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## Empirical research into white racialized identities in Britain

### Journal Item

How to cite:

Garner, Steve (2009). Empirical research into white racialized identities in Britain. *Sociology Compass*, 3(5) pp. 789–802.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1111/j.1751-9020.2009.00229.x>

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2009.00229.x/abstract>

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## Empirical Research into White Racialized Identities in Britain

Journal:	<i>Sociology Compass</i>
Manuscript ID:	SOCO-0294.R1
Manuscript Type:	Article
Keywords:	Identity < Psychology < Subjects, Race & Ethnicity < Compass Sections, empire < Key Topics, ethnicity < Key Topics, race < Key Topics, racism < Key Topics



## White Racialized Identities

*Empirical research into the racialization of white identities in British Sociology*

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In their introduction to a collection of papers on whiteness, Twine and Gallagher (2007: 5) label the empirical studies of localised whiteness as it intersects with class, nation and gender, the ‘third wave’ of whiteness studies. Thus far, the intellectual project of using whiteness as an explicit tool of analysis is not one that has taken root in the UK. Those of us interested in pursuing it may wonder whether we will be in time to surf the fourth wave, let alone jump on the third one. Here I argue that there are plenty of empirical studies that investigate the racialization of white identities in the British context: they just do not refer to themselves with the term ‘whiteness’ very often. It is worth reiterating that I am going to focus on empirical fieldwork in this essay, for three reasons. Firstly, because this is a domain saturated in interdisciplinary theoretical writing **and secondary analysis**: there are no reviews of strictly empirical work, although there are a number of reviews of theory. Indeed this journal has provided two of those (Nayak, 2007; Ferber, 2007). Secondly, sociology is not the main disciplinary origin of many of the contributors to this corpus, and I am a sociologist. Third, US academia is the centre, the metropolis of whiteness studies and work in the peripheries does not usually get much of a look in, as Nayak (2007) indicates. Yet I will be drawn also to a comparison with the USA. Indeed, this international comparative element is part of the methodology I advocate at the end. However, in this article I aim to identify some of the principal themes to have emerged from the sporadic *empirical* studies of white racialized identity in the British context, from the early 1990s until 2007. I will begin with an introduction to the British context and then identify some key themes in the fieldwork. After that I will

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draw some comparisons with the US fieldwork and finish with an interpretation of what all this means for a critical research agenda.

### **British background**

British scholars have frequently opted to avoid using the term 'whiteness' in relation to work that in the US would clearly fall into the domain of 'whiteness studies'. Indeed, there are good reasons to carefully choose our language. Presenting the findings of research data full of implicit and explicit assertions of racialized difference often expressed through claims of the eclipse of traditional solidarity and fairness can be interpreted by audiences as endorsing populist ideas of beleaguered white communities upon which Far-right political mobilization across Europe is based. The danger of lending credence to identity politics based on white racial reflexivity haunts the British fieldwork. The paradoxically broad disavowal of 'whiteness' on the part of UK academics working in the field of the sociology of racism therefore forms part of the context in which the following synthesis is produced.

### **British fieldwork**

Empirical sociological studies that contribute to a research agenda on 'white' identities in specifically British contexts, have made sporadic appearances over the last decade and more (Hoggett, 1992; Back, 1996; Phoenix, 1996; Tyler, 2003, 2004; Nayak, 2003; Byrne, 2006; Dench et al., 2006; Reay et al., 2007; Garner, 2007). The main themes I have identified are; invisibility; norms/values; cultural capital and integration; contingent hierarchies; and Empire.

### **Invisibility**

## White Racialized Identities

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4 The assertion that whiteness denotes an absence of specificity, or is an invisible non-  
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The assertion that whiteness denotes an absence of specificity, or is an invisible non-raced identity is the traditional starting point for discussions of whiteness. Phoenix's (1996) interviews demonstrate how young white people enjoy the luxury of idealising egalitarianism, and asserting that colour is unimportant in judgements of personal worth, while essentialising blackness, experienced as a threatening presence in particular spaces. They are thus forced into the confrontation with the contradiction expressed by identifying themselves with non-racial identities, while recognising 'that being white signifies a social location, and as such, has a history and interconnections with other colours' (1996:192). The white subject is always viewed as a non-racial universal individual, while the Other is essentially a raced member of a collective (Farough, 2004). Yet some studies emphasising spatial awareness and mobility suggest that whiteness is *not invisible* to anyone. Watt and Stenson (1998) find that young white people in provincial Southern England see particular spaces as dangerous for a number of classed, gendered and racialized reasons, i.e. fear of crime and violence, an experience heightened when they do not know individuals resident in the areas they are crossing. Young minority people avoid certain areas, and even whole towns, seen as fearsomely white. Yet we should also steer clear of generalising this fear into a norm: other white subjects find that mixed occupation of space can be or become their norm, and their ontological security is unbalanced by an excess of whiteness. The difference between multicultural Stoke-on-Trent (where he went to college) and his home town, Coalville in Leicestershire, pushes 'Jim' in Tyler's (2004) study to question prevalent ideas on 'race' when he returns. Whiteness may emerge therefore as either marked (visible) or unmarked (invisible), depending on the location of the person doing the looking.

## White Racialized Identities

### **White norms and values in practice**

North American writers (Jacobson, 1998; Frye, 1992; Lamont, 2000) have suggested that whiteness is constructed as a set of interrelated norms and values, ranging from a feeling of racial superiority, Christianity, the work ethic, to lying and chronically unethical behaviour, fetishising rationality, order and repression of emotions.

Moreover, the process of constructing whiteness as normal, and otherness as abnormal occurs through selective understandings of culture as discrete and static, these understandings being presented as acts of common sense by the interlocutor. In the British context, I also highlight a distinction between urban and rural settings for a struggle over values.

### *Urban settings*

Hoggett's (1992) study of Tower Hamlets, in the East End of London, demonstrates the predominance of values as a battleground in racialized inter-communal tensions. The Bangladeshi incomers in this borough are perceived as embodying values that used to characterise the working-class East End communities; collective solidarity, patriarchy, entrepreneurialism. The sense of loss of such values is thus the cause of a degree of jealousy.

'The resentment the whites feel toward the Bengali community is made poignant by the fact that the latter community has many characteristics – extended and intensive kinship networks, a respect for tradition and more seniority, a capacity for entrepreneurialism and social advancement – which the white working class in the area have lost' (1992: 354).

## White Racialized Identities

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3 In local discourse, the physical presence of the Other in Tower Hamlets becomes  
4 embodied in the figure of the cockroach (Hoggett, 1992), when the modernisation of a  
5 tower block housing many Bangladeshis leads to an infestation. Here we return to  
6 more familiar notions of associating dirt, impurity and potential disease with out-  
7 groups (Douglas, 1966). The Bangladeshis' status as 'matter-out-of-place' is thus  
8 embodied, in contradiction to the social values and shared history of oppression  
9 *objectively* binding them to local working-class white East Enders. The out-group  
10 seemingly assumes the values of the white working class, while simultaneously  
11 'stealing' these values from them. Thus what follows is a series of projections and  
12 identifications. 'The local white is engaged in one sense in an envious attack upon the  
13 Bengali within him', writes Hoggett, 'an attack which twists and corrupts him into its  
14 opposite' (1992:354). Indeed, the traumatic experience of racialization evokes  
15 recognition of loss of place, standards, and status for white subjects.  
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## *Rural settings*

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38 Although 80% of the UK population lived in urban areas at the 2001 Census, this  
39 represents a 10% shift to rural areas since 1991. The English countryside has long  
40 been constructed as a repository for pure English values, and a space of authenticity  
41 vis-à-vis the dangerous cosmopolitan urban centres (Neal and Agyemang, 2006;  
42 Sibley, 1995; Rowe, 1998; William, 1973). These texts demonstrate that urban  
43 inhabitants are constructed as culturally alien: their presence degrades cities, and  
44 exacerbates their distance from the putative bucolic norm.  
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Hubbard (2005a; 2005b) argues that rural landscape is racialized as white in the  
process of opposing the locating of asylum-seekers in particular spaces in England.

## White Racialized Identities

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Alongside protests over land use *per se*, he identifies elements of discourse produced in campaigns in rural Nottinghamshire and Oxfordshire that construct asylum-seekers, regardless of their geographical origins, as an undifferentiated (over-ridingly male) criminal, sexually threatening and alien presence in the English countryside. Hubbard identifies a specific narrative of white rurality dependent on implicit norms of location away from chaotic and dangerous multicultural settings. One complainant writes to the local planning authority: ‘As a Bicester resident, I do not want to live in a multicultural community. Having lived in London and Surrey I have experienced the trouble this brings’ (Hubbard, 2005a: 14).

Tyler’s study of the Leicestershire village of ‘Greenville’ (2003) shows that semi-rural space is characterised by a white, middle-class habitus. Because the Asian families in Greenville lie outside notions of respectability and normality, by not getting involved in charity activities or going to the pub, they are produced as ‘abnormal’ (2003:394). Indeed, Garland and Chakraborti (2006: 164-65) echo this finding, adding that while some ethnic minority village residents’ professional status may obviate a degree of the hostility, they still cannot own the cultural codes required to function ‘normally’. ‘For community ‘insiders’’, they contend, ‘rural villages can be places where kinship and shared identities can be played out and enjoyed; for those subject to the ‘othering’ process, such places can be cold and unwelcoming’ (Ibid.: 169).

One Greenville Asian family extended its house (against local opposition) and the anxieties of the villagers reveal the prism through which the Asians are (mis)understood. Their private space is feared as a site of over-use: as a residence,



## White Racialized Identities

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3 business, and a prayer room. One villager states that: ‘They are very nice people but  
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5 eyebrows are raised when the hordes of friends and relatives come from Leicester. It  
6  
7 isn’t done in Greenville’ (Tyler, 2003: 405). Indeed, Tyler concludes that ‘wealthy  
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9 Asians are thought to live in extended families, are perceived to be excessively  
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11 wealthy, extravagantly religious, run disruptive businesses from their homes and cook  
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13 smelly foods’ (2003: 409). While their economic capital secures them residence in the  
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15 wealthiest sector of the village, the Greenville Asians literally cannot buy the requisite  
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17 cultural capital to become invisible in it.  
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### **Cultural capital and integration**

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26 For the middle classes in semi-rural Leicester, tranquillity is a prized ideal. While  
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28 solidarity (for the poor elsewhere) is demonstrated through the routines of charity  
29  
30 work, the real test of belonging is to attain invisibility. Talking of a particular Asian  
31  
32 family in the village, one resident tells Tyler (2003:400) ‘They are as good as gold ...  
33  
34 I never see them’. **Cultural capital can include knowing how to behave in various  
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36 circumstances, which could mean realising when to be inconspicuous.**  
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41 **Integration is often constructed as inconspicuousness. In Greenville, hiding**  
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43 oneself and keeping the noise down is viewed as the correct way to behave, a value  
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45 contradicting the justification for not forging more intimate relations: Asians ‘don’t  
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47 mix’.  
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51 This ‘invisibility test’ seems from our own fieldwork (Clarke and Garner,  
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53 forthcoming) to be applied by the majority of white UK people to the integrating  
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55 minorities. They generally understand ‘integration’ to mean ‘assimilation’. ‘Denise’  
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57 sees her two friends as ideal integrators:  
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‘My husband's cousin is Indian (...) they do wear their saris at special occasions and things, but they're not here demanding to bring a bit of India or, you know, to be Indian in this country (...) The children's godmother is from Jamaica (...) Janine is just as English as I am because, well, she was born here, but not because of that, because she's not, you know, they're just the same as me and anybody else. They're not trying to be different’.

The contrast of minorities ‘trying to be different’, with the expected norm of assimilation therefore generates frustration and resentment in white interviewees. They tend to use the ‘when-in-Rome’ argument to bolster the case for assimilation. The various practices seen as disruptive can be countered by stating that ‘we’ would not be able to do such things if we lived abroad (Clarke and Garner, 2009). These are usually related to dress code, access to welfare, the construction of churches, and the celebration of culture.

One of Wells and Watson’s respondents, a butcher (2005: 269-70), narrates his area’s transformation away from Britishness through the types of meat available. The white working-class clientele’s demand for rabbit has long given way to the appearance and proliferation of halal, and before that, kosher butchers. The expectations of civilized and classed familiar meats have been overturned by ‘smelly’ and alien meat preparation methods: a microcosm of the invasion narrative related in the rest of their interviews.

We have argued so far that white identity requires both strategically and ideologically-procured and maintained invisibility (i.e. a denial of raced specificity),

## White Racialized Identities

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3 and the performance of values and norms that are reflexively juxtaposed against  
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5 competing and inferior ones. What sustains these norms? Cultural capital can involve  
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7 among other things, shared expectations of behaviour on the part of minority groups,  
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9 a belief that one is part of a tradition of dominance including Empire, knowledge of  
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11 norms and behaviour patterns that will produce intended outcomes in particular  
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13 situations; including the right to question certain people's eligibility for various  
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15 resources without this being countered, and the assumption of rationality juxtaposed  
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17 with the irrationality of Others. We might think of this as the basis for Lewis' (2004)  
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19 'hegemonic whiteness'.  
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27 There are however alternative cultural capitals. In Watt and Stenson's (1998)  
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29 exploration of the contingency of racialized space and young people's leisure-related  
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31 mobility in 'Townsville', the cultural capital of non-whites includes security-oriented  
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33 knowledge of places of dangerous, excessive whiteness. Moreover, minority spaces,  
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35 however safe, are not always emancipatory for members of the minority, e.g. for  
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37 young Muslim women, who prefer to go somewhere more anonymous for nights out,  
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39 an experience echoed by young Sikhs in Kaur's (2003) study of Southall. Watt and  
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41 Stenson's respondents' leisure itineraries are shaped by intersections of class, raced  
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43 identities and gender. Their middle-class suburban white youths are fearful of both  
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45 white working-class neighbourhoods and an Asian area in the town, whereas non-  
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47 whites steer clear of particular areas in 'Townsville' unless they know white people  
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49 who inhabit them, through school or shared leisure activities. Indeed, most of the  
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51 inter-ethnic friendships were among the working-class respondents on estates (1998:  
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53 256). The middle-class youth, more advantaged in many areas of cultural capital, are  
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55 in this respect impoverished in (multi)cultural capital that they have *not* accrued (in  
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## White Racialized Identities

contrast to their working-class peers) from 'personal contacts across the ethnic divides which were so important for moving confidently about the town' (1998: 257).

This deficiency has not escaped one strand of the British middle classes. Some of Byrne's (2006) London mothers talk about choosing a school with 'the right mix' (of racialized groups, in which Whites remain in the majority) for their children, while in Reay et al.'s (2007) study of parents' school choices, the 'right mix' is now vital to some middle-class parents' projects of enabling their secondary school-age children to accumulate 'multicultural capital'.

## Contingent hierarchies

Where the British-based work most acutely pinpoints the complexity and conceptual fluidity of white identities is in identifying where conditional alliances, allegiances and loyalties that blur the black/white binary emerge.

Tyler's (2004) inter-generational dialogue among smalltown Leicestershire inhabitants shows how the contingency of personal biographies may shape how people perceive 'Others'. Among the interviewees, no homogenous representative voice is expressed: white superiority is contested by some, just as it is accepted unthinkingly by others. Identification can take the form of empathy, for example, as in 'Sarah's recognition of her own narrative - the experience of *her* Czech immigrant father's struggle to run a business - in critiques of Asian businesses (Tyler, 2004: 304).

In Nayak's (2003) study of three youth subcultures in the city of Newcastle, the 'Real Geordies' see themselves as the most authentic bearers of working-class culture. Their family and/or occupational histories and allegiance to Newcastle United F.C bind them to the region's manufacturing and mining base. This leads them to view the

## White Racialized Identities

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3 keystone of respectability as hard work, which subsequently grants entitlement. They  
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5 contrast themselves flatteringly with the 'Charver Kids' (unemployed status,  
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7 involvement with petty crime, and ambivalent relationship to black music and dress),  
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9 and the 'White Wannabes' (fascination with what they understand as Afro-American  
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11 culture). Wells and Watson's London shopkeepers (2005) perceive their 'authentic  
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13 locals' position as jeopardised by groups receiving State resources at the expense of  
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15 people like them, i.e. on the basis of cultural otherness *per se* rather than earned  
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17 through hard work. Spaces that were seen as neutral, or as resources previously  
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19 accessible to the whole community have been turned into mosques, for example,  
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21 indicating the neighbourhood's demographic fall from Britishness.  
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27 Les Back's (1996) ethnography of South London estates suggests that values  
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29 determine the salient borders of identity, as culture becomes the modality through  
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31 which the young people are racialized. Black and white youths put aside differences  
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33 to ally against Vietnamese and Bangladeshi newcomers on their estates (1996: 240-  
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35 41). While the black youths are well aware that in other circumstances they could be  
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37 the victims of such aggression from their white counterparts (see also Hoggett, 1996),  
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39 in the context of defining authentic membership of the estate, their secular, linguistic  
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41 and music-based coalition with white youth in 'Riverview' appears to predominate.  
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44 They thus become what Back terms 'contingent insiders' (1996:240).  
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51 Moreover, Wells and Watson (2005) find in their survey of shopkeepers in a London  
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53 borough that not all those championing white values are white, while some champions  
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55 of white rights include their black neighbours in their embattled and beleaguered  
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57 'we'. In those cases the Other is usually Muslim/Asian, which resonates with Back's  
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59 configuration of Afro-Caribbean + White vs. Asian. The contingency of belonging  
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## White Racialized Identities

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revolves around factors including histories of residence and social networks, as Hartigan (1997) finds in inner-city Detroit. When British people complain now that 'they' get preferential access to housing over 'us', the 'us' may well include local black, Mixed and Asian people, and the 'they' might, in parts of the UK, be white European migrants (Garner et al., 2009). Clearly, the power relationships at a personal and local level allow for whiteness to be stretched to incorporate those not phenotypically white beneath its cultural canopy, and exclude some who are!

In terms of focus, Kaur's (2003) on white women in Southall, and Byrne's (2006) on South London mothers, is therefore rare and welcome. Ferber's critique that gender is usually ignored in US whiteness studies (2007) is equally valid for the British ones.

**Kaur's is an ethnography of young white women living in an area of West London where there is a white minority in the 1990s. She notes that in their interviews, her respondents stress gendered experiences more than racialized ones. They are conscious of being a minority, and seek to avoid drawing attention to their whiteness. In a place where the idea of feminine whiteness is often linked to sexual availability, the women also realise they have to perform particular versions of femininity to obtain respect and ward off the frequent accusations of loose morals they either experience, or perceive as being levelled by Asian men. Byrne's project involves interviewing the mothers of primary school age children about their choice of school. The women discursively negotiate 'race' through complex narrations, often eliding 'race' to instead focus on culture, nation, class and gender. 'While whiteness was largely undiscussed', concludes Byrne (2006: 172), 'it was at the same time defined through difference'. As a consequence of the identity-juggling and erasure practices noted in both cases, the women's gendered experience is always raced, their raced experiences always**

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3 gendered. Indeed, an early attempt to tease out white British women's whiteness  
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6 (Lewis and Ramazanoglu, 1999: 40) noted that they deployed strategies to avoid  
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8 talking about 'race', including retreating to other terrains of more comfortable  
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10 identity:

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12 'Women could mark their whiteness as absence rather than substance by defining  
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14 everyone as individuals, by claiming not to see difference, by denying the specificity  
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16 of a white culture or by slipping into other facets of identity: especially gender,  
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18 sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, region' (Ibid.: 40).

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22 With only three studies of women in the corpus, there is clearly a lot more work to do  
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24 in conceptualising the intersectional in studies of white identities in the UK.

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27 However, a set of trajectories of whiteness does become apparent from ethnographic  
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29 studies. Nayak's 'White Wannabes' (2003); the youths on Back's 'Riverview' estate  
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31 (1996); Watt and Stenson's Townsvillers (1998); Byrne's white mothers of 'mixed'  
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33 children (2006); and Kaur's white Southall sisters (2000), all negotiate themselves  
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35 across cultural and geographical terrains with varying degrees of ease and intimacy  
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37 with black and Asian people from their neighbourhoods. While there is frequently  
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39 tension, there is also alliance, through personal relationships drawing on shared  
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41 knowledge and experiences. White actors can be highly reflexive about their  
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43 racialized identities, and complex, contradictory ideas can be held.  
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## Empire as presence

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52 One emergent thread of this work is that of the post-imperial legacy of Britain, and  
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54 how this plays out in the contemporary racialization of British social relations. The  
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56 working and middle class subjects in the British work often position themselves as  
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58 facing deprivation: the appropriation of 'their' values and territory is viewed as a  
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physical and cultural invasion in which the State (local and/or national) may well collude. 'Jim' (in Coalville), reports that his uncles had been upset by the purchase of his grandmother's former house after her death: 'The presence of Asians in the home where they were brought up signifies an intolerable and unacceptable transformation' (Tyler, 2004: 299). Just as the link is often made in popular discourse between racialized minority presence and the physical degeneration of an area, so the Asian presence in Jim's uncles' home retrospectively degrades their status.

Communities can express nostalgia for particular values and relationships. The precise nature of the loss is shaped by the actors' location of themselves in a downward trajectory, or at best a fragile and threatened slot in the post-empire world order: whether or not empire is explicitly invoked (Gilroy, 2004). The direct evidence gleaned from qualitative interviewing is less compelling here, but this relationship is crucial, at least for the theorisation of British versions of a global white identity. Early studies written from within the 'race relations' paradigm, assumed the continuity of the coloniser-colonised relationship (Banton, 1967; Rex and Moore, 1967). However, as Knowles (2003) suggests, the justification for not examining such an important assumption is now far less easy to sustain. Knowles (2005) has followed up her appeal for the examination of postcolonial British whiteness with a small-scale study of white migrants in Hong Kong, yet the question she raises in regard to former imperial territories is all the more pertinent in relation to Britain itself. How exactly does the colonial heritage impact upon white identities, particularly in terms of its relationship with people descended from former colonial subjects in the metropolis? Tyler reports one of these rare moments of explicit juxtaposition and its interesting uses. Self-employed 'Mike', commenting on a retired, former Raj, client in



## White Racialized Identities

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4 Greenville, first situates himself as neither a racist nor a snob. He then describes the  
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6 situation:

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10 'He has got Indians living to the back and side of him ... The house with the mosque  
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12 thingy ... So you can understand it from their point of view. They have worked hard  
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14 all their lives to achieve whatever bracket of wealth or status, to enjoy their retirement  
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16 in a quiet village, and all of a sudden you get three families moving into one house  
17  
18 and try and run a business from it. Transporter vans coming and going and they  
19  
20 probably have a couple of sewing machines running in the garage. Women doing a bit  
21  
22 of machining and then multiples of kids running around the garden, as he is sitting out  
23  
24 on a nice sunny day, and it all drives you mad. It is very difficult for them' (Tyler,  
25  
26 2003: 402-03).

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34 Mike's musings on the Asians' activities make his phantasies explicit, realigning him  
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36 as an ally of the Raj man by sharing a script of hegemonic whiteness that suspends  
37  
38 class differences between Mike and the client. It is tempting to think of this as  
39  
40 revealing the projection of some contemporary British fears; secular doubt in the face  
41  
42 of faith, where the latter is seen as communal, self-effacing and irrational; guilt over  
43  
44 others' industriousness that threatens your supposition of laziness and incompetence;  
45  
46 maybe combined with unfair competition (through unwaged family labour). Finally,  
47  
48 there is the plague of large noisy families and expressive communities, the hint of  
49  
50 high birth-rates and the ultimate assumption of power by the 'hordes'.  
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55 Yet it could equally be argued that the younger actors, particularly in working class  
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57 areas (Back, 1996) do not reflexively utilise the colonial relationship for interpreting  
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59 their locations. Some questions that require further research are: to what extent are  
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## White Racialized Identities

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younger actors, in comparison to older ones, aware of the colonial past? If the parasol of whiteness shades both villages in middle England and urban estates, then do we need to qualify the salience of the colonial legacy? I would suggest, by connecting with, snagging on, regurgitating and revamping previous discourses that provide a pool of interpretative frameworks and a blueprint of hierarchy. When this hierarchy appears open to change, anxiety and tension are exhibited.

### **A Distinct British habitus for white identity formation?**

I have argued that white identities in the British fieldwork involve the construction of contested sets of interlocking values, which neither coincide systematically with skin colour, nor pertain exclusively to all members of a group. Social relations often appear more complex than the black-white binary allows for: the white subjects display a range of degrees of critique and reflexivity toward the dominance of whiteness *on an individual basis*. Yet this conclusion in no way disturbs the *structural* domination of whiteness: individuals cannot alter this, but they can and do question and critique it, even if this is a minority position. Indeed, a recurrent topic in is the heterogeneity and elasticity of the category 'white' in its members' affiliations with black and Asian cultures. This of course means shifting the boundaries of the 'we' rather than abolishing the boundaries. **Boundaries always go somewhere. Moreover, it could be suggested that the elasticity of boundaries surrounding the white group at various moments, in various places is determined by its white members. In some cases (Reay et al., 2007; Clarke and Garner, forthcoming), the alignment of forces is such that it is the non-respectable white working-class who are assigned the bottom rung below respectable minorities by both working and middle-class respondents. Other times, there is a threshold above which the**

## White Racialized Identities

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3 **coolness or multicultural kudos gained from mixing in public spaces is**  
4  
5 **transformed into classed and raced dangers (Reay et al., 2007; Byrne, 2006). The**  
6  
7 **ambivalence of white identities, even where they appear at their most inclusive**  
8  
9 **(Byrne, 2006; Back, 1994), is never far from the surface.**

10  
11  
12 Indeed, the majority of the British studies so far have been micro-level ones. It is not  
13  
14 the case that there is no tradition of theorising British whiteness in varying degrees of  
15  
16 explicitness (Puar, 1995; Bhattacharyya, 1997). Virtually all the writing on 'race' and  
17  
18 ethnicity in Britain could in some way be understood as covering different aspects of  
19  
20 whiteness. Landmark work such as Hall et al. (1978), Carby (1982) and Gilroy (1987)  
21  
22 are all partly about white British identity formation. Yet theoretical explorations of  
23  
24 whiteness have so far been minimal. This is a striking difference between the British  
25  
26 and American academic contexts. In the latter models of systemic racism that  
27  
28 explicitly conceptualise whiteness (Harris, 1993; Mills, 1997; 2003; 2004; Yancy,  
29  
30 2004) are available to researchers, as are the quantitative surveys of wealth, income  
31  
32 and residential segregation (Massey and Denton, 1994; Oliver and Shapiro, 1995)  
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34 upon which claims about the contemporary USA can be empirically based. British  
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36 researchers cannot yet moor their fieldwork to such sturdy bases.  
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## Conclusions

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47 **The sociological approaches here operate a twin reformulation of the question**  
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49 **posed for more than a century in the social sciences: what makes people who are**  
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51 **not white different and in what ways? This is the thrust of ethnographic and**  
52  
53 **anthropological work since those disciplines began, and whose traces remain in**  
54  
55 **the 'race relations' problematic that dominated post-war Britain's policy**  
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57 **debates. Instead, the researchers referred to here have turned the 'white gaze'**  
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## White Racialized Identities

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**(Yancy, 2008) onto itself: this means asking, rather than assuming that whiteness corresponds to complexion, what does whiteness (as a set of practices, beliefs and ways of being) actually mean? It also means investigating what people actually say and do about ‘race’, and what appear to be the patterns that we might call ‘white’ positions in this discourse. The fieldwork thus captures some of the messiness, contradictions and discursive associations in people’s accounts of themselves and enables us to understand some of the contingency and complexity that is evacuated from accounts that use larger abstractions (‘white’, ‘black’, ‘Asian’, etc.) not merely as descriptors but as analytical tools supposing behaviour and interests. The sociology of white identities should not end up constituting a separate field, but rather complement the sociology of racism. However, the focus on what white means challenges the direction of the academic gaze by forcing white researchers to ask the same questions about the dominant group of which they are members as they do about others. It is clear just from the British studies that what was previously seen as solid does in fact melt into air, to a certain point. We are left with questions about where boundaries lie, what the legacy of empire is and what the articulation of class and ‘race’ looks like on the ground. I am not convinced we could arrive at the same set of questions without having approached from the perspective of whiteness.**

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The reader of the state-of-the-art fieldwork on white identities in the USA and the UK is confronted with a number of similar scripts. These are post-welfare state discourses of bereavement articulated by white subjects confronted with the breakdown of white superiority (Weis and Fine, 1996; Weis et al., 1996; Lamont, 2000). Although misrecognition of ‘affirmative action’ is the locus of such bereavement in the USA (McKinney, 2005; Bonilla-Silva, 2006), and state control of resources in a post-

## White Racialized Identities

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2  
3 colonial context could be seen similarly in the UK, this is still a dovetailing rather  
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5 than a bifurcation of ways of envisaging white identities among the majority of those  
6  
7 encountered in research. **The British context is a postcolonial one, with its specific**  
8  
9 **history of migration, and state interventions in the field of ‘race’.** Researchers  
10  
11 **there have focused on the urban centres in which most migrants settled in the**  
12  
13 **post-war period, and in the work referred to here, have studied the ways in**  
14  
15 **which the complicated legacies of empire are worked out against the shrinking**  
16  
17 **welfare state that characterises much of Western Europe in the last part of the**  
18  
19 **twentieth and first part of the twenty-first centuries. The published British**  
20  
21 **fieldwork elucidates the complexity of the process of making ‘white subjects’**  
22  
23 **that we as researchers are both witnessing and carrying out, particularly in the**  
24  
25 **way that classed and racialised identities compound each other. The small but**  
26  
27 **growing corpus on white identities in Britain thus raises further questions to do**  
28  
29 **with what we are researching and how to research it.**

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36 Having got this far, I wonder whether we are not in danger of reproducing a double  
37  
38 erasure. On one hand, that of minorities’ pain and loss, and secondly, of the roles of  
39  
40 the decision-making, cultural capital-rich middle classes who make infrequent  
41  
42 appearances, both in the US (Pierce, 2003; Lewis, 2003) and British literature (Byrne,  
43  
44 2006; Reay et al., 2007; Clarke and Garner, forthcoming). It is clear that the research  
45  
46 focus has so far been primarily young, mainly working-class men, principally in urban  
47  
48 England. More studies of middle-class subjects and women, outside England and/or in  
49  
50 rural settings would thus be welcome additions to this corpus, while the theme of  
51  
52 making the relationship of Empire to contemporary practice is a vernacular seam to be  
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54 mined in future work.  
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In all we do we must remind ourselves that these social relationships we investigate are not *just* about ‘race’, but nor are they just about gender, or class, or the specifics of contemporary England or California. People’s lives are irrevocably embedded in the multiplicity of identities, but this is not the same as saying that this multiplicity somehow cancels out the principal vectors of discrimination that contour people’s life chances, or that we can pick and mix identities (as if particular kinds of shoe or music tastes are equivalents of structural locations). The people whose lives we study are always located in power relationships. So we ought not to be asking only ‘what does this tell us about being white?’, but always, ‘what does this tell us about racism?’ If one of the answers is ‘that it is much more complex than a world in which people are hailed *only* as racial subjects’, then so much the better.

Whatever else we do in excavating ‘what white looks like’ (Yancy, 2004), it is a grave error to forget that whatever it looks like is also always a function of what ‘black’, or ‘Asian’, or ‘Latino’ look like at any given moment. When we focus on white identities, the temptation is to become fascinated by the diversity of the micro-level and miss the macro-level strands holding it all together. This is the problem of disconnection, which is an occupational hazard of both qualitative sociology and critical theory. Empirical researchers have to read theorists and do engage with them, but theorists seem generally less interested in empirical fieldwork.

Next, the **USA** does not have a monopoly on whiteness (although the vast majority of US-based studies seem to assume just that). Over a century, American scholars have made a compelling case for turning the academic gaze onto whiteness, establishing that it is a source of power, and that this power works differently in different contexts. Yet the framework of ‘national’ studies is a barrier to moving beyond the ‘third wave’ into the fourth, to imagining work whose analytic dimension encompasses more than

## White Racialized Identities

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2  
3 one national context, and which explores some of the global ‘moral economy’ of  
4  
5 whiteness (Garner, 2007) **in places like Latin America and Asia as well as Europe**  
6  
7 **and North America. Ideas such as ‘color-blind racism’ and the ideological**  
8  
9 **strands of liberalism that seek to make individuals fully responsible for negative**  
10  
11 **social outcomes ascribed to ‘race’ for example, appeal to people who are not**  
12  
13 **racialised as white, yet are impacted on by the norms of whiteness in terms of**  
14  
15 **their ideological orientation to ‘race’ (Twine, 1996; Bonilla-Silva, 2006). The**  
16  
17 **significance of this should be examined further than the UK and the USA.**  
18  
19 **Indeed, this extension of the geographical basis for analysing the racialisation of**  
20  
21 **white identities is essential if this process is to be fully understood and not seen as**  
22  
23 **yet another Anglo-American subfield irrelevant to the social relations of other**  
24  
25 **places (Garner, 2007).**

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27 **In summary, this fourth wave** would require more empirical research; more  
28  
29 internationally comparative work; more analysis; more interdisciplinary studies and  
30  
31 action-oriented research on how this knowledge can actually be deployed in an  
32  
33 emancipatory framework. So far, awareness of structural racism and white people’s  
34  
35 diverse roles in it is seen as the ideal (cf. Twine’s ‘racial literacy’ (2004);  
36  
37 ‘confessional’ narratives (Frye, 2000); practical books and workshops on recognising  
38  
39 one’s role as beneficiary of white privilege, etc.). Yet how does this process get rolled  
40  
41 out into the communities where people do not necessarily identify with explicit anti-  
42  
43 racism? How do we use our knowledge to become part of anti-racist praxis that  
44  
45 engages white people of good will who do not identify with anti-racism *per se*, to  
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47 question their whiteness without feeling attacked? And is this particular moment,  
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49 when international finance and the neo-liberal social relations deriving from it are  
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3 losing their capacity to pass themselves off as natural and benevolent, the most  
4 propitious time to try and make this work?  
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10 **The author would like to thank the two reviewers for their helpful and**  
11 **stimulating comments.**  
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For Peer Review



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