

Could genders be
termed as their own
race?



Race, Sex, and Gender

Society uses race, sex, and gender to categorize human beings. Much of a person's identity, their life opportunities, their career path, and even the way they speak and dress are dependent on these concepts. We come to expect certain things from these categories, and our treatment of individuals is often based on what, rather than who, they are. Given the similarities of society's treatment of the people society places into these categories, is it possible to draw a comparison between them? In other words, could women be called a race?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to establish working definitions of race and sex. According to Stephen E. Cornell and Douglass Hartman (1998: 21), authors of *Race and Ethnicity*, "race can be thought of as a genetically distinct subdivision of a given species." Michael Kimmel (2000: 3), author of *The Gendered Society*, defines sex as "the biological apparatus, the male and female - our chromosomal, chemical, and anatomical organization." Although society tends to think of races as groups of people who can trace their ancestry back to different parts of the world, this definition of race does not refer to ethnic backgrounds - only biological or genetic differences. Therefore, any biological variation among individuals of the human species (including chromosomal, chemical, and anatomical differences) can be categorized as race. In fact, under Cornell and Hartman's definition, sexes may be the only categories that can truly be classified as races under the technical definition, as most differences between individuals of different races are not biologically 'real'; they are only perceived.

The film *Race: The Power of an Illusion* further explains how race has been constructed by societies and is not based in biology. The film follows a group of students of different races performing DNA tests and comparing their results to that of their classmates to measure their differences. While most of the students assumed that they would be most genetically similar to their classmates that were of the same race as them, it was discovered that there were only marginal differences between all of the participants, and students were not necessarily most similar to those of their racial background. Scientists throughout history used similar tests in an attempt to explain racial differences using biology, but were unsuccessful in doing so, as race cannot be measured in this way. Although there are visual differences in individuals of different races, such as skin color, there are no other physical characteristics that can define a group of people as a race because humans simply have not been separated long enough for species variation to occur (Herbes-Sommers, Smith, and Strain 2003). Conversely, the physical differences between males and females are visual, can be measured, and are rooted in biology, making it possible to define the sexes as different races.

Defining women as a race is more complicated than establishing a connection between sex and race. Women and men are measured by not only sex, but by gender, or masculine and feminine traits. Just like race, gender is often thought to be based in biology. However, while there are physical differences between men and women, there is no strong, biological evidence to explain some gender differences. Similar to the tests that attempted to explain racial differences, mental rotation tests attempted to

use biology to explain why more men occupy different careers than women. Although male children typically performed better, the difference was only marginal, and the test was criticized for exaggerating gender differences and making questionable links between traits and complex characteristics, like a child's aptitude for certain careers (Kadanoff 2018a). Like race, gender is a socially constructed concept that is subject to change across space and time. For instance, different countries count different racial categories, and the categories of one country may change multiple times over the course of several years. Similarly, women and men hold different social statuses in different countries, and their status may change over time.

As the definitions of gender and sex both coincide with that of race, with sex representing observable, physical differences and gender representing perceived differences, it is possible to characterize women as a race. Having said that, there is a complicated relationship between race and sex/gender that makes it difficult to do so. For instance, in the United States, white people have traditionally held positions of power and have been at the top of the social ladder. African Americans and other racial minorities fell below them, with some races (like Asian Americans) being slightly better off. Similarly, women have traditionally held a position in society below men. However, not all women have a lower status than all men, and not all racial minorities have a lower status than all whites. A white woman, for instance, may have better opportunities than both black men and black women, and a Hispanic man may earn less money than a white man. As gender and sex complicate and are complicated by race, it is impossible to hold women to the same standards as other races.

Still, there are a great number of similarities of the consequences experienced by each group. Just decades ago, laws put in place by the United States government ensured that African Americans held a subservient position in society, not because of any biological reason, but because society viewed them as inferior. Even after the passage of the 13th and 15th Amendments, government institutions allowed for segregation, rampant racism, and discrimination. Similarly, up until the 1920s (although there was no evidence to support the idea) women were thought to be intellectually inferior and were not permitted to vote. Although white women did not experience the same hardships as other minorities, they still faced discrimination by both other citizens and by the government itself.

Even after government laws and regulations were officially done away with, they continued to have a profound effect on society. African Americans, Latinos, and even Asian Americans continue to hold lower paying, lower status careers, and earn less money than their white counterparts working identical jobs. Even with the same income, white families have nearly double the income of black families, and the homes of black families are worth far less - not because of a lack of money, education or other factors, but due the lasting legacy of laws and regulations that preceded the Fair Housing Act (Herbert-Sommers et al. 2003). Similarly, although women have experienced increasing equality, they continue to make about 23% less than men on average, and 8% less in identical positions (Kadanoff 2018b). There is not a good reason for this gap in pay; women are sometimes paid less just because they are women, just as minorities sometimes earn less than whites because they are not white. Additionally, women hold relatively few positions

of power in government and other institutions, and there has yet to be a female president in the United States. This difficulty that women experience in trying to rise to top-level, executive positions in institutions is described as the glass ceiling, an invisible barrier that prevents women and minorities from advancing. Men in society have power over women, make more money, and hold a higher status, and white people have the same advantages over minority groups.

Although both white people and men are structurally dominant in society, they do not always recognize their privilege, especially as society's standards begin to change and more efforts are made to increase equality. While dominant groups tend to exert their power through official channels, in the military, many men use subversive tactics against women, including rumors, threats of sexual violence, sabotage, resistance, and constant scrutiny (Miller). Landlords and employers may also use subversive tactics to discourage African Americans and other minorities from applying for rent or employment. All of these tactics, referred to as "weapons of the weak," are generally used by non-dominant groups in society, so it is somewhat surprising to see them implemented by those who have, and have always had, a dominant role.

As sociologist Laura Miller explains, men in the military do not always recognize the privilege they possess. They perceive themselves as a non-dominant group, and women's more 'favorable treatment' as the breakdown of meritocracy. This is not dissimilar to the criticism some white people have of affirmative action and other policies that promote racial equality. Despite both white people and men (on average) having more power, better

opportunities, and higher income, many see increasing equality as giving another group more favorable treatment that they have not necessarily earned, and in some cases, see themselves as being oppressed. It seems as if they perceive these traditionally non-dominant groups as a threat, to themselves and to the social order, and so they implement tactics to resist these changes to the detriment of the non-dominant groups.

It is easy to compare consequences of racial and gender differences, and to see how the treatment of minority racial groups by white people compare to that of the treatment of women by men. It is possible, though somewhat complicated, to use these comparisons and the technical definitions of sex and gender to classify women as a race. The definition of race implies that there is some biological distinction between races, whereas the groups society calls 'races' are separated only by skin color. Conversely, the sexes are biologically distinct, and therefore could be called races of their own; in some ways, they are the only real races. Just like gender, our current definition of race is a social construct. Even though it cannot be measured biologically, race is real because the consequences of race are real, and affect nearly every aspect of our everyday lives.

Works Cited

- Cornell, Stephen E. and Douglass Harman. " Race and Ethnicity." 1998. https://jcc.open.suny.edu/bbcswebdav/pid-571975-dt-content-rid-3012318_1/courses/201812-SOC-1510-3413/Cornell%20and%20Hartman%20-%20Ethnicity%20and%20Race.pdf. Accessed 12 December 2018.

- Kimmel, Michael. "The Gendered Society." 2000. https://jcc.open.suny.edu/bbcswebdav/pid-571980-dt-content-rid-3012327_1/courses/201812-SOC-1510-3413/Kimmell%20-%20Ch%201%20and%20Ch%205%20in%20The%20Gendered%20Society.pdf. Accessed 12 December 2018.
- Herbes-Sommers, Christine, Llewellyn M. Smith, and Tracy Heather Strain. 2003. "Race: The Power of an Illusion." [videorecording] Public Broadcasting Service.
- Miller, Laura L. 2007. "Women in the Military." Pp 518-534 in *Down to Earth Sociology*, edited by James M. Henslin. 14 ed. New York, NY: Free Press.