

## **Race and ethnicity**

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- Humans categorize and name things
  - including ourselves and each other
  - we divide up our perceptions of the world into kinds of things that we can identify and name
    - we divide a spectrum of colors into named categories: red, orange, yellow, green, blue...
    - we divide furniture to sit on into categories like chair, stool, bench, rocker, throne, armchair, recliner, sofa...
  - This is useful, because we can then talk about and think about things as members of a general category
    - rather than treating every thing as a unique, special case
  - some categories are really “out there” in the physical world
    - there are dogs and cats, but nothing in between
  - but many, even most things in the world really fall along continuous ranges of variation
    - like colors
    - or kinds of furniture to sit on
    - or breeds of dogs
    - for many things, there are no natural, real divisions
  - how we divide up these continuous ranges of variation into named categories is just a matter of convenience
    - where do we draw the line between different colors?
    - or between different breeds of dogs?
    - or between a chair, stool, bench, rocker, throne...?
  - these categories are arbitrary cultural constructs
    - where we draw the lines is arbitrary
    - which things we lump together and consider to be “the same” is arbitrary
    - what I classified as a Stingray bike, others classified as a scraper bike
      - these categories do not perfectly overlap
        - A bike is a Stingray based on the shape of the handlebars, seat, and other features
        - Scraper bikes are categorized more by decoration, especially by the wheels
        - while many scraper bikes are also Stingray bikes, not all are
      - both are equally arbitrary ways of categorizing bicycles
        - an outsider faced with a bunch of bicycles would probably classify them differently
      - yet despite being arbitrary, artificial, and invented...
        - these categories carry real meanings that really affect how people think about things and behave
  - so categories can be arbitrary,,,
    - in that they have no reality in the physical world...
    - yet still be real in the social world
    - in that they affect people’s thinking and behavior
- Two common ways of categorizing people are by ethnicity and race

- Ethnicity:
  - **ethnicity**, or **ethnic group**: a category of people thought to be similar to each other and different from other ethnicities, based on
    - language, and/or
    - customs, beliefs, values... and/or
    - religion, and/or
    - history (migration, slavery, warfare, etc.), and/or
    - geographic origin, and/or
    - physical features (skin color, hair color, eye shape, etc.)
  - Each ethnicity is defined by its own mix of cultural, historical, and/or physical characteristics
    - These are clearly arbitrary ways of lumping people into categories
    - They depend on people agreeing that in one case, language is important; in another, religion; in another, history; and so on
    - ethnic categories are arbitrary cultural constructs
  - Examples of ethnicities:
    - German, Russian, British, Spanish
      - mostly by language, culture, region
      - somewhat by history and physical features
    - in Rwanda: Hutu and Tutsi
      - mostly by history of economic and political status: Tutsi were a dominant minority, Hutu an oppressed majority
      - impossible to distinguish them reliably by appearance or genetics
    - in Ireland: Protestant and Catholic
      - nominally by religion, but largely by culture and history
    - Hispanic or Latino
      - mostly by language, somewhat by history and culture
    - African-American
      - by physical features and by shared history and culture
      - just ask any recent immigrant from Africa if they consider themselves African-American, or if they are accepted as African-American by African-Americans!
  - A person's ethnicity may be identified...
    - by himself or herself: self-identification
    - by others
    - these may differ!
      - Gertrude, who knew I was Jewish (even though I am not)
    - ethnic identity can be complex, flexible, negotiated
      - A Chinese-American might emphasize American ethnicity in one context, and Chinese ethnicity in another
  - Slide showing physical variation among some well-known “Hispanics” or “Latinos”
    - what makes these people “Latino”?
      - language?
        - yet we all probably know Latinos who speak no Spanish

- country or region of origin or ancestry?
  - yet Latinos come from many different countries, on at least three continents
- physical characteristics?
  - yet there are naturally blonde Latinos, Latinos of Japanese descent and appearance (in Peru, Honduras, etc.)...
- Point: ethnicity is obviously arbitrary and culturally constructed
  - not any sort of objective reality that scientists could directly observe
  - Even so, categories of ethnicity may be useful and really affect people's lives
- Race:
  - **Race:** A category of people thought to be similar to each other, and different from other races, based on
    - physical, biological characteristics
    - due to shared descent from people of a particular region
  - A key difference from ethnicity is many people assume that racial categories are
    - real, objective, observable, scientific
    - inborn and permanent: one is born with one's race and it does not change
    - people often assume that there are a limited number of distinct races
      - Black, Asian, White, etc.
      - a limited number of basic types of people
      - plus some people who are mixtures of those basic races
    - unlike the obviously complicated, changeable, arbitrary categories of ethnicity
  - Key point: anthropologists find that these assumptions are false
    - racial categories in humans are just another set of arbitrary cultural constructs
    - how we divide up humans by physical traits is no more real or determined by nature than our ideas of what is food and what isn't
  - Example: Omar al-Bashir, the President of Northern Sudan, would be Black in the US
    - but to the Sudanese, he is an arab, absolutely NOT Black
    - the Black Africans of Southern Sudan dislike him in part because he is NOT Black like they are
      - see Salva Kiir Mayardit, President of Southern Sudan
        - he is ethnically Dinka, of southern Sudan
        - the Sudanese see him as Black
        - absolutely not the same race as Omar al-Bashir
        - even though in the US, both would be the same race: Black
  - These race categories are not "real"
    - we lump people one way
    - people from other cultures lump the same people into different groups
    - so how real can those groups be?
    - they are simply arbitrary cultural constructs
    - socially significant, but not physical, scientific reality
  - like ethnicity, race may be determined...
    - by the person himself or herself: self-identification
    - or by others

- again, these others may not necessarily agree with the person or each other
  - is Tiger Woods Black?
  - is President Obama Black?
- in your reading, you saw that a person might be Black in the US, but not in Brazil
- Or a Brazilian might be classify himself into different “race” categories on different days!
- Point: racial categories are arbitrary and culturally constructed
- A problem with thinking of races as “real” categories
  - A basic feature of the race concept is that ...
  - people supposedly fall into a limited number of relatively distinct categories or races
    - Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, etc.
    - the exceptions who do not fit these racial categories are combinations of them
      - that is, they have ancestors from multiple 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
    - instead, humans form a continuous range of variation
      - there is a continuous range of variation of skin color, not clear groups
      - continuous range of variation in hair color
      - hair texture
      - eye shape
      - nose shape
      - mouth and lip form
      - height, body proportions, lung capacity, and on...
    - and these ranges tend to cross-cut each other
      - humans have almost all combinations of all these ranges
      - such as almond-shaped eyes (due to the “epicanthic fold” in the upper eyelid) with
        - dark brown skin (San, Ju/'hoansi)
        - tan or “yellow” skin (Chinese, etc.)
        - white skin (Slavs)
  - So consider an analogy to the smooth range of colors (slide)
    - the “race” concept suggests that there are several distinct races (or colors)
    - but human variation is continuous, without gaps
    - so how many “races” are there?
    - where do we draw the lines between them?
    - which kinds of people do we lump together and consider to be “the same” race, despite their differences?
    - looking at human variation as a spectrum of continuous variation illustrates that any division of people into races is arbitrary
      - it may be useful for some purposes, as a way of describing people
      - but any particular way of dividing people up into races is in our heads
      - not “out there” to be observed
  - Or consider travelling across Eurasia
    - 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, China, India, central 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
  - people on either side of any line are similar
  - people from places far apart within any racial category are different
- almost any way of dividing up the map would be equally valid
  - you could divide people in Eurasia into Europeans and Asians
    - but where you draw the line is arbitrary
    - if you prefer the term “Caucasian” over “European”, you might draw a different line
    - equally arbitrary
  - you could just as well divide them into Europeans, South Asians (Afghans, Pakistanis, Indians, etc.), and East Asians (Chinese, Koreans, etc.)
    - so are there two races here, or three... or more?
    - people on either side of any line are similar
    - people from places far apart within any category are different
  - we can and do draw boundaries between racial categories and the regions they are from
    - but these boundaries are arbitrary
- Point: human variation does not cluster and divide into distinct “races”
  - racial categories are not “out there” to be observed
  - instead, the categories that we use are arbitrary cultural constructs
- This 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 every culture uses its own racial categories
  - even scientists classify people in many different ways
    - depending on their purpose at the moment
- In spite of all this, people generally think that they can easily divide most people up into a limited number of “racial” groups
  - we classify people by race all the time
  - in daily life, walking around campus, etc.
  - census forms, university surveys, affirmative action programs, etc.
  - medical research comparing illness among African-Americans versus European-Americans
  - political polling and campaigning
  - 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)

- if human variation does not fall into distinct categories, why do we find it so easy to categorize people by race?
- 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
        - we learn what to look for to classify people in the same way that others around us do
      - 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
  - racial categories seem to work 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”
      - we learn (or maybe have an inborn tendency) to ignore other traits that contradict the categorization scheme
  - 2. A historical illusion, because we mostly encounter people from only certain 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 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 ordinary 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 many more) show that these apparently biological, racial categories are not real divisions inherent in biology or genetics, but are socially constructed
    - they depend on the culture of the observer, not the biology of the people being observed
  - 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.”
- Like it or not, race *is* important in our society
  - You probably have no trouble classifying most people as “Black”, “Asian”, “White”, etc.
  - You all have probably had experiences in which race mattered
  - even medical researchers, psychologists, and others who should know better keep using our racial categories
  - illusions seem real...that is what makes them illusions
- but the common concept of race as a *biological* category actually does not fit the patterning of variation in humans

- we can use the term “**social race**” to acknowledge that these racial categories are arbitrary cultural constructs
- with real social effects
- but without objective biological reality
- 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
  - because it was superficially biological, it fit with the European “scientific” world view
    - it helped Europeans to reconcile their cultural norms about justice with their conflicting desires for economic and political gain
    - for example, it could be the “White man’s burden” to rule India, because the Indians were simply born without the ability to rule themselves
  - this explains why there can be argument about whether other cultures’ categories, like burakumin, are “races” or not
    - because the concept of race as distinct from ethnicity is not very relevant in many other cultures
- Take-home points on race:
  - human variation does not cluster into distinct groups (races)
    - virtually all modern human variation is continuous or gradual (**clinal**)
      - no clear boundaries divide humans into distinct “races”
  - We obviously do categorize people by “race”, but based on
    - the few particular traits arbitrarily selected as important
    - historical accidents of population movements and contacts
      - that cause most of the 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”)
  - Our racial categories define **social race**: a socially constructed, socially significant categorizing scheme
    - but not a biological reality
    - race is no more real or objective than ethnicity
  - 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, language, shared history, etc.
      - generally: by ethnicity, rather than race
      - recognize that ethnic categories are cultural constructs



- that arbitrarily divide a continuous spectrum of variation
- just for convenience, not in any biologically real sense
- ethnic categories can and do change over time, and adjust to the current circumstances
- recognize that since there are not really distinct biological groupings,
  - people have few inborn, biologically determined traits based on being from a given group
  - so there is very little basis for saying that members of any group are inherently smarter, lazier, stronger, etc. than any other
  - they may differ by culture, but there are few consistent inborn, biological differences between racial categories of humans
  - assuming that such differences exist and are significant is the essence of racism
- when we need to discuss racial categories, we should recognize them as **social race**
  - real categories that affect peoples' lives
  - but culturally, not biologically, determined
  - not as objective, permanent, or meaningful as many people think