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Q1(e)

Do you think that the boundary line between ethnicity and race is blurred? Justify your answer

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Stratification and Mobility: Concepts

Stratification and Mobility: Concepts - equality, inequality, hierarchy, exclusion, poverty and deprivation; Theories of social stratification - Structural functionalist, Marxist, Weberian; Dimensions - Class, status groups, gender, ethnicity and race; Social mobility - open and closed systems, types, sources and causes.

Core demand of the question

- Do you think that the boundary line between ethnicity and race is blurred? Justify your answer
- Keep the justification within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Race was coded as biology and ethnicity as culture and believed descent.

Weber and Barth treat ethnicity as honour and boundary, not as a trait list.

States recode the same populations as race or ethnicity across time.

Both produce **endogamy**, stigma, and unequal chances, so the lived line is blurred.

Keep the analytical distinction so that body-talk and peoplehood-talk are not mixed by accident.

Introduction

Race has been treated as a classification of bodies. Ethnicity has been treated as a classification of culture, language, and origin. In social practice the line is blurred, because both are made in history, law, and closure, not found as two natural kinds.

Body

Classical distinction

- Race was used, especially in colonial and United States law, as a supposedly biological rank of human types.
- Ethnicity, in **Max Weber**'s sense of ethnic groups, is a believed common descent, often tied to language, memory, and honour, whether or not the genealogy is true.
- **Fredrik Barth** shifted ethnicity from a list of traits to a boundary that groups maintain in interaction.

Why the boundary blurs

- What counts as race in one state counts as ethnicity in another. Jews, Irish, and Italians were racialised in some United States periods and later recoded as white ethnics.
- Colonial India used race talk for tribes and caste, while the **Census** and later politics recoded many of the same populations as ethnic, linguistic, or Scheduled groups.

- Racism attributes destiny to the body. Ethnic closure attributes destiny to culture. Both produce **endogamy**, stigma, and unequal life chances.
- W. E. B. Du Bois and later writers showed that the **colour line** is a social fact. Barth showed that ethnic boundaries are also social facts. The mechanisms overlap.

Justification

- Yes, the line is blurred in lived classification, in census boxes, and in violence that attacks both body and culture.
- **The analytical distinction remains useful:** race talk claims nature; ethnicity talk claims peoplehood. Conflating them hides how states switch labels.
- Indian debates on Adivasi identity, caste as race in some United Nations forums, and language politics show the same switching, not a clean two-box map.

Flow diagram

Race as body rank -> Social closure
Ethnicity as believed descent -> Social closure
Barth boundaries -> Social closure
Weber ethnic honour -> Ethnicity as believed descent
State census law -> Race as body rank
State census law -> Ethnicity as believed descent

Conclusion

The boundary between ethnicity and race is blurred because both are socially constructed closures that states and groups can recode. The distinction still matters as two languages of ranking. A justified answer is therefore yes, blurred in practice, with a remaining analytical difference between body-talk and peoplehood-talk.

Facts & figures

Weber on ethnic groups

Groups that share a believed common descent and a sense of honour, independent of proven genealogy.

Fredrik Barth

Ethnic Groups and Boundaries treated ethnicity as maintained borders, not as a cultural inventory.

Colour line

Du Bois's term for the socially enforced racial divide in the United States.

Census recoding

Official boxes that move populations between race, tribe, caste, and language across enumerations.

Endogamy

Marriage closure used by both racial and ethnic groups to keep the boundary.

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