

Race and racisms

Why and how to compare?

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Introduction

This chapter outlines recent debates in the literature on comparative race and racisms, with a particular emphasis on empirical, cross-national comparisons. Due to the exponential growth of this field, an exhaustive review of all works produced in the past decades is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, this chapter focuses on three key issues: (1) the conceptual justifications for the proliferation of comparative studies on race and racism; (2) the historical development, and limitations posed by, studies of comparative race thus far; and (3) the emergence of new strategies for comparing race and racisms, with a focus on conceptual and methodological choices. The chapter concludes by discussing remaining challenges to, and potential opportunities for, the advancement of a comparative approach to studies of race and racism.

Why compare race and racisms?

The central claim of this chapter is that the comparison of race and racisms is central to unpacking the different ways that race is socially constructed and how racisms work across different contexts. Given the high frequency with which versions of the statement “race is a social construct” can be found in the footnotes and introductions of academic papers dealing with race and racism, one might be tempted to claim further examination of this topic is unnecessary. Yet, there is much less consensus about the meaning of this statement within academia. Analyzing school textbooks, surveying college students, and interviewing university professors across disciplines, Morning (2011) finds that the idea of race as a social construct is more elusive than its frequent mention might lead one to believe. The author argues that, although the social construction of race is a widely accepted notion in social sciences, most scholars have a hard time explaining what it means beyond a vague rejection of essentialist understandings of race. It is also a less accepted notion in other disciplines, such as biology. In fact, across most disciplines, college students generally rely on essentialist understandings (both biological and cultural) when explaining racialized outcomes (e.g., why blacks are more frequently professional athletes or the causes of lower birth weight among African American or Asian infants). Beyond academia, the growing popularity of genetic

tests in search of “racial origins” serves as a tangible reminder that understanding of race as a social construct is not as prevalent as most social scientists might assume (Roth and Ivermark, 2018).

According to Suzuki (2017), one obstacle to the diffusion of the idea of race as socially constructed could be that most studies on race and racism still rely on a definition of race that is specifically relevant to the United States context and assume this national understanding of race as universal. If Omi and Winant’s (1994) concept of racial formation—and other similar concepts—have been important in pushing forward scholarly understanding of the social construction of race, such concepts might also have unintentionally generalized from the historical experience of the United States. This is partially due to the fact that, after World War II, social scientific theorizing about race and racism developed much more consistently in the United States than elsewhere. The consequence has been that, although race has been studied in the UK, South Africa, and Brazil, the United States experience is often taken as paradigmatic in studies about race and racialization.

The growth of comparative studies has been, in part, a response to the perceived ethnocentrism of the United States literature. According to Van den Berghe (1970), one of the pioneers of comparative sociology of race and ethnicity, the only way to overcome the provincialism of the American literature on race and ethnicity is to rely on a comparative approach. Similarly, Fredrickson’s (1989) comparative studies of slavery and race were also largely inspired by the need to put the American alleged exceptionalism in perspective. By contrasting the American context to that of other countries, we can better understand the multiple ways in which racialization processes work across these contexts and illuminate the shortcomings and national assumptions of existing theories and concepts. What are the limits of what can be considered as “race” and “racism”? And what types of comparisons can be made with such multifaceted concepts?

The historical development of comparative race relations as a field of study

Throughout the 20th century, the cross-national, comparative study of race and racisms was dominated by historians. According to Frederick Cooper (1996), comparisons of slavery and discourses of racial difference can be found as early as 1910. One exemplary work is Frank Tannenbaum’s (Tannenbaum, 1992 [1946]) comparison of slavery in the United States and Latin America. First published in 1946, in the aftermath of World War II and escalating attention to race issues in the form of a growing civil rights movement, today the book reads as an attempt to find a solution to what the author perceived as the problems in the United States. Indeed, Tannenbaum found a solution in Latin America.

Comparing moral discourses about slavery across the Americas, Tannenbaum argued that in English-speaking colonies—namely the United States—the status of the slave was that of non-human, subject of neither Church nor State. In contrast, in Latin America, the slaves, even if exploited, retained an element of humanity as subject of the crown and the church. Because of that, according to Tannenbaum, after abolition, “the integration of the ex-slave into society and polity posed no fundamental problem in Latin America but a very basic one in the United States.” (Cooper, 1996, p. 1123). In order to explain this basic difference, Tannenbaum relied on a broader discourse of “Iberian culture,” similar to that mobilized in Gilberto Freyre’s (1934) argument for the existence of racial democracy in Brazil (which can also be considered—even if not explicitly—a comparative work between the United States and Brazil).

Although today such an argument seems overly simplified, if not irrelevant, we should not underplay its political and academic consequences. Politically, works like those of Tannenbaum and Freyre have encouraged UNESCO to conduct studies in Latin America and have been mobilized in nation-building narratives based on racial-exceptionalism (or claims of lack of racism) throughout the region. Academically, the comparison between the United States and Latin America (in particular Brazil) became one of the most influential in comparative race research, but criticisms of this approach created resistance within, and against, the field.

Criticisms unfolded on multiple fronts. Historians such as Charles Boxer (2002) have relied on empirical data based on social indicators (e.g. the higher mortality rates of Brazilian slaves) to denounce the idealized version of Latin American history and slavery. Others, such as Eugene Genovese (1969), have focused on similarities across countries—in particular, Marxist explanations for race and slavery that center on global capitalism. More recently, historians such as Frederick Cooper (1996) have denounced the underlying essentialism of race and culture that has served as the basis for these comparisons—“a willingness to draw direct inferences from the era of slavery to the present, leapfrogging over a messy history that lay in between” (p. 1123).

Focusing on differences or exceptionalisms, such comparisons commonly make moral judgments about what comprises better or worse race relations. If most early studies echoed Pierre van den Berghe (1976, p. 532) question, “Why is the United States a more racist society than the Latin American republics?”, explicit and implicit comparisons in the post-civil-rights era increasingly became concerned with the failure of Latin American racial minorities to organize successfully to fight racism (Hanchard, 1998). The underlying assumption was one of a similar moral hierarchy of racialization processes across nations that still echoes in more recent works focusing on normative evaluations of nation-building ideologies, multicultural strategies, and resistance strategies.

These shortcomings have been addressed, in part, in later more systematic and less normative comparative studies and a shift in focus from “nations” as cultural entities to “nation-states” with institutions and political conflicts. Anthony Marx’s (1998) *Making Race and Nation* is exemplary of this turn. First, Marx proposes a reframing of the research question driving comparison of processes of racialization between Brazil, the United States and South Africa. The question no longer seeks to explain *why* there are racial tensions or racism in Brazil but why Brazil lacks a history of formal segregation, such as Jim Crow or apartheid, and what are the consequences of this difference. Second, Marx’s explanation for the differences does not rely on abstract cultural differences—which are explicitly denied in the first section of the book—but on institutions, actions, and power. For example, the author argues that conflicts between white elites were absent in Brazil yet central to the shaping of political alliances in the United States and South Africa. Third, Marx focuses not only on formal and legal practices but also on the unintended consequences of these practices. In particular, he argues that a lack of segregation policies created obstacles for the political mobilization of black Brazilians around anti-racist movements.

While *Making Race and Nation* is exemplary of a new approach to the comparison of race and racisms, its criticisms reflect the continuing challenges of this field. Loveman (1999) argues that, even if Marx clearly states that race is a social construction, the author still largely takes for granted the existence of “whites” and “blacks” across the three sites, making the book less about how race is made and more about how states manipulate race. Nation-states are also largely taken for granted as the unit of analysis, underplaying the importance of transnational processes and repertoires about race. Finally, despite taking seriously the possibility that racisms can be mobilized differently, Marx still evaluates different strategies based

on the assumption that they should look the same in all contexts or, even more egregiously, develops a normative argument about national anti-racism strategies (as discussed in the justification of the project of Moreno Figueroa and Wade, (n.d.)).

New approaches to comparing race and racisms

Recent works comparing race and racisms have taken these issues seriously. In order to address them, they have proposed new methods of comparison, including innovative macro-historical approaches, survey strategies and ethnographic approaches.

Comparing race-making in state institutions and through transnational processes

Several scholars have followed the path of macro-historical approaches, focusing on institutions—especially the state—as the key actors of race-making. Yet they also incorporate the idea that racial boundaries are themselves created by the state. The institutional focus ranges from formal categorization to more informal networks, but, regardless of the object of analysis, they all analyze historical and changing processes that transform the meanings and consequences of these categories across time and space.

Comparative research on the history of census serves as an excellent example of the potential of these approaches. In pathbreaking work on census racial categories in Brazil, the United States, and South Africa, Nobles (2000) has shown how counting (or not) race is a political process that creates and negotiates race as a political category. Several authors have examined how laws create race indirectly—beyond official segregation policies and openly discriminatory practices. The focus on racial effects of race-blind laws (or a racism without races) has been particularly prolific in Europe, where immigration has brought a wave of non-white residents but the language of race is still largely resisted (Simon, 2017). Comparisons have been made regarding how countries design and implement policies to promote equality and fight discrimination against racialized, and mostly immigrant minorities (e.g. Kastoryano, 2002; Bleich, 2003). The growth of anti-Muslim sentiment has also opened a new comparative agenda about the different ways in which racism is defined by states and by policies for responding to it (e.g. Bleich, 2011; Kastoryano, 2015).

Beyond the central role of nation-states, contemporary comparisons have also taken seriously a broader understanding of race as a global experience extending from histories of colonization, slavery, and immigration (e.g. Gilroy, 1993; Winant, 2001; Reid Andrews, 2004; Goldberg, 2006). In fact, recent studies have been much more attentive to transnational processes, in particular new scientific ideas about race and frameworks of multiculturalism. For example, Stepan (1991) and Wade et al. (2014) have focused on how national ideas about race enter into and are affected by transnational scientific practices such as old theories eugenics and contemporary debates on genomics. Loveman (2014) shows that Latin American censuses are shaped by transnational ideas of scientific practices and transnational repertoires about race, while Paschel (2016) analyzes how the wave of new anti-racism policies in Latin America has been shaped by alliances between local and transnational social movements in Brazil and Colombia. Focusing on Asia, Goh (2008) investigates the impact of racialist policies adopted by colonial powers on current understandings of multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore. Together these works highlight the importance of incorporating these transnational movements into research, yet without losing sight of variation in their enactment across different contexts.

This body of research on transnational processes has also pushed the scope of the literature beyond the Western experience and revealed a paradox: Transnational processes are, in large part, studied in non-Western (or Global South) racialization experiences. In contrast, racialization processes in Europe and North America are more often understood as shaped by domestic and national contexts. In fact, the processes through which race is negotiated within international organizations and through international relations have remained largely understudied (Lauren, 2018; Galonnier and Simon, forthcoming).

Comparing race and racisms as the independent and the dependent variable

Macro-historical and institutional comparisons provide us important insights into how nation-states and transnational processes construct race, but they tend to focus on top-down approaches, telling us little about the actual impact of race and racism in shaping unequal outcomes across different countries. Since the 2000s, the growth in the number of countries collecting ethnoracial data in their national censuses—itself a transnational transformation (Morning, 2008; Loveman, 2014)—presents an opportunity to compare how racialization shapes socioeconomic outcomes across different contexts.

Such types of comparisons are more common, if not widespread, in economics. These studies largely converge in identifying statistically significant inequalities across national contexts, even if in different degrees and diverse associations. For example, in a recent analysis relying on national household surveys in Brazil, the United States, and South Africa, Gradín (2014, p. 90) finds,

[E]ven if blacks [operationalized as *pretos* and *pardos* in Brazil, African black in South Africa and African American in the United States] had the same observed characteristics as whites in these three countries, a substantial (conditional) differential would still persist in average incomes.

The author shows how racial income inequalities are related to different observed demographic characteristics in the three countries. While educational gaps and regional concentration are the most important drivers of racial inequalities in Brazil, type of household (e.g. female-headed households) and performance of household members in the labor market play a more important role in the United States. In South Africa, Gradín found the strongest association between racial and household characteristics, especially the educational level. Considering these findings from a sociological perspective, one can conclude that racialization is happening through different institutional mechanisms, an agenda that could be pursued further by social stratification scholars interested in how institutions shape racial inequalities (e.g. Telles, 1992; Moraes Silva et al, under review; Carter, 2012).

Nevertheless, relying on official data collected through varied methods and with differently constructed categories may create a problem of comparability (Wrench, 2011). This is especially consequential in the case of comparisons of attitudes towards race, racisms and discrimination, in which the framing of the question can have a strong impact on the patterns of response. Cross-national surveys—although rare due to their high cost—have opened a new path for comparison. Comparison that relies on publicly available surveys (e.g., Eurobarometer, LAPOP) and include questions about ethnoracial identification or perceptions of racism and discrimination have shown how attitudes about the salience of racism and discrimination vary across countries (e.g. Quillian, 1995; Bail, 2008; Staerklé et al., 2010;

Canache et al., 2014). In Europe in 2008, the EU-Midis, financed and conducted by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights, surveyed 23,500 ethnic minorities and immigrant groups throughout the 27 EU member states, as well as 5000 majority people across ten member states (EU-MIDIS, 2009). The survey asked respondents about their experiences of discrimination, their experiences of criminal victimization (including racially motivated crime), the extent of any involvement of the security forces in these encounters, their awareness of their rights, and their reasons for reporting (or not) these encounters. In its official report (EU-MIDIS, 2009), the study primarily compares across different ethnoracial groups (Roma, Muslims, North Africans, Sub-Saharan Africans, etc) within each country and, due to sampling limits, refrains from comparing across countries.

But beyond collecting comparable data, comparing race without taking it seriously as a theoretical concept may conflate different dimensions and meanings of the term (see Roth, 2017) and reproduce an essentialized notion of race. Aware of this risk, surveys have also been used to compare different understandings of race or compare race as a dependent variable (Suzuki, 2017). The Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA), for example, has focused on how racial self-identification can vary depending on the categories proposed to respondents. The survey analyzes divergence between the self-identification of respondents and the interviewer's classification of them. It also attempts to disentangle racial categories from skin color, ideas that are frequently conflated. Telles and PERLA (2014) asked interviewers to rate the skin color of interviewees based on a color palette and concluded that, when compared to racial categories, skin color rankings better captured the dynamics of racism in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru. Bailey, Saperstein, and Penner (2014) advanced the analysis of racial categories and skin color by using data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), which relied on the same color palette designed by PERLA to expand the measurement of color and racial hierarchies across Latin America. The authors also added the case of the United States, where a different but comparable skin color measure has been used in the 2012 General Social Survey. As in the case of PERLA, they find that racial categories and color do not always overlap, but they also show that income inequality can best be understood in some countries by using racial categories alone and in others by using skin color. In a few countries, including the United States, a combination of skin color and self-identified race best explains income variation. They conclude that the different ways in which racial categories (and skin color) are understood impact inequality, complicating cross-national comparisons of racial inequalities within Latin America as well as between Latin American and the United States.

Comparing cultural repertoires of race and racisms

Comparative studies relying on ethnographic and in-depth interviews propose a different alternative to understanding how people experience race and racism. By focusing on narrated experiences and observed interactions, these methods can be more appropriate for analyzing how race and racism work across different settings. An exemplary approach is Essed's (1991) study of everyday racism based on 55 in-depth interviews with black women in the Netherlands and United States. Analyzing these narratives, Essed shows how everyday micro-processes are linked to distinct macrosocial racialized structures. Although the author's explicit goal is not to make a systematic comparison between the Netherlands and United States—rather she uses the United States as a frame of reference for analyzing the Netherlands—Essed points to a number of factors that cause race and racism to be interpreted differently in these two national contexts.

The comparative goal is more clearly at the heart of the collectively authored book, *Getting Respect*, (Lamont et al., 2016). Based on 500 in-depth interviews with working-class and middle-class African Americans, black Brazilians, and Arab Palestinians, Ethiopian and Mizrahi citizens of Israel, the study seeks to systematically compare how racism—conceptualized as experiences of assault on worth and discrimination—is experienced in the United States, Brazil, and Israel. Conceptually, the authors propose that these experiences can be better understood by focusing on similarities and differences across contexts and along three dimensions: historical, socioeconomic, and institutional structures (such as those analyzed in the macro-historical comparative studies previously discussed); national and transnational cultural repertoires (such as national myths and empowering ideologies); and groupness (defined as the mix of self-identification and symbolic boundaries towards outgroups, in terms of both race and class). The detailed comparison of narratives of stigmatization experiences illustrates how specific experiences are perceived as discriminatory (i.e. as having consequences on access to certain resources) in certain contexts but not in others. This explains, for example, why in survey studies perception of discrimination among black Brazilians is much lower than among African Americans, despite experiencing similar, or even higher, levels of socioeconomic racial inequalities. In addition, the authors explore why different ideal and actual responses to racism are chosen, despite a widespread recognition of racial stigmatization across all cases. Finally, adding the case of Israel to the traditional Brazil versus United States comparison highlights how understanding race as skin color, ethnicity, national identity or religion can change the way racism is interpreted and resisted. The exclusion through blackness—as in the case of African Americans, black Brazilians and Ethiopian citizens of Israel—has a long shared history and a vast repertoire of interpretation and resistance. In contrast, the exclusion through ethnicity or culture may be perceived as localized, specific or naturalized through the often elusive goal of integration, as illustrated by the case of Mizrahi citizens of Israel. The case of Palestinian citizens of Israel evidences racialization, coupling religion and national identity, in which ethnoracial boundaries are perceived as more rigid and hard to cross or question. The growing importance of nationality and religion coupled with a context of growing securitization of national borders and restriction of citizenship may make the Palestinian case particularly illustrative of new forms of exclusionary racialization.

While *Getting Respect* identifies the importance of transnational narratives in shaping national experiences of race, particularly in Brazil and Israel, other recent studies have focused more explicitly on the growing transnational dimension of race. Roth's (2012) comparison of the racial schemas of Dominicans and Puerto Ricans who migrated to the United States versus those who stayed in their home countries shows how these schemas migrate from one country to another. The author finds that these “race migrations” have transformed understandings of race not only in the home countries but also in the United States. Along the same lines, Joseph's (2015) detailed account of changes in the racial repertoires of Brazilian immigrants in their comings and goings from the United States shows how changing understandings of race transform the way racism (and anti-racism) are experienced.

More conceptually, recent works comparing national repertoires of race brought “culture” back into the study of racialization processes but abandon essentialized and nationalistic understandings of culture. Instead, such works analyze “culture in action,” focusing on how different cultural repertoires frame both the social construction of race and resistance to racialization and racisms.

Concluding remarks

Although not exhaustive, this chapter has presented a broad review of multiple comparative approaches to the study of race and racisms in social science research. It has argued that comparison of race and racisms has a long history in the social sciences, but it has often been accused of falling short in its conceptualization of race and national differences.

As reviewed in this chapter, recent works on comparative race relations have relied on diverse conceptual and methodological approaches that have addressed prior shortcomings in multiple ways. Macro-historical comparisons have taken seriously the idea of how race is constructed differently by state institutions and transnational processes. Statistical models and surveys have been mobilized to examine how race and racisms shape socioeconomic stratification across different contexts and, as concepts, are perceived differently across countries. Finally, in-depth interview studies and multi-site ethnographies have analyzed how race and racism are shaped by everyday interactions and boundary-making, which are themselves shaped by national and transnational cultural repertoires. Despite the abundant literature, a number of challenges and opportunities remain for future research.

First, and perhaps most importantly, the comparative study of race and racisms always carries with it the risk of essentializing race. Although a degree of analytical abstraction is necessary to define a comparative unit of analysis, we should be careful not to take racial categories as proxies for racial groups (for an important discussion on this topic see Loveman, 1999). The groupness of racialized groups is itself a key variable to understanding how race and racisms work across different societies (Lamont et al., 2016). Recent works comparing how these boundaries are challenged, for example, through different understandings about multiracial or mixed-race identities (e.g. Thompson, 2012), multiracial relationships (Osuji, 2013), or the experiences of those converted to Islam (Galonnier, 2015) open an interesting line of inquiry about how racial boundaries work in different ways across different contexts.

The second challenge is the flipside of the reification of race—the risk of constructing comparisons between apples and oranges. The idea of racism without race contributes to the understanding that race is not inherently linked to any specific characteristic, such as skin color or phenotype. It also creates the challenge of drawing the limits of what constitutes racialization. Does it make sense to compare groups based on their language, immigrant status, religion or phenotype? The answer, of course, depends on the types of research questions proposed in the comparison. More attention to comparative studies of dominant identities, for example—such as experiences of whiteness and white privilege—might help us find a common unit of analysis across different cases.

Third, there is always risk of relying on comparisons to emphasize the exceptionality of traits, groups, or countries, and to create moral hierarchies among them. For example, the growing focus on skin color in the Americas has advanced an argument that racial categories such as black, mestizo, and indigenous have limited explanatory power (Telles and PERLA, 2014; Monk, 2014). Focusing on skin color as a more objective measure, however, also risks reducing racialization to phenotype, without developing a clear conceptual understanding of what skin color tells us about race or acknowledging the relationality through which skin color is experienced. When it comes to the “groups” analyzed, the focus of comparative research has been largely on the experiences of people of African-descent, and more recently Muslims. This focus risks overgeneralizing these experiences and underestimating other experiences of racialization or the multiple intersectionalities that shape them. Finally, the continuous emphasis on the United States as a paradigmatic—or, alternatively, exceptional—comparative case threatens to bias our understanding of how race and racisms work. In fact,

most of the work on comparative race and racism is still produced in the United States, although a growing number of transnational collective projects have been produced in recent years (e.g. Lamont et al., 2016; Moreno Figueroa and Wade, (n.d.); Telles and PERLA, 2014).

In spite of these risks, comparative studies on race and racism remain an important tool to unpack the different ways that race is constructed. As shown in this review, recent studies have proposed interesting ways to conduct comparative research that take stock of these challenges and address them through creative research strategies. This is certainly a growing and resourceful field of research “in the making” not only through emerging analytical approaches but also new empirical developments. Race and racism are currently being transformed through transnational processes that not only reproduce racism but also create new anti-racist alliances. Transnational formal and informal anti-racist associations and forums as well as international migrations are interesting points of reference to empirically analyse those issues. In addition, it is important to take into account how these transnational processes are experienced and translated in local disputes not only to recognize discriminated identities but also to make visible dominant (and usually invisible) ones. In other words, comparing race and racism also means comparing the different ways in which racial privilege is constructed, reproduced and challenged. Finally, in comparing race and racisms studies can also be more attentive to how these concepts are transformed through different and localized intersectionalities with class, gender and sexuality. In fact, comparing the different ways these categories interact across different contexts, as well as the different political alliances they perform, would be a great tool to move forward processual and dynamic understandings of race and intersectionality. In short, the best way to deal with the perils of comparative research on race and racism is comparing more and in creative ways.

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