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# **After Michael Banton: Some Reflections on his Contributions to the Study of Race**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper the focus is on the contributions of Michael Banton to the study of race and ethnic relations. Over a period that begun in the 1950s and continued until his death in 2018 Banton continued to make important contributions to a number of scholarly areas, including the study of race relations in urban communities, the history of racial thought, policing and community relations and the understanding of race equality policies. His work in all of these areas has helped to shape a field of scholarship and research and is likely to remain a point of reference for future generations of researchers. In reflecting on Banton's varied contributions the paper argues that there is much to be gained from engaging with his work. It concludes by exploring some of the critiques of his key contributions.

**Keywords:** Michael Banton; race and equality; race relations; racial thought; racism; antisemitism

## **Beginnings**

The death of Michael Banton in 2018 at the age of 91 brought to an end a formidable academic career that has its origins back in the 1950s. His death was marked by a wide range of tributes

that testified to his standing within sociology and anthropology and his contributions to specific fields of study. In the period since his death there has also been recognition that his body of scholarship since the 1950s needs to be critically assessed in order to bring out both the range of his contributions as well as to differentiate it from other key thinkers in his fields of interest. Given the longevity of his academic career it is not surprising that there have already been a number of efforts to reassess his contributions to sociology and the study of race relations in particular<sup>1-3</sup>. It is with this core concern in mind that this paper will attempt to review Banton's key contributions to the study of race and ethnic relations and the implications of his scholarship for both current and future research agendas.

Before embarking on this account of Michael Banton's contributions to the study of race and ethnicity it is also important to comment on his personal attributes as a fellow sociologist and scholar. I first really got to know Michael well towards the end of his formal academic career, after he had become an emeritus professor at the University of Bristol. My main contact with Michael from the 1990s onwards came about through his involvement with the journal I helped to edit and on which he served as a member of our International Editorial Board, namely *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Given his long and varied career Banton developed relationships with all the key journals in the field of race and ethnic studies, including *Patterns of Prejudice*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* and numerous others. Yet what was noticeable about Michael was both the diligence of his work for the journal as a reviewer as well as the seriousness with which he seemed to read the various papers we published. He often had strong views on both the quality and the substance of the papers published by the journal, but he remained fully engaged with the work of the journal and was always keen to attend our annual editorial board meetings as well as to provide advice on a wide range of articles submitted to us.

It is also important to note that Michael remained actively engaged with the work of professional bodies such as the British Sociological Association well into his eighties. He had

a strong interest in engaging with the work of new generations of scholars, even when he disagreed with their work. He was not enamoured by what he saw as the turn to cultural studies in sociology or the turn to post-structuralist modes of analysis, but he retained an interest in talking to those who expounded such ideas. Indeed, for those of us who came to know him somewhat later in life it was amazing to see Banton engaged in submitting his work for academic review and rejection well into his later eighties. His commitment to championing the role of sociology within the social sciences and in society more generally remained undimmed to the end.

As we shall argue in the rest of this paper Banton can be seen as one of the key foundational figures for scholarship on race and ethnicity in British sociology and anthropology. But in addition, he made substantial contributions to the study of the origins of the idea of race, the role of the police in society and the role of international measures to promote racial equality and justice. Like many scholars of his generation he did not focus on one narrow field of research to the exclusion of other interests, and his contributions therefore are spread across a range of both conceptual and empirical research arenas. In this paper we shall begin by focusing particularly on his early contributions to the study of race relations, which involved research on race relations in urban contexts in the UK and West Africa during the 1950s. From there we move on to explore his efforts to develop a conceptual framework for the study of race and ethnic relations. This is perhaps the central focus of his scholarly research from the 1960s onwards, and something he returned to regularly throughout his work. We shall also highlight the contributions he made towards unravelling the historical development of the idea of race and modes of racial thinking. The paper will then conclude by exploring Banton's key contributions from the perspective of how we can utilise them both to understand the history of racial thinking as well as to make sense of key issues we face in the present conjuncture in relation to questions about race and racism in the twenty-first century.

## Early research

The social scientific study of race and ethnic relations in British society can be traced back to the period of the 1940s and 1950s. At the time scholarship on issues such as race, ethnicity and racism was very much in its embryonic stages within the context of British society, and there was relatively little theoretical work on which to draw in framing research agendas. It was during this period that early pioneering studies were produced that explored the changing role of colonial migration and of the migrant communities that were becoming a feature of the wider society. Such studies were produced by scholars who at this stage situated their work within the traditions of social anthropology rather than sociology, including Kenneth Little and Anthony Richmond<sup>4-6</sup>. Many of these studies were focused on explorations of race relations within the setting of local communities and were framed by a concern to analyse the relations between minority and majority communities in specific locales and were largely empirical in orientation. They were shaped in many ways by the preoccupations of the time, particularly with issues about the constructions of what was talked about at the time as the ‘colour problem’ and more generally by the presence in the major urban conurbations of growing numbers of migrants from the West Indies, South Asia and other parts of the Empire<sup>6</sup>. In this sense it is not really possible to comprehend Banton’s work from this period in isolation from the wider set of social transformations that were occurring in British society and beyond.

It was in this wider context that Banton’s research career began to emerge. His first major contribution was a study that he started in 1950 of the ‘coloured quarter’ in London’s East End<sup>7</sup>. Framed around the concern to explore the everyday living conditions of colonial migrants in this part of London it was part of a wider literature that emerged during the 1950s and 1960s that was focused on studies of newly arrived migrant communities and the urban localities in which they settled<sup>6, 8-10</sup>. Reading Banton’s work from this period it is perhaps clear to see that it was both shaped by the concerns of its time and was largely empirical in focus, which is

somewhat against his oft-repeated view that what distinguishes sociology from other social sciences is the importance it places upon theory and concept formation <sup>11</sup>. But his approach to these early studies already bore the hallmarks of his emerging approach to the study of race relations as involving the relationship between diverse social groups. In one of his early theoretical articles he drew on American sociological writings to outline what he saw as the core issues to be addressed by a sociology of race relations. He used the concept of 'social distance' to argue that a key feature of race relations involved the processes through which social groups sought to maintain a certain distance with regard to strangers <sup>12</sup>. From this starting point he went on to argue that sociology's contribution to the study of race relations lay in the analysis of the formation of groups and the relations that emerge over time between them.

Even in this early stage of his research career Banton also displayed a strong interest in the comparative study of race relations. During 1952-53, for example, he carried out extensive fieldwork in the capital of Sierra Leone, Freetown, focusing particularly on the experiences of internal migrants in an evolving and changing colonial urban environment <sup>13</sup>. His approach to fieldwork in this colonial environment has been criticised for not directly addressing the broader role of colonial power relations in Sierra Leone <sup>14</sup>. But although the research was framed very much around empirical fieldwork it does contain extensive insights on issues such as employment, community organisation and the transformation of urban life through rapid urbanisation resulting from migration to Freetown from rural environments. It was one of the few sociological accounts of urban transformation in the colonial environment produced at this time.

Alongside this research in Sierra Leone, Banton continued his research in London. The focus of his next major book, *White and Coloured*, was on the evolving nature of interactions between white majority and non-white minority communities. Banton's perspective was influenced to some extent by his own experiences as a researcher working on largely community focused

research and across disciplinary boundaries. As a newly emerging field of scholarship scholars such as Banton found themselves very much at the forefront of the efforts to make sense of the processes that were shaping community relations in the areas where migrant communities were beginning to settle and establish themselves. At this stage much of this research was outside of the confines of academic sociology. Yet in a number of ways these early studies helped to influence the conceptual and empirical research focus of this sub-field. At this stage the study of race relations was seen as more of a social policy issue rather than integral to sociology as a discipline. Michael Banton, for example, argued in his 1959 book on *White and Coloured* that:

The study of race relations maybe regarded as one of the applied social sciences. It has no specific lines of inquiry, as psychology, sociology and economics have, but seeks to apply the theories developed in these schools to the elucidation of particular problems <sup>15</sup>

For Banton the key issue that needed to be addressed in the context of emergent patterns of race relations in British society was the clear evidence he found in his research of patterns of discrimination by white British people in their relations with non-white communities. From his research work in a number of community settings he concluded that a key role in shaping discrimination could be found in the attribution of negative values to the skin colour of migrants from the colonies. The detailed research on which the book draws out in some detail the social significance of the skin colour of migrants from the colonies. This emphasis on discrimination on the basis of skin colour was a theme that Banton remained interested in throughout the various stages of his academic career. Much of the discussion in *White and Coloured* follows on from this observation and helped to push Banton towards developing more conceptual tools for analysing racial and ethnic relations in the context of the urban conurbations in which migrant communities were beginning to settle and develop forms of community based social interactions.

Banton's work during the 1950s can be seen as helping to shape what he was later to term the 'race relations problematic' <sup>16</sup>. This was to a large extent shaped by Banton's conceptualisation of race relations around the frame of the migrant other as the 'archetypal stranger'. The role of Banton's early research, along with other scholars such as Kenneth Little and Sheila Patterson, in shaping the research frames for seeing race and nation through the language of distance and difference has been the focus of much of the critical response to this phase of his research career. As Chris Waters points out one of the features of both *The Coloured Quarter* and *White and Coloured* was a tendency to naturalise common sense ideas about nation and national identity:

By naturalizing the desire for distance as a universal desire, Banton was complicit with a popular yearning to maintain distance in order to fix the boundaries of belonging and effect a closure in the rhetoric of the national community.<sup>17</sup>

From this perspective a key problem in Banton's early research was his tendency to look at the emergent race relations in London and other major urban conurbations through the lens of unitary and fixed concepts of culture and national community, by constructing the emergent black and minority communities as 'strangers'. Other critiques of the race relations problematic have emphasized the relative neglect of questions of class, gender and racism in much of the race relations research that helped to shape this field of research through the 1950s and 1960s. It is interesting to note, of course, that Banton himself was not uncritical of his early research and continued to reflect critically on the conceptual and methodological limitations of these early studies. It is certainly the case that much of the theory and language that is used in these studies can be seen as somewhat dated from the perspective of today. But it would be wrong to dismiss Banton's work from this period without critical engagement with the substantive analysis of race relations that he helped to shape. Although many of Banton's early research contributions are somewhat neglected in the contemporary intellectual environment they can

be seen in hindsight as providing an important point of reference for scholars interested in how the field of race and ethnic studies was shaped by the everyday concerns of the 1950s and 1960s. Part of the interest in this period of Banton's intellectual development is the insight it provides into the wider bodies of scholarship that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s that focused precisely on the nature of 'race relations' in British cities. The focus on studies of communities and social interaction became a recurrent theme in studies of race and ethnic relations throughout the 1950s and 1960s<sup>6, 8, 18</sup>. It also helped to shape Banton's growing interest in the development of a broader analytical frame for the comparative study of race relations. It is to this aspect of his work that we now turn.

## **Race and sociology**

The key facet of Banton's scholarly work from the 1960s and 1970s was his effort to develop better analytical concepts in order to lay the foundations for a more systematic study of race relations. This aspect of his work had emerged in the 1950s and was partly the outcome of his frustrations at the limited theoretical tools he saw as available for researchers working on race and ethnic relations. In an early paper on 'Sociology and Race Relations' he chose to explore what he saw as the specific contribution that a sociological perspective could make to the study of race relations and forms of racial discrimination<sup>12</sup>. This paper signalled the beginnings of his effort to provide a more developed theoretical frame for his work, and to develop his understanding of how the situation in British society compared to trends and developments in other societies. Perhaps more importantly it also signalled his growing interest in developing better tools for the analysis of race relations as a comparative phenomenon.

By the mid-1960s this interest begun to bear fruit in a number of ambitious efforts to outline key elements of his theoretical framework. In a paper he wrote for his inaugural lecture at the University of Bristol he sought to outline the ways in which race interacted with broader sets

of social relations. He argued, for example, that there was a need to differentiate race as a social category from wider sets of social relations, arguing that:

In many multi-racial societies class conflicts are overlaid and reinforced by racial differences, but, as I tried to demonstrate, the significance attached to racial background introduces elements of much greater rigidity than are characteristic of inter-class relations<sup>19</sup>.

It was in a sense from this starting point that he then sought to fashion a role for the study of race relations within the social sciences. He sought to explore both sociological and anthropological literatures on race and ethnic relations in order to broaden his understanding of both historical and contemporary forms of race relations.

This led to the publication in 1967 of his monumental study on *Race Relations*<sup>20</sup>. This was seen at the time as one of the most systematic efforts to produce a general theoretical framework for the study of race relations<sup>21, 22</sup>, and attracted attention on both sides of the Atlantic. Using historical and contemporary examples drawn from the USA, South Africa and Britain to outline race relations as a global field of study. The range of cases covered in *Race Relations* reflected Banton's continuing interest to explore the possibilities for developing the conceptual tools necessary for a global field of study that could account for both similarities and differences between national environments.

Given its impact when it was first published it is somewhat surprising that *Race Relations* remains somewhat neglected in contemporary discussions of race relations. There is surprisingly little engagement with its core arguments among new generations of scholars in the field. Banton himself was in later years somewhat critical of his own efforts in this volume to outline his broad theoretical vision for the study of race relations. But in hindsight it can be seen as a turning point in this aspect of Banton's scholarly efforts. A recurrent theme in the

book was an argument that Banton had begun to outline in some of his earlier work, namely that the study of race relations could best be conceived as multidisciplinary social science. The point he was trying to make was that the study of race relations was more akin to fields of research such as criminology, and therefore needed to draw substantively on a broad range of disciplinary perspectives in order to make sense of the complex forms of racial inequality and differences that were evident in a wide range of societies.

It is also relevant to note that it was in this period that the politicisation of race and immigration helped to push forward the wider sociological interest in race. In 1969 the British Sociological Association organised its Annual Conference on the theme of *race relations*. In choosing this topic the BSA was both recognising the emergence of what then a relatively new area of research and providing a space for academic debate on what had by then become a controversial issue in both civil society and politics. The edited volume produced after the conference contained influential contributions from key scholars in the field, including Michael Banton, John Rex and Sheila Allen among others. As Tom Bottomore noted in his foreword to this volume the various contributions to the conference had sought to 'connect the understanding of race and racialism with broader sociological theories'<sup>23</sup>. The conference came at a time when the issue of race and immigration was becoming an important facet of policy debates. Within the wider political culture the interventions of Enoch Powell through his various speeches had helped to create an atmosphere in which debates about race and immigration had become increasingly politicised and polarised<sup>24, 25</sup>. Within the academy there had been a shift from relative silence on questions about race and immigration to an engagement with at least some aspects of the politics of immigration and the changing position of the migrant communities that were emerging as a feature of urban life and culture in British society. It is interesting to note in this regard that in a review of the conference proceedings A. H. Halsey argued:

It is not too far-fetched to suggest that the essential shift in European sociological thought on human conflict from before to after the Second World War has been a shift in focus from class conflict to race conflict<sup>26</sup>

Whatever the merits of Halsey's characterisation of this shift, it perhaps reflected the feeling that was beginning to emerge in the later 1960s and early 1970s that the question of race was one that needed to be addressed by sociologists, as well as by other social scientists, from both a conceptual and an empirical angle.

Banton's work continued to evolve and develop through the 1970s and 1980s through his efforts to address questions specific to British society as well as wider comparative facets of race and ethnicity. This emphasis on race relations as a multidisciplinary social science remained important for Banton throughout the various stages of his scholarly research. Nevertheless, it is also important to note that a recurrent theme in Banton's work from this period is the need to delineate the specificities of the sociological study of race relations. In this he shared the ambition of other scholars such as John Rex, though he was often in disagreement with Rex's approach<sup>27</sup>. He remained somewhat uncertain about what a theory of race relations should consist of. In a classic article on 'Analytical and Folk Concepts of Race and Ethnicity' he expressed this uncertainty in the following terms:

The study of race relations, however, is less certain of its analytical concepts than better established fields; when a sociologist looks for a theory of race relations it is difficult to say quite what it should be a theory of. Political concerns about the analysis of oppression and exploitation can enter, but, as has so often been insisted, even the writer who tries to exclude political values is himself adopting a political stance. To reduce the area of uncertainty it is helpful to examine previous conceptions and, by identifying the political influences and intellectual assumptions in one's predecessors' thoughts, to become more conscious of the same factors in one's own<sup>28</sup>.

Banton's concern to investigate more fully the articulation of analytical and folk concepts reflected his effort to help develop a more systematic approach to the development of research on race relations. It also reflected his concern to show that there were deep limitations to the use of everyday notions of race in the development of social scientific research.

Even towards the end of his long career Banton continued to hold on to views that he saw as important even though they were against the grain of much of the contemporary literature in the field. In one of his last papers he returned to his critical stance on what he saw as a 'preoccupation with racism' by arguing forcefully that in the future:

Social scientists will have to pay more attention to the social significance attributed to differences in skin colour than the recent preoccupation with racism has permitted. This will stimulate them to develop a conceptual armoury that will supersede the conception of race that has defined so much of their 20th-century work <sup>29</sup>.

This stance reflected on his earlier disagreements with scholars such as John Rex and Robert Miles about what the core focus of research on race and ethnic relations should be <sup>16</sup>. But it also linked up with his long-standing view that modes of race thinking could not be seen simply as an expression of class or racism.

### **Origins and development of race thinking**

While the 1960s and 1970s saw Banton's work veer towards developing the theoretical tools for an analysis of race relations in a more systematic manner it was also the period when he began to explore more fully the question of the historical development of modes of racial thought. During the 1970s, in particular, he focused some of his most important work on an effort to retrace the history of ideas about race and how these ideas evolved and changed over time. Banton saw this facet of his work as an important corrective to the tendency of much of

the contemporary research on race and ethnicity, within sociology and more generally, to be shaped by what he termed 'presentism'<sup>30</sup>. But he also saw it as a way to provide a deeper understanding of how forms of racial ideology emerged and evolved from the sixteenth century onwards.

Part of the reason for this turn towards a more historical perspective can also be traced to Banton's critique of the concept of racism to refer to a broad range of forms of racial thinking. In books such as *The Concept of Race* and *The Idea of Race* he sought to rethink both the history and evolution of ideas about race and to explore the definition of racism as a concept<sup>31,32</sup>. Banton was later to rework and develop some key elements of these ideas in his influential text on *Racial Theories*<sup>33</sup>. Focusing both on the history of the idea of race and on the evolution of different modes of racial thought Banton's work in this period of his career helped to provide both a historical corrective to what he saw as a dominant 'presentism' while at the same time highlighting the importance of delineating more clearly both the origins of ideas of race and their expression over the period from the seventeenth century onwards.

Banton's account of the origins and development of modes of racial thought underpinned his concern that the notion of racism used in much sociological analysis was not precise enough. This concern with providing a more precise definition of forms of racial thought and racism was in some ways to remain a recurrent theme in his work. A good example can be found in a classic article on the relationship between racism and antisemitism<sup>34</sup>. Banton begins the article by referring to the 1975 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3379 which 'determines that Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination'. Given his critique of the over-use of the concept of racism and the need to be specific in defining both historical and contemporary expressions of racist ideas it was perhaps no surprise that Banton concluded his analysis by arguing:

Nothing is gained by defining antisemitism as a form of racism. They are both political ideas used in interpreting experience and in organizing protection against the repetition of past evils. They have stimulated attempts to understand the factors in human society which give rise to—and magnify—group hostilities, but neither racism nor antisemitism belongs in the battery of analytical concepts of social science which are useful in identifying the causes of hostility or in planning measures to reduce disadvantage. Both of them are emotion-laden, especially for the victims of group hostility. Both tend to be Eurocentric, reflecting particular events in the history of Europe and of European expansion into Africa and the Americas, so that people in other regions of the world sometimes conclude that such issues are not their concern. Both racism and antisemitism relate to hateful experiences; their contemplation easily leads to pessimism <sup>34</sup>.

By rejecting the terms of debate about antisemitism and racism Banton argued forcefully for a rethinking of both of these commonly used notions. Although he was writing at a time before the current debates about antisemitism his efforts to highlight the limitations of both notions remain relevant to these on-going discussions.

Banton's efforts to retrace the history of ideas about race remained something that he returned to throughout his career. It was perhaps not surprising that much of his last book, published in 2015, on *What We Now Know About Race and Ethnicity* is taken up with a detailed discussion of usages of the concepts of race and ethnicity in both academic research and in everyday language <sup>35</sup>. He remained intrigued to the end by the ways in which the language that we use to talk about race has been shaped both by social-cultural processes and by ideology. And, as he argued forcefully in his last book part of the challenge we face is not only to define what we know about race and ethnicity but to find ways to research and investigate what we don't know.

## **Rethinking research and policy agendas**

Thus far we have focused mostly on Banton's efforts to provide systematic conceptual foundations for the analysis of race and forms of race relations. But it is also important to note that he was also concerned throughout his career with the issue of how to develop policies to deal with racial inequalities and conflict <sup>36</sup>. This was partly linked to his long-standing view that the study of race relations was intrinsically concerned with how to tackle the root causes of racial discrimination and inequalities. But it was also the outcome of his efforts to link the study of race relations to the wider social policy environment.

Although he was firmly committed to the need to create a space for the study of race relations in the social sciences, he was also aware of the need for researchers to engage with policy issues. During most of the 1970s Banton was the Director of the first national research centre in the UK for the study of race and ethnic relations. The Social Science Research Council made the decision to support research in this field in a dedicated multidisciplinary centre in part because it was advised that academic social scientists did not perceive race relations to be a field in which they could pursue their disciplinary interests <sup>37</sup>. The SSRC founded the SSRC Research Unit on Race Relations under the Directorship of Banton in 1970, and it was based at the University of Bristol from 1970 to 1978. Soon after it was founded it changed its name to the SSRC Research Unit on Ethnic Relations. Under the direction of Banton the core concern of the Unit was to stimulate research on race relations in disciplines such as sociology, social psychology, political science, economics, education and human geography. But the Unit was also encouraged to address issues of relevance to policy-makers at both the local and the national level.

It is interesting to note in this context that although Banton was always keen to emphasize the need for academic scholarship to retain a high degree of autonomy from political ideologies he

was also aware that research on race relations was inevitably shaped by the wider political environment. Reflecting on the work of the SSRC Research Unit on Ethnic relations he noted:

The political context of race relations research has changed greatly during the past ten years, due largely but by no means entirely to transatlantic influence and the polarisation of black-white relations; but I believe that the field is still not attracting academic attention proportionate to its theoretical interest and practical importance' <sup>38</sup>.

The link between the theoretical and practical importance of race relations research became an important aspect of Banton's scholarly interest through the period from the 1970s to the 1990s. This interest in helping to shape policies about racial discrimination was not purely limited to the national context of the UK. At an international level, for example, he was closely involved during the 1990s in the work of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. It was through this involvement that he became interested in such issues as international action against discrimination, the international politics of race and the rights of indigenous people and this facet of his work was also reflected in some of his academic work <sup>39-41</sup>.

Although we have no space to explore this in more detail in this paper, it is interesting to note in this context that Banton's concern with issues of social policy was not limited to his work on race relations. During the 1960s and 1970s he also made important contributions to the study of the police, laying the foundations for the sociological study of the police as an institution <sup>42-44</sup>. Some of this work was linked to his interest in race relations, as evidenced in his research on race relations and policing in the UK and in his exploratory study of race and public order in an American city <sup>43, 44</sup>. But it was also closely linked to his interest in situating the study of the police within the context of communities and in developing the sociological tools for developing a fuller understanding of the police role.

## **Banton's key contributions**

Looking back at the work of a scholar who was active in research and scholarship for a number of decades makes it difficult to do full justice both to the range of their work as well as to explore in detail the richness of specific areas of their scholarship. As we have tried to make clear in this paper this is certainly the case in relation to Michael Banton. His scholarly output has covered a wide range of issues and he regularly changed both the conceptual frame of his work as well as its empirical focus.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century Banton sought to provide an overview of 'Progress in Ethnic and Racial Studies' during the second half of the twentieth century<sup>45</sup>. He posed the question:

How much, and in what ways, has knowledge within ethnic and racial studies advanced in the past fifty years?<sup>45</sup>.

Given the fact that he had been an active participant in this area of research throughout these five decades, it was perhaps a surprising question. But it reflected his concern not to take for granted the extent of progress in developing the necessary conceptual and methodological tools to help us understand the forms of ethnic and racial relations that emerged during the second half of the twentieth century. Although his own response to this question was nuanced and somewhat sceptical at the same time, it remains an important question for scholars working on questions about race and ethnicity to explore in relation to contemporary research agendas. In this concluding part of the paper we want to turn the question round somewhat by asking 'In what ways did the work of Michael Banton helped to advance the study of race and ethnic relations?'

In the broadest terms there are at least three key areas where he can be seen as making an important contribution to the sociological study of race. First, he sought to outline the ways in

which a sociological perspective could add to our knowledge of the processes that shape our understandings of race and racialised relations. This is a concern in his work from the 1950s onwards, and he often returned to it towards the end of his career. Second, he became interested from the 1970s onwards in the question of the development of modes of racial thought from the seventeenth century onwards. This is an area of his work that has, perhaps, attracted less attention in recent years, but his efforts to locate the origins of what he termed the ‘racialising of the West’ remain an important point of reference. Third, he prioritised the need to develop a dialogue between scholarly researchers and practitioners who were seeking the root causes of racial inequalities and discrimination.

Given his commitment to self-critique as well as criticism of the ideas of others it is interesting to note in this context that Banton retained a degree of scepticism about the distinctive nature of research on race and ethnic relations. Towards the end of his life Banton wrote a retrospective paper on ‘Finding, and Correcting, My Mistakes’<sup>29</sup> in which he sought to look back on the various mistakes that he has made at various stages of his scholarly career. Given the reflective nature of this paper it provides a helpful insight into his own self-awareness about the limitations of his own research. Reflecting on his efforts from the late 1950s onwards to develop an approach that emphasized the distinctive nature of race relations he accepted that he was always uneasy about this approach. As he pointed out in this paper, ‘Although I adopted the premise that racial relations were distinctive, I felt uneasy about it’<sup>29</sup>.

But in hindsight it is both important to acknowledge both the range of Banton’s contributions to the development of research on race and ethnic relations, but also to engage critically with many of the challenges that he sought to articulate about the limitations of contemporary research agendas. One of these challenges was his concern to fashion a specifically sociological voice in the study of race and racialised relations. While supportive of multidisciplinary frames of analysis he kept coming back throughout his career about what sociology as a discipline and

as a method could contribute to the understanding of racial and ethnic divisions and inequalities in the context of both the late twentieth century and in the twenty-first century.

Perhaps what is striking about the current state of research on race and ethnic relations is that it is a field of scholarship that is still rapidly expanding. Even in the two decades since Banton wrote his assessment of progress in ethnic and racial studies there has been a notable expansion of research and scholarship in this field <sup>46</sup>. We have seen the growth of scholarship and research shaped by a range of conceptual frames, including critical race theory, postcolonial and decolonial theory and feminist theory. Indeed the past two decades can be seen as a kind of high point in the establishment of ethnic and racial studies as a core theme across both the social sciences and humanities <sup>47-49</sup>. Much of this new research has helpfully pushed the boundaries of race and ethnic studies beyond the more limited research agendas of the second half of the twentieth century. There is much to celebrate and engage with in these new bodies of scholarship, but it is also important to remember that there is much to be gained from reflecting on the work of earlier generations of scholars such as Michael Banton. As we have tried to show in this paper there is much in Banton's work that remains to be critically explored and it to be hoped that a re-assessment of his contributions can take place that recognises both the role he played in framing research agendas and in highlighting questions in need of more critical analysis.

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