

# The Politics of Naming

In this section, the importance of language and other cultural codes are explored in more depth. We have shown that the connotations of cultural codes are actively interpreted by the ‘reader’ and that, while they are open to different readings in practice, these tend to be constrained by dominant social values and popular conventions of interpretation that can be dissected along the lines of key social divisions from which they are viewed. Language can be a source of intense ethnic rivalry; in some instances it can be used to belittle, abuse or, as in the example quoted below, almost to deny the separate existence of unique and complex cultures.

A single English word can effectively, in an instant, disembowel the vast 100,000 year histories and culture of about five hundred different peoples in Australia by naming us ‘Aborigines’. That language was used by the colonisers as a weapon can be seen in the experience of numerous colonised peoples (here and in other countries) who were forced to use the coloniser’s language.

(Foley 1997)

It is exactly because language is so intrinsically linked to culture, identity and meaning that colonisers were at pains to control its use, and also why it may become a flashpoint in ethnic struggles of resistance as in. For example, the unique Basque language and the desire for Basque autonomy within Spain. There are many such struggles (Welsh, Catalan) that are examples of what Hechter (1975) has termed ‘**internal colonialism**’, suggesting ethnic enclaves’ struggle for autonomy within

the boundaries of the nation-state. The means by which regional languages were discouraged has been a source of long-standing enmity to those who felt the power of the state at school and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

One of the indications that race and ethnicity do not have fixed referents but rather belong to the domain of shifting social and cultural meanings in which boundaries are constantly negotiated is the fact that conventions of naming are a constantly changing and sensitive area. How a group is denoted is not experienced as an arbitrary label but as a deeply meaningful and often challenging semantic field. Naming and categorising of individuals is highly political. The way in which these boundaries are established at times admits individual choice and self-determination. At other times it is enforced by the dominant culture, colonial power or government. At the level of popular understandings, there are frequently issues about what is the correct (and politically correct) term to describe ethnic groups. It is significant that students are often concerned to ensure they have the right terminology. At times our **misrecognition** of others reflects the lack of communication between mainstream culture and minority groups by our using terms from another era such as ‘coloured people’ (‘people of colour’ is still used in the USA). While these terms are considered deeply patronising to those to whom they are directed in the UK, it is not surprising that white middle-class students feel unable to keep up with trends that have little impact on mainstream white culture. Indeed as Kohn (1996) notes, ‘we’ harbour anxieties about ‘race’. ‘We feel that the subject is covered by a taboo, but we don’t know exactly what the rules of the taboo are. It seems important if not obligatory, to discuss cultural differences, but dangerous even to mention physical differences’ (Kohn 1996: 1). Ironically, elements of black culture – especially music and fashion – are frequently appropriated, filtered and commodified for a mainstream white consumer market.

## DEFINING RACE AND ETHNICITY

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It is important to recognise that the shifting meanings of these terms are a consequence of the fact that they refer to socially constructed concepts. At times they have been used interchangeably (in Europe); at others they are strongly differentiated. ‘The modernist connotation of “race” and “ethnicity” sees “race” either subsumed in “ethnicity”, or referred to euphemistically through “ethnicity”’ (Popeau 1998: 177). Popeau indicates that the term ‘ethnicity’ is typically used as a ‘polite and less controversial term for “race”’ (1998: 166).

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1 Consider the example of the treacherous ‘Welsh Not’, A piece of wood that had to be carried by a child at school if caught using the Welsh language. They could, though, pass it on to other children who were heard to speak Welsh, so it encouraged betrayal as the last child carrying the hated object at the end of the day was the one to be punished.

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## 'Race'

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'Race' is an extraordinarily problematic term, debated and reviled and contested so fiercely yet still employed as it is clearly so intrinsically woven into the fabric of western cultural history (inverted commas are often employed to indicate that the term is, at best, part of a dubious fossil record of an inglorious history. It is certainly a candidate for being placed 'under erasure' (Derrida's convention '**sous rature**') a process by which such terms are used with a line through them to indicate their problematic or spurious nature. However, despite this, many nations continue to use the term. For example, Malaysia and the USA both employ the term in contexts where Europeans would prefer the term 'ethnicity'. This use of the term 'race' as a marker of difference derives from differing social histories, stark divisions and, in the case of Malaysia, a long period of colonial rule. Furthermore, the term is woven into understandings about definitions of citizenship and lineage. Ideas of blood quantum are still used to determine identities and rights of membership to cultural and national groups. For example, membership of an ethnic grouping can be determined by lineage or blood quantum or by fact of birth within a country or by self-determination. The official status of people with different 'blood quantum' could equate to material reward being different for full blood, half-caste, quadroon, octoroon. Amongst indigenous peoples of Australia and America, it has been a means of determining rights to belong or to be excluded. It was the basis on which decisions were made about taking certain mixed children from their Aboriginal parents (a practice that was carried on into the 1970s). 'Quadroons and octoroons, under 10 or 12 years of age, should, where such can be done without inflicting cruelty on the half-caste mother, be placed in an European institution, where they can be given a reasonable chance of absorption into the white community to which they rightly belong' (Bleakley 1929: 17).

Not only were many thousands of Aboriginal families devastated by these forced removals, based on ideas of actively 'breeding out' aboriginality, but Aboriginal people of mixed ancestry encountered the dilemma of being caught in the middle of a harshly divisive system as the next example shows:

In 1935 a fair-skinned Australian of part-indigenous descent was ejected from a hotel for being an Aboriginal. He returned to his home on the mission station to find himself refused entry because he was not an Aboriginal. He tried to remove his children but was told he could not because they were Aboriginal. He walked to the next town where he was arrested for being an Aboriginal vagrant and placed on the local reserve. During the Second World War he tried to enlist but was told he could not because he was Aboriginal. He went interstate and joined up as a non-Aboriginal. After the war he could not acquire a passport without permission because he was Aboriginal. He received exemption from the Aborigines Protection Act – and was told that he could

no longer visit his relations on the reserve because he was not an Aboriginal. He was denied permission to enter the Returned Servicemen's Club because he was.

(Read 1996)

Race is central to ideas of culture that emerged during the Enlightenment. The concept emerged in European languages in the late fourteenth early fifteenth centuries. 'Race' was first used in English in the sixteenth century. In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams (1983) cites its earliest uses as 'offspring in the sense of line of descent'. Young (1995) and Malik (1996) show that the divergent views about race and racial categories stem from the Enlightenment when divisive categorising and pseudo-scientific views of racial difference emerged albeit with resistance from some philosophers who held fast to ideas of universal humanity united by given capacity for reasoning and civil life and that differences were in fact due to climatic or agricultural variations. As a discourse, the concept has a long and complex history of shifting meanings 'parasitic on theoretical and social discourses for the meaning it assumes at given historical moments' (Goldberg 1992: 553).

This suggests that different uses of the term can be traced within historically specific discourses. The interpretation of race as a 'floating signifier' (see Hall 1996b) is anchored to the prevailing social realities of the time.

Table 2.1 is based on the discourse of race as expressed by Theo Goldberg (1992) and charts some of the strands that have composed the socially interwoven ideas about the construction of race. These will be given some consideration in turn.

## SHIFTING MEANINGS OF RACE

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### Monogenism

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With regard to questions of origin, religious orthodoxy maintained a strong and constant influence on thought. The Great Chain of Being from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment provided a fixed and immutable order for creation. God's creations were set out in layers from the infernal regions below the Earth, to the lowliest terrestrial life, to animals, birds, humanity, and above them to celestial beings, to God the Father. All linked by a chain. However, there were anomalous gaps between the realms that were not easily accounted for. The Bible was treated as an accurate text explaining the process of creation (the world was calculated to be only 5,500 years old). Humankind sprang from Adam and Eve. As non-Europeans were more frequently encountered and as the slave trade progressed, other biblical explanations were needed to safeguard Christian morality. There was the notion that black-skinned people were the descendents of Ham, the son

Table 2.1 Evolving discourses of race

DISCOURSE	DESCRIPTION	CONSEQUENCES
<b>Monogenism</b> (fourteenth–eighteenth century)	focus on origin, breed, stock; descent from Adam and Eve	commitment to race as lineage, pedigree
<b>Polygenism</b> (eighteenth–nineteenth century)	biological inheritance and hierarchy	species; population; rigid categories
<b>Evolutionism</b> (late nineteenth century)	more fluid taxonomies; race as sub-species genetically interpreted	breeding populations are species; races are sub-species.
<b>Race as class</b> (nineteenth-century on)	socio-economic status or relation to mode of production, or status	race as determined by class; reductionist – ignores cultural dimension
<b>Race as culture</b> (nineteenth-century on)	identification with language, religion, customs, mores encultured characteristics	group-bound dictum ‘manners (or language) maketh man’
<b>Race as ethnicity</b> (twentieth-century on)	use of term ‘race’ inherently; ethnocentric ‘ethnicity’ used interchangeably with race; social choice to identify by natural rather than social criteria	reflects reification of concepts over time; ethnicity shifts back to objectified category ‘them’ rather than ‘us’
<b>Race as nation</b> (late nineteenth-century on)	race as nation; similar to early concept of lineage, rallying force behind nationalist movements	for example, White Australia Policy; also current concerns about immigration and asylum seekers, etc.

that Noah cursed and banished to the land of Nod – East of Eden. And there were also notions that there were pre-Adamic beings that were outside of the regular Christian remit. These views, which are not supported in the Bible, were nevertheless influential.

The voyages of discovery that began in earnest in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the consequent acts of colonialism and empire-building began to broaden ideas about the world and its inhabitants. Initially shrouded in mystery and prone to mythological invention, 'other' peoples became the object of increased interest and study and even collection and exhibition. McCaskell (1994) gives the example of how a chimpanzee was brought back to Britain in 1699 and efforts made to over-represent certain features to make it appear much more human, as it was considered a potential candidate for a missing link between monkeys and humankind. There was a desire to eradicate the anomalous areas and gaps on the Great Chain.

### Polygenism

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Monogenism, which was maintained by many Enlightenment thinkers, gradually gave way to notions of hierarchical ordering and separate generation of races as species. As early as 1677, William Petty proposed that 'savages were a permanently distinct and inferior species of humanity located between (white) men and animals on the Great Chain' (Frederickson 1981). Fifty years later, the consequences of Petty's classifications and their far-ranging consequences were realised by Swedish biologist Linnaeus whose *General System of Nature* (1806) established four basic colour types in descending order:

- White Europeans
- Red Americans
- Yellow Asians
- Black Africans.

By the tenth edition, the colour categories had also been linked to attributes of character that showed the gradual influence of the idea that the stamp of character was innate and implicitly linked to physical differences. This had the consequence of forming much more fixed and inviolable traits and further emphasised the hierarchical and mutually exclusive natures of the 'races'. A century later, these categories and the ready stereotypical traits were apparently accepted and commonplace.

Works such as Oliver Goldsmith's *Animated Nature* (1876) portray the races as separate. Well into the twentieth century, the influence of such stereotypes and an acceptance of a **Manichean divide** were being reproduced in popular 'everyman' sort of sentiments. Take, for example, the morally superior tone of *Savage Survivals* (1933) which states that:

Savages cry easily and are afraid of the dark; they are fond of pets and toys; they have weak wills and feeble reasoning powers; they are notoriously fickle

and unreliable and exceedingly given to exaggeration of their own importance – in all of these particulars being much like the children of the higher races.

(Moore 1933: 73)

The frequently apocryphal and stereotyped traits seem to have remained fixed and resilient (obviously due to remoteness and lack of contact in many cases). Take the entry in Goldsmith's on Laplanders:

These nations not only resemble each other in their deformity, their dwarfishness, the colour of their hair and eyes, but they have in a great measure, the same inclinations, and the same manners, being all equally rude, superstitious, and stupid. The Danish Laplanders have a large black cat, to which they communicate their secrets, and consult in all their affairs. Among the Swedish Laplanders there is in every family a drum for consulting the devil; and although these nations are robust and nimble, yet they are so cowardly that they never can be brought into the field.

(Goldsmith 1876: 209)

It is quite clear that no attempt is made to understand indigenous practices and belief systems other than through a veil of ethnocentric Victorian values.

What impact did such classifications of human beings have? The consequences of these classifications were far ranging. A major error was to assume that the human species was clearly divided into subgroups, such as sub-species.

- 1 Human differences once classified seemed more fixed. Once terms are habitually used they become naturalised and embedded in the culture and the language.
- 2 The linking of physical and behavioural characteristics fitted with long-standing, common-sense values; that differences in physical appearance betoken differences in habit and temperament.
- 3 These typologies tended to ignore the geographically gradual nature of biological differences and examples which didn't fit. Gross differences are recognisable subtle variations are not recognised as easily.
- 4 All of these above aspects helped to reinforce a value-laden hierarchical view of different peoples. It could be argued that powerful Christian images like the Great Chain of Being had already predisposed European culture to such notions.
- 5 Legitimized as God-given and 'natural' supposed inferiority of non- Europeans. The views of scientists such as Blumenbach and Linnaeus who were widely renowned lent authority to such views.
- 6 History suggests that the hardening racialisation which had already occurred in the USA began to become more prevalent in Europe. A consequence is

that black thinkers, writers, scientists, philosophers were removed from the records and histories, their considerable achievements were negated.

## Evolutionism

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Ideas about evolution did not begin with Darwin. Hierarchical schemes of varying sophistication were developed from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries onwards. Count Arthur Gobineau's pessimism about the outcome of the French Revolution of 1789 stemmed from a belief that inequality was a natural state and that the democratic views that stripped the aristocracy of their elevated positions were the outcome of racial miscegenation leading to a degraded racial stock, which would inevitably level a naturally uneven playing field. Again this early conception linked race with social strata as well as racial types. This view, as we will see, took hold and was maintained into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The interpretation of Darwin's radical view of biology had already been framed by earlier conceptualisations of evolution. Lamarck had suggested that acquired traits of the parents could be inherited by their offspring. His ideas were appealing at the time as the suggestion that acquired social traits could be inherited biologically was looked at favourably by social reformers. At the same time, Lamarck maintained that there was a grand design towards greater perfection and elaboration: 'Nature, in producing in succession every species of animal, and beginning with the least perfect or simplest to end her work with the most perfect, has gradually complicated their structure' (Lamarck 1801: 16). This did not send out the same shock waves to devout believers as Darwin's suggestion that the process of natural selection was apparently random.

Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* had a major impact on nineteenth-century thought and ran contrary to racial theory, which 'required the fixity of characteristics – race only had meaning if characters which defined a racial group remained constant over time' (Malik 1996: 90). However, in natural selection, biological types or species do not have a fixed, static existence but exist in permanent states of change and flux. This startling theory, which was supported by Darwin's empirical work (owing much to the younger Darwin's passage as a naturalist on board the *Beagle*), presented all living organisms in a struggle for survival, a struggle to produce offspring, of which only the best adapted to conditions will survive. One of the catalysts for Darwin's ground-breaking vision of change was the work of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830) which showed the Earth to be in a continuous process of change from ongoing geological forces and also indicated, by reference to fossil records, that mankind was much older than biblical accounts. The immense periods of time that Darwin suggested implied that change was more random and accidental than pre-ordained.



The effect of all these points was to move human beings away from the centre of creation and imply that they could hardly be its crowning glory. Some writers and cataloguers of humanity seemed to take note of this greater fluidity and, while they used racial categories, illustrated the extraordinary diversity within these groups.

The plates from Baron Cuvier's *Animal Kingdom* (1890), which portray the human race are divided into four categories: American Indian, Caucasian, Mongol and Negro (the same as Linnaeus's red, white, yellow and black), show the varieties within these colour-coded groups (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2). Each plate purports to show details of human types. The inclusion of the skull indicates the preoccupation with materialist anthropology and physiognomy at the time. The studies, from drawings by Thomas Landseer, are sensitive and sympathetic to the dignity and character of their subjects, and a long way removed from the crude stereotypes that can be seen in other works of the period. The accompanying text explains that these categories of humankind are not considered separate species, as this precludes interbreeding between species, whereas it is clearly possible between human groups. However, the physical boundaries of race are affirmed by the presence of 'hereditary peculiarities of conformance':

Although the human species would appear to be single, since the union of any of its members produces individuals capable of propagation, there are nevertheless, certain hereditary peculiarities of conformation observable, which constitute what are termed *races*, *Three of these* in particular appear eminently distinct: the *Caucasian*, or white, the *Mongolian*, or yellow, and the *Ethiopian*, or negro.

(Cuvier 1890: 37, italics in original)

Yet the hierarchical connotations noted in the text are seemingly at odds with the sensitive *individual* portraits of Landseer. Each Mongolian or Negro type is based on a specific portrait. The Negro race (Figure 2.1), for example, are far from animalistic, but show people from diverse, sentient and complex cultures. These portraits illustrate the wide physical differences *within* a category and further contradict rigid ascription of race. However, Cuvier's text falls back on crude racist stereotypes, drawing them as debased and irrevocably primitive:

The Negro race is confined to the southward of the Atlas chain of mountains: its colour is black. Its hair crisped, the cranium compressed, the nose flattened. The projecting muzzle and thick lips evidently approximate it to the Apes: the hordes of which it is composed have always continued barbarous.

(Cuvier 1890: 38)

Social critics of the time were scornful of these attempts to caricature attributes of the world's human varieties. It is not difficult to imagine how weaknesses

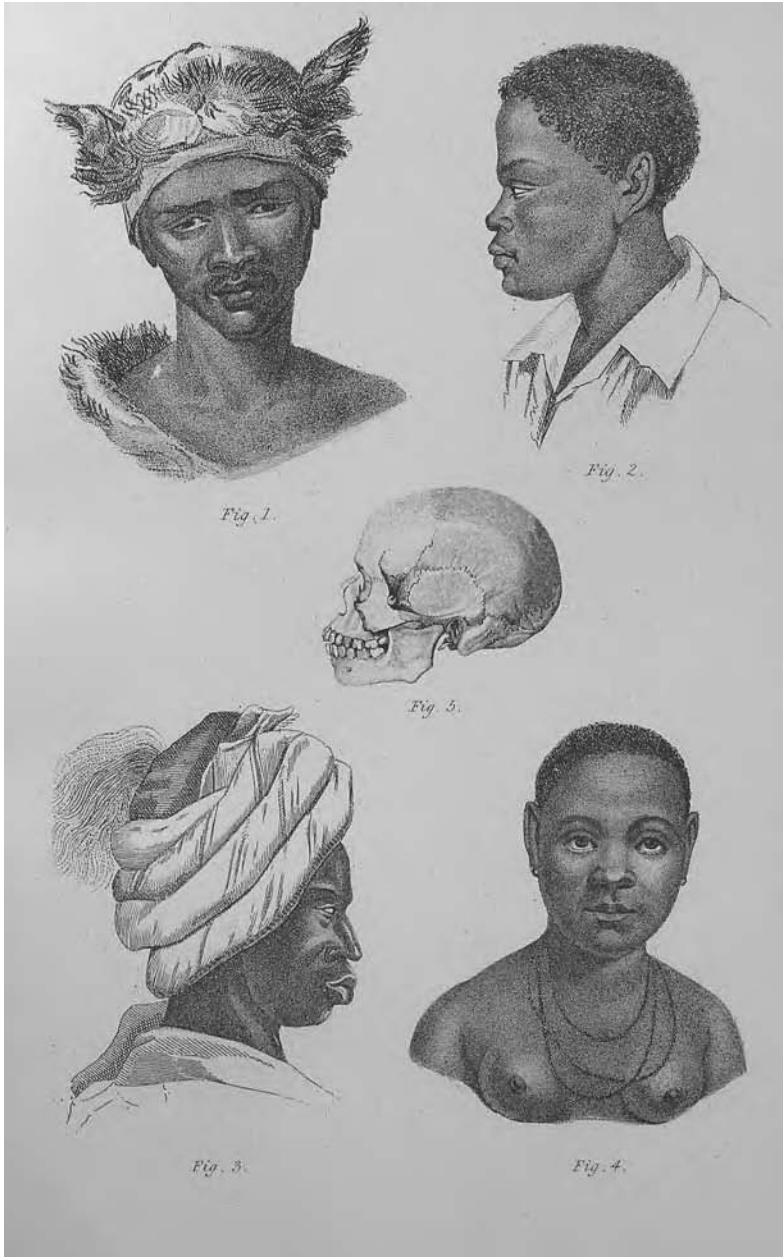


Figure 2.1 Negroes. Negro race – portraits by Landseer in Baron Cuvier's *Animal Kingdom*

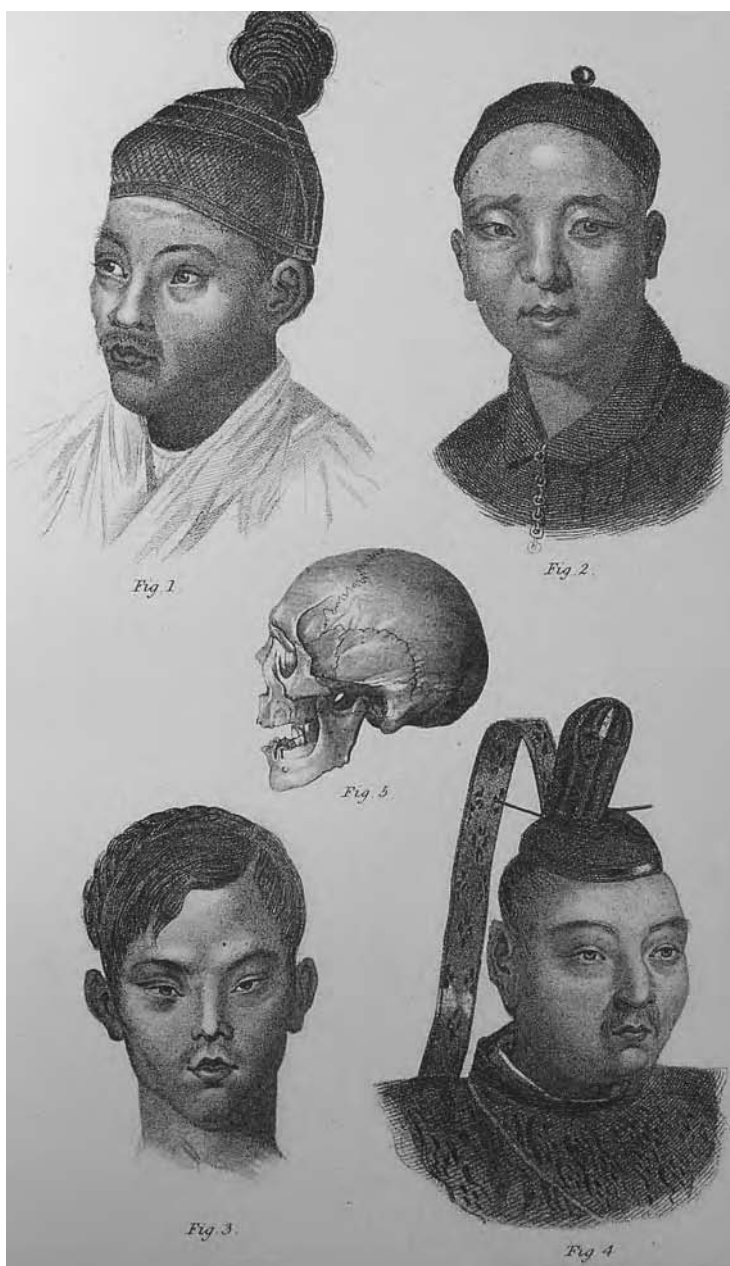


Figure 2.2 Mongols. Mongolian race – portraits by Thomas Landseer in Baron Cuvier's *Animal Kingdom*

and negative values observed in one's own society were projected onto the individuals of groups that the race scientists had never encountered. In the 1890 volume an additional note is made by W. B. Carpenter and J. O. Westwood: 'With all deference, I would suggest that naturalists are much too prone to confound resemblance with identity' (Cuvier 1890: 39).

*The Origin of Species* (1859), while it led to recognition of the non-uniqueness of the human race, also

gave the rationale for a racially stratified view of evolution based on an ethnocentric colonial view of the subjugated nations who, with reference to their relative lack of western technology, were deemed more lowly. Europeans represented the highest point of evolution, diverse Asians and Indians fell in somewhere behind, and Africans brought up the rear, with Aboriginal and Papuan peoples allocated the very bottom.

(Young 1976: 50)

Imperialists, calling upon Darwin in defense of the subjugation of weaker races, could point to the 'Origin of Species', which had referred in its subtitle to 'The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life'. Darwin had been talking about pigeons, but the imperialists saw no reason why his theories should not apply to men.

(Hofstadter 1955: 171)

Use of the discourse of social Darwinist thought accords with a popular view of the inherent morality and civilised virtue of the 'white race'. There was a proliferation of popular pseudo-scientific treatises on the evolution of human types that had foundations in the physical analogies made to identity, character, intelligence, criminality, etc, popularised by phrenology, physiognomy and craniology. Shape and size of skull or other features for example, the Jewish nose (which was 'discovered' in 1711 (Mosse 1978)) and came to be seen as measurable means of assessing an individual's position on an imagined genetic ladder.

Social Darwinism was the theory that societies and classes evolve under the principle of 'survival of the fittest'. Natural selection eliminated weak persons and groups. Most Social Darwinists were, therefore, against improving the conditions of the poor. To let nature run its course was considered best, as natural equilibrium would eventually result. The theory in effect justified poverty and social stratification by combining Darwinism with individualistic and liberal values.

Laissez-faire economics and the Industrial Revolution produced a large, underpaid and exploited wage-earning class. Capitalists grew rich and the poor stayed poor. Industrial nations grew into large empires and exploited colonies to further fund the industrial expansion and the growing desire for consumer products

through the plunder of booty capitalism. In such a context, the concepts of 'struggle' and 'survival of the fittest' were a useful justifications for exploitation.

Ideas of 'progress', which underpinned the drive towards greater industrialisation and scientific rationalisation, seemed analogous to 'progress' in evolution. However, the meanings embraced by the term were quite different. Industrialists and social reformers saw progress as the expansion of capitalism and the nation's productive capacity; Social Darwinists saw the improvement of the race; and biologists the selective adaptation of living things to their ecological environment.

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) was an English philosopher who developed a theory of evolution even before Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Spencer developed the principle of 'survival of the fittest' to society, arguing that societies grow from an initial militant phase into large organized social units, from 'an indefinite incoherent homogeneity, to a definite coherent heterogeneity' (Spencer 1860). The pre-scientific basis of early hierarchies such as the belief in a Great Chain of Being in Christianity made ranked tiers of evolution already seem plausible. Darwin developed the theory of natural selection to explain differences between species, but many of his contemporaries, including Spencer and Darwin's own cousin Francis Galton, used his ideas to promote Social Darwinism and eugenics. Social Darwinism maintains that certain groups of people are poorer than others and more likely to be used as slave labour because they're 'less evolved' and therefore inferior.

However, the initial principle of eugenics, defined by Galton (1996), was directly in connection with the teaching and work of Darwin, himself very influenced by Malthus. According to Darwin, the mechanisms of natural selection are thwarted by human civilisation. One of the objectives of civilisation is somehow to help the underprivileged ones, therefore to be opposed to the natural selection responsible for extinction of the weakest. According to eugenicists, this intervention could affect the natural balance, leading to an increase in individuals who were weaker genetically and who would have normally been eliminated through natural-selection processes.

## RACE AND CLASS

In the nineteenth century, racial differences, which effectively drew species divides between people, were applied on grounds of class position also. 'What we would now consider to be class or social distinctions were seen as racial ones' (Malik 1996: 81). Race can be associated with measures of social status, where one lives, occupation, language, style of dress, and so on. There is, as Goldberg points out, the sense that if one behaves 'white', one is seen as white. So, race is composed of conventional discourses and if performers 'play white' then they are likely to be considered white. A more Marxist interpretation suggests that race is a relationship

to the means of production (see Chapter 3). In this view, race is seen to be a mask for other forms of social inequality and is reducible to socio-economics. Accepting racialisation by creating inviolable genetic boundaries legitimised inequality and allowed unequal treatment to become institutionalised.

It could be argued that the use of racial divisions emerged as a way of resolving the conflict between, on the one hand, the ideology of equality for all and universal reason and, on the other, facts of social inequality. We might think of Orwell's *Animal Farm* and the pig Napoleon's dictum: 'All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others' (Orwell 1945). The development of a contradictory concept of 'race' stems from just this style of reasoning. Indeed, without such a concept, inequality might have been a much more bitter pill to swallow: 'Racial ideology was the inevitable product of the persistence of differences of rank, class and peoples in a society that had accepted the concept of equality' (Malik 2002: 5).

## **RACE AS CULTURE**

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Whether 'culture' is taken to mean a whole way of life or as signifying discursive practices through which hegemony is produced, it is nevertheless integral both to the lived realities of race as well as the construction of boundaries that make it an intensely political concept.

Race, from a culturalist viewpoint (such as that espoused by Stuart Hall), is a series of shifting and unfinished points of identification. While these may have some biological referents, they are quite removed from inheritable biological concepts of race. As Goldberg explains, 'In its non-biological interpretation, then, race stands for historically specific forms of cultural connectedness and solidarity' (Goldberg 1993: 59). It is here that the concept of ethnicity seems to overlap with this discourse of race. Culture has taken a central place in many areas of social science. There has been a marked 'cultural turn' away from structuralist paradigms, with their focus on macro-level forces of social change that obscure the more individual experiences of social actors. The cultural stuff that is contained within the lived experience of ethnic boundaries becomes the focus for a differentialist approach. However, culture is also prone to reification and correlates, at times, closely to more physical attributes. As Frederickson states, it's 'difficult in specific historical cases to say whether appearance or 'culture' is the source of the salient differences because culture can be reified and essentialised to the point where it has the same deterministic effect as skin colour' (2002: 169).

## ETHNICITY

Ethnicity derives from *ethnikos*, the Greek word for ‘heathen’. ‘It was widely used in the senses of heathen, pagan or Gentile, until C19, when this sense was generally superseded by the sense of a racial characteristic’ (Williams 1983: 119). However, in the modern era, ethnicity has come to be generally used as a term for collective cultural identity (while race categorises ‘them’ from outside, ethnicity is used for shared values and beliefs, the self definition of a group, ‘us’). Van den Berghe drew the influential distinction between ethnicity as ‘socially defined but on the basis of cultural criteria’ whereas race is ‘socially defined but on the basis of physical criteria’ (Van den Berghe 1967: 9).

In the context of western multicultural societies, ethnicity has become the preferred used term to avoid ‘race’ and its implications of a discredited ‘scientific’ racism. Ethnicity is generally taken to be a more inclusive and less objectifying concept; indicating the constantly negotiated nature of boundaries between ethnic groups rather than the essentialism implicit in divisions of ‘race’. The crossing of ethnic borders and encounters with those of different ethnic background is one of the most significant experiences in the formation of our identities. In the same vein Stuart Hall writes that:

To be English is to be your self in relation to the French and the hot-blooded Mediterranean, and the passionate, traumatized Russian soul. You go round the entire globe: when you know what everybody else is, then you are what they are not. Identity is always, in that sense, a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative.

(1991: 21)

The way in which ethnic boundaries reflect often heartfelt values and ideas of maintaining national integrity is frequently portrayed through the use of everyday discourses about others that often involve hackneyed images. These might include jokes, urban legends and stereotypes. However, there is also evidence that ethnicity can be an instrumental category that is activated during times of external threat. It is a functional aspect of groups that allows them to compete, often using a predetermined values and beliefs (self-affirming stereotypes and negative stereotypes of the other), to strengthen their case.

Guyanese academic and author Brackette Williams points out that it is important to consider the way groups produce meaning and which signs and symbols they attach meaning to. Perhaps there is no final, definitive ‘ethnicity’, only specific readings of ethnic identity at specific times and places.

What is the use of these categories in studying the production of meaning and its relationship to power? For me, these terms and concepts are simply working

tools. I'm not especially concerned with the ultimate meaning of 'ethnicity,' but rather with the reasons it keeps intervening as a category through which people shift kaleidoscopic kinds of meanings in relation to economic regimes and shifts in those regimes.

(Williams 1995)

Charles Taylor points out the dangers of classification becoming a practice that has distorting and belittling consequences: 'our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence. Often by the misrecognition of others. Non recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm can be a form of oppression imprisoning someone in a false distorted and reduced mode of being (Taylor 1992: 25).

The way in which ethnic identity is ascribed is important to consider. Is the shared characteristic the feature of a 'group' (which implies shared goals and coherency) or is it merely a pattern? The implication of being a member of an ethnic group is that at some level one has an awareness of shared values and interests and would be motivated to take collective action using this sense of common ethnic identity as an organising principle. Conversely, individuals who share common origins and cultural traits could be counted as belonging objectively to that ethnic group, yet when membership is not operational and genuinely shared motives do not exist, then this could be described as an ethnic category. What makes an ethnic category an ethnic group is the sense of 'we-feeling' and common interests in advancing the group's position in society through collective actions.

In Guyana for instance the creolese term 'ahwe people' is a uniting term that designates a Guyanese identity across ethnic boundaries, as in the following exhortation on the Guyanese Land of Six Peoples web site – a plea to bring back the old practices before the ethnic unrest of the late 1960s:

Is wha it gon tek fu bring back some a dem ting wha we talk bout – leh we tink, what about forming groups to plant up de land either in we backyard or in de back dam, forming a steel band, youth group(s), drama group(s), and so on.

My people yu interested? Alright, afta dis village day leh we organse ahwe self and show dem big people dat ahwe can du ting like dem and even betta – Right!

Leh we try.

(Hazel Robinson, *Guyana Chronicle*, 23 May 2004)

The strong sense of communal identity in Robinson's statement shows the intentionality of ethnic identity. Here, a strong memory forms a potent exhortation for collective action across ethnic boundaries united by shared creolised language and culture. It shows how an 'imagined community' can perhaps mobilise sense



of identity and possibly action. In a similar vein, Jenkins (1996: 23) relates the Marxist concept of ‘class in itself’ and ‘class for itself’ to this character of group identity. In other words a class can be a passive term, which simply describes apparently common features, but when the class recognises its true nature in relation to the means of production, then the identity is activated and class consciousness occurs. In a similar way, ethnicity, like race, can be an imposed category or, conversely, it can become central to a revolutionary sense of identity in a struggle for independence or political power, or simply a recognition of shared experiences or attributes. This tension between externally proscribed and internally held identities is extremely political and may lead to conflicts, civil war, persecution or, conversely, it may be the catalyst to restore a sense of positive community.

Ethnicity can then be considered as a transient concept. It is not necessarily useful to try and pin down a final meaning. Rather, the different possible dimensions reflect the shifting terrain of social theories about difference. As we shall see, attempts to pin down or reify terms like ‘ethnicity’ are part of the problem as they reduce a complex ever-changing phenomenon. Loomba addresses this issue:

The term ‘ethnicity’ has dominantly been used to indicate biologically and culturally stable identities, but Hall asks us to decouple it from its imperial, racist or nationalist deployment and to appropriate it to designate identity as a constructed process rather than a given essence. For Hall, the new black ethnicities visible in contemporary Britain are results of the ‘cut-and-mix’ processes of ‘cultural *diaspora-ization*.’

(Loomba 1998: 176)

## RACE AS ETHNICITY

In the concept of ‘ethnorace’, as Goldberg suggests (1992), the phenomena that are ostensibly separated by the terms ‘ethnicity’ and ‘race’ are liable at times to overlap. For example, ‘Jews, Blacks, Hispanics, and Japanese in the United States may now be referred to as either race or ethnic group’ (Goldberg 1992: 554). These categories may have different connotations, and ethnicity tends to be seen as less tendentious. Furthermore, more recent US data (2000 Census) define ethnicity as the broader term cutting across possible divisions of race:

In general, the Census Bureau defines ethnicity or origin as the heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth of the person or the person’s parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States. People who identify their origin as Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino may be of any race. According to the revised Office of Management and Budget standards noted above, race

is considered a separate concept from Hispanic origin (ethnicity) and, wherever possible, separate questions should be asked on each concept.

(US Census Bureau 1999)

The association of ‘race’ with scientific racism and Nazism and the lack of any evidence for basic biological differences in the genetic composition of ‘races’ have led to the cautionary use of inverted commas and the preference for the term ‘ethnicity’ which has become the acceptable term used for otherness in multicultural societies like Britain, Canada and Australia, and yet the term has different and sometimes contradictory meanings. As a means of categorisation, the term ‘ethnicity’ can be another manifestation of the dominant culture marginalising minority groups in its midst. In Australia, for example, over recent years, the term ‘ethnic’ has become a generic noun for anyone of other than Anglo-Celtic origin (and is especially associated with Greeks and Italians, as the term ‘wog’<sup>2</sup> becomes recognised as racist and unacceptable) as in ‘He (or she) is ethnic’. This reification of terms is exactly why Hall (1996a) is concerned to reclaim the process of construction in the term ‘ethnicity’ and to avoid ready-made labels, indicating that ethnic identity is a process of becoming, a question of intersubjective negotiation, not a final state. However, in popular culture as well as in ‘official’ documents, ethnicity is conflated with race. A prime example of this semantic confusion is demonstrated by the census categories used in the UK and the USA.

In our society we are frequently confused about the correct term to use to describe people. The term ‘background’ (as suggested by Soysal 2000) could be argued to indicate the subject’s loss of continuity, perhaps as a member of one of many diasporic communities (see Chapter 8). A ‘background’ might be an expression of an imagined community, a constant reminder that one has been separated from one’s past – or that the past is constantly being reshaped by the present. Appropriate titles and forms of address change rapidly and, as can be seen, in Figure 2.3, the process of eliciting ethnic identity can be fraught with problems. There is a noticeable lag between official forms used for the census and the social reality of people’s self-identifications.

In the 1991 UK Census, the form in Figure 2.3 had become a familiar sight and one that served as a constant reminder of the difficulties inherent in categorising people. Forms like this telegraph certain imagined identities, but they do not appear to actually be considering ‘ethnicity’, or at least, if they are, they do so in a most contradictory fashion. As Ratcliffe (2004: 37–8) points out, “‘White’ is clearly a pseudo-“racial” term based on phenotype, “Black-Caribbean”

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2 A term used to denote Greek/Italian Australians. An interesting phenomenon is the reclaiming of this derogatory term by the Greek/Italian communities, this has been seen in several popular TV and stage comedies *Wogs Life* and *Wogs Out of Work*.

White	<input type="checkbox"/>
Black Caribbean	<input type="checkbox"/>
Black African	<input type="checkbox"/>
Black other	<input type="checkbox"/> (please specify)
Bangladeshi	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chinese	<input type="checkbox"/>
Indian	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pakistani	<input type="checkbox"/>
Asian other	<input type="checkbox"/> (please specify)
Other	<input type="checkbox"/> (please specify)

Figure 2.3 Ethnic categories used in the 1991 Census

also prioritizes phenotype and conflates a variety of island origins and language groups . . . “Indian”, for example, brings together under one label those of many different religious, linguistic and regional backgrounds’. In short, there is little suggestion of the collective cultural identifiers that we might consider to be included in ethnicity.

The disparity between Figure 2.3 and 2.4 illustrates this constant process of reinventing and reshaping past identities and forming new, hybrid identities more realistically aligned with one’s social experiences. However, the categories used are, again, problematic. Origins, allegiances to cultural heritage, questions of citizenship and belonging as well as the marked interethnic relationships in the United Kingdom are all issues that underpin the decisions in constructing census categories and that have informed the changes that can be noted between the two censuses.

In the 2001 Census, a range of more detailed categories were included. Although there seems to be some attempt to recognise the changing perceptions and dynamism within communities, there are still fundamental problems. The white category has been extended, which breaks down the hegemonic and monolithic nature of whiteness into several categories. However, the ascriptive choices offered give little recognition of ethnic identity. These labels are by themselves unable to address questions of the multifaceted forms of cultural identification that cut across the borders of such broad categories. However, a question on religious identity that was used in the 2001 Census does begin to collate a more refined picture.

The category of black again takes on a different meaning here as a master category, arguably asserted as more inviolable. Asian too is now recognised as a unifying category in parallel to black (but Chinese has separate status/identity).

White – British
White – Irish
White – Other
Mixed – White/Black Caribbean
Mixed – White/Black African
Mixed – White/Asian
Mixed – Other
Black/Black British – Caribbean
Black/Black British – African
Black/Black British – Other
Asian/Asian British – Indian
Asian/Asian British – Pakistani
Asian/Asian British – Bangladeshi
Asian/Asian British – Other Asian
Chinese
Other Ethnic Group

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Figure 2.4 Ethnic categories used in the 2001 Census

These decisions are of course intensely political. The self-identity of Asians within this frame is extraordinarily complex and, within the national categories recognised here, is also defined by regional ethnic and religious cleavages. One of the most significant shifts over the ten years is the inclusion of ‘mixed’ as a category. This begs the question, how a significant percentage of people chose to designate themselves in 1991. The term ‘mixed’ could also be considered problematic as it implies there are pure ethnicities. The preferred term today is ‘dual heritage’ (or ‘multiple heritage’).

The presumption of Britishness as a distinct and unified ethnic category is increasingly problematic. This does not only apply to the devolving of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales away from immediate Westminster control or the complex hybrid identities that comprise the mix of Asian, Caribbean and African groups that make up nearly 9 per cent of the UK’s population, but also movement towards defined regionalism. It is argued that: ‘more people can define themselves as Londoners, Brummies, Mancunians or Geordies first, and English second. Scots often divide on east-west lines in terms of instinctive local identities’ (from a speech by MP Barbara Roche, 2002). In 2004, the idea of the North East warranting a separate regional assembly was mooted and overwhelmingly rejected by the people themselves in a referendum. But many would argue that ‘Geordies are distinctive

in their character, dialect and in their identity forged through strong associations with the working-class occupations of mining, ship-building and the steel industry’.

In the USA, similar semantic struggles are being conducted as Brackette Williams (1995) comments on referring to the significance of the detailed semiotic process of naming. For members of the majority white culture who have, perhaps, had less cause to feel marginal, such concerns might seem surprising, but in the USA, as in many multi-ethnic nations, citizenship and identity are often struggles for equality and recognition in the face of political and economic marginalisation.

In the United States, when you look at categories like Asian American, African American, Hispanic American and then look at the category *black*, you notice that it remains one of the few uncapitalized categories. Part of the reason for people wanting to change this label is precisely to acquire that capitalization. That may seem trivial, but to have that capital, as opposed to being lowercased, is a way of speaking semiotically about status positioning. It does not create the position. It does not really alter status. But what one attempts to do is to reorient one’s position in this struggle to attain that status one doesn’t yet have. By capitalizing everybody, perhaps one puts everyone on the same terrain of struggle.

So you look at things like that and you think, how have categories changed? We now talk about Native Americans instead of Indians, but we don’t hyphenate Native and American. What does acquiring a hyphen, acquiring a capitalization, altering it from a color category to a so-called cultural or transcontinental category, mean for the political positioning of that group? Does it alter that positioning? Is it archaeological? That is, is it a trace of what has already been accomplished? Or is it a signal for what will happen, for what one expects to happen in the future? If you want to be hyphenated in an environment where everyone else is not hyphenated, what is the motivation?

(Williams 1995)

This semiotic struggle indicates a shifting identification, pride and assertion in identity. It could reflect shifts between ideas of race (colour based) and the ascendancy of ethnicity. However, the US Census has fewer racial categories, and the typical breakdown of results makes certain interesting distinctions to the British model as shown in Figure 2.5.

The striking fact about these categories is that they are based on race and, in fact, are not far removed from some of the oldest forms of racial categorising (based on colour and other phenotypical attributes). Therefore, because Hispanics (who are a significant population in the USA) are not seen as a race, they are not measured in this census as it is assumed that ethnic is the wider category and race is subsumed under this broader term. So it is possible for black people or

Population Counts for City X	
Total Population	500,000
One Race – Total	450,000
White	400,000
Black or African American	10,000
American Indian and Alaska Native	5,000
Asian	500
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	100
Some Other Race	34,400
Two or more races – Total	50,000

Figure 2.5 Typical breakdown of ethnic categories in the US Census

(Source: US Census Bureau, Public Information Office, 2001)

Asians to also be Hispanic. This could be interpreted as a positive practice in the sense that it actively resists the conflation of race with ethnicity. However, the selecting on the basis of race gives power and credence to one of the most dubious and divisive terms. Interestingly, here there is no recognition of ‘mixed’ categories, although in reality the USA has very significant mixed (or dual heritage) populations.

Between 1970 and 1990, the number of multiracial children under age 18 has quadrupled to 2 million according to the U.S. Census Bureau. That number will grow as interracial marriages continue to soar. There were 1.4 million interracial couples in 1995, a 114% increase since 1980, the Census Bureau said.

(*USA Today*, 8 May 1997)

The unwillingness to utilise a category that would affirm people’s mixed or dual identities is puzzling. (In 2000, the US Census Bureau gave some ground on this issue permitting individuals to mark several boxes to indicate their mix of ethnicities.) Although by all accounts the decision may be motivated by political resistance of African Americans who may see a significant ‘mixed’ category as undermining the resource base received.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

Race and ethnicity, like other cultural terms that are central to social identity, are especially complex and difficult to define. Some scholars and census takers might insist on separating the terms and seeing race as a very different category based on physical and objective differences, hinting at a nature–culture divide between the terms race and ethnicity. Yet, from the Spanish origins of the term (*raza*), as Sollors (2002: 102) points out, ‘race’ was used to designate not only Moors and Jews, but also heretics and their descendants. Pieterse has shown the manner in which boundaries have been drawn over history to include and exclude different groups in Europe, and Goldberg’s work has traced discursive changes that reflect social and political realities in different historical periods. While race-makers categorised human types and suggested sharply demarked physical differences, there was always dispute about where and how to draw boundaries.

### EXERCISE 2.1

- 1 When you look at the census forms (Figures 2.3 and 2.4), do you feel confident that your identity is adequately captured? Why?/Why not?
- 2 Which one allowed you the most approximate identification? Why?
- 3 What are the implications of the category ‘white’ or ‘black other’?
- 4 How would you decide on a category if you were of ‘mixed race’?
- 5 What does the form suggest about the manner in which such categories have come into being?
- 6 What is your regional identity? How defined is it? Are you aware of distinct cultural history, or regional dialect or accent? Do you choose to identify or dis-identify with this? Why?
- 7 What role does class play in regional identities?
- 8 Discuss images of regional identities (e.g. of Geordies) in magazines (like *Viz*’s Basher Bacon, etc. and in cartoons like ‘Andy Capp’). Do such caricatures capture anything enduring?
- 9 Consider the speculative comments made by Brackette Williams. What differences do you think would occur between USA and the United Kingdom in terms of the drawing of ethnic boundaries and the sense of identity experienced in each country?
- 10 Compare the British Census to the more limited categories in the US Census.
- 11 What might be the reasoning behind not using a ‘mixed’ category on a national basis? (Several states have instituted this, but it has been resisted nationally.)
- 12 Consider other semiotic forms of expression of citizenship and nation. How do the following reflect identity?

- (a) flags
  - (b) coins/notes.
- 13 Consider words that we commonly use to designate other peoples, such as Asians, Arabs, Caribbean, Europeans. These terms generalise and obscure differences. When does it become necessary to use more specific terms and why? What is the possible impact on your identity to be subsumed under an umbrella term?
  - 14 What signs are there today that there is still some belief and support for eugenics or eugenic-type policies? Are such policies always wrong?
  - 15 The strand of evolutionist biology that was applied to Social Darwinism has survived today in certain theoretical ideas and principles. What are they, and do they have any credence?
  - 16 There is, as Goldberg points out the sense that if one behaves 'white' one is seen as white. So race is composed of conventional discourses and if the performer 'plays white' then he/she is likely to be considered white. Discuss this observation and relate it to situations of adaptation to the dominant culture. Are visible differences partly or wholly negated by impression management? (You might relate this to Indians who take on the 'dreadfully English' stereotypes or to other ethnic minority groups. Such presentation is frequently parodied on TV – consider *Goodness Gracious Me*.)