



race

Race is part of everyday life in the United States. We're asked for our race when we fill out forms at school or work, when we visit a government agency or doctor's office. We read or hear about race in the daily news, and it comes up in informal discussions in our neighborhoods and social circles. Most of us can apply—to ourselves and the people around us—labels like white or Asian. Yet for all its familiarity, race is strangely difficult to define. When I've asked people to explain what race is, many have trouble answering.

Two uncertainties are widespread. First, there is confusion about the relationship between *race* and *ethnicity*. Are these different concepts? How often have you come across descriptions of someone's "ethnicity" that use terms like *white* and *black*? The public, the media, politicians, and scientists often use *race* and *ethnicity* interchangeably. Both terms have something to do with our ancestral origins, or "background," and we often find both linked to ideas about "culture." As historian David Hollinger points out, we often use the term *multi-cultural* to refer to racial diversity. In doing so, we presume that racial groups have different cultural beliefs or practices, even though the way we classify people by race has little to do with their behavior, norms, or values.

Defining race is also a challenge because we are unsure how it is related to biology. Are racial categories based on surface physical characteristics? Do they reflect unobserved patterns of genetic difference? If race is a kind of biological taxonomy, we are uncertain about exactly which traits anchor it.

Clear-cut definitions of race are surprisingly elusive. *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, for example, equates *race* with *ethnic group*, and links it to a wide range of possible traits: "physical characteristics," "culture," "history," and "language." The U.S. Census Bureau is another place to look for an authoritative definition. In contrast to the dictionary definition, the federal government rejects both culture and biology as relevant to race. This is apparent in its approach to racial enumeration and how it explains its definition. The U.S. Census makes the most visible use of the official racial categories that the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) first promulgated in 1977 and revised in 1997. These standards require all federal agencies to use the following classifications in their data collection and analysis:

1. American Indian and Alaska Native
2. Asian
3. Black or African American
4. Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
5. White

The OMB deliberately refrains from naming Hispanics as a race, instead identifying them as an "ethnic group" distinguished by culture (specifically, "Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race"). The growing tendency among journalists, researchers, and the public is to treat Latinos as a *de facto* racial group distinct from whites, blacks, and others, but the government view is that cultural differences do not determine racial boundaries.

Biological differences are also declared irrelevant to the official standards. The Census Bureau maintains that its categories "do not conform to any biological, anthropological or genetic criteria." Instead, the bureau says that its classification system reflects "a social definition of race recognized in this country"—but it does not elaborate further on that "social definition." The Census Bureau and OMB see themselves as technical producers of race-based statistics largely for the purpose of enforcing civil rights laws, not as the arbiters of the meaning of race.

We may take the Census Bureau's reference to a "social definition" as a version of the social-scientific understanding of race as a "social construct." In other words, race is whatever we as a society say it is. The American Sociological Association took this view in its 2002 "Statement on the Importance of Collecting Data and Doing Social Scientific Research on Race," where it defined race as "a social invention that changes as political, economic, and historical contexts change." The association also noted that concepts of race usually involve valuations of "physical, intellectual, moral, or spiritual superiority or inferiority." Both are crucial observations about the type of idea that race is: It arises at particular moments and in particular places, and has long served to perpetuate deep social fissures. However, the constructivist position does not necessarily define the actual content of racial beliefs. Many kinds of classification schemes are socially constructed and serve as the basis for class systems. So what distinguishes racial categories from other taxonomies?

Sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) offers a useful starting point for seeing the elements of ancestry, culture, and biol-

ogy in terms of socially shaped belief. However, it is his definition of “ethnic groups”—not races—that provides the template. Like most scientists of his time, Weber felt that races stemmed from “common inherited and inheritable traits that actually derive from common descent.” In his definition of *ethnicity*, however, he introduced the notion of “believed” rather than actual commonality, describing ethnic groups as “those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists.” Substitute “races” for “ethnic groups,” and strike “customs” but retain “physical type,” and we have the basic ingredients for a comprehensive definition of race.

An emphasis on *belief* in common descent, as well as *perception* of similarity and difference, is crucial for a useful definition of race. Without them, we could not account for the traditional American “one-drop” system of racial classification, for example. According to this logic, a person with one black great-grandparent

and seven white great-grandparents is a black person, because their “drop of black blood” means they have more in common with blacks than with whites. This shows how we base racial classifications on socially contingent perceptions of sameness and difference, not on some kind of “natural” calculus.

Finally, regardless of our personal views on the biological basis of race, we must recognize that physical characteristics—Weber’s “inherited and inheritable traits”—are central to the concept. As historian George Fredrickson points out, the word *race*, deriving from the late 15th-century Spanish designation for Jewish and Muslim origins, came freighted with Christians’ belief that such people embodied an innate, permanent, and negative essence. Although Spaniards had previously believed that infidels could become Christians through religious conversion, the suspicion that they could never truly make the transition took root after 1492, when many Jews and Muslims chose conversion over expulsion. This early notion of inherent and unchangeable difference gave rise to the understandings of race we share today. We believe, for example, that a black person can “act white” or

that a white person can “act black,” but that no behavior, shared ideas, or values can actually determine the race that one truly is.

With these elements in place, we can improvise on Weber to define races as *groupings of people believed to share common descent, based on perceived innate physical similarities*. This formulation addresses the relation of culture and biology to race. Culture is absent here as an explicit basis of racial membership, leaving a clear distinction between race and ethnicity. Though both refer to beliefs about shared origins, ethnicity is grounded in the discourse of cultural similarity, and race in that of biological commonality. In addition, this definition emphasizes the constructivist observation that although racial categories are ostensibly based on physical difference, they need not be so in reality. Even if we disagree

about whether or not races are biological entities, we can agree that they are based on *claims* about biological commonality. As a result, this definition gives us a shared starting point for the most contentious debate about the nature of race today, namely, whether advances in genetic and biomedical research have proven the essentialist claim that races are identifiable, biologically

distinct groups that exist independently of our perceptions and preconceptions.

Sociological literature often suggests that the general acceptance by scholars of the idea of race as a “social construct” gives it the status of “conventional wisdom.” Yet resurgent claims about the biological nature of race are increasingly difficult to ignore. After something of a postwar hiatus in “race science” following international condemnation of the Nazis, the question of the biological basis of race has received renewed scientific attention in recent years. In March 2005, for example, the *New York Times* published a geneticist’s essay asserting that “scientists should admit that there is such a thing as race.” A variety of professional scientific journals and popular science magazines have taken up the question of whether “there is such a thing as race.” In December 2003, the cover of *Scientific American* inquired “Does Race Exist?” *Nature Genetics* devoted most of a November 2004 supplement to the same question. *Science*, the *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Genome Biology*, and the *International Journal of Epidemiology*, among others, have also addressed the issue. In fact, the relationship between race and human biology is far from settled in scientific circles.

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Ann Morning writes about the uses of racial classification in demography, public policy, biology, education, and everyday life.

The argument that race is socially constructed rests on two simultaneous claims, although we sociologists have tended to focus on just one. The constructionist idea implies that race is a product of particular historical circumstances and also that it is *not* rooted in biological difference—it only claims to be. By working harder to demonstrate the former—for example, the historical variability of racial categories, their roots in particular social institutions, their divergence from one society to the next—we have turned away from investigating why racial boundaries do not correspond to physical differences. In our teaching and writing, we have not tried to explain why race may not be rooted in biology even though Americans are accustomed to being able to see race; they see, for example, who is Asian or who is white. Yet a comprehensive constructionist account must explain why we consider only some of the many kinds of differences between geographic groupings of human beings to be racial differences. We see racial differences between Norwegians and Koreans, for example, but we do not consider the differences between Norwegians and Portuguese to be racial.

Although sociologists may be reluctant to evaluate geneticists' and medical practitioners' pronouncements on human differences, feeling that this is not our turf, the arguments made today about race and biology lend themselves to sociological analysis. As the recent *New York Times* essay demonstrated, the current claims about distinct racial genetic profiles involve assumptions about group membership that social scientists are generally accustomed to questioning. We are used to investigating problems of sample construction and potential bias, exploring how assumptions about boundary lines affect our results. If we find, for example, that African Americans and European Americans have different probabilities of having a particular gene variant, does that prove the existence of black and white "races" to which they belong? If Latinos have yet another probability of having that gene variant, have we proved that they too constitute a racial group? How about Ashkenazi Jews?

Does it matter if only one in a thousand genes displays such a pattern of variation? Does it matter how many people provided the DNA samples, or how they were located? Should we be suspicious that the red/white/yellow/black racial classification that scientists and census-takers use today is at heart the same framework that Linnaeus established in the 18th century without the aid of genome sequencing? In short, despite the complexity of the human genome and the tools that we now have to study it, the debate about the nature of race revolves around broader questions of logic and reasoning—which makes it that much more important to establish a comprehensive but flexible definition of race.

recommended resources

Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann. 2004. "Conceptual Confusions and Divides: Race, Ethnicity, and the Study of Immigration." In *Not Just Black and White: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States*, ed. Nancy Foner and George M. Fredrickson (Russell Sage Foundation, 2004). Cornell and Hartmann compare the concepts of race and ethnicity and discuss the sociological analyses that traditionally employ them.

George M. Fredrickson. *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton University Press, 2002). A concise and engaging history of the concept of race.

David Hollinger. *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (Basic Books, 1995). In this influential and readable essay challenging our everyday conflation of the terms race and culture, Hollinger uses the phrase "ethno-racial pentagon" to describe the current (though not official) tendency to recognize the following as races: whites, Hispanics, blacks, Asians, and American Indians.

Max Weber. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (University of California Press, 1978). In chapter 5, "Ethnic Groups," Weber scrutinizes the concept of ethnicity as a basis for social action, yet concludes that it "dissolves if we define our terms exactly" and is "unsuitable for a really rigorous analysis."

BETTER RED THAN ... (AT LEAST IN VIRGINIA)

It shall hereafter be unlawful for any white person in this State to marry any save a white person, or a person with no other admixture of blood than white and American Indian. For the purpose of this chapter, the term "white person" shall apply only to such person as has no trace whatever of any blood other than Caucasian; but persons who have one-sixteenth or less of the blood of the American Indian and have no other non-Caucasic blood shall be deemed to be white persons.

— Virginia Racial Integrity Act of 1924 (declared unconstitutional, June 1967)

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