

DEBATES AND DEVELOPMENTS

## Racialization and racialization research

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### ABSTRACT

This paper advocates a greater emphasis on racialization research, and consists of observations and research questions that could add to our understanding of racialization. Such understanding will be useful and perhaps even necessary, as a variety of world events result in continuing population movements as well as economic and political crises that could increase intra and international conflicts. Any of these could lead to the further racialization of refugees, migrants, earlier immigrants and others.

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### Introduction

Today's world is marked by dramatic changes that provide a reason for extending and broadening the concept of racialization and to research using it.

The world's current and expected changes include continuing population movements brought on by war, civil war and, in the longer run, drastic climate change.

Moreover, the ever increasing globalization of the economy and technological innovation is affecting most national economies, and setting people of different social positions and with different interests against each other economically and politically. As a result, yet other ingroup–outgroup conflicts could develop in the future.

Some (if not all) of these changes could increase and intensify the racialization and demonization of refugees, migrants and others as dangers to national identity, well-being, safety and security.

Even now, a more active and detailed approach to the study of racialization may encourage the new empirical research that is likely to be needed, not only to advance knowledge but also to help policy-makers figure out how to deal with racialization and its effects.

In the U.S., racialization has generally been focused solely on the racial act itself. Thus, Omi and Winant define the concept as: “the extension of racial

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meaning to a previously racially unclassified social relationship, social practice or group” (2014, 111).

As I read their definition, it, like all others, does not include the initial such extension, which occurs after birth when we are assigned to a race, at least in the U.S. and other modern societies. As I understand common usage, racialization refers to subsequent extensions.

Another definition, which resembles Omi and Winant’s, substitutes racial outcomes for meanings (powell 2012, 4), which calls attention to the fact that the outcomes are usually harmful to the racialized. As a result, racialization is virtually always condemned, at least by social scientists.

In addition, the term is most often applied to populations and groups, whose characteristics, practices and activities are explained by racially causal explanations, often racist.

These effects can vary in intensity levels, and in almost all modern societies, the harshest effects are usually visited on the poorest and darkest skinned among these populations.

Racialization is also a process, which generally begins with the arrival of new immigrants, voluntary or involuntary, who are perceived as different and undeserving. It may be accompanied by self-racialization on the part of those doing the racializing.

However, if and when the racialized are no longer viewed as undeserving, they may undergo deracialization, although subsequent changing circumstances can sometimes result in their reracialization.

The rest of the paper expands on these observations, many as hypotheses that deserve empirical study. The observations include some already well-known ideas and findings but looking at them through the lens of racialization could lead to new studies.

The paper is almost entirely devoted to negatively valued racialization and deals mainly with racialization in the U.S., although hopefully, its observations and assertions will be useful elsewhere. Many of my observations have already been made by others, but in the U.S. they have often been framed in ways other than racialization or taken the form of passing comments.

Other countries have done more with the concept, and British scholars have unpacked it most completely (Murji and Solomos 2005). Also, this journal has published articles on racialization all over the world (e.g. McDonnell and de Lourenco 2009; Han 2010; Ergin 2014).

## **Racialization as a process**

Despite its often being viewed as a single act, racialization is best understood as a process, beginning as a temporal process with the act that is described in the Omi and Winant definition.

Racialization also has endings. It can become a condition of long and even nearly permanent duration. In that case, all members of the racialized group are treated as if all they do, feel and think is caused by their race as it is conceived by the racially dominant population (in the U.S., read mostly whites). Then, racialization is likely to become institutionalized.

All aspects of this process have to be examined. Questions to be investigated include how does racialization start – and how could it be stopped. Who begins it and how; and how are other racializers recruited or found or find each other. Do informal and formal racializing organizations take part, and what about others, including “the media?”

Since people and social situations need to be perceived as different if they are to be considered for racialization, one must ask what differences are considered in the process and how they are perceived or imagined. Are the perceived differences phenotypical or behavioural or both? And do the perceived differences vary by the kinds of populations targeted for racialization?

How the differences are judged is also relevant. What reasons, justifications, motives and emotions are involved and invoked in these judgments? And which are used to find or recruit other racializers?

Racialization must be studied as a social process as well, since it is a socially agreed upon construction with a number of participants, with the most important being the racializers and the racialized.

Others include the individuals, organizations, agencies and institutions that help bring about and benefit economically and otherwise from racialization, as well as those who must deal with whatever social problems result from racialization. These include politicians, jurists and civil rights activists, among many others.

Consequently, racialization ought also to be studied as an economic and as a political process. Economic racialization often steers the racialized into bad jobs, that is, poorly paid, “dirty” and dangerous ones, such as selling illegal goods or being sent into military combat. The racialized may also be excluded from the labour market altogether.

They are frequently exploited economically in other ways, such as having to pay higher prices for food, shelter, other necessities, loans, and many other goods and services.

Political racialization may involve exclusion from various citizenship rights, as well as proportionally high levels of punishment, including incarceration. Racial biases are also built into some government programmes that offer benefits from which the racialized are excluded.

## **Racializers and the racialized**

Identification of the racializers should be among the first topics to be studied. Even though they tend to come from the racially dominant population, they

may also include other, already racialized groups seeking to reduce the social distance between themselves and the racial dominants.

America's immigrants, whatever their colour, have always learned quickly to imitate native-born whites and discriminate against blacks and other previously racialized populations similarly.

Another needed study must try to determine which dominants set the racialization process in motion: whether elites or the rank and file population, and who in each.

Elites are usually the official initiators. They define race, rule which phenotypical and other characteristics determine it and codify the colour or other schemes by which races are differentiated phenotypically. Which elites do what should be studied, distinguishing between experts, including scholars, as well as elected and appointed public officials and the economic and social influentials. Politicians who play on fears about newcomers and argue for their racialization or its maintenance have always played a significant role in this process.

However, elites rarely act in a social vacuum, often responding to encouragement, organized and unorganized support and pressure from the racially dominant populace. It may even initiate the racialization process.

Again, who does exactly what, how and why must be part of the research. Basic demographic analyses of both racializers and racialized are needed as well.

The racialized will generally also racialize their racializers. They probably do so mostly with feelings of resentment and anger since overt action against racial dominants could be punitive.

Still, their artists, writers, academics, activists and others are generally allowed to publicly express and act on these feelings. Some of them – social scientists included – are celebrated and rewarded for what they say and do.

However, the lighter skinned members among the racialized will likely also reinforce it on their co-racials, using the phenotypical and other differences invoked by the dominants, notably the shades of skin colour.

While most racialization research is conducted among adults, looking at the process among children and young people may offer useful clues about the workings of the process. Studies of when children notice what adults define as racial differences, and when they copy parental, other adult or peer judgments can shed new light on the process.

Pollsters and other researchers regularly report that America's young whites are racially more tolerant, which suggests studies of whether and how they racialize, and how their process differs from that of adults. Equally important is research into whether and under what conditions they later adopt adult patterns of racialization.

## The causes of racialization

Racialization must also be understood by identifying its causes, and policy-oriented causal studies are particularly necessary to help put an end to racialization, or at least that judged negatively. One likely and initial cause of racialization is the arrival of newcomers, particularly poor ones, although sometimes long residing populations can, because of changing economic or political events, be racialized belatedly.

Newcomers who are perceived to differ phenotypically from the racial dominants are probably the first targets of the racialization process. Still, sometimes newcomers (again especially poor ones) are perceived to differ racially even if they are phenotypically similar.

At America's very beginning as a country, Benjamin Franklin, one of its most active founders, is said to have complained that Swedish and German newcomers were hurting Anglo Saxon racial purity. Because the criteria of purity are as flexible as other racial criteria, once impure newcomers may be purified relatively quickly if a newer and darker skinned set of newcomers arrive.

Nonetheless, the more important cause of racialization is the perception of threat, imagined or real by the racially dominant population. The perceived threats can include feared loss of safety or security, personal or national, as well as worries of downward mobility, especially those resulting from fears about the newcomers taking their jobs and for lower wages.

Publicly visible activities or ideas that reject significant rules and norms of the racially dominant may also be perceived as threatening. Such threats can come to the fore especially when the economy performs poorly for many racial dominants, or when rising rates of street crime or violence increase the fear of strangers.

Threatening times may even persuade racializers that the newcomers are engaged in secret activities that justify their racialization. Thus, all Muslim Americans are beginning to be seen as a potential threat, for example as possible jihadists. In the process, some racial dominants seem to consider Muslims – and Arabs as well – a race.

Although the fear of threats usually develops with or shortly after the arrival of newcomers, already existing stereotypes associated with the newcomers' country or region of origin can stimulate the expectation of threats before they even come.

Centuries ago, dark-skinned Africans were thought to be savages or animals, which helped racialize African-American slaves before they were brought here. To be sure, the lowest possible status assigned to slaves in the class hierarchy also played a role – and still does so 150 years after their emancipation. Voluntary immigrants from preindustrial countries viewed as tribal or primitive may become candidates for racialization too.

Even the poor immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe who came to the U.S. between 1880 and 1924 were racialized, including by Northern Europeans who had immigrated only a generation or two earlier. The newcomers' skins were thought to be dark or at least swarthy, and the country's racial dominants only accepted them as fully white after the Second World War (e.g. Roediger 1991; Ignatiev 1995; Gans 2012)

### **The effects of racialization**

The causal analysis of racialization must be accompanied by studies of the treatment of the racialized. Such research should begin when newcomers first arrive. How these treatments change over time and may be institutionalized is, however, a long-term study.

The major treatments can be divided into three kinds. The first includes name-calling, blaming, demonization and other forms of stigmatization; the second, discrimination, segregation, eviction and other forms of exclusion from the society of the racial dominants. The third and harshest form of treatment is harassment, persecution, prosecution, incarceration and other forms of punishment, including the ultimate one: lynching.

Although the activities constituting treatment, or more accurately mistreatment, have already been studied for a long time, racialization researchers could aim to determine intensity levels of mistreatment and learn which sets of racializers resort to which forms of mistreatment.

Studies of mistreatment associated with economic and political racialization can look at the racialization processes that shunt the racialized to bad jobs and into second class citizenship.

The effects of these treatments on the racialized have also been studied, but new effects are being discovered all the time, either because the treatments are changing or new research leads to new findings. For example, researchers are currently learning about the emotional and other effects of the high and nearly constant levels of stress among the racialized, and their cumulative worsening over the generations if harmful treatment continues.

Effects studies are particularly important because the effects of racialization generally do greater harm to the racialized than the racialization process itself. Consequently, continued study of which effects do the most damage, on whom, and why are essential, especially to help policy-makers and others seeking to put an end to such treatments.

Even so, racialization may have positive effects, even if these are almost always bitter sweet, since they are frequently accompanied by negative ones. Racialization can initiate or increase racial pride and cohesion among the racialized, although the pride is usually partly defensive as well.

When racializers treat some races as model minorities and favour them over all other races, the so racialized do not necessarily feel complimented. Young Asian-American women whom whites treat as exotic resent being defined as sexual objects.

## **Racialization and the undercaste**

As already noted, blacks (particularly African-Americans) have been the major victims of the harshest effects of racialization, as well as the likelihood of permanent racialization with little hope of eventual deracialization.

Indeed, poor blacks, particularly males, are in danger of being assigned to an undercaste (Gans 1993), a racialized variant of Gunnar Myrdal's economic concept of the underclass (Myrdal 1993).

The undercaste is located at the bottom of America's class and racial hierarchies, and its occupants are prevented from escaping it by unusually severe stigmatization, exclusion and punishment. The caste's borders are not totally closed; upward mobility into the black working and middle classes is possible.

However, only the unusually talented and ambitious whose skills are wanted or needed by racial dominants or others are able to move higher. The technically, intellectually and otherwise academically gifted are now sought after by elite colleges; athletes and entertainers can become celebrities as long as their talents or public personas are in demand.

One reason for the likely permanency of the undercaste is the benefits it provides for the racially dominant population. Its seemingly permanent position at the bottom of the racial and class hierarchies makes it a secure anchor for both hierarchies, promising other and better off non-whites and poor whites that even when the country is awash with downward mobility, they will never hit bottom.

Not only can the better off place obstacles to escape from the undercaste, but they can push its members further down if they cannot rise in the racial and class hierarchy on their own.

The undercaste serves as a permanent scapegoat, which can be blamed for whatever social ills all the populations above it want or need to justify, and can therefore be mistreated in various ways.

Among the several other benefits, the undercaste provides captive consumers for a number of businesses and industries, including money lenders, drug sellers and others.

For this and other reasons, the undercaste crowds debtor and other prisons, thus enriching the policing and prison industries. Its members turn the badly deteriorated and unsafe housing in which many must live into cash cows for landlords. But they provide benefits as well to untold others, including the social scientists who study them.

## Self-racialization

When new immigrants arrive in their new country, they also enter into its class and racial system, and if they are racialized as well, they most likely react in some way. Perhaps they do so in puzzlement, or anger, surprise, or with resignation, and in the process, they undergo what I call self-racialization.

The children of native-born populations who are racialized from birth undergo self-racialization as they grow up, and research about the emergent racial awareness among children can be used to study and understand how this takes place.

Still, the most interesting research question is whether racial dominants in the act and process of racializing others also self-racialize, and if so how. This question is particularly relevant to America, where many whites have not recognized that they are also members of a race.

Those who do realize it may even racialize themselves in the very act of racializing others. As they construct the racialized as biological or other inferiors, racializers might feel that they are superior. Indeed, that may be one reason racializers do what they do.

White self-racialization has a long history. American slavery was accompanied by the self-glorification of white slave owners and their supporters. After the slaves were freed, whites, especially poor ones had only their whiteness to distinguish themselves from blacks. Contemporary versions of this reaction persist among today's white working class and seem to be increasing as they continue to suffer from downward mobility in an economy which no longer needs them.

That reaction takes even more intense form among white nationalists, who express the superiority of whiteness publicly. Some openly advocate Nazi racialism, employ Nazi symbols and resort to forms of violence associated with the Nazis.

The fear that some of the current flood of Middle Eastern and other refugees in Europe will lead to their possible admittance into the U.S. has also resulted in additional white self-racialization.

Another kind of white self-racialization seems to be taking place in the U.S. currently as whites realize that by mid-century if not before, America will become a so-called majority minority society in which whites are the minority.

The beginning realization of this reduction in numerical status and its diffusion throughout the white population could increase self-racialization. In fact, in the future, as whites come closer to losing their majority, more whites are likely realize that they too are a race.

If the country's economy is then stagnant and its politics as adversarial as at present, conflicts over the allocation of public and other resources could be further inflamed by racial ones.



Researchers will have to decide whether the concept of self-racialization is useful, and if it is, they should rename it since it is not an individual choice. It could be called ingroup racialization, but then all other forms of racialization would have to become outgroup racialization.

However, if the basic idea is useful whatever its name, a fuller understanding of the effects of white self-racialization would assist policy-oriented researchers, for example in overcoming the negative effects of racialization.

## **Deracialization and reracialization**

In the U.S., the term deracialization has so far been mainly used by political scientists to describe black politicians avoiding the discussion of racial issues, especially when campaigning for elected office (e.g. Perry 1991)

Despite the problems caused by creating two different definitions for the same term, sociologists should define it as a reversal of racialization.

That definition would describe the process by which groups previously defined as non-whites are now treated as whites.

A more complex definition would identify degrees of deracialization, beginning with a now utopian notion of the complete elimination of all racial concepts.

More realistic concepts would include limited forms of deracialization, in which visible phenotypical differences are recognized but ignored. Another, probably even more realistic, limited form describes people when they are deracialized in the labour market but not in their neighbourhoods.

The best example of actual deracialization in America is what social scientists have called the whitening of the European immigrants already described above, who were originally classified as dark or swarthy races and then became white ethnics.

However, much the same deracialization has begun among some of the Asian, Latino and other non-European immigrants who came to the U.S. after 1965. The first to be whitened have been the second-generation descendants of the immigrants who have married whites, particularly those who have moved into the middle and upper middle classes.

Years from now, the children of these intermarrieds who “look” white may not even be noticed by racializers. If and when their children also intermarry, they may simply vanish into the white population and may describe and consider themselves whites.

Conversely, few blacks have so far been whitened, or for that matter married whites to the same extent.

Another limited deracialization focusses mainly on eliminating the harsh treatment of racialization. It is typified by the pursuit of racial equality by the coalitions of whites and non-whites in the civil rights movement and its predecessors, and helped by liberal governments when they are in power.

Another and more recent example, in which social scientists have been particularly active, is the whiteness movement, if it can be called that, and its more recent corollary, which emphasizes the elimination of white privilege.

These forms of deracialization aim primarily to change patterns of self-racialization by whites so they will become aware of and give up their unequal rights, privileges and powers (e.g. Roediger 1991; Wildman 1996).

Since deracialization is also a social process, researchers can identify deracializers and the deracialized in these and other examples of deracialization.

One of the more intriguing set of deracializers are whites who now treat friends and colleagues from other races as white but still racialize people they do not know. Whether or not these deracializers still notice that the friends and colleagues they have whitened are phenotypically different from them is worth studying. A related study could examine whether whites notice any phenotypical differences among other whites.

Reracialization takes place when deracialized populations are restored to their previous racial status if racial dominants reconstruct them as threats. A good example are the Japanese Americans who were interned during the Second World War even though some had already been whitened before the war.

Other previously deracializeds may be reracialized in situations in which their erstwhile deracializers become or feel they are in danger of becoming a numerical minority, or of being disempowered in other ways.

The deracialized may be divided into those who fear that they could be reracialized, and those who feel secure about their deracialization. For example, many (if not most) Jews have long believed that antisemitism could always return since it has always done so in the past. Whether whitened Asians, Latinos and others share such fears is another worthwhile study.

## **Racialization and intersectionality**

The racialization process cannot be fully understood without bringing in class, gender and age, but also others.

Class is clearly the most prominent, since the first suspects considered threatening are the poor who then become the initial targets of racialization. Still, if once better off newcomers are suspected of becoming poor when they arrive, they may be viewed as threats as well. The Middle Eastern refugees now fleeing to Europe are a current example. But the racialization of rich arrivals may be celebratory, particularly if they are ready to spend their money or possess scarce skills.

Racialization is age-stratified, gendered and concurrently class-related as well. Poor young men are thought to be the most threatening, singly and in groups, and have often been described as members of a dangerous

class. Poor young women can be thought promiscuous or candidates for single motherhood who then are felt to endanger the nuclear family norm.

Even race itself can function as an intersectional factor in racialization, for the racial dominants who determine the racial criteria and categories have the power to formulate flexible ones that can be applied to anyone they deem threatening.

Thus, race can be defined as any publicly visible characteristic that can justify racialization, including nationality and religion.

Although skin colour is usually the first definitional criterion, other phenotypical characteristics can take its place when the newcomers' skin is the same as that of racial dominants. The size and shape of the nose or the curliness and colour of hair are examples.

However, non-phenotypical characteristics such as speech patterns, names, clothing styles and noticeable behaviour patterns and activities can also serve.

Religion has always been treated as a potential racial characteristic, especially if religious populations vary phenotypically from racial dominants. Whether Jews in the past or Muslims today, they could be suspected of threatening activities in their places of worship. Moreover, that suspicion covered non-religious Jews and Muslims as well.

They could also be racialized by being assigned already racialized characteristics. When poor Irish Catholics first arrived in predominantly Protestant America, they were deemed black, as were the first Turks who came to Germany a century later.

Because international terrorism is now associated with their religion, America's Muslims can now be perceived as potential terrorists. Only a few examples of actual terrorist acts allow racial dominants to describe Muslims in racial terms making them eligible for racialization.

Even clothing becomes a racialization tool, a graphic example being the *hajib*, which is sometimes implied as evidence that Muslim women are racially different. Whenever a cultural practice is thought to be unique to one group, people who are eager to racialize turn its practitioners into a race.

## **Racialization and othering**

Ultimately, racialization must also be understood as a form of othering, its distinctiveness being its potential for harsher, and sometimes permanent mistreatment than other forms of othering.

Phenotypical differences are particularly useful for permanent othering since the racialized cannot easily change them.

Conversely, when publicly visible activities and behaviour patterns are the tools for othering, the racialized can potentially escape through acculturation

but even then, the “otherizers” retain the ability to prevent or limit their social assimilation into the mainstream.

For example, a rising number of Asian-Americans can assimilate socially into the white world, including the labour market, but only up to a point, the so-called bamboo ceiling preventing them from further occupational mobility.

## Conclusion

Despite the widespread use of race to stigmatize, exclude and punish, current trends suggest a slow but continuing move toward greater racial equality. Social scientists have helped, especially by publicizing the victims of racial inequality in a variety of ways through their research.

Since racial inequality begins with racialization, greater emphasis on racialization research can perhaps enable social scientists to help the U.S. and other countries move yet further toward racial equality.

## Disclosure statement

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