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RACE, ETHNICITY AND SOCIAL HARMONY: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**Richard Basham**

Few words are more contentious than 'race'. In common usage the word suggests a connection between physical appearance and behavior, or even between appearance and intellectual and physical capabilities. As such, invocation of 'race' implies acceptance of a gamut of behavioral stereotypes. Often such racial stereotypes seem harmless enough, especially when they appear complementary. Thus, for example, few American blacks resent their racial characterization as people with rhythm or natural athletic ability. But such stereotypical thinking usually has its darker side and positive physical attributes of blacks have been intertwined with less favorable assessment of their intellectual ability, appearance and moral standards. The fact that such stereotypes have had wide currency among *both* whites and blacks only enhances the latter's sensitivity to their pejorative nature (See Kardiner and Ovesey 1951: 248—257; Proshansky and Newton 1973),

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The difficulty in deciding which racial stereotypes are assumed, or can be expressed, in any given context points to one reason social scientists generally feel discomfited with the notion of 'race': it is invariably a politically-loaded concept, so deeply intertwined with individual perspectives and a society's political history as to render objective research almost impossible. One aspect of the difficulty of studying and reporting on race is that every group has its own notion of which racial characterizations are fair comment and which are 'racist'. Of course, strictly speaking *any* characterization of behavior on the basis of 'race' is 'racist'. And even use of the word 'racist' – especially, habitual use – to label people (as opposed to verbal or written statements) suggests that the speaker is probably afflicted with the malady he, himself, condemns; those who seek constantly to uncover 'racists' need usually look no further than their own mirror.

'Race' is clearly a political and interactional minefield, one in which one's own academic, political and 'racial' interests often come into conflict with those of others. Thus, for example, to survive a 'racial' discussion and avoid being labelled a 'racist', people often adopt one of two strategies: either engage in a dance of social niceties and inanities in which one grasps for pleasant things to say about members of other 'races' or else denigrate one's own. The former strategy tends to limit conversation, as one seeks to evade such potentially sensitive issues as economics, religion, diet and social manners, while the latter strategy – of denigrating one's own group – is

usually adopted as a kind of refined condescension by those who regard themselves as offspring of a superior race and wish to ingratiate themselves with those they regard as their inferiors.

Far more significant than such interactional implications of racialistic thought, however, is the fact that the assumptions which generally underlie use of the word 'race' — in which behavior and ability are connected with socially-defined behavioral types — have long been discredited (Gordon 1964: 27–28; Montague 1975). Certainly, few would argue today that children of one 'race' adopted by those of another could not comport themselves as full-fledged members of their adopted 'race'. Even on a purely physiological level, race is a suspect concept. If we restrict its use to delimiting populations which are genetically-distinguishable (and this is not as easy as it sounds), we are still faced with the fact, long ago established by the anthropologist Franz Boas (1938, 1940), that genetic variation within any population leads typically to overlapping of measurable physiological characteristics among races (Mason 1970: 28). The importance of this point should be clear if we consider the salience of such non-physiological factors as dress, language and comportment in directing our 'racial' categorizations. Thus, while we can readily distinguish among Malays, Chinese and Indian individuals, for example, we encounter people of ambiguous appearance far more often than our mind permits our eyes to see; in such cases, we invoke unconsciously internalized rules of categorization based on behavior to resolve physical ambiguity.

To complicate matters still further, phenotype (appearance) is not always a reliable indicator of genetic relationship — i.e., people who look alike may not be related. Thus, the fact that skin color and nasal shape of peoples whose ancestors have long been resident in tropical climates tends towards similarity, and differs markedly from those of temperate origin, suggests not a world-wide genetic relationship among tropical peoples as opposed to temperate ones, but climatic adaptation resulting from natural selection (see Weiner 1954). Such adaptations are quite specific and unrelated to cultural and social phenomena.

To avoid legitimating spurious connections between physical appearance and behavior, social scientists generally prefer to use the term 'ethnicity' rather than race, even when (as in the case for Malaysia) there exists a strong correlation between physical appearance and ethnicity. Replacing 'race' with 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic group' — terms which emphasize a sense of common ancestry and tradition, rather than physical appearance *per se* — does not eliminate intergroup tensions, alter the nature of the phenomena, nor deny that the actors themselves may use physical differences to differentiate among ethnic groups (see Cox 1948; Baxter and Sansom 1972: 15). But it does shift focus to cultural, economic and political factors, which are usually of far greater salience than physical appearance.

In replacing 'race' with 'ethnicity', however, we are left with a residue of instances of intergroup relations which are difficult to characterize as being of an ethnic nature. Chief among these is the case of American blacks who are acculturated — the idea of a distinct American 'black culture' is a chimera constructed largely for psychological and political reasons — but not assimilated to the larger American society, i.e., American blacks *are* culturally American, but whites and blacks do not for the most part share common