

## **Working With and Against the Concepts of "Race" and "Ethnicity": Research Dilemmas and Tools**

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Review Essay:

**Yasmin Gunaratnam (2003). Researching "Race" and Ethnicity: Methods, Knowledge and Power.** London: Sage, 224 pages, 0-7619-7287-2(cloth) £90,95, 0-7619-7287-0 (pbk) £38,95

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**Abstract:** With her book "Researching 'Race' and Ethnicity: Methods Knowledge and Power," Yasmin GUNARATNAM makes a thoughtful contribution to the ongoing methodological debate on the concepts of "race" and ethnicity in qualitative research. She addresses some of the central concerns of the debate, including current conceptual approaches and practical research dilemmas involved in working with the concepts of "race" and "ethnicity." Following the tradition of critical "race" studies, she notes the inherent tendency of these concepts to essentialize and naturalize socially constructed differences and suggests analytic approaches that work both with and against these categories. She also comments on the procedure of "racial matching" (of interviewer and participant) and the related North-American debate on "'race'-of-interviewer-effects." Using her own empirical data from an ethnographic study on the construction of "race" and ethnicity in a hospice setting in the UK, she illustrates the complexities of the subject matter and the indispensable value of self-reflexivity in the research process. Shortcomings of the book relate to its occasional conceptual vagueness and proliferation of different theoretical approaches and the resulting lack of a central methodological theme that links the different chapters. However, the book provides a stimulating introduction to the field and constitutes a useful resource for teaching qualitative research methods in the context of "race" and ethnicity.

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## 1. Introduction

How do you escape the pitfalls of essentialization and racialization when doing research on "race" and "ethnicity"? And how do you develop a non-essentializing, deconstructivist approach without completely taking apart the conceptual tools which you need to study the lived experience of marginalized groups? These are some of the main questions addressed by Yasmin GUNARATNAM in her book "Researching 'Race' and Ethnicity: Methods, Knowledge and Power." Introducing the reader to the critical debate on the concepts of "race" and "ethnicity" in social science research, she traces the challenges faced by researchers in the field and discusses various social constructivist, feminist and radical "race" approaches to managing them. The explicit aim of the book is to address the dilemmas involved in the production of knowledge on "race" and ethnicity

"not so much in a prescriptive, task-oriented style of many method books, but in a way that is process oriented and about a thinking-through of some of the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions involved in the process of doing qualitative research that is concerned with recognizing difference and with pursuing social justice" (p.3). [1]

It has to be said, the expression "thinking-through" does reflect an occasional vagueness in her approach. Those readers seeking a point of clarity and certainty—both regarding the theoretical concepts as well as research practices—may be disappointed: the dilemmas are discussed but not resolved. However, the book offers a range of theoretical and analytic tools for managing the dilemmas productively and is skillfully illustrated with interview data from an ethnographic study on the production of "race" and ethnicity in a hospice setting in the UK. All in all, the book makes a thoughtful contribution to the ongoing methodological debate and provides a useful text for teaching qualitative methods in the context of studying "race" and ethnicity. [2]

The book contains eight chapters and is divided into three sections: Part 1: *Introduction—Thinking through knowledge, methods and power*, Part 2: *Debates and dilemmas in "interracial research"* and Part 3: *The doings and undoings of "race"—researching lived experience*. As indicated by the titles, the first part focuses on the theoretical debate, the second on aspects of the methodological debate and the third part demonstrates a number of specific approaches to analyzing empirical data. In this review, I appraise the three parts before discussing my experience of using a chapter from the book as teaching material in a qualitative methods class and ending with a concluding assessment of the strengths and shortcomings of the book. [3]

## 2. Part I: Introduction—Thinking Through Knowledge, Methods and Power

The first chapter, "Researching 'Race' and Ethnicity," introduces the reader to the concepts of "race" and "ethnicity" in the current theoretical debate. Drawing on post-structuralist, feminist, critical "race," and postcolonial theories, GUNARATNAM problematizes the concepts of "race" and ethnicity and points out that they carry a danger of essentializing difference. She follows a deconstructivist theoretical perspective and traces the difficulties and contradictions involved in working with these concepts while acknowledging their relevance for the lived experiences of marginalized individuals and groups today. [4]

GUNARATNAM notes that the terms are generally distinguished in that "race" evokes a biological and genetic referent while "ethnicity" refers to cultural and religious difference and kinship. She points out that "'race' is not a scientific category" but a "political and social construct" (p.4), thus drawing attention to its role in the construction of racism as a system of socio-economic power, exploitation and exclusion. Despite its lack of scientific validity, which has been previously noted by many authors (see for example BOLAFFI, BRACALENTI, BRAHAM & GINDRO, 2003; BULMER & SOLOMOS, 1999; RATCLIFFE, 2004; TWINE & WARREN, 2000), the concept of "race" nevertheless remains a pivotal position in contemporary discourse. As a discursive practice, "race" has naturalizing effects and racial difference appears to be a fixed, scientific fact. When held up to scientific scrutiny, however, the biological differences that the concept seems to suggest, do not hold up. As GUNARATNAM points out, "the differences attributable to 'race' within a population are as great as those between racially defined categories" (p.4). Racial and ethnic groups are "imagined communities" (BULMER & SOLOMOS, 1999, p.5) that, nevertheless, have real, material consequences. To signify a critical awareness of the socially constructed nature of the category, GUNARATNAM places "race" in quotation marks, as is common practice in the current debate. However, she does not give the adjective "racial" the same treatment, which seems somewhat inconsistent. Furthermore, she does not subject the term "ethnicity" to the same level of scrutiny (as other authors do, e.g. RATCLIFFE, 2004) and it is unfortunate that she does not address the concept of "racialization" in greater depth. She does succeed, however, in placing research on "race" and ethnicity in the historical context of colonialism and post-colonialism and shows how the recent political context in the UK and the USA has shaped the production of knowledge through research practices. [5]

GUNARATNAM discusses the need to recognize experience as partial and contradictory and takes an anti-essentialist stance to the category "race." However, she also notes that the deconstructivist enterprise has its limits—quoting ALEXANDER and MOHANTY (1997)—she notes that if we were to dissolve the category of race completely, it becomes difficult to claim the experience of racism. [6]

In terms of the practical implications of this theoretical debate for research practices she notes two key questions: 1) How can we do research on and with these categories without reifying their ideological content? 2) How can we make decisions about the points at which we "fix the meanings of racial and ethnic categories in order to do empirical research?" (p.5) Based on the insight that social discourses and lived experiences are co-constituted, she advocates a "radical reflexivity" in the research process and practices this in a consistent and inspiring manner, especially in the latter chapters of the book where specific empirical examples are discussed. [7]

The second chapter, "A 'Traacherous Bind': Working With and Against Racial Categories," addresses the fundamental epistemological tensions in research on "race" and ethnicity once more, including the dangers and contradictions of the continued use of racial and ethnic categories: "Naming and examining 'race' and ethnicity (often in order to uncover oppressive relations of power), always runs the risk of reproducing 'race' and ethnicity as essentialized and deterministic categories that can (re)constitute these very power relations" (p.32-33). [8]

GUNARATNAM argues for a "doubled research practice" (p.35) that is capable of working both with and against racialized categories. As an example, she discusses the approaches to empirical research and analysis by Avtar BRAH, Gail LEWIS and Kum-Kum BHAVNANI. The value of such "doubled research practices" lie in their ability to illuminate the heterogeneity, areas of ambiguity and partiality within any category of difference which counteracts the danger of reifying unified and fixed notions of difference between supposedly homogeneous social groups. [9]

### **3. Part II: Debate and Dilemmas in "Interracial" Research**

The second part of the book contains two chapters, both of which address the methodological debate surrounding "interracial" research and "racial matching" of interviewers and participants. The first, Chapter 3, "Faking 'Race' or 'Making Race'?" 'Race-of-interviewer-effects' in Survey Research, deals with "interracial research" in both quantitative and qualitative research as key sites for the production of racialized discourses and practices. Recognizing the social nature of the dilemmas that individual researchers face, she examines the methodological debates on interracial interviewing. She discusses the American discussion of the "race-of-interviewer-effects" in survey research and critically examines the suggestion that research participants are less willing to tell interviewers from another racial group what they "really think." Taking a critical stance, GUNARATNAM suggests that the debate contains assumptions about a single "truth" and about a supposed unreliability of racialized research subjects. [10]

Chapter four, "Messy Work: Qualitative Interviewing Across Difference," focuses on the debate on "interracial" research and ethnic matching of interviewer and participant in qualitative research specifically. As a methodological ideal, "racial matching" was formulated in recognition of Black Americans "distrust of the research enterprise" that has mainly been carried out by White researchers, too

often with harmful effects for Black research participants (TWINE & WARREN, 2000, p.7, also see GAMBLE, 2002). When interviewed by Black researchers, Black participants seemed to be more willing to openly discuss issues pertinent to their lives as compared to being interviewed by White researchers. However, it has been noted that "race" is not the only relevant "social signifier" in research encounters (TWINE & WARREN, 2000, p.9) and that other dimensions of differentiation and affinity (e.g. class, gender, sexuality) can be equally or more salient. GUNARATNAM examines the contributions of feminist and minoritized researchers to the debate and joins the canon of critical voices. She problematizes the privileging of "race"/ethnicity in the analysis of interview interactions. Furthermore, using her own mixed-cultural background as an example (she was born in Sri Lanka and migrated to the UK as a child), she notes that it can be impossible to exactly match the racial or ethnic backgrounds of researchers and participants. Rather than assuming that similarities in racial self-identification will guarantee a trusting and open research relationship, she implies that all researchers should be sensitive towards the complex workings of "race"—independent of their respective racial or ethnic identification—and carefully analyze how "race" and racial identities are negotiated and situated in the research process. [11]

#### **4. Part III: The Doings and Undoings of "Race"—Researching Lived Experience**

The third and final part of the book contains four chapters that focus on specific analytic approaches while drawing on empirical material for illustration. In Chapter 5, "Looking for 'race'? Analyzing racialized meanings and identifications," GUNARATNAM discusses how to analyze *explicit* racial identifications in interview accounts as well as interview accounts where "race" is not talked about in direct ways or where it is embedded. She uses an analytic approach suggested by KNOWLES of disassembling "race" by examining the ways in which it acquires meaning through different narrative themes. This analytic approach is read through a theoretical understanding of "race" as a "metalanguage" (HIGGINBOTHAM, 1992). [12]

The sixth chapter, "'What do you mean?' Insecurities of meaning and difference," pays attention to insecurities of meaning in research and suggests a method of analysis that reveals the insights one can gain from ambiguities of meaning about social and subjective difference. Acknowledging that all meanings are vague or ambiguous to a certain degree, GUNARATNAM suggests analyzing *obvious* ambiguities of meaning in the data by way of "contextualizing, de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing" (p.142). "Contextualizing" and "de-contextualizing" are an interrelated process involving the identification of such obvious ambiguities, freezing them, scanning them against one's areas of experience and understanding, thus taking them out of the original context in which they had psycho-social connections. The critical step is the third, where the researcher has to "re-contextualize" ambiguous meanings by exploring them against a wider context. GUNARATNAM suggest that this re-contextualization process address four main areas: 1) the context of the interview (how the ambiguity of meaning is

situated and connected to other narrative themes in the interview); 2) biographical, social and subjective differences between the researcher and participant; 3) social discourses and historical contexts; and 4) dominant representations (how the subject positions of the researcher and participant might serve to inscribe them into dominant representations). [13]

GUNARATNAM illustrates this analytic process using an example from her hospice study. She interprets a sequence from an interview with an older male Jamaican research participant, "James," who made ambiguous statements about the meaning of and reasons for his particular sleeping habits. Interpreting the ambiguities and contradictions in this account, she carefully analyses the interview interaction between her and James and draws on theories of masculinities in the process of "recontextualizing" the data. [14]

Chapter 7, "Threatening topics and difference: Encounters in psycho-social space," introduces the concept of psycho-social space, drawing on literature from cultural geography on the production of social space (LEFEBVRE). GUNARATNAM points out that space is co-constituted and examines how individuals and space produce each other in the research encounter. She further focuses on particular research encounters where sensitive topics are addressed. Noting that talking about particular topics can be difficult, or can be avoided or resisted by both research participants and researchers alike, she refers to the term "topic threat" from the methodological literature. She argues that attention to the co-production of topic threat and its effects within research interactions can provide a valuable opportunity for examining spatial dimensions of difference in research encounters. Drawing on the theoretical framework of LEFEBVRE (1991), GUNARATNAM argues that "research interactions are produced by, and producing, specific psycho-social spaces, in which locations of 'safety' and 'danger', and power and relations can be multiple and shifting" (p.157). [15]

The final Chapter 8, "Towards multi-sited research: Connection, juxtapositioning and complicity," explores ideas from ethnography about multi-sited research and proposes that researchers trace both the local and the wider connections of research interactions across different cultural and discursive spaces. She offers a "reflexive analytic framework for discovering and making links between the micro-interactions of research encounters and broader contexts" (p.178). According to GUNARATNAM, multi-sited research involves a "politics of connection" that is "particularly relevant to research concerned with 'race' and ethnicity, where many different sites of experience and knowledge/power can come together, unravel and have unique effects within research interactions" (p.178). With this perspective, she echoes the views of other researchers who showed that research taking place in different cultural contexts can make important contributions to understanding the socially and historically situated nature of racism and "race" (BHAVNANI & DAVIS, 2000). [16]

## 5. Notes from the Classroom: Using the Book as Teaching Material

Each chapter of the book is organized so that it can be used as teaching material: it starts with a summary stating the aims of the chapter and ends with a conclusion section. Further reading is suggested and grey boxes throughout the chapter highlight key points such as theoretical concepts or analytic procedures (e.g., a note on the terms "race" and ethnicity, a description of the "Hottentot Venus" case, a critical note on the term "ethnic minority," Kum Kum BHAVNANI's approach, etc.). [17]

When using Chapter 6, "'What do you mean?' Insecurities of meaning and difference," in a qualitative research methods class, however, the graduate students stated they found the chapter "confusing." One reason for their confusion was GUNARATNAM's tendency to introduce not just one, but a number of different theoretical and analytic approaches in each chapter, touching upon each only lightly. The second reason lay in GUNARATNAM's interpretation of the interview interaction with "James," an older Jamaican research participant in her hospice study. Her interpretation involved a number of references to a complex body of theoretical work which seemed overwhelming for students not so familiar with post-modern theories of masculinities. Furthermore, the narrative structure of her argument in the interpretation was described as unsettling as it lacked a clear goal or conclusion. To GUNARATNAM's defense one has to note that (not the confusion, but) the unsettling of the reader and an increased level of interpretative uncertainty are not entirely unintended—GUNARATNAM concludes the chapter by saying, "I have tried to show the benefits of working with insecurities of meaning in order to gain a different—more complex, but also self-conscious *uncertain*—understanding of the dynamic and situated nature of difference within research encounters" (p.154, emphasis added). [18]

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the book discusses some of the important dilemmas faced by researchers studying the concepts and lived realities of "race" and ethnicity today and it provides various theoretical and analytical approaches to handling these in qualitative research. [19]

The book does not provide a "complete" overview of the debate, for example, it does not discuss the current debate about constructions of "Whiteness" in research encounters, a topic receiving ample attention in other methodology books on the topic (see for example TWINE & WARREN, 2000). This might in part be due to the fact that GUNARATNAM's book is a monograph based on her research experience as a British-Asian researcher. Furthermore, the book focuses on text as data at the expense of other forms of data, such as images or film. In my view, the greatest shortcoming of the book relates to the occasionally lack of conceptual clarity and its tendency to inundate the reader with brief excursions into different theories and bodies of work. A more in-depth discussion of fewer approaches (and maybe an illustration of their application in empirical studies) might have been more enlightening, particularly for using the text as

teaching material. In this regard it would have also been desirable to have a conclusion chapter that ties the different approaches, procedures and concepts back in together. [20]

On the positive side, GUNARATNAM does present an interesting introduction to the multiple voices and different theoretical approaches in the field. She provides the reader with a taste of the debate and good references for further reading. It is also appreciated that she draws on literature from neighboring fields, for example theories and research on sexuality, illness or physical ability. In doing so, GUNARATNAM rightfully places the debate on "race" and ethnicity in the wider context of debates on the social construction of difference and power inequalities in general. Furthermore, GUNARATNAM skillfully uses empirical examples for illustration and I was most impressed by her illustration of practiced self-reflexivity in the tradition of "working the hyphens" (between self-other) as put forth by Michelle FINE (1994). My overall impression is that this is an inspiring and useful text for discussing the pitfalls and dilemmas involved in research on "race" and ethnicity, particularly for readers who can tolerate having more questions raised than answers given. [21]

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