

My thoughts on race

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



As a young child, I was always thought that race meant what color a person was on the outside. From myfamilyI was taught that there were white people, black people, and Oriental people. Those were the three races of the world. I was raised to believe that white people were the majority and even though I don't remember being told that being white was the best race to be, I grew up with this feeling because it was inferred enough. I thought Oriental people were rare, blacks lived in cities, and I was lucky to be a white person.

In school we were grouped into categories such as " white", black", or " other" when we had to fill out forms. Those were the three choices given out when asked to check off our race. Later, these forms were amended to include choices such as " Latino", " Asian", and " Native American."

Nowadays government/school forms have increased the choices and currently include selections such as " Pacific Islander" and " Hipic/non-Latino". As these choices increased, I began to see that there were other races beyond the original three of years back, but I still felt I was white and that was a pretty good thing.

I know in my early school years we were taught that Martin Luther King Jr. was a hero to this country in a manner of speaking, but we learned little about people of color in general beyond the fact that they were brought to America as slaves hundreds of years ago. For a white child to grow up with very little contact with anybody of color, in a family and community that did not promote racialequalityor exposure, I simply gave very little thought to race and just accepted my families views as my own.

Somewhere along the path of my education I was taught that there are some diseases that are more likely to occur in people of color, or people with Asian ancestors, or from some European countries. One such example, which I now understand better, is the sickle-cell gene. I either learned it wrong in school or was taught it wrong at the time, but I thought that this was a genetic mutation that only people of color had. The class readings have dispelled this idea completely as now I know it is “common in tropical Africa, where malaria is widespread. Up to 40 percent of Africans in such areas carry the sickle-cell gene.

It's also common in the malaria-ridden Arabian Peninsula and southern India, and rare or absent in the southernmost parts of South Africa.”(Diamond, 1994) Though I long ago kind of gave up that humans could actually be divided neatly into racial groups, this is a reminder of how things we learn long ago stay with us unconsciously. As science progresses information becomes more accurate, and we become old enough to form individual opinions, it is important to be open to this new information and willing to alter what we were taught as children.

I happen to be considered white because I am Italian, but what does this really mean? It has certainly kept me from experiencing much racism, especially compared to my friend Deirdre, a woman of color who is married to a German immigrant and having what our culture terms biracial children. That is not to say I have never experienced racism, I think that every person has on some level, I am simply aware that my experiences wane in

comparison to what they have probably experienced and will continue to experience.

So, I check off “ white” on forms, which ask for my race, or I leave it blank all together. But a Swede is also considered white too. Am I whiter because Swedes are genetically closer to some Africans than they may be to me? The more I think about it, the less sense race makes at all.

Race has been debated for hundreds of years and probably longer. And, as far as I know, there has never been one consensus on how many races there are across the planet in which the world wide scientific community has agreed on, despite what was taught years ago. There are many different questions regarding how one would classify races or differences between races, and over the years many different systems of classifications have been used. However, the most used method seems to be by categorizing people based on visible physical characteristics that include skin color, eye color, and shape of the eye.

In today’s world, it just makes common sense not to rely on this type of separation of peoples. With so many technological advances in modern times, which allow for very intricate internal and external evaluations, less obvious methods of categorizing people have been begun to be used. In utilizing these new advances it looks like the idea of race has actually collapsed and the theory that humans belong in different racial groups is now practically obsolete. It has been made obvious that a person’s genetic make-up is in part a reflection of where they live as well as their heredity.

Each geographic location has very specific weather conditions, specific agriculture, and specific dietary habits of the population, specific diseases to fend off, and other possible factors that may have changed human genetics during the evolution of humans.

So why do we still have government forms which ask people to claim they belong to a race, and why do some still even consider race a viable scientific category, and why is it still being discussed as a separator of humans?

Really, how can stereotypes of race still prevail when, depending on which criteria is used, a Swede may be linked genetically closer to a Fulani than a Fulani with another person of color from the African continent? (Diamond, 1994) “ People impose order on their social universe by classifying it.

These classifications sometimes match genetic relationships and sometimes diverge from them significantly. How we classify is not based on nature, not determined by nature, but is a construction of our social minds that we impose on nature to help us organize things.”(Marks, 2001) Dividing people into race categories has become a comfort factor rather than a matter of science.

I think the long term consequences of many whites is that they will be held responsible for the creation of races as a concept and for the ways in which early scientists classified people by race. I also think that the tensions felt between peoples of different colors may be a long-term consequence of whites proclaiming superiority over all others either by direct actions or by inferences. Some Native-Americans blame the government for the situations of their modern tribes.

As such, they fought and won the right to receive special treatment by the government by being taxed less and by having certain gaming privileges, and possibly by other means I do not know of, because of the way the whites that first came to America treated them. Some people of color are actively seeking reparations from the United States government because some of their ancestors may have been slaves of America's early white residents.

Because the government allows the Native-Americans special privileges, they are conceding that the early whites in America did something wrong, which I happen to agree they did. But, by continuing to behave as if whites and Native-Americans are separate races, even if only on forms and in certain minds, the race myth will not go away. If the American government concedes to reparations to blacks for something ignorant whites did centuries ago, we will be further drawing a line between populations of humans that do not need to exist.

So, the early white scientists classified race before the information known about humans today existed. They created a world that believed their scientific theories because most people did not know any better. And after hundreds of years of believing what we were told as fact and not fiction, it may very well take another hundred or more years to dispel the myth of race.

The sense of comfort that propels us to sort people into groups is also a case of fear overriding reason. The Ku Klux Klan could not exist with the fear of other races, even if many racists would deny this. Just as there are many so-called white people who discriminate against blacks, Chinese, or other

people, there are many non-white groups of people that discriminate against whites or other people different than themselves. A Chinese father may insist his daughter marry a Chinese man for the simple reason that he has accepted that they are of the same race, and a white man would not be, because that is how he has been taught throughout his life.

Even if there were such thing as races of people, how would one define their race in a world where everybody intermingles? If a man marries a Chinese woman, what would their children's race be? The government/school forms always ask that a person select only one race on certain forms. If their children put "white" down, they are denying their Chinese heritage. If they put "Chinese," "Oriental" or whatever it is that a person of Chinese heritage would fit under, they would be denying another side of the family. Why should any humans be asked to deny one part of themselves and embrace only one segment of who they are?

The bottom line of the future is that governments and major scientific organizations often set the tone for how populations treat and understand the concept of race. Until governments and major corporations stop circulating the concept of race and until the concept of cultures are embraced rather than race, the separation of peoples by race will never be dispelled.

Sources:

1) Diamond, Jared. "Race Without Color." Discover 15. 11 November 1994.

2) Marks, J. (2001) Scientific and folk ideas about heredity. In: The Human Genome Project and Minority Communities: Ethical, Social, and Political Dilemmas, ed. by R. Zilinskas and P. Balint. Westport, CT: Greenwood, pp. 53-66.