The Social Construction of Race

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http://www.iastate.edu/~soc.134

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Race is socially constructed

✓ Race: category of people labeled and treated as similar because of some common biological traits, such as skin color, texture of hair, and shape of eyes (p. 383)
✓ These traits are culturally determined
✓ Race has no “scientific” basis, e.g., DNA
  • Biological variability exists, but doesn’t conform to our “race” categories; racial characteristics aren’t transmitted as complexes
✓ Race was invented in the 18th Century
✓ Race and racism have always been connected

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Some racial taxonomies

✓ The ancients: us vs. “barbarians”
✓ Linnaeus’ taxonomy
✓ Nazis: important distinction was Aryan vs. Jew
✓ South African apartheid: four categories (white, black, colored, Indian)
✓ Brazil: wider range of fluid skin color designations
✓ United States
  • Most important distinction historically has been white vs. non-white
  • U.S. officially recognizes five races plus “other,” and multiple race combinations

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The first “scientific” racial taxonomy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linnaeus’ races</th>
<th>Alleged characteristics</th>
<th>Ruled by:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homo sapiens</td>
<td>Red, ill-tempered,</td>
<td>Custom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americanus</td>
<td>subjugated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homo sapiens</td>
<td>Yellow, melancholy,</td>
<td>Opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asiaticus</td>
<td>greedy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homo sapiens</td>
<td>Black, impassive, lazy</td>
<td>Caprice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homo sapiens</td>
<td>White, serious, strong</td>
<td>Laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europarius</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homo sapiens</td>
<td>Includes coneheads, flatheads,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monstrosus</td>
<td>troglodytes, dwarves &amp; other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>unusual variations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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U.S. racial system complications

✓ The U.S. racial system has focused on the white-nonwhite dichotomy
  • The one drop rule: one drop of black blood (i.e., any percentage of ancestry) makes someone black
  • Until 1967, many states had laws against miscegenation (marriage or sexual relations between a man & a woman of different races)
✓ People and groups move from one racial category to another
  • Because of the one-drop rule, many blacks throughout U.S. history have looked white enough to “pass” as white; this has resulted in a large percentage of whites with black ancestry
  • New immigrant groups, e.g., Irish, Slavs, have been successful in becoming white
✓ Census categories
  • Races: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, Some other race
  • Ethnic category: Hispanic or Latino