *The Development and Regulation of Prejudice in Children*, London: ESRC research

1 **What methods were used by Rutland and how might their reliability be questioned?**

2 **What implications do Rutland's findings have for race relations in the UK?**

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in five graduates (18 per cent) admit to being prejudiced compared with more than a third (35 per cent) of those with no qualifications. Rothon and Heath note that younger people are more tolerant and therefore less racially prejudiced than older people. However, research by Rutland (2005) questions this assumption. His data found that rather than becoming more enlightened and tolerant in their racial attitudes, racially prejudiced White teenagers are aware that racial prejudice is not acceptable and consequently they very skilfully hide their prejudicial attitudes because they feel that it is in their interests to do so (see 'Focus on research', left).

Rothon and Heath argue that the rise in prejudice since 2001 has been fuelled by hostile newspaper coverage of immigration and asylum seekers. Barker (1982) agrees and argues that mass media representations of ethnic minorities are symbolic of a new type of prejudice which is the product of New Right politicians and journalists. This type of prejudice highlights 'cultural difference' and suggests that traditional White British/English culture is under threat from ethnic-minority culture because ethnic minorities are allegedly not committed to integration with their White neighbours. The mass media, especially tabloid newspapers, such as the *Sun* and *Daily Mail*, reinforce these prejudices by portraying Black people, Muslims, refugees and migrants from Eastern Europe as a 'problem'. They are often represented as scrounging off welfare benefits, as criminals and as a threat to the British way of life. Barker notes that these media representations play down the problem of White prejudice towards ethnic minorities. Instead, they strongly imply that the fault lies with the 'reluctance' of ethnic minorities to adopt a British way of life.

Rothon and Heath note that although many UK newspapers urged readers not to link Islam and terrorism, numerous articles have made such a connection. They suggest that this may have resulted in a rise in 'Islamophobia' – unfounded hostility and prejudice towards Islam, and therefore fear or dislike of Muslims.

The Runnymede Trust (1997) identified a number of components that they believe make up Islamophobia and make anti-Muslim hostility seem natural and normal:

- Islam is seen as a monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to change.
- Islam is seen as inferior to the West. Specifically, it is seen as barbaric, irrational, primitive and sexist.
- Islam is seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism and engaged in a 'clash of civilizations'.

Racial discrimination

Racial discrimination is racial prejudice put into practice. It can take many forms.

Racist name-calling and bullying

On an everyday level, racial discrimination may take the form of racist name-calling. Connolly and Keenan's survey found that 21 per cent of respondents stated that their friends had called someone a name to their face because of their colour or ethnicity. They also note that because of

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the sensitivity of the issue, this figure is likely to be an underestimation of the true incidence of racist name-calling.

Research sponsored by the Department for Education and Skills (2002) found that 25 per cent of pupils from minority-ethnic backgrounds in mainly White schools had experienced racist name-calling within the previous seven days. A third of the pupils of minority-ethnic backgrounds reported experiences of hurtful name-calling and verbal abuse either at school or during the school journey, and for about a half of these (one in six overall) the harassment was continuing or had continued over an extended period of time.

A survey conducted by Mirza (2007) found that nearly 100 000 racist incidents in schools have been recorded by education authorities between 2002 and 2006. Cities such as Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham have seen great increases in reported racism in the classroom. Education authorities suggest such increases are the product of more efficient and robust reporting methods, but Mirza suggests that the problem suffers from under-reporting because of embarrassment and fear of further racist bullying.

Racial attacks

Discrimination may take the form of racial attacks and street violence. According to the Institute of Race Relations, between 1991 and 1997 there have been over 65 murders in Britain with a suspected or known racial motive. Although some of these victims have been White, the overwhelming majority of victims have been Asian, African-Caribbean, African or asylum seekers.

The Crime and Disorder Act created a number of new 'racially aggravated offences' in 1998. It stated that, for crimes such as assault, harassment and wounding, if there was an additional racial element to the offence, punishments should be increased. Racist chanting at football grounds was also made a criminal offence. More than 61 000 complaints of racially motivated crime were made in 2006/07, a rise of 28 per cent in just five years, with increases reported by most police forces in England and Wales. Officers classified 42 551 of the complaints as racially or religiously aggravated offences. Nearly two thirds were offences of harassment, 13 per cent wounding, 12 per cent criminal damage and 10 per cent assault.

However, the number of racial attacks reported to the police may still only be a fraction of the actual attacks that take place. According to the British Crime Survey, those at greatest risk of racially motivated attacks are Pakistani and Bangladeshis at 4.2 per cent, followed by Indians at 3.6 per cent and Black people at 2.2 per cent. This compared with only 0.3 per cent for White people.

A study of racial harassment conducted by Chahal and Julienne (1999) found that the experience of racism had become part of the everyday experience of Black and minority-ethnic people. Being made to feel different in a variety of social situations and locations was largely seen as routine and in some instances expected. Racist abuse was the most common form of everyday racism. The study found that there was limited support for victims of racist harassment and they generally felt ignored, unheard and unprotected.

Employer racism

In 2004, a BBC survey showed ethnic-minority applicants still face major discrimination in the job market. CVs from six fictitious candidates – who were given traditionally White, Black African or Muslim names – were sent to 50 well-known firms covering a representative sample of jobs by Radio Five Live. All the applicants were given the same standard of qualifications and experience, but their CVs were presented differently. White 'candidates' were far more likely to be offered an interview than similarly qualified Black or Asian 'names'. Almost a quarter of applications by two candidates given traditionally 'White' names – Jenny Hughes and John Andrews – resulted in interview offers. But only 9 per cent of the 'Muslim' applications, by the fictitious Fatima Khan and Nasser Hanif, prompted a similar response. Letters from the 'Black' candidates, Abu Olasemi and Yinka Olatunde, had a 13 per cent success rate.

In 2007, the Commission for Racial Equality reported that they had received 5000 complaints from ethnic-minority workers during the first half of 2007 and that 43 per cent of these were related to employment. The most common complaints focused on workplace bullying, lack of career progression and being unable to secure interviews. Employer racism may be partly responsible for the fact that in 2007 the unemployment rate for ethnic minorities was over 11 per cent – twice the national average. The Office for National Statistics have estimated that a Black person is three times more likely to be out of work than a White person. Research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggests that, even when they are in work, people from ethnic-minority groups do not receive the same rewards as people from White backgrounds with similar qualifications. In 2004, White men were paid an average of £1.80 per hour more than ethnic-minority men.

Institutional racism

Some sociologists argue that racism is a basic feature of the rules and routines of Britain's social institutions, such as the police and courts, the immigration service, central and local government, the mass media, the education system, and the employment and housing markets. Racism is taken for granted and is so common that it is not even recognized as racism. This is known as '**institutional racism**'.

Policing

Lord Macpherson's 1998 report into the murder of the Black teenager Stephen Lawrence by White youths in 1993 concluded that the London Metropolitan Police were guilty of 'institutional racism', which was defined as 'unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racial stereotyping which disadvantaged minority-ethnic groups'. For example, when the police arrived at the scene, they initially failed to understand that Stephen had been murdered because he was Black and they also assumed that all Black people near the site of the killing (including Stephen's best friend, who had witnessed the attack) were suspects rather than witnesses. The Macpherson report denounced the Metropolitan Police as fundamentally racist for its handling of the investigation into Stephen's death. No one has been convicted of the crime.

Explanations of racism and racial inequality

Cultural explanations

Racist stereotyping probably originates in a number of diverse cultural sources:

- *Britain's colonial past* – Britain's imperial power exercised during the 19th and 20th centuries clearly saw Black and Asian people as subordinate to and heavily dependent upon White people. The teaching of Britain's imperial history in schools may reinforce stereotypes of ethnic minorities picked up during family socialization and in the media.
- *Language* – Language often contains implicit cultural messages. For example, some socio-linguists have noted that words associated with Black people – e.g. 'things are looking black', accident blackspot, black sheep of the family – are negative. Black is also symbolic of evil and wrong-doing. Whiteness, on the other hand, is associated with innocence, purity, goodness, etc. The use of this type of language may, therefore, reinforce racist stereotypes passed down through socialization.
- *The mass media* – A number of degrading unsympathetic or negative stereotypes of ethnic minorities are common across the media. Van Dijk (1991) conducted a content analysis study of tens of thousands of news items across the world over several decades. He found that Black crime and violence is one of the most frequent issues in ethnic coverage. Ethnic minorities are often portrayed as a threat to the White monopoly of jobs and housing. Moreover, ethnic-minority cultures are often represented as abnormal in terms of their values and norms, and thus as undermining the British way of life. The *Big Brother* racism scandal in 2007, in which the Indian actress, Shilpa Shetty, was racially abused by White housemates, originated in the fact that they regarded her culture and accent as strange and alien.
- *Family* – People may pick up these stereotypes in the course of normal socialization from their parents and other family members.

The host–immigrant model or assimilation theory

A sociological approach that also stressed the importance of culture was Patterson's (1965) theory – the host–immigrant model – which shares many of the assumptions of functionalist sociology. Patterson depicted Britain as a basically stable, homogeneous and orderly society with a high degree of consensus over values and norms. However, she claims that this equilibrium was disturbed by the arrival of immigrant 'strangers' in the 1950s who subscribed to different cultural values. Patterson argues that this resulted in a culture clash between West Indians (who were regarded as boisterous and noisy) and their English hosts (who valued privacy, quiet and 'keeping oneself to oneself'). Patterson argued that these clashes reflected understandable fears and anxieties on the part of the host community. She claimed that the English were

not actually racist – rather they were unsure about how to act towards the newcomers.

She therefore suggested that there were three causes of racial prejudice, discrimination and racial inequality:

1. the host culture's (White people's) fear of strangers, cultural difference and social change
2. the host culture's, particularly the working class's resentment at having to compete with ethnic minorities for scarce resources such as jobs and housing
3. the failure of ethnic minorities to assimilate, i.e. to become totally British and integrate – they tended to live in segregated communities rather than socially mixing.

Patterson's theory is implicitly critical of the insistence of ethnic minorities that they should retain their own cultural values and practices because these allegedly make White people anxious. However, she was reasonably optimistic about the future of race relations in the UK and argued that ethnic minorities would eventually move toward full cultural assimilation by shedding their 'old' ethnic values and taking on English or British values.

There are signs that the Labour government elected in 1997 was very influenced by this assimilationist model. Government ministers implied that racial tensions and inequality are the result of a supposed Asian desire and choice for residential self-segregation – to live in 'comfort zones' with 'their own kind'. Labour has suggested that this self-segregation of areas has led to school segregation; in some primary and secondary schools, Asian pupils have become the majority, and the affluent White middle-class have consequently responded by moving elsewhere – this has become known as 'White flight'. However, the White poor get left behind and have to compete for the same jobs and housing, which has led to racial tensions in areas like Lancashire as some areas allegedly have become no-go areas for White people.

Labour responded by introducing 45-minute multiple-choice nationality or citizenship tests. In order to get British citizenship, immigrants to the UK must successfully answer questions on aspects of British culture and swear an oath of allegiance to the Queen. Some commentators have suggested that this Britishness test should have a language component to ensure all potential citizens can speak and write English. Critics have suggested that Labour believes that racism, racial inequality, racial tensions and the alienation of Muslim youth can only be tackled by ethnic minorities doing more to assimilate – the ideological message quite simply is: embrace British culture and become 'more like us'.

Criticisms

The evidence from areas in which racial tensions spilled over into riots in 2002, such as Oldham and Burnley, collected by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) suggests segregation was a product of discrimination rather than choice. Estate agents in Oldham promoted residential segregation by steering White and ethnic-minority populations into different areas. The CRE also noted evidence that suggests council officers allocated Asians to the most deprived council estates compared with Whites.

How was the New Labour introduction of citizenship tests influenced by the assimilationist model?

Despite Whites and Asians suffering similar levels of economic and social deprivation, this policy did not promote social mixing. This segregation also made it easier for the British National Party (BNP) to stir up rumours and resentment among the White population. The BNP claimed that Asians were being allocated superior council housing despite the fact that 25 per cent of the White population lived in council housing compared with only 9 per cent of Pakistanis. The CRE also point out that Whites are responsible for White flight rather than Asians, because the White middle classes do not want to mix socially with Asians. Being able to afford to move out of an area because ethnic minorities are moving in is a type of racism.

Critics of this assimilationist host–immigrant approach point out that African-Caribbeans are the most assimilated of all ethnic-minority groups – they speak English as a first language at home, they intermarry into the White population, their children mix freely and easily with White children and they are usually Christian. There are no cultural barriers preventing them from assimilating into British cultural life. However, the economic, social and educational position of African-Caribbean people is no better than it was 50 years ago. They are still more likely to be unemployed and in poverty than Whites and their children are still most likely to fail academically or be excluded from school.

Patterson can be criticized because she failed to acknowledge that the UK is a multicultural society and that the concept of assimilation is ethnocentric – it fails to recognize that no one culture is superior and that all cultures, British and ethnic minority, have similar value. The host–immigrant model also focuses so much on culture that it tends to end up 'blaming the victim' or scapegoating them, by attributing racism and racial inequality to their 'strange' cultures.

Finally, racial hostility has not declined as predicted by Patterson. The basic structure of British society remains unchanged, and the struggle over scarce jobs, housing and money between groups of urban poor, Whites, Asians and African-Caribbeans continues to fuel racial tensions.

Weberian explanations

The work of Max Weber (1864–1920) has had a significant influence on explanations for racial discrimination and inequality. He noted that modern societies are characterized by a class struggle for income and wealth. In this sense, he would agree with Marxists. However, he also notes that modern societies are also characterized by status inequality. Status and power are in the hands of the majority-ethnic group, thereby making it difficult for ethnic-minority groups to compete equally for jobs, housing, etc. Ethnic minorities who do manual jobs are technically part of the working class, but they do not share the same status as the White working class. This is because they are likely to face prejudice and discrimination from the White working class who see them as in competition for the same scarce resources, e.g. jobs. Ethnic minorities therefore suffer from status inequality as well as class inequality. Even middle-class Asians doing professional jobs may experience status inequality in the form of prejudicial attitudes held by members of both the White middle and working classes.

Organisation of the job market

Such prejudice and discrimination can be seen in the distribution of ethnic minorities in the labour force. The '**dual labour-market theory**' of Barron and Norris focuses on ethnic inequalities as well as gender inequalities in employment. They suggest that there are two labour markets:

1. *the primary labour sector* – characterized by secure, well-paid jobs, with long-term promotion prospects and dominated by White men
2. *the secondary labour sector* – consisting of low-paid, unskilled and insecure jobs.

Barron and Norris (1976) point out that women and Black people are more likely to be found in this secondary sector. They argue that Black people are less likely to gain primary-sector employment because employers may subscribe to racist beliefs about their unsuitability and even practise discrimination against them, either by not employing them or by denying them responsibility and promotion.

Furthermore, Barron and Norris point out that the legal and political framework supporting Black people is weak. Trade unions are generally White dominated and have been accused of favouring White workers and being less interested in protecting the rights of Black workers. The Race Relations Act 1976 (which was introduced to protect Black people from discriminatory practices) was generally thought to be weak and was rarely used in practice.

However, the recent amendment to the Race Relations Act, which came into force in 2001, increases the need for greater clarity concerning the meaning and status of race. It 'places a general duty on public authorities to work towards the elimination of unlawful discrimination and promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different racial groups'. The modern Race Relations Act, therefore, aims to have a much greater and wider impact – it seeks to ensure that racial discrimination is outlawed throughout the public sector and places a duty on all public bodies and authorities to promote good race relations. However, it is too early to say whether this amendment is having any real impact.

Underclass

Another Weberian approach is that of Rex and Tomlinson (1979), who argue that ethnic-minority experience of both class and status inequality can lead to poverty, which is made more severe by racism. They believe that a Black underclass has been created of people who feel marginalized, alienated and frustrated. Another aspect of status inequality is that some young Blacks may feel both socially excluded from the standard of living most other members of society take for granted and experience policing as harassment. These feelings may occasionally erupt in the form of inner-city riots.

However, there is considerable overlap between the White and Black population in terms of poverty and unemployment, although the constant threat of racism does suggest that some members of the White working class do not recognize the common economic situation they share with Black and Asian workers. The concept of status inequality may therefore help to explain the apparent divisions between the White and ethnic-minority working class and the outbreaks of racial conflict between White and Asian people in some northern towns in 2001.

Marxist explanations

Marxists such as Castles and Kosack (1973) argue that ethnic minorities are generally part of the exploited working class and it is this that determines their fate in capitalist society. Marxists see racial conflict, discrimination and inequality as symptoms of some deeper underlying class problem. They see these symptoms as deliberately encouraged by the capitalist class for three ideological reasons:

1   *Legitimization* – Racism helps to justify low pay and poor working conditions because ethnic-minority workers are generally seen as second-class citizens undeserving of the same rights as White workers. Capitalist employers benefit from the cheap labour of ethnic minorities in terms of profits made. Some Marxists note that ethnic minorities, like women, are a **reserve army of labour** that is only taken on in large numbers during periods of economic boom but whose jobs are often the first to be lost in times of recession. However, the existence of racism means that the plight of ethnic minorities in the job market is rarely highlighted.

2   *Divide and rule* – If ethnic minority and White workers unite in a common economic interest, they are in a stronger position to campaign for better wages and conditions. Castles and Kosack argue that racism benefits employers because it divides the workforce. The White workforce will fear losing their jobs to the cheaper labour of ethnic-minority workers. Employers play on these fears during pay negotiations to prevent White workers from demanding higher wages or going on strike.

3   *Scapegoating* – When a society is troubled by severe social and economic problems, then widespread frustration, aggression and demands for radical change can result. However, instead of directing this anger at the capitalist class or economic system, White people

are encouraged by racist ideology and agents such as the mass media to blame relatively vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities for unemployment, housing shortages and inner city decline, e.g. 'they have come over here and stolen our jobs, taken over all our corner shops'. Ethnic minorities become the scapegoats for the social and economic mismanagement of capitalism. This process works in the interest of the wealthy and powerful capitalist class because it protects them from direct criticism and reduces pressure for radical change.

However, some Marxists such as Miles (1989) have been influenced by the Weberian argument that the concept of 'status' should be used alongside the concept of 'class' to explain racism and racial inequality. Miles argues that the class position of ethnic minorities is complicated by the fact that they are treated by White society as socially and culturally different, and consequently they have become the victims of racist ideologies that prevent their full inclusion into UK society. At the same time, ethnic minorities too set themselves apart from the White majority by stressing and celebrating their unique cultural identity. Miles suggests that, as a result of these two processes, ethnic minorities are members of '**racialized class fractions**'. He argues that the White working class stress the importance of their ethnicity and nationality through prejudice and discrimination, whilst ethnic minorities react to such racism by stressing their ethnicity in terms of their observance of particular religious and cultural traditions.

Miles acknowledges that some ethnic minorities may be economically successful and become part of the middle classes. These professionals and owners of businesses may see their interests lying with capitalism. For example, recent statistics suggest there are currently over 5000 Muslim millionaires in Britain. Furthermore, their ethnicity may be a crucial influence in their business practices and financial success. However, the fact of their ethnicity probably makes it difficult for them to be fully accepted by the White middle class. They are, therefore, a racialized class fraction within the middle class.

Recent approaches

It would be a mistake to think that all ethnic minorities are disadvantaged in UK society. Owen and Green (1992) note that Indians and Chinese are two ethnic groups that have made significant economic progress in the British labour market since the 1980s. Recent figures indicate that their average earnings are very similar to those of White workers. More generally, evidence suggests that increasing numbers from these ethnic minorities are entering the ranks of the professional middle class. Sociologists are also starting to notice the growth of ethnic-minority businesses and the spread of self-employment among ethnic-minority groups, particularly Asians. However, it is important to note that although groups such as Indians are moving into white-collar and professional work, they may experience a 'glass ceiling' as White professionals and managers fill the higher-status positions within this sector.

Some sociologists have also questioned whether self-employment is really such a privileged sector of the economy. The high rate of self-employment among ethnic minorities may be a reaction to the racial discrimination that prevents them from getting employment. In other words, self-employment may be forced upon them. Sometimes, these businesses are precarious ventures in extremely competitive markets (e.g. taxi-driving) and offer small rewards for long hours. Often, the owners of such businesses only manage to survive because they are able to use cheap family labour.

Postmodernist approaches

Postmodernists, such as Modood (1992), reject Weberian and Marxist explanations that seek to generalize and offer blanket explanations for ethnic groups as a whole. Postmodernists argue that ethnic-minority groups in the UK are characterized by difference and diversity. They point out that the experience of racism is not the same: different groups may have different experiences. For example, police stop-and-search tactics focus on African-Caribbeans rather than other ethnic-minority groups. Postmodernists point out that there are also different ethnic-minority cultural responses to racism.

However, postmodernists tend to focus on 'culture and identity' issues rather than racial inequality. They suggest that both White and ethnic-minority identities are being eroded by globalization and consumption, and so members of such groups are less likely to have their identity shaped by membership of their ethnic group. Postmodernists suggest that in the 21st century, the young, in particular, have begun to 'pick and mix' their identity from a new globalized culture that interacts with both White British culture and the ethnic-minority subcultures that exist in the UK. This process has produced new **hybrid identities**. As a result, racial or ethnic differences are not fixed and imposed by membership of an ethnic group. Instead, identity has become a matter of choice. The implication of these trends is that as ethnicity and race are reduced in importance and influence, so racism and racial disadvantage will decline.

Postmodernists argue that the extent and impact of racism differ from one person to another as identities are chosen and interact. They argue that once identity is better understood, ethnic disadvantage can be targeted and addressed. For example, if we know that Jamaican boys not born in Britain living in a particular area are more likely to drop out of school, then something meaningful can be done to address this problem.

In criticism of postmodernism, evidence from studies of ethnic identity suggest that ethnic and religious identity often overlap, and that through agencies such as the family, community, places of worship and faith schools, ethnic identity is imposed rather than chosen. Such processes are often reinforced by the experience of unemployment, poverty, poor housing, inner-city deprivation and the constant fear of racial harassment. In conclusion, we can argue that postmodern ideas have greatly exaggerated the capacity of both White and ethnic-minority people to resist cultural influences and that they unrealistically play down the social and economic factors, such as everyday racism, that impact on the life-chances of ethnic-minority groups compared with Whites.

Check your understanding

1   How can it be argued that the term 'race' has more explanatory value than the term 'ethnicity'?

2   Where does racial prejudice come from? Give examples to back up your arguments.

3   Explain why members of organizations deemed 'institutionally racist' may not necessarily be racist individuals.

4   How can institutional racism be tackled?

5   What is wrong with early functionalist explanations of ethnic inequality?

6   How was the Labour government's policy towards race relations influenced by assimilation theory?

7   Briefly summarize three Weberian accounts of ethnic inequality in the workplace.

8   How do Marxists argue that racism benefits capitalism?

9   Why do postmodernists reject Weberian and Marxist explanations of ethnic inequality?

Activities

Research ideas

1   Carry out a piece of research to explore local people's knowledge of ethnic differences. Do they understand the distinctions between the various Asian groups? Do they understand the significance of particular festivals? Do they know of prophets or holy books? Can they point on a world map outline to the countries of origin of the various groups?

2   Assess the extent to which an organization such as your school or college might be deemed to be institutionally racist. Look at the distribution of ethnic groups on the various courses. Try to acquire statistics on exclusions, achievement rates and progression. What problems might you encounter in your research and how might you overcome them?

Web.tasks

Go to the guardianunlimited website at **www.guardianunlimited.co.uk**. Search the archive by typing in 'race equality'. Read the articles highlighting a range of issues from institutional racism, social policy reform to rural racism and racial harassment.