Reflections on social justice, race, ethnicity and identity from an ethical perspective
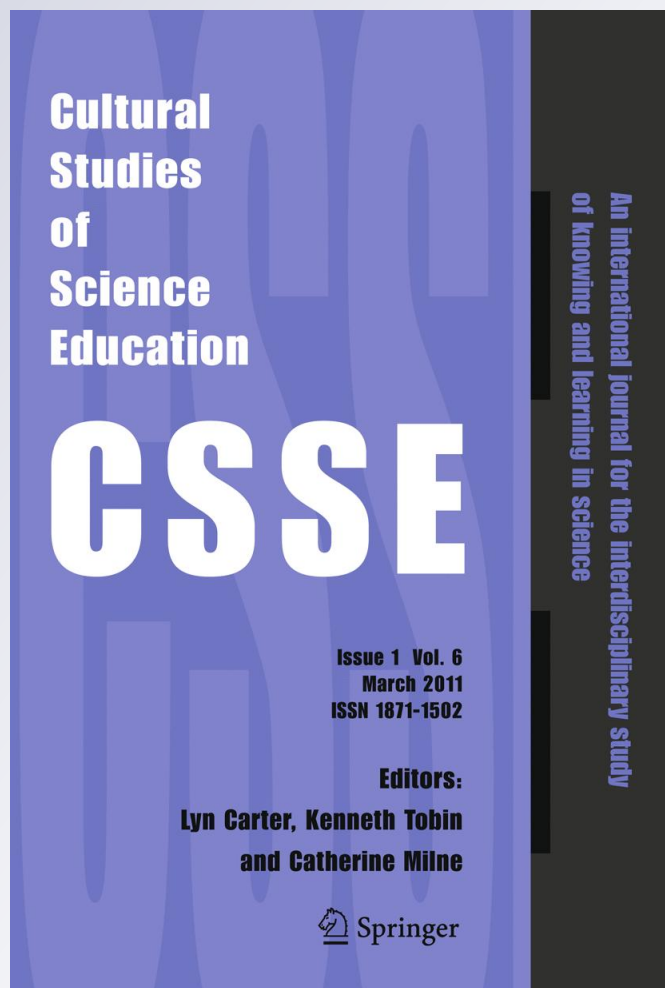
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Reflections on *social justice, race, ethnicity* and *identity* from an ethical perspective

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Abstract   In these reflections, I identify complexities in few constructs that are often used in educational research, although not often critically, namely, *social justice*, *race, ethnicity* and *identity*. This paper suggests a non-ontological and non-epistemological approach to ethics as developed by Emmanuel Levinas as a normative means to deal with some of the complexities. In dealing with the construct of social justice, an ethical approach calls for productive research tools to not only understand exclusion but also to change situations of injustice to marginalised groups. Further, both constructs *race* and *ethnicity* can be used to identify groups of people based on their history, culture and/or lifestyles. As social constructions they have different historical origins and are open to alternative connotations, uses and abuses. An ethical perspective is useful to manage the dilemma of essentialism that group identification may lead into. Finally, the debate around the usefulness of the construct of identity raises some ethical questions about the role of research and the lived experience of its subjects. An ethical stance demands that constructs of analysis in social inquiry should not only demonstrate their utility for knowledge generation but also should demonstrate a responsibility for the construction and reconstruction of lifeworld in which academic endeavours are conducted.

Keywords   Social justice · Race · Ethnicity · Identity · Science education

In making these reflections on some issues that the paper by Gale Seiler has evoked within me, I write both as an outsider and as an insider in the context of the author and some of the readership of this Journal. As a mathematics educator, my knowledge of the literature in science education is perhaps more limited than what I might wish it to be. While undoubtedly there are commonalities of themes within the two disciplines, I will not make the assumption that the issues discussed in them are identical. Further, as a non-North

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American writer, perhaps I am not fully cognizant about the intricacies of common usages of some terms and their connotation in that particular social context. Lastly, some theoretical constructs used by the author are not constructs that I have developed an expertise in or used to frame my own academic writing. However, I share with the author a commitment to social justice, which forms the foundation of her concern in the published article. Similarly, my experience in international academic writing and editing does equip me with some tools to reflect upon issues raised in the Seiler paper as expected in this Forum, albeit from an alternative perspective.

In these reflections, I indentify four particular constructs used by the author to develop the arguments in the paper; namely *social justice*, *race, ethnicity* and *identity*. The aim here is to point to some complexities in these constructs and to suggest a non-ontological and non-epistemological approach to ethics as a normative means to deal with some of the complexities. I will not attempt here to engage with the arguments and conclusions developed in the paper itself—a task that has been done appropriately by the reviewers and the Editor. Rather I will summarise some of the more general problematics that the paper has evoked within me. Finally, I do not present these thoughts as highly developed arguments, but rather, like Michel Foucault (2000), "I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same thing as before" (p. 240) and, hopefully, to further the debate on them within the general education community towards more informed and socially just practices.

Perhaps it is appropriate to commence by reflecting on the construct of social justice itself.

Complexities in the discourse of social justice

While, during the last half century, concerns about social justice in the mathematics education literature (I trust that it is the same in science education) has moved from the margins to the centre (Atweh and Keitel 2007), the term is not always theorised and is still open for alternative interpretations leading to possibly conflicting practices. Take for example the debates around 'what about the boys' and the 'gifted and talented.' Further, the term is often used interchangeably with other terms such as equity and diversity—with some possible regional differences in their use between North America and European literature (Atweh 2007). As in the previous two references, here I use the more encompassing term social justice.

In Atweh (2007), I pointed out that Marion Young (1990) understood that principles of social justice are not abstract general principles that can be applied to specific practices and situations in all localities and societies; they are not theorems. Rather, they are claims that some people make over others; "they are [arguments] addressed to others and await their response, in a situated political dialogue" (p. 5).

Traditionally, the conception of a social justice model was based on the redistribution of resources and goods, whether material or symbolic. Distributive models of social justice focus more on unequal opportunities in society rather than solely on outcomes. However, Sharon Gewirtz (1998) identifies two forms of distributive justice: a weak form, equality of opportunity, and a strong form, equality of outcome. Philip McInerney (2004) noted that a society cannot be called just unless "it is characterized by a fair distribution of material and non-material resources" (p. 50). John Rawls (1973 in McInerney 2004) claimed, "the primary subject of social justice must be the basic structure of society, or, more precisely, the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and

responsibilities and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation" (p. 50). At the same time as he affirmed the individual right to pursue goods, Rawls insisted that distribution of wealth, income, power and authority are justifiable if they work to maximize the benefit of the least advantaged in society.

In education, distributive models of social justice are reflected in compensatory programs allocating designated resources for the disadvantaged. However, many of these compensatory programs do not question the curriculum itself, the pedagogy or the regimes of testing used in the classroom and their role in creating educational inequality. Further, they construct the recipients of social justice remedies as individuals as parts of a collective—yet they may not alter the status of the collective. Finally, they do not take into account the reasons for inequalities that have historical roots and are socially and politically determined.

Several poststructuralist feminist writers have critiqued the distributive model of social justice by pointing to its limitation. Gewirtz (1998) noted that relational understandings of social justice are needed in order to "theorize about issues of power and how we treat each other, both in the micro face-to-face interactions and in the sense of macro social and economic relations which are mediated by institutions such as the state and the market" (p. 471). Relational models of social justice deal with "the *nature* and *ordering* of social relations" (p. 471, italics in original). Gewirtz went on to indicate, "the relational dimension is holistic and non-atomistic, being essentially concerned with the nature of inter-connections between individuals in society, rather than with how much individuals get" (p. 471). Similarly, Iris Young (1990) presented a critique of traditional conceptions of social justice in that they are based on 'having' rather than 'doing.' Grounding social justice in individual solutions that allow little room for the consideration of membership in multiple social groups is inadequate. Furthermore, extending such models, developed on the distribution of material goods to other goods such as self-respect, honour opportunity, and power, is problematic. To understand the struggles for social justice by a variety of groups, such as women, African Americans, and gay, lesbian and transgender people, feminist theorists posited a discourse of social justice based on the principle of *recognition*. Nancy Fraser (1995) expounded:

> Demands for "recognition of difference" fuel struggles of groups mobilised under the banners of nationality, ethnicity, 'race', gender and sexuality. … And cultural recognition replaces socioeconomic redistribution as the remedy of social injustice and the goal of political struggle. (p. 68)

In response to the concern that giving attention to cultural recognition might have devalued economic inequality that is best alleviated through a distribution model, Fraser (2001) stressed that social justice today requires both redistribution and recognition measures. She presents a model of *parity of participation* as a guiding principle that incorporates both models. In later publications (Fraser and Honneth 2003) she presented what she calls a "critical theory or recognition" that avoids reducing one dimension to the other and avoids falling into postmodern non-normative deconstruction.

I make these comments because I believe that Seiler's paper is primarily motivated by the agenda of attaining social justice for marginalised groups. The main focus of the paper was to understand how science education can be used to "think of the role of schooling in advancing cosmopolitanism as a more hopeful ideology [than one based on race and division] and one more aligned with the orientation of education to social justice and equality of rights and opportunities." This concern about social justice is directed towards students from non-dominant groups who are at risk of dropping out from school as well as

teachers from these groups of dropping out from the profession of science teaching. Further, in her identifying the problems inhibiting social justice, the author identifies several factors that call for 'redistributive' remedies as discussed above. These factors may include "limited college access, family expectations for first generation college students, bias in accreditation exams and the lack of a critical mass of non-dominant students in teacher education programs." Similarly, there are concerns that may best be dealt with using a *recognition* model of social justice. Seiler asserted that "students of color often feel devalued and alienated in teacher education programs and in the profession of teaching, because many of their cultural and educational experiences are different from those of the majority White teacher workforce and Euro-centric institutions of science schooling."

Undoubtedly remedial action towards both forms of injustice—i.e., lack of recognition and lack of equitable distribution—is essential. Importantly, Fraser argues that redistribution and recognition remedies are analytic tools that are not mutually exclusive and in practice most social justice action contains elements of both. However, in practice, such action may lead to unintended consequences and complications. First, tensions may arise due to the ultimate aims of the two agendas with regard to group status. Redistribution measures aim at reducing group differences, e.g. in achievement and participation, and hence its ultimate aim is to abolish group differences. Recognition measures, on the other hand, aim at enhancing group differences and status (Fraser 1997). Second, remediating distribution concerns might be vulnerable of a backlash of misrecognition (Fraser 1995) for the target group by constructing them as victims or as needy of special assistance, while the recognition remedies promote the group status. On the other hand, the recognition agenda might be vulnerable of romanticising difference between groups by treating them as exotic, while the distribution agenda highlights their exclusion and disadvantage.

Fraser (1997) calls this the distribution-recognition dilemma. To deal with this dilemma, the author introduces two further analytic tools to describe remedial action for social injustice. Fraser differentiates between affirmative and transformative remedies for injustice and argues that they cut across the redistribution-recognition divide. *Affirmative* remedies include those "aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them" (p. 82), whilst *transformative* remedies are "aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework" (2001, p. 82).

While this formulation of social justice is undoubtedly comprehensive and constructive for understanding the complexities of social justice claims and to understand many of its various claims, it remains open to questions as to its own foundation. Normative decisions on social justice can give rise to certain conflicts and dilemmas. For example, Immanuel Kant, argued that social justice to one group might imply social injustice to another group outside our immediate concern. Further, a contested social justice depends on discourse and language, and hence it is inherently *violent* in the sense discussed by Jacques Derrida. Political considerations in general and social justice in particular, necessarily reduce the individual to merely being a member of a species. By saying social justice is violent, I do not understand it here as being evil to be overcome. Rather it is inherently open to the possibility of violence and, hence, needs to be kept under questioning and in need for another foundation to deal with its conflicting claims. If social justice claims are not based on given principles that can be articulated in legal entitlements or requirements, do they have any ontological or epistemological foundation? I will return to this question in the concluding section of the paper.

Reading Seiler's paper, I highly commend her aim of understanding how science education can contribute to a cosmopolitan—hence a more just and arguably

peaceful—worldview. Science education is achieving a high prominence in the national educational debate and reform in Australia and many other countries. Often this debate is constructed in terms of economic and social development and international competition. Any attempt to seek a role of science education for social harmony is to be applauded. I hope that seeking ways in which this vision can be fulfilled would include looking at how we can increase the parity of participation of students and teachers from non-dominant groups in the social construction of science and science education. This can be achieved by *transformative* remedies that deal with different forms of exclusion and marginalisation. The challenge is to seek productive research tools to not only understand but also to change situations of injustice.

Complexities in the discourse of race and ethnicity

The next pair of constructs that evoked some reflection within me through my engagement with the Seiler paper is that of *race and ethnicity*. I have often noted that there are regional differences in the use of the terms in academic writings as well as public life. I write these reflection from an Australian context in which the construct of race is not often used (at least in current literature) to describe distinctions between groups of people. For sure this is neither to say that social tensions do not arise from perceived racial differences within the Australian society nor to ignore the suffering of some groups of people as a result of their perceived race. I take the stance that racism is alive and well within the Australian society (Hollinsworth 2006). Here I make the distinction between the use of the terms of *race* and *racism*. To emphasise an assertion I made above, the intention here is not to argue for a normative stance on the use of the terms; rather to promote further debate about their understanding, usefulness and limitations. However, first I need some elaboration of theoretical understandings of the function of language from which I approach my reflections.

Here, I accept that words do not have essential meaning that is supposed to reflect an external and objective reality. Rather, words are social constructs that evolve out of specific historical contexts and their meaning and use is always subject to change. Further, they have dual role in social life. Adopting a well established feminist perspective as first articulated by Casey Miller and Kate Swift (1977), words reflect a certain image of 'reality' as seen by user and groups of users, but at same time they create reality for the user. This is in line with Lev Vygotsky's argument that we think with words and with Foucault's discussion of discursive formations and regimes of truth. In the context of this paper, I am interested in the function of words to make distinctions between groups of people within the social world. In one sense, every word functions as *othering* of some phenomena. It is not possible to use the word 'book' without othering non-book objects such as a 'journal' or a 'computer,' and so on. Every time I say my name, I other myself from my siblings, neighbours and rest of humanity. In fact it is impossible to imagine communication without such othering. This is not to take a naïve stance arguing that all otherings are natural hence harmless. Every othering has the potential of leading into value judgement. Hence, the use of words is potentially political. This is particularly true about words whose function is primarily to other people, such as race, ethnicity and nationality.

As Foucault (1983) famously warned us that everything is dangerous. But Foucault added, *"If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to hyper- and pessimistic- activism"* (pp. 231–232). For our purposes here, this is a challenge for constant vigilance about words, their origin, use and function. As Christie (2005) suggested, we need to "work with and work against" (p. 240)

words to avoid the traps that words may lead us into. In the following, I outline two criteria in which different othering words can be reflected upon: their *status* in reflection of the understanding of the lifeworld and in their *function* that they play in the lifeworld.

Arguing that all words are social constructions does not imply that all words have the same *status* according to the type of experiences they refer to within the lifeworld. Not all words reflect the same lived experiences. In one sense both words 'Santa Claus' and a 'parents' denote social constructions that do not have essentialist meanings and their meaning and use are very much culturally bounded. However, they do not refer to the same type of experiences in the lifeworld. For example, my encounter with both Santa Claus and (my) parents lead to the different outcomes. My encounter with my parents leads into a sense of an ethical responsibility that, as Emmanuel Levinas (1969) argued, precedes ontological and epistemological understandings which I don't particularly develop towards Santa Claus. (It is important to note that Levinas discusses this ethical responsibility resulting from encounter with every Other, and not only parent). Hence, while both constructs serve certain purposes in my experience in the lifeworld, they reflect, (or determine for that matter), different types of experience in, or understanding of that lifeworld. In particular, Rogers Brubaker and Fredrick Cooper (2000) made the distinction between the use of words that denote categories of people such as nation, race, and community as "categories of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by social actors, as distinguished from the experience-distant categories by social analysts" (p. 4). He pointed out that while the words, 'nation,' 'race' and 'ethnicity' reflect categories experienced in everyday life, only the later two have also become analytic tools for the social scientist. Hence, the relationship between constructs of practice and constructs of analysis is not straightforward.

Similarly, it is possible to differentiate diverse *functions* that words play in the lifeworld based on their status of reflecting the lifeworld. Foucault adds to the quote above that everything is dangerous by asserting that, "everything is not equally dangerous" (McLaren 2002, p. 43). In this context, I am interested in possible outcomes of miscommunication using words to identify human subjects or groups. For example, the claim that "Jo is a movie lover" may or may be universally understood (how much should they enjoy movies before they are called movie lover) or does not reflect the way that that person functions in the lifeworld (it may be a just a rumour) or the way they see themselves (they actually prefer reading books). However, there are perhaps very few serious implications of any possible miscommunications arising from such assertion. Other classifications have arguably more serious ratifications in case of miscommunication. For example, miscommunication arising from 'Rene is an effective teacher' may have more urgent implications for employment, promotion and other educational decisions. More serious is the claim that 'Claud is a terrorist'. Undoubtedly, potential miscommunication about what does being a terrorist mean, what are the intentions of the classifier or whether the claim reflects Claud's intentions or action in the lifeworld are much more 'dangerous', both for society and the subject themselves.

Like with all words, there is no essentialist understanding of the word *race*. In some contexts it is used interchangeably with *culture*, *ethnicity* and *origin*, while in others is specifically refers to identifying people based on physical phenotype distinctions. For example, the Oxford dictionary indicates that race as a noun stands for, among other uses, "each of the major divisions of humankind, having distinct physical characteristics" but also "a group of people sharing the same culture, history, language, etc.; an ethnic group." However, as Australian sociologists Farida Fozdar et al. (2008) note, in the majority of sociological literature it is more common to use race, primarily and at least initially, to

point to differences based on biological characteristics. Similarly, they point out, although many different biological differences are possible to identify people, e.g. colour and type of hair, and shape of eyes, the colour of skin is the dominant feature used. This, as I will argue below, is not by arbitrary nor by chance. However, it is important to point out some significant exceptions to the use of race to denote obvious physical differences. The authors give the example of the use of race under Nazi Germany where Jews were identified as a non-German race not based on their physical features—with, I might add, devastating outcomes.

Using observable physical features for social identification gives rise to several complications. First, as the authors above note, if one travels from the northernmost part of Europe into the heart of Africa, one notices gradual changes in physical characteristics between neighbouring groups rather than discrete changes. Further, in an increasingly globalised world where people from different groups are increasingly intermixing, physical characteristics are becoming increasingly more gradual and problematic to be used for racial identification.

As the authors go on to discuss, very rarely is identification merely as objective practice; often binaries lead into hierarchies arising from associating physical differences with other more important ones. Tracing the history of the use of race as a social identifier, the authors note that attempts were always made to link the physical features that define a particular race with other characteristics, such as "intelligence, morality, physical prowess or personality traits" (Fozdar et al. 2008, p. 11). It is perhaps due to these associations that physical differences—such as skin colour—were used to identify races rather than due to the importance of the physical differences themselves. Similarly, the historical development of race identifications cannot be isolated from the historical contexts of use of people for labour. Hence, identifications are always political. In the face of mounting evidence that observed physical characteristics are not related to mental ability and the persistent claims to the contrary by certain scientists, as early as 1950s, the UNESCO declared that:

> There is no proof that the groups of mankind differ in their innate mental characteristics, whether in respect to intelligence or temperament… for all practical purposes "race" is not so much a biological phenomenon as a social myth. (Fozdar et al. 2008, p. 11)

Of course, by saying something is a myth does not imply that it is not real in its effect. So how does the construct of race function in the lifeworld? First I note that race identification, at least in its origin, is often done by external observer of a non-complicit group. Second, it is fixed in the sense that there is no room for agency allowing agents to dis-identify themselves from the race to which they are assigned. In particular one cannot identify with a new social group by naturalisation into a new society—even if they so wish.

The use of the term race as a category of analysis remains contested (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Some have argued that even though 'race' as a category is not based on scientific grounds, many people remain disadvantaged and discriminated against based on their perceived race. Collette Guillaumin (1995) asserts that the issue of race is not whether it has biological basis or not, but that it remains a powerful othering mechanism that has serious ramifications in society. She noted "Race does not exist. But it does kill people" (p. 19). Any examination of the term race should take into account the daily suffering of groups excluded on bases of identifiable features in employment, access to education, discrimination and outright violence. Hence, racism remains a major crisis for many societies irrespective whether race is a useful construct or not.

For others, the use of categories of analysis, such as race, is in danger of emphasizing the taken for granted assumptions about biological differences between people. Hence, categories of analysis may assist in the reproduction of conditions for the categories of practice as well have the potential of exposing them and challenging them. Brubaker and Cooper argued that we do not "have to use "race" as a category of analysis ... to understand and analyse social and political practices oriented to the presumed existence of putative 'races'" (p. 5). The authors concluded "we should avoid unintentionally *reproducing* and *reinforcing* such reification by uncritically adopting categories of practice a categories of analysis" (p. 5 italics in original). In other words, the danger is that such a persistent use of the analytic construct of race, might imply, at least to some people, that 'race' does actually exists and people have a 'race'.

Undoubtedly, race as used in today's policy and sociological writing only relates to phenotypes. The implied cultural distinctions are central. Similarly, understanding of race allows for some self-identification—particularly in some cases of mixed lineages where the physical features are ambiguous. In the 1970s the use of the term *ethnicity* had expanded, arguably in part to "overcome the many of the theoretical and empirical shortcomings of 'race'" (p. 26 quotes in the original) as an identifier. While race identifications were typically and at least initially based on identification of people based on physical characteristics, ethnic identifications were typically and at least initially based on affiliation by people with common cultural or national background with each other's. It is a collective acknowledgement of their common history and tradition that they share. As such they are more open for self-identification and dis-identification or re-identification. Milton Yinger (1981 in Fozdar et al. 2008) took the stance that ethnic affiliations do sometimes include characteristics associated with race identifications.

> An ethnic group perceives itself and is perceived by others to be different in some combination of the following traits: language, religion, race and ancestral homeland, with its related culture. (p. 29)

Naturally, ethnic identification also plays various roles in society. Ethnic affiliation has a performative role in terms of public celebrations and particular social practices such as consumption of specialised food and means of entertainment with the danger of leading into what Val Colic-Peisker (2008) called nominal ethnicity and others have called naïve multiculturalism. However, to say that ethnic affiliation is based on identification and performing is to not to be oblivious of the political role of ethnicity. Many ethnic affiliations and groups often have a social and political agenda for recognition and struggle for rights and equality. At times, such struggles may lead into outbreak of violence between different ethnic groups—at times as violent as conflicts constructed on racial grounds. Hence, devastating outcomes can result from whatever identifier is used.

Before I conclude my reflections in this section, perhaps it is useful to point to the status of the Indigenous peoples in Australia in terms of social identification. Prior to 1967, the Aboriginal peoples in Australia were referred to as 'aboriginal natives.' As a matter of fact, the Australian Constitution at the time stipulated that "in reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives shall not be counted." In other words, Australian Aboriginals had no citizenship status until the referendum of 1967. Due to intermixing with other non-Aboriginal population, the identification of who is Aboriginal became problematic. The criteria at that time for determining who was "aboriginal native" was that somebody had more than 50% Aboriginal 'blood'—arguably not by a scientific blood test but by parental identification.

This led to categorisation of some Aboriginal people as "half cast" or "mixed blood"—categorisations that current Aboriginal people find offensive.

As a result of the 1967 Referendum, the words 'aboriginal person' no longer appeared in the Constitution, and the Commonwealth acquired a power to legislate for the 'aboriginal race' which was previously held solely by the States. Since that time, the census conducted every 4 years requested people to identify themselves based on their 'origin' and not the race they belong to. Currently, a widely accepted Australian policy is to accept that an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives' (Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1981, p. 1). A similar, but distinct census questions asks all Australians to identify their 'origin' rather than their race or ethnicity. Two things are interesting to note here, that neither the word race nor ethnicity is explicitly used. Secondly, classifications are based on self-identification. The preferred term by the Australian Aboriginals to refer to themselves is Aboriginal Peoples (in the plural. It is common practice in Australia that when the words Aboriginal and Indigenous are use to refer to Australian Aboriginal peoples, they are always capitalised). This identifies themselves as a social group with special status as original owners of the land—not unlike the use of the term First Nation popular in North America—and point to the diversity of culture and language groups who inhibited the land.

This is far from saying, however, that Australian Aboriginal Peoples have not encountered racism in the past nor that it does not remains a part of their lived experience today. Problems of lower educational standards, lower age expectancy, the large number of incarcerations, deaths in custody and the ongoing effects of the stolen generation are a few of the problems that still plague the conscience of the nation and affect the daily lives of many Australian Aboriginals.

In summary, both terms *race* and *ethnicity* can be used to identify groups of people based on their history, culture and/or lifestyles. As social constructions they have different historical origins and are open to alternative connotations, uses and abuses. For some, the identifier race brings back a history of assumptions grounded in ignorance and prejudice with strong connection to hierarchies and stratification. Hence, they would argue that such terms should be avoided. On the other side, some would argue that since racism is alive and well and is part of the lived experience of many people who are seen to be different, race is a fact that remains in society. The use of the term is very much regionally determined. Ethnicity, on the other hand arose out of affiliations based on culture, lifestyle and, in the main, self-identification. However, it too is open to possibility of leading on one hand to discrimination and violence and on the other hand to nominalism and trivialisation. Ultimately, as the experience with the Australian Aboriginal peoples demonstrates, the people involved in the social groups themselves that should have a say on the appropriate terms for self referral and referral by others. This is in line with the social justice as recognition as discussed in the above section.

Complexities in the discourse of identity

In her paper, Seiler has employed 'identity' as the main construct for the analysis of her observations and interviews. One aim of the paper is to show how teacher's identity is developed as a hybrid of different identities from both within the profession—i.e., in this case as teachers—and from the social context outside the school—in this case from within the African American and Caribbean backgrounds. (Another focus of the paper, which will

not be elaborated here, is on creolized science education). These outside influences on identities also vary in their origin—either as experiences of teachers in science (or science like) activities or from aspects of lifestyle of a particular social group. The effect of such hybridisation of identity on becoming a better teacher of science is not clear or consistent. For example, with the case of Lucy and Wayne, the teachers *saw* their early childhood experiences in nature and from their grandmother's kitchen as influential to the development of their identity as "doer(s) of science." However, with Donna, her identity as a 'doer of science' from early childhood *was seen* to fail to translate into an identity as an effective teacher of science in the classroom. The change in verb mode in the last two sentences is significant and will be discussed further below. The arguments that: (a) the outside of school experiences in science (like) activities assists in developing sense meaning and agency in science; (b) cultural identification of students with teachers from similar background may be effective as role models to promote their persistence in its study; and (c) presenting science in ways that are culturally and socially meaningful to students can enhance understanding, are undoubtedly valid and are consistent with previous research (at least in the literature of mathematics education with which I am familiar). Here, I will make some comments on the usefulness of the construct of 'identity' itself for such analysis and conclusions.

Identity is a construct that has re-entered educational discourse, as it did in social science and cultural studies, in significant ways during the last 30 years or so. It is widely used in numerous research publications from a variety of theoretical stances. At times its understandings are made explicit; while in other contexts its meaning and usefulness are taken for granted. One should note, however, that the way the term is used and understood in the majority of the current literature is quite distinct from the way it was used traditionally. In the 1960s, 'identity' (often referred to as ego identity) was used to refer to sense of *individuality* or the *self*. Anna Sfard and Anna Prusak (2005) refer to terms such as "*character*, *nature* and *personality*" (p. 14, italics in original) that are often associated with the construct of identity as was then understood. Erik Erikson (1968) put it this way: "Ego identity, then, in its subjective aspect, is the awareness of the fact that there is a self-sameness and continuity to the ego's synthesizing methods and a continuity of one's meaning for others" (p. 50). Hence identity is a sense of sameness and consistency. It is open to question about how the individual recognises themselves versus the way they are recognised by others. Erikson argued that while identity was not given at birth, it does not develop in isolation of the body. It develops into identifiable stages whose outcomes significantly depend on the success or failures of social experiences with the established identity at every stage. In this regard, identity refers to stability (long term characteristics versus short term interests and practices) and essentialism (what I am 'really' like versus what I happen to do in certain situations). This understanding of identity is a very much an *individual identity*.

However, the construct was understood in another context as well. In the late 1960s, new understandings of identity have arisen. In particular those that relate to communal identities. As Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue, this coincided with the rise of the Black Power and other ethnic identifications modelled around it and the weakening of the class-consciousness in the USA. Discourse around gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationalism are often constructed in language of identity. The understanding of construct in these contexts refers to similarity between different members of the groups identified in their lifestyle, values, culture and practices. While the concern in individual identities was about how I am the same or similar in temporal sense, the concern with social identities was about how I am similar to other people who share same background. They also are open to questions

as to the inside and outside—i.e., how do members of the group see their similarity and how do others see it from the outside. Here I note that this construction of identity has more often been associated with struggles for rights by marginalised groups and has given rise to identity politics in academic and political discourse in the United States in the 1970s.

Undoubtedly the two referents to which identity is used, i.e., the individual and the communal, are not disjoint. Communal identities are often reflected—by self-adoption or otherwise—in individual identities. In other words, from the perspective of the individual, the collective identity forms a part of his or her personal identity. However, the two understandings of the construct played different roles in society. Communal identities, primarily but not solely, have played a crucial role in political struggles of social groups, whereas individual identities, primarily but not solely, have served as tools for personal fulfilment and well-being.

With the advancement of the constructivist stances of thinking since the 1970s, the more recent emergence of the discourse of identity differs from those of the earlier discourses. The current educational discourses on identity posit it as: constructed (i.e., not naturally given), fluid (i.e., as always changing), multiple (i.e., context dependent), fragmented (i.e., subject to different forces), and hybrid (i.e., have different origins). These understandings are referred to by Brubaker and Cooper (2000) as "weak" and non-essentialist versions of the previous "strong" essentialist understanding. The authors raise the question whether the weak version of the construct avoided the problems of essentialism posed by the older understandings. They go on to note that often there is a slippage between essentialist and constructivist stances in the use of the terms by many authors. In particular, they argue that this slippage is "not a matter of intellectual sloppiness. Rather, it reflects the dual orientation of many academic identitarians as both *analysts* and *protagonists* of identity politics" (p. 6, italics in original).

The authors go on to discuss different uses of the construct in current academic and public literature. They summarise:

> Clearly, the term "identity" is made to do a great deal of work. It is used to highlight non-instrumental modes of action; to focus on self-understanding rather than self-interest; to designate sameness across persons or sameness over time; to capture allegedly core, foundational aspects of selfhood; to deny that such core, foundational aspects exist; to highlight the processual, interactive development of solidarity and collective self-understanding; and to stress the fragmented quality of the contemporary experience of "self," a self unstably patched together through shards of discourse and contingently "activated" in differing contexts.

Further they argue that some of these uses are in "sharply differing directions" loading the term with contradictory theoretical assumptions. Considering the ambiguity in what the term refers to and the complexity of its understanding, the authors question whether it remains useful as a construct of analysis in social science, cultural studies and educational literature.

In this context, I will make two general observations about the use of the construct in much of educational research. First, typically, in educational research that employs the construct of identity, data is collected using observations and interviews with a group of students or teachers. Identity formulations are usually identified by the researchers themselves based on either reported views of the participants by themselves and on themselves (note the case of Lucy and Wayne above) or based on judgements made by the researcher on the participants (note the case of Donna above). A question can be raised whether both sets of formulations can be seen equally and non-problematically as part of

the identity of the participants. In other words, does the identity as seen by the participants coincide with the identity as seen by others? A related concern might be if the participants themselves see these categories generated by the researchers as actually part of their own identity. I note that the term itself is not part of the everyday language of the teacher. Arguably, it is not a construct that describes the lived experience of the participants. In that sense, it fits what Brubaker and Cooper call a category of analysis rather than a category of practice. This, by itself, is not implying that it is not useful in research—but that its use should not be taken for granted if teachers should be able to see themselves in the research and if research is to contribute to any changes in the lifeworld of the teacher.

A second observation I make with regard to the construct of identity as used in educational research is the lack of clarity about what aspects of the lifeworld it proposes to refer to. Stuart Hall (1994) provides a definition of identity as "names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (p. 394). Other researchers in mathematics education like Sfard and Prusak (2005) "equate identities with stories about persons" (p. 14). What kinds of names and what kinds of stories are implied are not as clear. It seems to me that the discourse of identity is used to refer to what traditionally has been referred to as: teachers' beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, efficacy and practices, among others. There are some gains and some loses in this lack specificity. On one hand, they present a more comprehensive totality of personhood. Yet on the other hand, if identity stands for many things, it stands for very little. In particular, what are the implications of this comprehensive view of identity for improving the lifeworld and practice of teachers? What are possible required interventions or capacity building activities for the improvement of the lived experience of the teachers? I raise the question whether such broad constructions of identity have contributed to a loss of its potential for political action.

I will conclude this paper, by relating the constructs of social justice, race, ethnicity and identity to the discourse of ethics.

On ethics

The discussion above on the four constructs identified from my reading of the paper by Seiler raises questions as to their ontological foundation. Using the terminology of Brubaker and Copper (2000), they appear to be categories of analysis rather than categories of practice. To borrow a term that Agnes Heller (1992) used to describe human rights as represented in international conventions, they are 'fictions' (p. 351). Of course, by saying they are fictions is not to dismiss them as whimsical and unnecessary; rather to point out that they have no ontological reality and hence are in question as to their foundation. It is customary to refer to all such terms in academic and public discourse as 'social constructions.' While, this is perhaps an appropriate description as to their origin, it fails to explain, or inform, their normative use in society. Can such a normative use be explained by epistemology? Arguably, knowledge and understanding are necessary for accepting the self and the other and to inform conversations about social justice. However, as Klas Roth (2007) explains, knowledge can also lead to oppression and domination. Hence, epistemology cannot provide a foundation for the normative decisions required for action towards peaceful and harmonious social life.

Levinas (1969) points out that Western philosophy has mainly concerned itself with questions of existence (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology). Questions of ethics that occupied earlier philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to Kant have been exiled from

Western philosophical discourse to the realm of metaphysics and religion. Referring to the philosophical and ethical discourses Socrates who established the primacy of the knowledge of the *good* over the knowledge of the *truth*, Richard Cohen (2005) raises the question "has the philosopher abdicated responsibilities" (p. 39). However, it was only in the 1980s that the word ethics came back to intellectual discourse after the antihumanism of the 1970s. Further, the post-ontological philosophical writings of Levinas (1997) have been influential in the re-introduction of ethics within philosophy by establishing ethics as the 'first philosophy'.

For Levinas, ethics is before any philosophy and is the basis of all philosophical exchanges. It precedes ontology which is a relation to otherness that is reducible to comprehension or understanding. This relation to the other that precedes understanding he calls 'original relation.' Levinas's original contribution to ethics is that he does not see ethics as a pre-determined set of principles that can be used to make decisions about particular instance of behaviour. Rather it is an adjective that describes a relationship with the other that precedes any understanding and explanation. Using a phenomenological approach, Levinas argues that to be human is to be in a relationship to the other, or more accurately, in a relationship *for the other*. This relation is even prior to mutual obligation or reciprocity. Wolff-Michael Roth (2007) argues that this original ethical relationship discussed by Levinas consists of an "unlimited, measureless responsibility toward each other that is in continuous excess over any formalization of responsibility in the law and stated ethical principles" (p. 31).

It is worthwhile here to point to two implications for this stance. First, the other is not reduced to the 'same.' It is the unescapable engagement with the difference of the other that evokes this sense unlimited responsibility towards it. An attempt to reduce the other to the self is doing violence to their otherness. Second, prior to the encounter with the other, there is no sense of self. On the contrary the self-consciousness arises through the encounter with the other. Hence, the ego identity emerges only through interaction with the other.

In his later work, Levinas (1997), in response to Derrida's claim that the encounter with the other is 'violent' if it is based on language and discourse, introduced the distinction between *saying* and the *said* in the face-to-face encounters with the other. Further, he locates the initial encounter with the other as based on saying which precedes the ontological said. Prior to the speech act, the speaker must address the other, and before the address is the approach of the other or proximity. Importantly for our purposes here, Levinas places ethics in the *saying* and politics and social justice in the realm of the *said*. He argues that *peace* is in the *saying* and the *said* is necessarily open to the possibility of violence. Using this distinction, Levinas demonstrates how ethics and politics are necessarily independent, however, one needs the other. Ethics, which is the encounter with the other, requires politics since the other is not singular—as there are many others. On the other hand politics requires ethics since politics is always open to the possibility of excesses and needs to be kept in check.

I will turn now to the question of how this construction of ethics might assist in managing some of the complexities discussed above. The following comments are very much 'thoughts in progress' and point to possible lines of thinking differently about the constructs that might prove to be productive.

In the discussion on social justice, I raised the question as to whether social justice can be grounded on ontology or epistemology. In understanding ethics as pre-ontological and pre-epistemological responsibility to the other, and social justice as belonging to the *said*, ethics provides a foundation for social justice. As a manifestation of ethics in the public

life, social justice is based on primary responsibility and thus social justice concerns are seen as moral obligation, rather than charity, good will or convenient politics. By the same token, social justice dilemmas may thus to be managed with recourse to primary ethical responsibility. In other words, while adopting a social justice approach places knowledge as a servant to justice; an ethical approach places justice at the service of the moral (Cohen 2001).

Similarly, given the debate around classification categories such as 'race' and 'ethnicity', the *recognition* understanding of social justice would avoid terms that cause misrecognition of the groups being classified. It seeks the group's own input into normative practices of naming. Further, a distributive understanding of social justice would assure that the group's political claims are not lost. However, an ethical perspective might be useful to manage the dilemma of essentialism that group identification may lead into. Ethical responsibility is constructed primarily as a reaction to an encounter with the other. Hence dealing with the other as *only* a representative of the group is unethical since it prejudices an open encounter. However, to deal with the other *without* recourse to their social affiliation weakens their political interests, and hence is unjust.

Finally, the debate around the usefulness of the construct of identity raises some ethical questions about the role of research and the lived experience of its subjects. An ethical stance demands that constructs of analysis in social inquiry should not only demonstrate their utility for knowledge generation but also should demonstrate a responsibility for the construction and reconstruction of lifeworld in which academic endeavours are conducted.

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