

## Race, ethnicity and joining the club

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In 1960 I flew from Durban to Bloemfontein to watch the third rugby test between South Africa and New Zealand. (This wasn't a regular thing—my father's employers had chartered a private plane, and he wangled a seat for me.)

It was something for a twelve-year old to remember. 55,000 fans in the Free State Stadium, Colin Meads versus Johan Claassen in the line-outs, Don Clarke kicking 80-yard touches through the thin Highveld air. The All Blacks came back from 11-3 down to grab a draw and take the series to a deciding final game.

Except, that wasn't the proper All Blacks team. They'd left all their Maoris at home in New Zealand. Of course, we all know that South African teams in those apartheid days were racially exclusive. But what isn't so often remembered is that many other countries—including nice, democratic New Zealand—readily went along with this agenda, even into the 1960s, happy to leave out some of their best players to send racially pure “white” teams to South Africa.



In general, sporting history scores very badly on race. Many major sports were organized on colour lines throughout much of the twentieth century. In America, professional baseball, football, hockey and basketball were all strictly segregated until after WWII. The Olympic Games accepted all-white South African teams until 1960. The West Indies cricket selectors insisted appointing white captains of limited playing ability until the end of the 1950s.

Thankfully that's all gone now. Overt racial discrimination is now illegal in most places. Moreover, the intensity of modern sporting competition works against any surreptitious racial favouritism. No coach or selector would keep their job long if they allowed skin colour to trump skill in choosing players.

True, there are some places that haven't heard the news. In parts of southern and eastern Europe, the local fans still think it funny to throw bananas at visiting players of colour. Even so, such behavior is nowadays widely condemned, and organizations like Kick it Out and FARE (Football Against Racism in Europe) take pains to ensure that perpetrators are identified and punished.

But I wonder if we have travelled as far from the last century as we think. We still tend to think in terms of *races*. We have laws against *racial* discrimination. There are organizations, like Kick it Out and FARE, designed to foster *racial* inclusiveness. I'm not sure that this is the right way to set things up. I worry that the very notion of race may be part of the problem, not the solution.

Most people think of races in terms of "blood", some kind of inner nature that is responsible for racial characteristics. In their view, races like "Africans", "Chinese", "Caucasians", "Polynesians" and so on all have a defining essence, passed on from parents to children, and responsible for the allegedly distinctive moral characters, physical features and intellectual abilities of each race.

This kind of thinking is a historical throwback. There is nothing in modern biology to support the idea of race-defining essences. But essentialist ideas of race run deep in our culture, fostered by centuries of spurious justification for the enslavement and exploitation of supposedly "inferior" races.

A give-away is the "one-drop rule". People whose ancestry is 75% European and 25% African are still classified by most people as "black". This makes no logical sense. Why aren't they more "white" than "black"? But things fall into place if you think of African "blood" as constitutionally inferior, and so as placing anybody with some in their veins outside the realm of privilege.

We will do better to kick out the whole idea of race, along with racism. Of course, we need to acknowledge that many human traits are influenced by genes, and moreover that the frequency of these genes varies systematically between recognizable population groups. But gene frequencies fall a long way short of dividing the human species into distinct races.

For one thing, migration and intermarriage are constantly reshuffling ancestral genes into new combinations, especially in the contemporary world. And, even

apart from that, the average genetic differences between different population groups co-exist with large overlaps at the level of individuals (just as an average height difference between Germans and Spanish doesn't mean that all individual Germans are taller than all Spaniards).

In an ideal world, we wouldn't put people into racial boxes at all, but simply see them all as humans differentiated in myriad ways. Maybe that ideal isn't as unreachable as it sounds. I like to think that modern Britain, along with many other European countries, is fast dropping the idea of race—and moreover that sport has played a pivotal role in bringing this about.

Britain has the advantage of no long-standing history of local racial discrimination, if for no other reason than lack of opportunity. Before 1950 there were fewer than 20,000 non-whites in the country. However, immigration since then has altered the numbers dramatically, and now there are over 7 million people of colour in the United Kingdom, over 10% of the population.

It can't be said that their arrival has always been welcomed. In his memoir of family and football, *The Last Game*, Jason Cowley describes his grandfather Frank, a retired London bus-driver, and initially an unabashed racist. "The darkies overran the buses", he would say. "They're good at sport because they are used to swinging around in trees."

Then his football side Millwall signed two black players, and his feelings softened slightly. They were still "darkies", but they played with pride and commitment, and so became "our darkies". Later still, Cowley describes accompanying his grandfather to a match where an opposing black forward was subject to sustained and vicious racial abuse. On the way home, his grandfather was thoughtful. After a while he said "It was tough for that black fella up front this afternoon, wasn't it?" Cowley remembers the words: "*Black fella*. My grandfather had always used the word 'darkie'."

Nick Hornby tells a similar story in *Fever Pitch*. He describes his strange sense of pride when the foul stream of obscenities hurled at visiting black players by the Arsenal fans began to leave out the racial epithets. Hornby downplays it—“It’s not much to be grateful for, really, the fact that a man calls another man a cunt but not a black cunt”—but I don’t see why. I’d say it’s rather a lot to be grateful for.



Viv Anderson, Arsenal, first player of colour to represent England

There are currently well over 1 million people in Britain who identify themselves as “mixed race”. Some of them are prominent athletes: Theo Walcott, Jessica Ennis-Hill, Lewis Hamilton. When asked, they tend to say that they are mixed-race rather than “black”. They don’t see why some bigoted one-drop rule should make them deny their white parents. More generally, I doubt that there are many Britons left who mindlessly stereotype these figures as “black”, or indeed think very much about the issue at all.

Some would argue that an insistent colour-blindness is in danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. They feel that we will lose something valuable if we insist on ignoring the diverse origins of many citizens in modern societies.

There is something to this argument. People grow up with nursery rhymes, ancestral stories, special cuisines and local customs. It is right and natural that

communities with a joint origin should want to celebrate their common cultures and pass them on to their children.

It is conventional nowadays to talk about “ethnicity” rather than “race”. The point of this terminological shift is precisely to move beyond old-fashioned prejudice, and make space for pride in distinctive traditions grounded in shared histories. I don’t want to classify people racially, but I recognize that it is important to many people in my country that they have a Gujarati, or Yoruba, or German Jewish, or Bangladeshi, or Polish background.

In 1990 the conservative politician Norman Tebbit formulated a sporting criterion to decide whether newly British citizens with foreign backgrounds were sufficiently committed to their adopted country. According to the “Tebbit test”, a Briton with a Gujarati background, say, isn’t properly loyal unless they support the English team when it plays cricket against India.

That is chauvinist crap. I am properly British all right. All my grandparents were in Britain by 1900. Still, because my father’s job took my family to South Africa during my teenage years, I root for South Africa whenever they play the perennially one-dimensional English rugby union team. Perhaps it’s something to do with my trip to Bloemfontein. But whatever the exact reason, it certainly doesn’t mean that I’m somehow wanting as a citizen.



Fans at an England-India match in Cardiff

To resist the Tebbit test is not to deny that new citizens of a country are under some obligation to respect its way of doing things. As I pointed out in an earlier post, a healthy community requires a mutual sense of acceptable public behaviour, of how to settle disputes, of your obligations to neighbours and acquaintances, and so on.

So immigrants should certainly adjust some of their behavior to accommodate to their new society. But this doesn't mean that they have to disown their origins. There are many dimensions to identity. You can respect the public customs of your new country while still celebrating your religious holidays, or dressing in a traditional style, or indeed supporting your country of origin on the sports field.

And even the latter can be a nuanced matter. While I support South Africa at rugby against England, I am conversely frantic for England to win when the two sides play cricket. Similarly, I would expect that most young Britons of Indian background will back India against England at cricket, but will be firmly behind England when they play soccer. (All right, maybe they would side with India at soccer too, if India ever played England—but I can't say that I have ever noticed an Indian soccer team.)

Not all philosophers are happy about eliminating the idea of “race” in favour of the more neutral “ethnicity”. They feel that this demands a willful blindness to social reality. Sure, they agree, there is no objective basis for the racial categories imposed by many modern societies. But that doesn’t mean that they don’t make a big difference to people’s lives. In many parts of the world your life chances depend crucially on your perceived race. These classifications may be social constructions, but they are certainly real to those who suffer discrimination in their name.

I remain uneasy. I agree, of course, that we should recognize and resist racial discrimination whenever it occurs. But this doesn’t necessarily mean that we should think of the people who are subject to it as groups with any sort of shared identities. In my view, this is already to allow the racists to pollute our thinking.

The UK Census in 2011 included an “ethnic group” question, inviting respondents to say whether they were “White, Mixed, Asian or Black” or some yet further category. The US Census of 2010 similarly asked—this time under the heading of “race”—whether respondents were “White, Black, Native Americans” or something else. (The States didn’t have a “Mixed” option, but allowed more than one box to be ticked.) Of course these queries were designed with good intentions, not least to help locate and stamp out discrimination. But I don’t think they should have been asked. They conceded too much ground to people who think that skin colour (as opposed to shared culture) is important.

After the 21 year-old Tiger Woods won the Masters by 12 shots in 1997, he was invited onto the Oprah Winfrey show. Asked whether he counted himself as African-American, Woods demurred, explaining that his two black great-grandparents were outnumbered by two Chinese, two Thai, a native American and a Dutchman.

Woods was widely criticized in America. Many in the black community felt that his



refusal to accept an African-American identity was implicitly racist. Colin Powell, later US Secretary of State, and rather lighter-skinned than Woods, responded by saying that, “In America, when you look like me, you’re black”.

In my view, Woods’ critics were just wrong. Of course, everybody should be concerned about prejudice against African-Americans in the United States, and especially so if you are yourself a citizen of that country. But this falls a long way short of saying that you have to accept that identity just because other people give it to you. It would make just as much logical and biological sense to count Woods as Chinese as black. If he doesn’t think of himself as black, that’s fine by me.



A young Tiger, and Oprah

Throughout his long life, Charlie Chaplin was often said to be Jewish. In fact he was of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic ancestry, and no more Jewish than Margaret Thatcher. Even so, he never denied the attribution publicly. He felt that making a fuss about not being Jewish would only add to the tide of anti-Semitism. He didn’t want to suggest that Jewish was something you didn’t want to be.

I have always thought Chaplin’s stance admirable. More generally, the world would be a better place if people stopped demeaning ethnic groups by emphasizing their distance from them. But this is not to say that you need to embrace whatever

classification is imposed on you. It wouldn't have made sense for Chaplin to agree that he was a Jew, just because the Committee for Un-American Activities said so. Nor does Tiger Woods have to self-identify as an African-American, even if he is stuck with many other Americans thinking of him in this way.

If you ask me, it is only acceptable to think in ethnic terms if we grant people the freedom to opt out. Sure, communities who feel united by history should be allowed, even encouraged, to take pride in their common traditions. But the other side of that coin is that everybody should remain free to shape their own identities.

In most cases we don't have any difficulty with this idea. If a Polish family immigrating to the United States chooses to submerge its ethnic origins and adopt a generic white American identity instead, who is likely to object? And most of us will feel the same if some young person wants to slough off their identity as a Northern Irish Protestant, or an Amish, or an orthodox Jew. These moves will of course be resisted by these religiously-defined communities themselves, but the majority of impartial observers will side with the right to individual self-determination.

I say that the same principle should apply even to categories like "African-American" or "British Asian". It is not for the rest of us to tell anybody what kind of people they are. That's down to them. Skin colour shouldn't come into it.

Perhaps I am pushing at an open door here. The idea that "self-identification" is central to ethnic classification is familiar enough nowadays. We appreciate that people often want to break free of their historical origins.

But what about the other way round? What about *opting in* to ethnic groups? This isn't so straightforward, but I think the same principle applies. Ethnic groups are only legitimate if they are porous in both directions. You should be able to check in as well as check out.

Earlier this year, Rachel Dolezal, a serving official in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), was accused of “passing” as black. Despite having two parents of unequivocally European ancestry, she had been presenting herself as an African-American for some years, and had been active in black community politics.

When the story broke, Dolezal was subject to widespread ridicule. Her claim that she “self-identified” as black was not taken seriously. But I’m on her side. True, there was an element of deception in her conduct, and her relationship with her parents was less than ideal. But if we put these specific issues to one side, it is not so clear where she went wrong. Why shouldn’t someone be able to join an ethnic group they feel an affinity to?



Rachel Dolezal

After all, in many cases such ethnic ingress seems straightforward. The Polish immigrants adopt the identity of white Americans. Or me, for that matter. As I said, I am proper English. I sang English nursery rhymes to my children, I speak and write like an Englishman, I am proud of Shakespeare and Bobby Charlton. But my forebears on both sides all came to this country within the last three centuries, and they certainly weren’t English when they arrived.

Perhaps these are easy cases. “American” and “English” are classic nations of

immigrants, about as cosmopolitan as you can get while still retaining an ethnic identity. All right, let's take a harder one. How about French Canadians? I presume they count as a real ethnic group defined by a desire to celebrate their common ancestry, if anything does.

Even so, it doesn't look that hard to become a French Canadian. Maybe someone who moves to Quebec as adult isn't going to make it. It's tricky to get the accent right, and it could be argued that you need a network of long-standing personal connections. But the children of such a couple would seem to qualify fine, supposing that they identify with French Canada and take pride in its history.

It is only when skin colour intrudes that the boundaries become impenetrable. That's the real reason we find it difficult to countenance Rachel Dolezal as an African-American. We think that she lacks the biological essence that is present in all black people, and which divides African-Americans from the rest, whether they like it or not.

To drive the point home, note that it's only white people who are disqualified in this way. I take it that "African-American" refers to an ethnic group whose history is grounded in the West African people who were forcibly transported to the New World as slaves. Maybe it seems unreasonable for a white woman like Rachel Dolezal to try to sign up to this group. But, if so, how come Barack Obama can join?

Most people have little problem with the idea of President Obama as an African-American. But in truth his claim is no better than Dolezal's. None of his ancestors were imported slaves. The darkness of Obama's countenance comes from his father, an East African Kenyan economist who met Obama's mother while a student in Hawaii, and owes nothing to the history of slavery.

I fear that, in most people's thinking, "African-American" is still basically an old-

style racial category. A necessary requirement is that you have some black African “blood”. Obama has some, so he can get in, but Denezal doesn’t. Just look at their skins.

I think we are better off without such thinking. To repeat, ethnic histories and traditions are often proper objects of memory and pride. But to keep them free of bad racial ideas, we must allow them to be porous in both directions. If you think that a certain kind of blood is needed to be an African-American, but not a French Canadian, then you’re thinking in the wrong way.

To say this is not to deny that genetic ancestry can make a difference. Funmbi Omotayo is a British Nigerian comedian. In his act he explains how his dual affiliations enhance his sporting fandom. When England was knocked out of the soccer World Cup, he switched his support to Nigeria. It was the same in the Olympics. He had two sets of athletes to back.

When it came to the 100 metres mens’ final, though, he was all for Usain Bolt. “I told my white friend this before the event, and he got really offended. ‘Why are you supporting Usain Bolt, Funmbi? He’s not British or Nigerian. You’re only supporting him because he is *black*.’ But I was like, ‘Dude, it’s the Olympic 100 metres final—they’re *reall* black.’”



100 metres final, London 2012

Omotayo is of course right. There hasn't been a white man in the 100 metres final since 1980. Nearly all the competitors have had some West African ancestry, benefitting from genes that foster the "fast twitch" muscles essential for top sprinting.

It's the same in many sports that call for extreme physical types. A disproportionate number of top competitors will descend from ancestral populations that evolved in special environments. Long-distance running is another example. Most champions over the last few decades hail from high-altitude populations in North or East Africa.

Still, we can acknowledge this importance of genetic ancestry without reinstating impermeable racial categories. Of course it is true that different groups have different proportions of sports-relevant genes—Jamaicans versus Poles, say, or people with some West African ancestry versus those without.

But this doesn't mean that these groups possess any special racial essence. It's just that they were sitting in a good seat when the sporting genes were shuffled. The points made earlier still apply. Most modern humans derive their genes from a

mixture of ancestral populations, and even those that don't overlap a great deal in their genetic attributes.

If you are a sports fan, you will do well to identify with groups that have been dealt good genetic hands. But don't make the mistake of thinking that they are winners because of their "racial" composition. In the end, there aren't any races—just people spread across the many dimensions of human difference.