

## Race and ethnicity

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- Humans categorize and name things, including themselves and each other
  - this seems to be a fundamental feature of human thought:
    - we divide up our perceptions of the world into kinds of things that we can identify and name
      - chair, table, etc.; furniture; wood, metal; yellow, brown...
    - most of our perceptions of the world are actually a continuum or spectrum of variation, not distinct categories
      - where do we draw the line between different colors?
      - or between a chair, seat, stool, bench, rocker, throne...?
  - these categories (where we draw the lines, what we lump with what) are arbitrary cultural constructs
  - we will look at this more carefully later on
- Two common ways of categorizing people are by ethnicity and race
  - **ethnicity**, or **ethnic group**: a category of people thought to be *culturally* similar to each other and different from other ethnicities, based on
    - customs, beliefs, values... and/or
    - language, and/or
    - religion, and/or
    - history, and/or
    - geographic origin, and/or
    - race
      - (why is race listed under culture? We'll get to that...)
  - A person's ethnicity may be identified by
    - himself or herself
    - others
    - these may differ!
      - others may differ with each other, too.
    - ethnic identity can be complex, flexible, negotiated
  - Examples of ethnicities:
    - German
    - Chinese
    - Hispanic or Latino
    - African-American
  - **Race**: A category of people thought to be *biologically* similar to each other, and different from other races
    - due to shared descent from people of a particular region
  - like ethnicity, race may be determined by the person, or by others
    - and they may not necessarily agree
  - “Ethnicity” and “race” really differ only in emphasis

- Hispanic or Latino are ethnic categories that emphasize culture and history
  - Latinos may look like Native Americans, Europeans, Asians, Africans...
  - yet people may assume that there are typical Latino physical characteristics
- Asian is a racial category that emphasizes physical characteristics
  - Asians may be culturally Japanese, American, Peruvian...
  - yet people may assume that there are typical Asian cultural characteristics
- Americans tend to use “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably
- We tend to think of “race” as being more biological, unchangeable, and real
  - while “ethnicity” is learned and negotiated
- In fact, “race” is no more real or objective than ethnicity
  - Our categories of race are arbitrary cultural constructs
  - they are not “out there” in the biological world
- The concept of race in humans
  - Like it or not, race is important in our society
    - You probably have no problem classifying most people as "Black", "Asian", "Scandinavian", etc.
    - You all have probably had experiences in which race mattered
  - but the common concept of race as a *biological* category actually does not fit the patterning of variation in humans
    - my approach here is derived from *How Humans Evolved*, by Robert Boyd and Joan Silk
- A problem with the race concept: A basic feature of the race concept is that
  - Most humans fall into a limited number of relatively distinct categories or races
    - Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, etc.
    - the relatively few individuals who do not fit these categories are combinations, that is, descendents of ancestors of different races
      - hence the "mixed race" category that is now common on forms
    - this is simply not true for humans
  - In fact, modern *Homo sapiens* simply cannot be divided into distinct groups like this
    - people obviously do vary from region to region
      - people tend to look similar to other people from the same region
      - so it *is* possible to lump people by their region of origin
        - for example, southeast Asia, north Africa, and northern Europe
    - but there are few clear boundaries between regions
      - most human variation changes gradually across the map
      - there are few gaps or divisions between nearby groups of people
        - such smooth, gradual changes across space are called "**clines**"
        - analogous to how an *inclined* plane changes in height gradually from one part to another
    - where you draw the line between these geographic groupings is arbitrary
    - any way of dividing up the map would be equally valid
      - you could divide people in Eurasia into Europeans and Asians

- but you could just as well divide them into Europeans, Central Asians (Afghans, Pakistanis, Indians, etc.), and East Asians (Chinese, Koreans, etc.)
  - so are there two races here, or three... or more?
- any line you draw will be arbitrary
  - which is why there have been so many different racial categorizations of humans
  - if there were clear divisions between categories of humans, there would be some agreement on what the "racial" groups are
  - but there is no such agreement among people who have looked into it very carefully
    - including various extreme racists who have come up with different categorizations
- Conclusion: human variation does not cluster and divide into “races”
  - racial categories are not “out there” to be observed
  - instead, the categories that we use are arbitrary cultural constructs
- So what if we try to use several traits at the same time to categorize people?
  - every trait has a different spatial pattern of variation
  - the clines vary along different directions, with different peaks and valleys
  - so the more traits you pick, the more combinations you get - the more "groups" or "races" you have to define
  - depending on which traits you pick, you get different numbers of groups and different boundaries
  - say you start with skin color, and lump all sub-saharan Africans together as dark-skinned
  - then you try to group by the frequency of having the epicanthic fold (the bit of skin that gives east Asians's eyes their almond shape)
    - you then have to group Asians together with some south Africans, Eskimos, and South American Indians, many of whom don't share the same skin color or nose shape
  - or you decide to use the frequency of the allele that causes sickle-cell anemia
    - its distribution does not correspond to skin color, epicanthic fold, etc. either
  - so there is no one way to divide up humans into groups that reflects more than just a few traits
    - which few traits we choose to consider is arbitrary
- The same conclusion, again: different aspects of human variation do not cluster into distinct “races”
  - the closer we look, the harder it is to separate out distinct “races”
  - racial categories are not “out there” to be observed
  - instead, the categories that we use are arbitrary cultural constructs
- There is nothing wrong with the idea of races; it just does not fit modern humans
  - 130,000 years ago, humans *could* be divided into two biological races
  - Neanderthals were distinctly different from other archaic humans
  - at that time, the boundaries of the clines of nose size, browridge size, brain size, occipital bun size, etc. were fairly sharp and roughly coincided with each other
  - so there was a "race" or distinct category of Neanderthals
  - today, there just isn't any region or population ("race") that can be separated in this way
    - no sharp geographic boundaries in variation
    - multiple traits do not cluster together

- Another problem with the race concept: Another basic feature of the race concept is that
  - There are supposedly significant differences *between* the races, and relative similarity *within* them
    - that is, knowing that someone is a member of a given race tells you out them than just their skin color
      - roughly what they look like
      - that they are more or less at risk of certain diseases
      - what physical characteristics and abilities they are likely to have or not have
      - what mental characteristics and abilities they are likely to have or not have
      - what their character is like or how intelligent they probably are
- This, too, is simply not true for humans
  - in fact, knowing a person's "race" does not tell you much about the person's genes or traits
  - the common racial categorization schemes account for only about 6% of the genetic variation among people
    - and the best categorization schemes that population researchers can devise using computer methods still account for less than 15% of the genetic variation among people
  - that is, there is far more variation *within* the groups than *between* the groups
    - 85% of all human variation is found *within* any given "race"
    - members of the same "race" differ from each other far more than their "race's" average differs from the average of another race
    - put another way, knowing someone's race does not tell you much about them other than the few traits like skin color that are used to categorize them in the first place
  - Conclusion: there is so much variation among members of any "race" that the grouping is just not very informative
- One reason why humans do not fall into clear racial groups is because we are genetically more uniform than most other animals
  - Compare the DNA of two chimps from different populations
    - typically about 7.5% of their nucleotide bases differ
  - Compare two humans from different populations
    - typically about 0.3% of their nucleotide bases differ
  - apparently because
    - all modern *Homo sapiens* are descendants of a single, small population in Africa between 100,000 and 50,000 years ago
      - there has not been enough time for significantly different regional variants to evolve
    - and modern human culture has encouraged lots of interbreeding among most of those descendents
- In spite of all this, people generally think that they can easily divide most people up into a limited number of "racial" groups
  - we do this all the time in census taking, affirmative action, etc.
  - doctors are constantly doing studies comparing European-Americans with African-Americans
  - college and job applications ask you to check a box in a list of racial categories, and they tally up the results (SSU is no exception)

- we know that human variation does not fall into neat categories, yet we categorize people into groups all the time. How is this possible?
- The impression that people can be categorized into clear groups is an *illusion* with two principal causes
  - 1. A psychological illusion, because we tend to focus on a very small number of traits
    - like skin color, nose shape, eye shape, and hair texture
    - reasons may be cultural, learned
    - but some of this also may be an evolved cognitive tendency
      - babies can recognize faces and individuals at a very early age
      - this particular sensitivity to certain facial features might help infants survive by helping them identify their mothers and reject others
  - if we were to give equal weight to other traits
    - visible ones like jaw form, finger length, knee shape, body proportions...
    - the countless invisible traits like blood type, tooth form, etc.
  - then we would quickly see that we could not classify people into neat categories
    - any classification by some traits would completely cross-cut the other traits
  - "race" seems possible because we tend to focus on just a few traits and ignore many, many others
    - nice example in the Jeffrey Fish reading
      - some populations in cold climates have evolved compact body shapes, which conserve body heat
      - others in hot climates have evolved lanky body shapes, which radiate heat better
      - we focus on skin color, so we see "compact" or "lanky" people as just variants of white, black, or other "racial" types
      - but we could just as well categorize people into a "compact" race and a "lanky" race, and see white or black skin color as variation within the "compacts" and "lankys"
    - Point: the choice of which characteristics are significant is an arbitrary cultural construct
      - (or maybe partially an evolved tendency)
      - a different choice of significant characteristics would lump people into entirely different "races"
  - 2. A historical illusion, because we normally encounter people from only limited parts of the world
    - due to historical accidents having to do with sea travel routes, the slave trade, and so on
      - in the US, we see mostly people from
        - Europe
        - West Africa, due to the slave trade
        - Certain parts of Asia, but not others
          - due to locations of ports, patterns of trade, political history
    - even today, most people encounter only small subgroups of the rest of the world's population
      - so people did not see the whole range of variants from intermediate places
      - so it seemed that the world was made of up distinctly different types of people

- in reality, the categories that are commonly used in the US and Europe are mostly the types of people at opposite ends of old trade and travel routes
  - so, for example, the "typical" African-American image is based on coastal West Africans, since that is where the slave trade to the US was concentrated
  - if many Northeast African Ethiopians or South African San had emigrated to the US, we would have a very different concept of what "Africans" looked like
  - maybe we would have several "African" categories instead of just one
  - or maybe we would see that the traits are too mixed up to effectively categorize
- Evidence that "races" are arbitrary cultural constructs
  - in other cultures and times, people used completely different "racial" categories
  - In Japan, people from the northernmost large Japanese island, the Ainu, are considered a distinct race and were discriminated against
    - most of us would have been taught how to categorize people in this way
  - Kottak suggests that the Japanese also categorize Burakumin as a separate racial group
    - although many other sources say that while Japanese see them as descended from a category of people who did "unclean" jobs, they do not consider them racially different
    - yet by carefully shifting addresses and hiding their background, many Burakumin pass as other Japanese
    - there is NO visual or biological clue at all to this "racial" category, even to Japanese who have grown up using it
  - 19<sup>th</sup> century North Americans commonly considered Irish immigrants to be obviously racially distinct and inferior from other Europeans
    - neither the Irish nor the non-Irish have changed biologically since then, but now we laugh at the idea of a separate "Irish" race
    - similar for Slavs and Italians, labeled as "Alpine" and "Mediterranean" races
      - said to be less intelligent than other Europeans
      - immigration into the US was limited by law in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century
  - Point: these examples (and there are many more) shows that these apparently biological, racial categories are not real divisions inherent in biology or genetics at all, but are socially constructed
    - they depend on the culture of the observer, not the biology of the people being observed
- nevertheless, since "racial" categories are well-known and have a big effect on our lives, people keep using them
  - even medical researchers, psychologists, and others who should know better
  - illusions seem real...that is what makes them illusions
  - but despite their continued use, these categories are not well defined or very informative in a biological sense
  - in a textbook, John Relethford says it nicely (pg. 127): "Biological variation is real; the order we impose on this variation by using the concept of race is not."
- Take-home points on race:
  - human variation does not cluster into distinct groups (races)
    - virtually all modern human variation is gradual (clinal)
      - without gaps or sudden changes

- the shapes and centers of the distributions of traits are all different
  - they cross-cut, rather than co-varying groups
- Racial categories account for very little of the genetic variation between individuals
  - other than the characteristics that were used to classify the person in the first place (skin color, etc.)
  - knowing what “race” someone is in tells you very little else about the genes or traits they are likely to have
  - there is much more variation within “races” than between them
- We obviously do categorize people by “race”, but based on
  - the few particular traits we happen to select as important
  - historical accidents that cause most people we see to come from a limited number of regions, not the whole globe and the full range of human variation
  - cultural biases (remember the “Irish race”)
- this is **social race**: a socially constructed, socially significant categorizing scheme
  - but not a biological reality
  - race is no more real or objective than ethnicity
- The very idea of separating biological “race” from cultural “ethnicity” is our own cultural construct
  - classifying people by skin color was rare until the 1600s
  - but classifying people into “peoples” by
    - region of origin
    - culture
    - language
    - general appearance, etc.
    - is as old as historical records
- The cultural construct of distinct biological races arose along with European imperialism
  - it legitimized European domination of “inferior” races
  - this explains why there can be argument about whether other cultures’ categories, like burakumin, are “races” or not
    - because the concept of race versus ethnicity is not very relevant in many other cultures
- So, what should we do?
  - Give up the idea of a limited number of biologically distinct “races”
  - instead, identify people by culture, region of origin, etc.
    - generally: ethnicity
  - recognizing that cultural and biological variation are continuous gradations across space and among individuals
    - not divided into distinct types