

Chapter 12: Ethnicity, Race, and Racism

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Learning Objectives

- Explore the origins and uses of the concept of ethnicity
- Identify race as a cultural concept, not a biological reality
- Examine the history of the invention of race and its consequences in the United States
- Compare the construction of race in different cultures
- Explore the connections between race and racism and the consequences of racism in the United States

Classifying Humans: Race & Ethnicity

Classifying humans and putting them into groups is one of the ways that we make sense of the world around us. Humans have probably always classified themselves into different groups, but the concepts of ethnicity and race are relatively new classification systems.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity, or **ethnic group**, is a way of classifying people based on a perception, both by the people in the group and the people outside of the group, that everyone in the group is culturally distinct. This concept emerged in the mid-20th century as anthropologists tried to move away from the concept of “tribe” as a way of classifying humans in an attempt to remedy the ethnocentric bias in our own field (Eriksen 2010; Levine 1999). The term is still often used interchangeably with “nation”, or “tribe”, or “race”. Ethnicity is a challenging concept because of its essentially constructed nature. There is no clear definition in anthropology for what makes someone belong to one ethnicity or ethnic group versus another. Or how many characteristics a group must have to be classified as an ethnicity. And the existence of cultural differences is not what ultimately defines an ethnicity. Two groups could have many cultural characteristics in common, such as history, language, and religion, but still consider themselves part of two separate ethnic groups. What anthropologists do agree on is that ethnicity is ultimately relational and about identity and the classifications of groups (Eriksen 2010:5; Levine 1999; Shneiderman and Amburgey 2023). It is about a perceived “Us” in contrast to a perceived “Them”. If groups did not know about and/or interact with each other, there would be no ability to identify ethnic groups. The term ethnic group has come to mean something close to “a people”. The trouble with this definition is defining the boundaries of that “people”.

Historically, describing something as “ethnic” was a way of othering that group, marking it as distinct from whatever the dominant group was in a particular nation-state (Levine 1999; Shneiderman and Amburgey 2023). However, minority ethnic groups are in no way more or less “ethnic” than majority ethnic groups, even though maybe political entities, including the United States, don’t recognize majority ethnicities. Today, anthropologists recognize the power ethnicity has for political mobilization and self-consciousness for majority and minority groups. Most anthropologists argue that ethnicity is not a fixed category, but rather a situational one that can be a powerful tool of self-identification and group definition (Levine 1999). Ethnicity is a useful concept for studying many groups of people, including modern migrants, indigenous peoples, proto-nations (ethnonationalist movements), ethnic groups in plural societies, and post-slavery minorities (Eriksen 2010).

Using ethnicity as a lens for studying groups of people was particularly popular in the late 20th century, as the concept of race was under scientific and political criticism. Ideas of race may or may not be part of the identity of an ethnic group and in general, ethnicity is considered to be a wider concept than race. There are important ethnic differences that can (and do) exist outside of the notions of race (see below), such as those among people of European descent in the United States who maintain ethnic identities such as German, Irish, or Italian (Eriksen 2010:8).

Race

For the past 400 years, one of the main ways that humans have classified each other is through the use of the concept of **race**. Today, race is present in almost all aspects of our lives – we record it on school forms, job applications, at doctors’ offices, and on our voting registration. And we believe that we can know someone’s race just by looking at them. That the visual differences that we see between people constitute real differences between entire groups of humans. We know that those external differences that we can observe are rooted in biology and we don’t have to see people’s genes to know that that is what we believe is the source of the different races. But this is a lie. A lie that has been carefully curated and perpetuated over the last four hundred years to reinforce and justify the existence of social hierarchies and power inequalities within our society. Yes, there are real biological differences between humans and yes, we can see much of that biological variation (there is also biological variation that we can’t see, like blood type, for example). Human genetic variation is real, but it is not the same as race. Some humans are tall, some are short. Some are male, some are female. Some humans have dark skin, some humans have light skin. But none of that biological variation can be mapped onto race. Race is a cultural category, not a biological reality. The definition of race, how many races exist, who belongs in which race, is different from one place to the next and has changed over time. Racial classification is arbitrary, not based on scientific criteria. However, to say that race is not a biological reality does not mean that race is not real. It is very real and has very real impacts on our lived experiences. Our reality is

made up of social constructs – they are what allow us to make sense of our world. But race, as a social construct, is not rooted in our genes.

As a species, humans have incredibly low genetic variability, especially compared to other species in the animal kingdom. There is as much genetic variability between two fruit flies as there is between a human and a chimpanzee. Only one in every thousand nucleotides is different from one human being to the next. And that genetic variability that does exist cannot be matched to race. No single race has possession of any particular variant of any gene or genes. In fact, there is more genetic variability within a race than there is between any two races. The biological variation that we see in humans is largely the result of the combined forces of mutation, adaptation, and environmental variability. Genetic variability can be divided by geography to some degree, but again, this does not align with the socially created racial categories that define our world. For example, if we look at the distribution of the hemoglobin S (HbS) genetic variant in humans, we see that this allele is not distributed into a single race or on a single continent. It is approximately the same in populations in Nigeria, Greece, and Saudi Arabia. But we wouldn't classify people from these three places as belonging to the same race. Instead, we see that the similarity in this allele frequency across these three populations is the result of an evolutionary adaptation to surviving in environments with high instances of malaria.

So, if race isn't biological, what is it and where did it come from?

"Race is a worldview and social classification that divides humans into groups based on their appearance and assumed ancestry, and that has been used to establish social hierarchies" (Graves and Goodman 2022:3).

Race is a system of classification. It is a way of putting humans in piles. It was invented during the 18th century by Europeans as a way to rationalize the social hierarchies they needed to exist in order to justify their practices of slavery and colonization. The purpose of the invention of race, as a system of classification, was to legitimize white power and white privilege. It divides humans into groups based on their appearance and assumed ancestry, and then assigns social standing and social worth based on which group you belong to, with the highest social standing going to the group that made the system in the first place – white European males. "Racism made race" (Graves and Goodman 2022:5). Race was designed to be intentionally deceptive and untrue, to mislead people into believing that the social hierarchies it established were natural, innate, and biological, and therefore inevitable.

Differences in physical appearance have probably always influenced how people distinguished themselves from one another. But the idea that you could people into groups based on these physical differences and that those groups would have differential access to wealth, power, and prestige as a result is a relatively new phenomenon. When we look at historical documents, the worldview that we now know as race didn't

exist before the 1700s. But as European colonial expansion increased, and those Europeans began to encounter more and more new and different environments, resources, and people, they had to develop a way to classify the things and people they encountered in a way that justified their conquest and/or brutal mistreatment of it. One of the first scientists to try to define races and classify humans based on them was **Carl Linnaeus**. Linnaeus believed that it was his purpose in life to classify all of the life that God created on Earth. He developed a two-part naming system to identify the life he encountered and that were reported to him by travelers around the globe. He gave humans the name *Homo sapiens*, which we still use today, and then further divided humans into smaller groups based on the reports he was given from travelers. He based his classifications on four continents, creating the (scientific sounding) groups: *Europeaus*, *Asiaticus*, *Africanus*, and *Americanus*. In addition to naming these groups, Linnaeus also defined them by color, temperament, and governance. For example, *Europeaus* was described as white, clever, and ruled by law while *Americanus* was red, free, and ruled by custom. Linnaeus' classification system for humans was based on two interrelated concepts: the stability of species and the existence of an inherent hierarchy. Neither of these ideas began with Linnaeus. The stability of species goes back to the commonly held explanation of the origin of species in the 18th century – Creationism. It is based on the idea that God created all life on Earth and since God can't make mistakes, all life forms must have been, and will always be, in their current form. Therefore, the differences in humans, both in terms of their physical differences and their temperament and governance, must have been created by God as well. The inherent hierarchy part of Linnaeus' classification system traces its origins back to the Ancient Greeks and the **Great Chain of Being**. The Great Chain of Being is the idea that all things on Earth exist in a hierarchy relative to their closeness to God, with angels and human beings at the top of the hierarchy and fungi and minerals at the bottom.

Using Linnaeus as a starting point, the concept of race was further refined. Europeans concluded that all light-skinned peoples in Europe must belong to the same variety of human and their variety of human must be the variety that was the closest to being made in God's own image. They named this variety of human "**Caucasians**" and determined that since they were the closest to God, they must have all of the best traits and characteristics, making them inherently superior to the other groups. And all other varieties of humans must be the result of a degeneration away from being like God, making them physically and morally inferior.

This system of classification which positioned Europeans as inherently superior to all of the other groups they encountered lent scientific support for their practices of slavery and colonization. Based on this hierarchical view of the groups of humans, Africans were seen as inherently incapable of governing themselves and Native Americans were not God's children. Therefore, the aristocrats of Europe were able to adopt a view that their treatment of Africans and Native Americans was both just and inevitable. They were able to believe that the cultural behaviors, temperament, and governance, assigned to these groups

were genetically determined, just like the biological variation of the color assigned to them (Figure 1). The institutional racism of slavery and colonization made the classification system of race possible.



Figure 1: Pages from the 1884 edition of *Cram's New Family Atlas of the World*. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

By the end of the 19th century, scientists were using pseudoscience to “prove” that races were real biological units and, therefore, that the differences we were seeing in the social outcomes of these groups were natural (and not the result of differential access to wealth, power, and prestige). Because if the differences between the races were the result of biology, then there was nothing that the people in power should (or could) do to improve the conditions of the races they deemed as belonging at the bottom of the social pyramid. This gave rise to the science of **Eugenics**, which was adopted in the 1930s by Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party as justification for their belief in the superiority of the Aryan race and the systematic elimination of non-Aryans.

The ideas of race and the way of looking at the world that it allowed spread everywhere that Europeans colonized, including the United States. In the United States, the worldview of race faced a potential problem: how can you have an inherent hierarchy of people known as race but also have a world in which “all men are created equal”? The solution in the United States was to extend the definition of race and use race to first deny the humanity, and later the citizenship, of certain races of people. All men are created equal but not all races are men. The founders of the United States used the same arguments that the aristocrats of Europe used when they first established the idea of race and relied on pseudoscience to mask the inequalities that this invented system was built upon and perpetuated. The first time a citizen of the United States of America was defined was in the Naturalization Act of 1790. According to this Act, a citizen of the United States was a free white person of good moral character with property (H. R. 40, Naturalization Bill, March 4, 1790). Anyone who did not fit this definition could not vote, could not serve on a jury, could not hold public office, and, in some cases, could not own property. Since 1790, the United States’ legal system has refined the definition of what it means to be a citizen of this country. However,

the people changing that definition have always been the people who already fit the definition. For example, in 1857, the Supreme Court ruled that all people of African ancestry, whether they were free or not, could never be citizens of the United States and therefore were not able to sue for their freedom using the court system in our country (*Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1856)). In 1923, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Bhagat Singh Thind, a man from India who met the definition of being Caucasian, was not a citizen of the United States because he was not a “free white man”, thereby changing the definition of “white” from someone from the Caucus Mountain region to a man of Euro-American descent (*United States v. Thind*, 261 U.S. 204 (1923)). It wasn’t until 1954 that the Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional to discriminate against people and prevent equal access to the institutions of the country based on their race (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)). In the United States, because we rely on an implicit understanding of race as something biological and also based on your ancestry, we believe that your racial classification is something you acquire at birth, and it doesn’t change throughout your life. And historically, when people were born from mixed-race parents, the children were assigned to the subordinate group, whichever of the two groups was lower on the social hierarchy of races. This practice, known as **hypodescent**, is a uniquely American way of viewing race and traces its origins back to the legal practices of the 19th century, when over half of the states in the United States had laws preventing marriages between people of different races. These **anti-miscegenation laws** remained legal in some places until 1967 (*Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 (1967)). These examples show two things: 1. That the definitions of racial groups have changed over time, which reaffirms their cultural (not biological) nature, and 2. That defining race and using race to decide who gets access to the rights and privileges of being an American has been an integral part of our country since its founding.

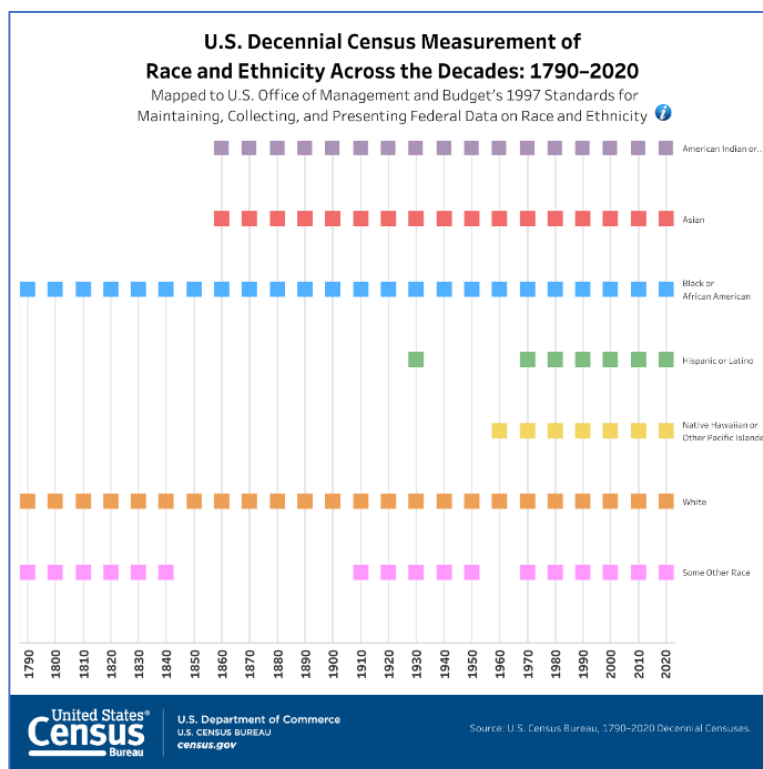
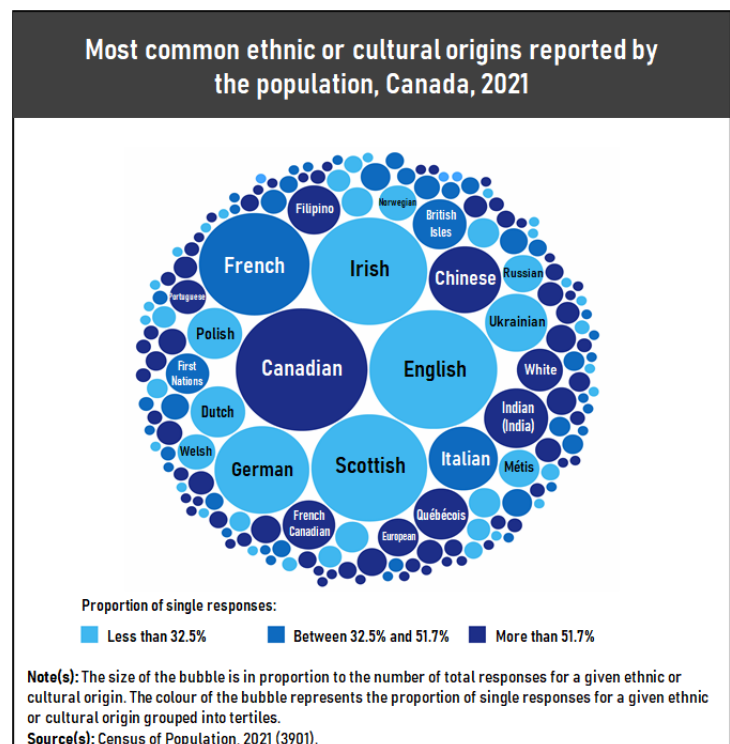


Figure 2: U.S. Decennial Census Measurement of Race and Ethnicity Across the Decades: 1790 – 2020.
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1790–2020 Decennial Census

Because race is culturally constructed, it is viewed differently in different cultures and has changed its definition over time. One of the easiest ways to see how racial categories have changed over the course of the history of the United States is to look at the racial categories identified in the U.S. Census. In the 2020 Census, there were six racial categories: White; Black or African American; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; and Some Other Race. The Census Bureau also kept track of people who identified themselves as two or more of these six racial categories (Jensen et al. 2021). But these racial categories have only been in place since 1997. Since the first census in 1790, the racial categories used in the United States have changed with White and Black being the only two racial categories consistently recognized in every census (see Figure 2).

And these racial categories are only the ones recognized by the United States Census. In Canada, the racial categories on the census are different. On the 2021 Canadian census, the question that Americans would recognize as being about race is titled “ethnic or cultural origins” and it is open-ended so that the respondents can use their own words to describe themselves. The Canadian census does include a link to a list of 500 examples of ethnic or cultural origins (see <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/ref/questionnaire/ancestry.cfm>) and in the 2021 census, over 450 ethnic or cultural origins were identified by Canadian respondents (see <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026b-eng.htm>). The Canadian census also puts emphasis on defining indigenous groups and has previously included a separate question for identifying people who are First Nations, Métis, and/or Inuit (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Most Common ethnic or cultural origins reported by the population, Canada, 2021. Source: Statistics Canada <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/g-b001-eng.htm>



In Brazil, race is also more flexible and less exclusionary in its construction. Like in Canada, in Brazil, there are a lot more terms used to describe race, with over 500 words reported at one point. In Brazil, your race is determined not only by how you look and where you come from, but also by how you dress, where you lived, the language that you speak, and how much money you have (Eriksen 2010:8-9; Mitchell 2022). Because there are more criteria for defining race in Brazil, a person's racial classification can change as they change these features. So, by changing where you live, and the language that you speak, you can change your racial classification in Brazil and race becomes an achieved status, rather than an ascribed status like is seen in the United States. This is largely because while Brazil shares a history of slavery with the United States, a rule of hypodescent never developed in Brazil. Most of the early European colonizers in Brazil were single men, married Native American and African women and recognized their racially mixed children. Rather than simply assigning people of mixed races to the subordinate group, in Brazil (and in Spanish colonized places more broadly), new racial categories were invented for the people of mixed racial backgrounds. This greatly expanded the number of recognized racial categories in these places (Carrera 2003; Mitchell 2022).

The Application of Race: Racism

While race is not “real” in any biological way, it cannot be ignored because it has very real impacts on the lived experiences of humans as a system of classification. In particular, because race was invented with a hierarchical structure attached, it has been used to create a powerful system of discrimination by powerful institutions and individuals against individuals based on their perceived racial group. This is known as **racism**. Only governments, corporations, and socially powerful groups and individuals can implement racism. The average individual cannot. Individuals are capable of racial discrimination, but it is only when that discrimination is attached to a power structure that it becomes racism. Racism is not about bad people making bad choices. It is what happens when “legal authority and institutional control transform individual prejudices into a far-reaching system that no longer depends on the good intentions of individual actors” (DiAngelo 2018:21).

At its simplest, racism is **prejudice** plus power. Everyone is prejudiced, meaning that everyone holds preconceived notions about other groups of people. If I am aware that a social group exists, then I have ideas about who is in that social group and what they are like. This is not limited to racial prejudice, although that is the focus here. We absorb these prejudices from our society – in media, from family members, in books, etc. The main importance of these individually held ideas is in how it fuels what the institutions that those individuals are a part of are capable of. When individual ideas become socially agreed on “fact”, this allows powerful institutions to discriminate against entire groups of people without repercussions (Figure 4). Redlining is a good example of this (see Case Study below).



Figure 4:
"Colored"
drinking
fountain from
mid-20th
century from
Oklahoma City,
Oklahoma.
Source:
Wikimedia
Commons

Biological Racism

In the United States, a lot of racism is rooted in **biological racism** – the belief that there are fundamental, biological differences between the races and therefore the differences that we see in the behavioral outcomes between the races are as natural as genetics. This allows us to ignore the historical and cultural circumstances that have caused whatever outcome we are seeing, such as higher infant mortality rates among African Americans, and instead blame something we can't control or do anything about, biology. But none of those outcomes that we see are the result of biology. All of them are the result of institutional discrimination based on race. For example, it isn't that there is something biologically that makes American Americans better at basketball and football than at hockey, or better runners than swimmers. But the first African American woman to win a gold medal in the Olympics for swimming was Simone Manuel in 2016. This is because historically African Americans have not had access to the places where you can learn to swim due to segregation, lack of access to safe places to swim, and lack of access to lessons and coaches. Biological racism is particularly noticeable in medical practices. For example, a recent study at the University of Virginia (UVA) Medical School found that medical students believed that black skin was thicker than white skin and that black people aged more slowly than white people (Graves and Goodman 2022:84). Many doctors refuse to test people for certain diseases because of a deeply held (but incorrect) belief that some races just don't get certain diseases. Because race is not a genetic category, there are no race-specific diseases. But there are differences in environment and chance that are influenced by access to resources and controlled by institutions that do cause some diseases to affect some races more than others. But this is the result of racism, not biology.

Not just Black and White

Although much of the conversation about race and racism centers on the dichotomy between Black and White, it is important to remember that there are other racial groups in the United States and that racism

affects them differently. For example, **Anti-Semitism** is a unique form of racism because Jew-hate simultaneously holds that Jewish people are less than (dirty, disgusting, infectious) they are also in control of certain industries, such as media, and banks. Despite the relative affluence of many, but not all, of the remaining Jews alive today, Jews have been persecuted for longer than any other racial group and continue to face prejudice and hate today (Graves and Goodman 2022:73-6). Another example of how racism can look is the case of Asians, especially Chinese and Japanese, as the “**Model Minority**”. Before the 1940s, Asian immigrants were seen as “Orientals” who were definitely not white (see example of US v. Thind). However, after World War II, Americans began to see Asian Americans as a group that was upwardly mobile, politically nonthreatening, and definitely not-black (Wu 2014:2). This racial group was then held up to demonstrate that racism against other racial groups, particularly African Americans and Hispanics, didn’t exist because if racism did exist it would have affected Asian Americans too. What this explanation doesn’t consider is the restrictive immigration policies of the early twentieth century in the United States which made it much more likely that they only Asians in America were ones who were already well-educated and therefore better able to take advantage of the institutions of the United States. For Asian Americans, racism looks like the assumption that they will be better able to assimilate into mainstream American culture, do better in school, have increased musical aptitude, and be able to achieve upward mobility, just to name a few. But this myth of the model minority distorts the material realities of many Asian Americans and masks the challenges that face Asian Americans in lower socio-economic groups (Wu 2014:255).

Race and Caste

Most scholars view race and **caste** as parallel forms of socially and politically sanctioned hierarchies. In the United States, race and caste are more similar than in other places because of the perceived ascribed status of race in the United States – you are born into a race in the United States, just as you are born into a caste in India. Intermarriage between castes is discouraged, if not prohibited, and there is no ability to move between castes. Some people argue that this inability to move between castes is what makes castes different from race-based class systems. But recent studies on the mobility of people in low classes in the United States suggest that this is not the case because there is little ability for upward economic mobility among racially subordinate groups. The biggest difference between race and caste is that people believe they can identify someone’s race just by looking at them.

In the United States, we see the effects of racism in race-based differences in education, employment, wealth, living conditions, incarceration rates, differential treatment in the criminal justice system, life expectancy, and overall health, just to name a few. These differences perpetuate the permanent caste-like system of inequality imposed by race and racism (Graves and Goodman 2022:241). “We have created a caste system in this country, with African Americans kept exploited and geographically separate by racially explicit government policies. Although most of these policies are now off the books, they have

never been remedied and their effects endure” (Rothstein 2017:xvii). Although the construction of race is cultural, globalization has allowed American-style racism to spread and combine with local constructions of race to degrade the lives of even more people (Graves and Goodman 2022:18).

Ten Take-Away Facts about Race and Racism

To conclude this chapter on Race and Ethnicity, below is a list of ten important facts to remember about race, racism, and their impact on our world (from Graves and Goodman 2022:237-238).

1. *Human biological variation is real. It is patterned, important, and a thing of beauty to be celebrated.*
2. *Race neither describes nor explains human biological variation*
3. *Humans do not have biological races.*
4. *Human biological races are a relatively recent idea that was reified – made real legally and scientifically – to justify racism.*
5. *Racial classifications developed historically as a politically important means to categorize and divide individuals.*
6. *Many individuals still believe in the myth of race as being “obviously” biological, in the blood and genes. Race is a powerful illusion. That myth provides ideological justification for systemic racial inequalities.*
7. *Racism is an ideology that is built on a myth and widely shared, with institutional and structural manifestations.*
8. *The proof of the impact of racism is found in the data on inequalities in almost all aspects of life, including education, employment, health, and wealth.*
9. *Race will become less salient when racial ideology is overcome and races reach equality in measures of life such as health and wealth.*
10. *We cannot have a civil and just society without racial equality. Racial equality will be good for everyone.*

Case Study: Redlining

In 2016, the median wealth for Blacks in the United States was \$13,204 and \$149,703 for whites. This wealth disparity has not changed since 1968. The median household income for whites in 2014 was \$71,300, while Black’s median income was \$43,000. The difference in household income between these two groups is almost the same, even when you look at individuals with the same educational background. In the United States, one of the main ways in which people accumulate wealth is through generational wealth, wealth that is transmitted from one generation to the next. Much of the generational wealth that a person acquires comes from homeownership. But institutional racism throughout the twentieth century

has prevented African Americans from being able to own homes in the United States through a practice known as **Redlining**. A summary of the practices known as redlining as described by Richard Rothstein in his book *The Color of Law: The Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (2017) is below.

“Until the last quarter of the twentieth century, racially explicit policies of federal, state, and local governments defined where whites and African Americans should live” (Rothstein 2017:vii). The original purpose of public housing was not to provide housing for those too poor to afford decent housing (as most people think of public housing projects today) but rather to provide housing to people who could afford it but still didn’t have housing because none was available. Alleviating the national housing shortage was one of the national projects addressed by the New Deal programs in the 1930s and 1940s. But segregation was built into those projects. The Public Works Administration (PWA), established by Franklin D. Roosevelt shortly after he took office in 1933, established a “neighborhood composition rule” for its housing projects, instructing all federal housing projects to reflect the previous racial composition of their neighborhoods (Rothstein 2017:21). However, the PWA frequently segregated neighborhoods where no previous segregation had existed and/or designated integrated neighborhoods as either “Whites-only” or “Blacks-only” and then made that designation come true by installing “Whites-only” or “Blacks-only” projects in the previously mixed neighborhood. This was the case for the Techwood Homes in Atlanta, the first PWA project which opened in 1935. The neighborhood was previously mixed, but the PWA demolished the existing buildings and replaced them with buildings for white families only. The African American families that were evicted from the existing building then had no choice but to move into other African American neighborhoods, making those neighborhoods even more crowded, as their incomes were too low to qualify them for the Black-only projects built by the PWA (Rothstein 2017:21-22).

By the late 1940s, white families were starting to be able to find housing through the private market, rather than relying on federally built public housing projects. This meant that the housing projects built for whites had vacant units while the housing needs of African American families continued to be unmet. But integrated neighborhoods and housing projects were continually prohibited through state and local measures. In 1952, the Truman administration finally adopted a “racial equity formula” that required local housing authorities to build projects to house low-income African American families in proportion to their need if the housing authority practiced segregation through separate building projects. This practice of building separate projects for white families and Black families continued even after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in the Supreme Court because the general counsel of the Housing and Home Finance Agency ruled that it didn’t apply to housing projects (Rothstein 2017:33). By the 1960s, the federal government put in place requirements for public housing so that it was only available to families who needed substantial subsidies while at the same time declining to provide the funds to make public housing a decent place to live (Rothstein 2017:37). This meant that public housing was no longer available for middle-class families and significantly contributed to the opinion that public housing projects were

rundown, overcrowded, crime-ridden places to live (Rothstein 2017:37). In 1984, a study of 47 metropolitan areas across the country found that of the nearly ten million public housing tenants, almost all of them were segregated by race and that every predominantly white-occupied project had better amenities, services, and maintenance than those occupied by predominant African American tenants (Rothstein 2017:34).

Once the housing shortage in the United States was no longer a major problem facing the country, local real estate organizations were able to continue the work of segregating American neighborhoods through racial zoning ordinances. In addition to building separate public housing projects during the early twentieth century, many cities across the country adopted zoning rules to designate separate living areas for Black and White families. These zoning ordinances largely prohibited African Americans from buying housing in predominantly White neighborhoods and vice versa. The first of these ordinances was passed in Baltimore, MD in 1910 (Rothstein 2017:44). Most of these ordinances were deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court because they violated the rights of the property owner to sell to whomever he pleased. So, the language in the ordinances was changed to be more subtle and instead, the zoning ordinances were designed to designate where people could live, not where they could purchase property. The zoning commissions then created maps that designated some areas as “white districts” and some areas as “black districts”. At the time, the justification for these zoning maps was that “home neighborhoods had to be protected from any further damage to values resulting from inappropriate uses, including the encroachment of the colored race” (Rothstein 2017:46). Zoning ordinances were then also used to determine which neighborhoods other kinds of development could be allowed in. Overwhelmingly, the neighborhoods that were zoned to permit industry, taverns, liquor stores, nightclubs, etc. were also the neighborhoods that were designated as places that African American families could live. These zoning maps continued to be used for city planning even after they were deemed unconstitutional in 1924.

African American families were not only prevented from living in white neighborhoods by zoning ordinances. They were also prevented through financial means. Local and federal officials also promoted policies designed to ensure that single-family homes were not financially available to lower-income African American families by denying them loans to purchase their homes. But denying these loans on the basis of race would be unconstitutional. So instead, these loans were denied based on where the homes that African Americans were trying to purchase were located. But where those homes could be was already racially segregated because of the policies mentioned above. And the presence of industries and commercial development in Black neighborhoods allowed the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), the largest mortgage provider in the twentieth century, to justify not providing loans to African American families because of the “undesirable elements” in those neighborhoods.

The Federal Housing Administration was created in 1934 by President Roosevelt and it was designed to solve the problem of middle-class renters being unable to purchase single-family homes. The FHA insured bank mortgages to make banks more likely to loan money to first-time home buyers. But in order to ensure the mortgage, the FHA insisted on doing their own appraisal of the property to make sure it was a low-risk investment. The FHA developed a manual to help with these appraisals, *Underwriting Manual*. Published in 1935, this manual stated that “if a neighborhood is to retain stability it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes” (Rothstein 2017:65). In practice, this meant that the FHA would not guarantee mortgages to African Americans or to whites who might lease to African Americans, regardless of the applicants’ financial situation. The race-based appraisals of the FHA’s Manual made race an official requirement of the federal mortgage insurance program.

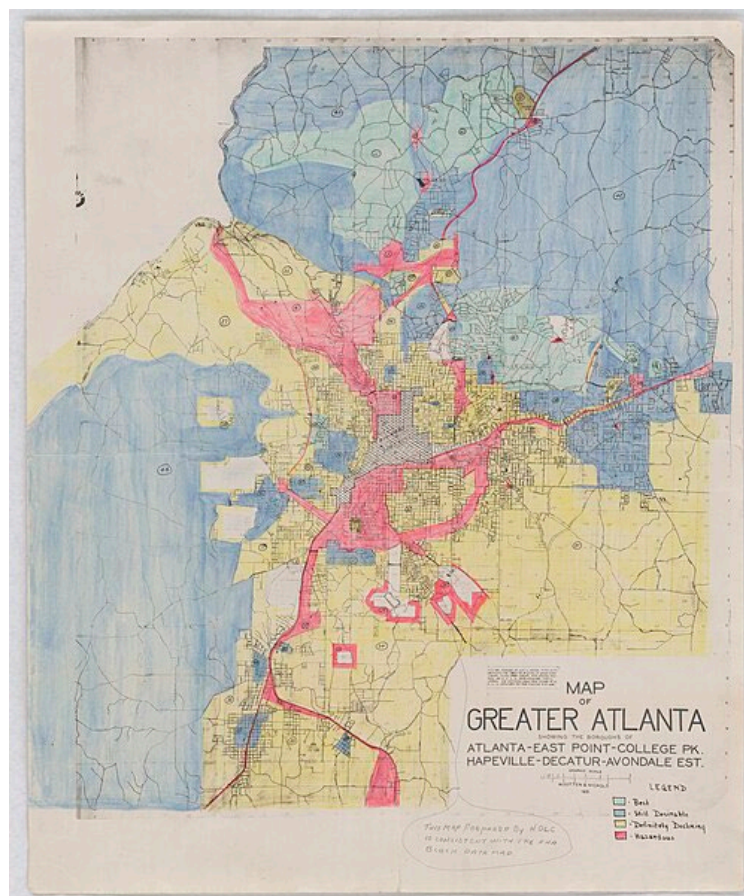


Figure 5: A Map of Greater Atlanta, created by the Federal Home Loan Bank Board. Home Owners' Loan Corporation (1931). Source: The National Archives and Records Administration. National Archives Identifier: 85713707. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/85713707>

The Home Owner’s Loan Corporation (HOLC) also had similar policies for assessing which properties to issue new mortgages for. The HOLC created color-coded maps of every major metropolitan area in the nation when it was founded in 1933 (Figure 5). The safest neighborhoods, the ones with brand new or

developing areas where affluent executives lived, were designated green. Blue neighborhoods were ones where salaried workers and responsible tradespeople live, and yellow neighborhoods were where working people lived. The riskiest neighborhoods were designated red. The criteria for being designated a red neighborhood varied slightly, but always the one criterion that was the same was that it was a neighborhood where African Americans lived. This meant that a neighborhood could be designated red even if it was a solid middle-class neighborhood of single-family homes. And mortgage loans were almost always denied to people trying to purchase property in these red districts, hence the term redlining. By the 1950s, the policies found in both the FHA and HOLC mortgage lending were adopted by local private real estate associations and organizations under the pretext of maintaining property values. These practices continued to affect homeownership until at least the early 2000s. In 2015 The Department of Housing and Urban Development reached an agreement with a Wisconsin-based bank to resolve a redlining case where African American and Hispanic applicants were denied loans to purchase property unless it was in neighborhoods with significant African American or Hispanic populations. The Bank agreed to pay approximately \$200 million, making it the largest settlement of a redlining case to date (Sullivan 2015).

The combination of these practices simultaneously created white suburbs and urban African American slums (Rothstein 2017:57). These “...racially explicit laws, regulations, and government practices combined to create a nationwide system of urban ghettos, surrounded by white suburbs. Private discrimination also played a role, but it would have been considerably less effective had it not been embraced and reinforced by government... Although most of these policies are now off the books, they have never been remedied and their effects endure” (Rothstein 2017:xii - xvii)

Chapter Summary

The concepts of ethnicity and race are both ways of classifying humans. And both of these concepts are relatively new. The broad concept of ethnicity originated in the mid-1900s as anthropologists modified how they described and studied groups of humans. With a vague definition and unclear boundaries, ethnicity is a constructed concept that aims to classify groups of people who share history, language, and religion. However, these are not the only characteristics that bind people together in a single ethnicity and often it is a personal sense of identity and relationships with others within the group that defines ethnicity. Like ethnicity, race is also a cultural concept that is used to classify humans into groups. Despite the widely held misconception that race is connected to biology, there is no biological basis for the idea of race. While biological variation does exist within humans, the differences that we see in phenotypes cannot be translated into racial categories. Race was invented by Europeans during a period of world-wide expansion and colonization to justify their practices of slavery and conquest and validate a system based on white power and privilege. White Europeans divided humans into groups based on what they saw as important and assigned a social standing to that group. Since its invention, those who invented

this concept, those in power, have been trying to “prove” why this hierarchy is natural and necessary using pseudoscience and misinformation. However, because race is cultural, the construction and application of race is not the same across all cultures. Different cultures use different terms, use different criteria for defining race, and identify different numbers of races within their societies. Although race is fundamentally a cultural construction, because of its hierarchical nature and long history of discriminatory practices, we cannot ignore race or pretend it doesn’t exist. Though race is not a biological reality, it has a real effect on the lives of human beings. It has been used to create a powerful system of institutional discrimination against individuals based on their perceived racial group. This the basis of racism—a prejudice that is coupled with power. In the United States, the consequences of racism, both in the past and the present, are seen in many aspects of culture, including living conditions, education, employment, wealth, and life expectancy. These differences across racial groups are so pronounced that some scholars argue that race in the United States resembles a caste system. And because of globalization, the way that Americans view race, and how we use it to discriminate against subordinate groups, is spreading world-wide.

Key Terms

Ethnicity
Ethnic Group
Race
Carl Linnaeus
Great Chain of Being
Caucasians
Eugenics
Hypodescent
Anti-miscegenation laws
Racism
Prejudice
Biological racism
Anti-semitism
“Model Minority”
Caste
Redlining

Comprehension Questions

1. What is ethnicity? How and why did this concept originate?

2. What is race? Where did it come from and who invented it?
3. What are the differences between race in the United States and race in other cultures, such as Canada and Brazil?
4. What is racism? How is it different from prejudice and how does it impact American culture?
5. What is redlining? How did it make segregation of living spaces possible in the twentieth century? How does it impact minority communities today?

Critical Thinking and Engagement Questions

1. Given the difficulty of defining them, are ethnic groups still a useful concept? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think the myth of the biological nature of race persists in society today? What are the consequences of the persistence of this myth?
3. Is racial equality possible in American society?
4. Why are race and racism so controversial in the United States? How does this affect how we study these topics?

Resource Links

- <https://americananthro.org/about/policies/statement-on-race/> This is the official statement from the American Anthropological Association on Race, published in 1998
- <https://www.racepowerofanillusion.org/> This is the website that goes with the PBS special "Race: The Power of an Illusion". It has links to the three videos, which are excellent, as well as supplemental material
- https://understandingrace.org/?utm_source=si.edu&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=MyVisitSI This website is the companion to an exhibit at the National Museum of Natural History about Race
- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/11138698_Skin_deep This is an article about skin color and the genetic variability that controls the colors that we see
- <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/caucasian-terminology-origin/> This is an article about the term "Caucasian", why we still use it and why it is problematic
- <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/dna-test-ethnicity/> This is a great article about the problems that come from the labels and groupings used in ancestry DNA testing
- <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/why-are-white-people-so-bad-at-talking-about-race> This is a video, published on Refinery 29, featuring Robin DiAngelo discussing White Fragility, what it is and why it makes talking about race so hard

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