



The Social Construction of Race

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



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. 379)
- ✓ 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

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

The first “scientific” racial taxonomy

Linnaeus' races	Alleged characteristics	Ruled by:
<i>Homo sapiens Americanus</i>	Red, ill-tempered, subjugated	Custom
<i>Homo sapiens Asiaticus</i>	Yellow, melancholy, greedy	Opinion
<i>Homo sapiens Afer</i>	Black, impassive, lazy	Caprice
<i>Homo sapiens Europaeus</i>	White, serious, strong	Laws
<i>Homo sapiens Monstrosus</i>	Includes coneheads, flatheads, troglodytes, dwarves & other unusual variations	

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