On the Possibility of Different Sorts of Racial Categories[1]

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Inspired by his own fieldwork with Torguud nomads in Mongolia, Francisco Gil-White's article "Sorting is not categorization" contributes to a long-running discussion about the specificity of Brazilian racial categories in opposition to other racial categories such as those in the United States. He questions the heuristic value of Marvin Harris' methodology and therefore doubts the substantive hypothesis based on the results of these methods — that Brazilians and Americans have a fundamentally different system of racial categories. Gil-White additionally proposes the opposite hypothesis — that Brazilian racial categories have much the same structure as those of the United States:

> "It is true that one does not find in the US as varied and prolific a vocabulary for describing people's phenotypes as one does in Brazil. It is also true that the US system features hypodescent, which prevents the emergence of intermediate racial categories. These are quite hoary observations of the differences between the US and Brazil. However, it is possible that this is the extent of the difference."[2]

We think that Gil-White brings a valuable skepticism to some claims that have been made about racial categories in Brazil. His linguistic considerations about ambiguities in the use of racial terms are pertinent, and he has correctly identified the need for a more sophisticated cognitive

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[2]Actually, because Gil-White thinks that racial and ethnic categories are more or less the same domain, he envisages an even stronger hypothesis — that Brazilians', Americans' and Torguud nomads' racial-ethnic categories are similarly structured.

study of racial categorization in Brazil (and elsewhere).[3] Nonetheless, we also think that his stance neglects some interesting hypotheses about cultural differences that deserve the attention of a cognitive approach. In this commentary, we would like to open a space for cognitive research to investigate these possible differences by exploring two inconsistencies in his article.

The first one is definitional. Take the three features of Gil-White's initial definition of 'race':

(a) Racial categories are based on phenotypic attributes: "This is a category of people made on the basis of phenotypic attributes. It is a category of people whose bodies 'look' a certain way."

(b) Racial categories have stereotypical associations: "Membership in the category is held to be explanatory or predictive of other things."

(c) People may essentialize racial categories: "But a lay category of race may be, even more than just a phenotypic category with explanatory or predictive beliefs attached; the people who use it may believe that they are looking at a biologically meaningful grouping."

In this initial definition, the third feature is not a necessary condition — "people *may* . . . ." But in the rest of the article, Gil-White interprets it as a necessary condition: 'race' refers to an essentialized category whose necessary and sufficient condition of membership is the possession of a specific essence inherited from another member (or members) of the same racial category.[4]

By considering essentialization a necessary condition for lay racial classifications, an important attempt is made to separate the understanding of simple phenotypic features from the understanding of primordial

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[3]Hirschfeld (1996) was the first to identify this need and to combine theories and methods from cognitive science with an anthropological perspective in the study of race.

[4]Gil-White believes an essentialized racial category to be an instance of a classical category (see also Gil-White 2001, where this point is explicit). But the fact that a principle of descent is fulfilling the causal "placeholder" of essentialism does not give a definition in a classical sense. The condition of possessing an essence A that descended from the same essence A is not definitional in contrast to the condition of possessing another essence B that descends from another essence B, simply because it does not include any specific information other than the difference between A and B. For a discussion of the relation between the classical view of concepts and causal essentialism, see Medin 1989 and Gelman & Hirschfeld 1999.

biological groupings.[5] But at the same time, other interesting hypotheses about the nature of Brazilian racial categories are not considered.

First, if (c) is necessary, it implies that (a) is not a necessary condition, since appearances are not a defining feature of an essentialized category. However, this stance a priori ignores the hypothesis that phenotype could actually be fundamental and possibly even defining for racial categories in Brazil. And this is a hypothesis that exists in the literature. For example, Brazilian anthropologist Oracy Nogueira emphasized the importance of phenotypes in the Brazilian system when he distinguished two types of socially significant "race" — 'raça de origem' (race of origin) and 'raça de marca' (race of mark), the former predominating in the United States and the latter in Brazil (Nogueira 1955).

Second, even if (a) is not fundamental for racial categorization in Brazil, it does not mean that what is structuring the Brazilian system is a notion of biological essentialism. Actually, in reaction to the hypothesis that phenotype is fundamental to racial categories, Harris and others (Pierson 1942; Wagley 1952; Kottak 1983) have asserted that: "[i]t is incorrect to imply that racial identity in Brazil is simply a matter of what a person looks or acts like, for the perception of what he looks or acts like appears to be influenced by *visually obscure if not invisible factors*" (Harris and Kottak 1963, emphasis added). Their hypothesis is that 'racial' identity is influenced by unseen factors, but in this case social class status rather than biological essences. As Kottak says:

> "The main difference is that the US has a dual system of stratification in which both 'race' and class divide the population. In Brazil, there is a single stratified order in which race, or phenotype, is simply one factor in determining a person's class affiliation. Other determinants are education, wealth, job, and family connections" (Kottak 1983).

Therefore, it can be that Brazilians' talk about phenotypic characteristics is based on a social class criterion instead of a notion of essentialism. In other words, it can be that racial categories in Brazil are prototypes for the

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[5]This is an important point because in the literature that discusses racial categories in Brazil, some researchers tend to consider any term that describes a specific phenotypic characteristic as a racial term. This seems to be a conceptualization of racial categories that is too broad, a point which is also made by many Brazilianists (see especially, Hanchard 1999 and Fontaine 1985).

activation of lay class concepts and their function is to indicate meaningful social class groupings rather than meaningful biological groupings.

We think that a detailed cognitive approach to racial categorization in Brazil must not dismiss these hypotheses, but rather examine them empirically. One should not look past appearances, but investigate their exact cognitive role because they may be a fundamental feature of Brazilian racial categories. And one should also examine the exact connection between lay social class concepts and racial categorization, both in terms of self-identification and other-identification.

We agree with Gil-White that sorting is not categorization if categories are essentialized, but the first onus would be to show that race concepts are really essentialized. Or, maintaining Gil-White's definition of 'race,' one would have to show if there are race concepts in Brazil at all.[6] But even assuming that in Brazil race is essentialized, we would like to envisage the possibility that there is more than one way that racial categories can be essentialized. We will address this point by exploring the other inconsistency in his article.

The second one is methodological. Take the following set of premises:

(a) Gil-White emphasizes the importance of applying efficacious methodologies for assessing the nature of categories: "[c]ognitive anthropologists have moved beyond mere elicitations or demands that informants introspect about their (often unconscious) mental processes. In their stead has grown a concern for procedures that will make people *use* their cognitive models, allowing us to infer their content and structure;"

(b) He assumes that his own methodology follows this precept of efficacy and that Harris' methodology doesn't;

(c) He envisions the possibility of applying his methodology in Brazil: "it could also be that, had I used Harris's methods in Mongolia, I would have reached his conclusions, and that, if I were to use my own methods in Brazil, the conclusions would be very similar to those I reached in Mongolia."

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[6]We are not worried here about giving prescriptions for the proper use of the word 'race,' but about maintaining conceptual distinctions that are important for the elaboration of different empirical hypotheses.

From these premises, one would expect Gil-White to propose applying his methodology to the study of racial categories in Brazil. Instead, he simply suggests some amendments to Harris' methodology, amendments that aren't sufficient to attain the methodological requirements that he himself advocates.

Here we want to speculate about the possibility of applying his methodology in Brazil. Consider his first question by using 'preto' ('black') and 'branco' ('white') and 'raça' ('race') accordingly: "If the father is preto/black and the mother branca/white, what is the raça/race of the child?" We think that a significant portion of Brazilians would use an intermediate racial term like 'moreno' or 'mulato' in answering this question.[7] If this is correct, in Brazil two parents of two different races can be thought to have a child of a third race. In addition to an intermediate racial term, we also imagine that other answers such as black or white are possible. There is nothing in principle to prevent the conceptualization of racial essences being transmitted in different combinations — and it is just this situation that we hypothesize for Brazil. This resonates with Harris and Kottak's claim that in Brazil full siblings may be classed in different 'racial' categories. But Gil-White explicitly denies this possibility:

> "Harris simply assumed that all of the terms he got referred to 'racial' categories and did not bother to examine people's cognitive models, limiting his study to an elicitation of labels. (This posture explains Harris's remarkable claim that in Brazil full siblings may be classed in different 'racial' categories, an interpretation that stretches thin not only the data he has, but also the concept of 'race' as usually understood.)"

Although much more research is needed, we do not think that Harris' interpretation stretches the data. The data presented by Harris and Kottak (1963) show that out of 100 subjects, only 6 used the same term to describe photographs of 3 sisters known to have the same parents. Most common answers were branca/white, mulata, morena, escura (which Harris and

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[7]That Gil-White accepts the possibility of an intermediary mixed racial category in Brazil is implicit in his discussion of the ambiguities of the term 'moreno.' In fact, mixing of racial essences is accepted in the anthropological literature (Stoler 1995). In addition, conceptions of mixing are also inherent in folk thinking about kinship (Hirschfeld 1996) and some research hints that mixing of essences is even thought to be possible between species (Kalish 1995).

Kottak speculate may be a euphemism for preta/black). Their data would only be stretched thin if there were concrete evidence that subjects were responding only in terms of color descriptors, but this is not obvious since the question wasn't phrased in color terms. Besides that, Harris and Kottak also asked people "Is it possible for brothers and sisters who have the same father and mother to be pretos and brancos?" to which all subjects responded "yes" (Harris and Kottak 1963). This makes perfect sense as long as the subject assumes the requisite essences to be present (in some combination) in the parents.

In addition, we do not think that this specific claim stretches the concept of race at all. Actually, if we consider the concept of race in Gil-White's own terms, there is no cognitive reason to suppose that Brazilians will avoid this multi-racial sibling classification. It can only be inconceivable that full siblings are of different races when the *specific* principle of descent entails that siblings will always be of the same race (in the case of parents of different races, either always the race of one of the parents or always a mixed race). Examples of strict interpretations entailing uniformity of sibling race are the principle of patrilineal descent as used by the Torguud nomads and the one drop rule.[8] However, there is no such specific interpretation in Brazil. Therefore, Harris and Kottak's claim may be pointing out a real cultural difference in the interpretation of racial essentialism.

The first type of question in itself seems to be intelligible for most Brazilians and suggests an important cultural difference in the interpretation of racial categories. All the other questions in Gil-White's methodology also seem to point to important cultural differences, but in a different way: we do not believe that the questions themselves would be intelligible for most Brazilians. The point of these other questions is to contrast nature and enculturation as the source of identity or behavioral disposition and therefore to verify if categories are essentialized. But it would be difficult to maintain that there is the folk perception of a specific preto/black enculturation opposed to a branco/white enculturation. Take,

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[8]Though the one drop rule itself entails uniformity, we are not implying that, aside from its use at the institutional level, people ordinarily use it to understand racial inheritance in the United States. Hirschfeld (1996) was the first to provide cognitive evidence for a commonsense commitment to this rule in some communities but not others.

for example, his third question with the appropriate substitutions: "A branco/white couple has a child that they don't want. They give it in adoption to a preto/black couple when the child is under a year old. The child grows up seeing only preto/black people and learning preto/black customs and language. What is the raça/race of this child?"

The question itself is unintelligible, because in Brazil there are not clear markers of preto/black language and it is difficult to sustain that there are customs that are perceived as conforming to a specific preto/black identity. In other words, it is difficult to say that pretos/blacks are considered an essentialized ethnic category in Brazil, simply because it is difficult to say that pretos/blacks are perceived as an ethnic group at all. And this seems to be an important contrast in relation to the racial categories in the United States where there are obvious language markers of black identity (on Black English see Morgan 1998) and it is plausible to suppose that blacks are perceived as sharing significant ethnic markers (van den Berghe 1987). But in conflating race and ethnicity as more or less the same domain, Gil-White has neglected this possible difference. Even if "... so-called races in particular times and places easily develop all the trappings of ethnic groups (e.g. the white/black boundary in the US)," this does not seem to be the case in Brazil. In other words, in Brazil it is plausible to sustain the hypothesis that there is race without ethnicity.

And this difference seems to be related to other important differences between Brazil and the United States in terms of overlap between named racial categories and perceived social groups. In Brazil, black political movements were not directly responsible for the changes in their legal "rights" and generally lacked the support enjoyed by similar movements in the United States (Skidmore 1985). This can be attributed on one hand to the resistance and uncomfortability by some mixed-race Brazilians to accept such a categorical distinction (Burdick 1998) and on the other hand to specific policies of the Brazilian State. At the state-level of political institutions, there are clear historical policy differences between the US and Brazil. From abolition after the Civil War (1865) until the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, legal segregation kept races separate by explicit rules specifying which biological features (percent of black blood or genes) would place a citizen in which group. At present, one's categorical identification still has political implications (in addition to social ones) in

the form of affirmative action policies. To the contrary, Brazil never had a policy of institutional segregation nor did it have laws determining how to categorically divide the population into discrete groups (Winant 1999). In fact, the Brazilian government actively propagated a specific ideology emphasizing the mixed nature of all Brazilians and the subsequent lack of confrontation between races.[9]

Before concluding our commentary, we must make a brief qualification. In discussing US and Brazilian systems of categorization, we do not assume national uniformity or historical continuity. Both of these countries are extremely large and heterogeneous, and we expect significant differences within the respective countries. In the case of the US, some recent cognitive anthropology research even shows that racial classification can vary from one community to that of a neighboring community (Hirschfeld 1996). Other research demonstrates that what may appear to be rigid essentialized categories from one social position can be perceived as fluid from a different social position (Mahalingam 1998).

In Brazil, recent research by Kottak shows that, even in the same towns where he and Harris came to many of their conclusions about Brazilian racial categories, the system of categorization is changing (Kottak 1992). We think that one of the important changes is the appropriation of representations of race from the US popular media (television, movies, and music) especially in regard to political concerns of Afro-Brazilians. In certain places in Brazil, especially larger cities such as Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, black leaders are specifically urging Brazilians with any trace of black blood to identify as categorically black especially under the newly used term, 'negro' (Sansone 1993). These leaders have begun a process of *ethnicizing* the racial categories. That is, specific music, food, and other cultural markers are being actively associated with blackness in a categorical way. Often these political actions are linked to carnaval associations (such as Olodum and Ilê Ayê) highlighting their African heritage (Hanchard 1999). Awareness of these essentialized categorical

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[9]This ideology, often called the "myth of racial democracy" is linked specifically to the 1936 book *The Masters and the Slaves* by prominent Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre. To be clear, this ideology is called a myth because it obscures the reality of racial prejudice. At the same time, it is impossible to deny that it has had important consequences in the perception of race relations.

distinctions spans beyond the local into mainstream Brazilian popular culture.

Much research needs to be done to assess how these new historical situations are affecting cognitive categories. The changing situation presents unique possibilities for research into the interaction between these various levels of environmental stimulus and the cognitive categories that are subsequently constructed.

Gil-White starts his article by supporting a new trend in cognitive anthropology to focus on what is general to human cognition, though he also notes the danger of neglecting cultural diversity. We believe that he has carefully avoided this dangerous trap since he is rather cautious about the speculative character of his claims. And, after all, it is possible that in the long run the cognitive research of racial and ethnic categories in Brazil (and elsewhere) will give empirical confirmation of his bold hypotheses. However, we do think that his universalist stance needs a counterbalance. Our aim in this commentary has been to fulfill just such a role.

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