

On Defining “Race” and Colors

(You are encouraged to look up the word “race” in more than one dictionary edition, but it’s often useful to make the following point.)

A 2004 electronic version of Webster actually omitted skin color, entirely, until the Thesaurus entry, at the definition’s conclusion – and, even then, skin color was the last item mentioned. Another (late 20th century) Webster dictionary claimed that systematic racial distinctions only began in the 19th century and were most distinctly cultivated in German Nazi Aryanism. It didn’t even mention any Western Hemisphere expressions. Scholars and many organized groups working for better understanding and resistance of racism ignore the dictionaries and build their own definitions.

So it’s understandable that there is a wide variety of understandings and a lot of confusion about this subject.

The introduction of “race” in European languages coincided with the period when anti-Semitic ideology in the church and European society was intensifying. The first Jewish ghetto had been established next to the Vatican in Rome. The Inquisition used “race” to distinguish Jews and Muslims in Spain, and the word found its way into a Papal encyclical in the following century. The principle was established in the 15th century that a single drop of Jewish blood was enough to justify discrimination by many institutions.¹ Although adapted from a word with neutral reference to source, “race” seems very early to have been used to frame negative inferences about a group disdained by the official or popular culture.²

Inter-group prejudice, obviously, had always been an issue, although no identity had previously been labeled “race.” As to skin color, biblical references suggest that people from Africa were respected equally by those from Israel, the Roman Empire and others. By the Middle Ages, however, there may have been emerging color consciousness among Europeans. Some of the Crusaders were said to have killed darker-skinned Middle Easterners including many who were Christians.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, “race” was given scientific reinforcement as archeologists focused on skull size and came up with the theory that larger skulls reflected greater intelligence. The largest skull found at that time was in the Caucasus Mountains; hence, they said, it symbolized the supremacy of Northern European humanity. *Caucasoid*, their race was called, and contrasted with the Asian *Mongoloid* and the African *Negroid* – the latter, based on the Latin term for “black,” illustrating European color-consciousness at the time. *Australoid* was added later to define indigenous people in newly discovered worlds.

Some scientists multiplied the races, one identifying more than a hundred. There was some legal confusion

¹ A straightforward analysis of Catholic teachings in this period – and acknowledgement of Luther’s initial invitation but later damnation of Jews – appears in James Carroll’s *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews* (Houghton Mifflin, New York, 2001).

² It should be acknowledged that positive uses now appear. As one example, *La Raza* now is used as a positive reference by many people of Mexican descent, somewhat comparable to the positive associations with blackness that have been strongly asserted, especially by many young African Americans, beginning in the 1960s.

in the USA in the 19th century when courts temporarily held that a person of Japanese descent and another of East Indian descent were white – but the Supreme Court ultimately decided that “common understanding” should govern and, based on that, non-Europeans were ruled out for citizenship naturalization. (Strange shifts in how U.S. law has addressed race historically were detailed in the book by Ian Haney-Lopez, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*.)

Biologists began to challenge the scientific validity of race in the 1950s. The American Anthropological Association acknowledged it as a myth in the 1990s, and now sponsors an exhibit on national tour, in three editions, portraying the false history of this social construct.³

As noted in the suggested introductory remarks, Caucasians seem first to have been described as “white” in the context of colonization, whereas no human being is truly white. (If you think you are, just look at a white piece of paper or some white garment next to your skin. Or check out the Wikipedia color chart on the web.) The color synonyms in Western languages, shown in the handout on the language of color, illustrate the reason for claiming ‘whiteness’ for a people seeking to claim superiority. Drawing upon pre-historic fears of darkness and celebration of the light, they latched upon and built the myth of metaphorical goodness and supremacy for their new racial “identity.”

The English definitions of colors have further evolved in the past four centuries to reinforce their value implications. The term, “white,” showed up in the first law defining citizenship in the Colony of Virginia in 1690. A century later, the first U.S. Congress used it to define who was eligible to immigrate and become naturalized: Only “white” people were legally allowed to be naturalized citizens until 1965.

It is important to note that science is profoundly influenced by culture. Biologists in the 1950s first began to challenge traditional assumptions in the science of race. In the 1952 sociology text, *Culture and Society* (Part 3, chapter 12), two Dartmouth professors acknowledged race as a generally accepted “biological term” but “a sociological fact,” and added: “Many attempts have been made to present scientific evidence...(that) one group is superior to another.” However, they added, “Such evidence as has hitherto been presented is not accepted by reputable scientists. It has yet to be conclusively demonstrated that any racial group is biologically superior....But human beings are neither rational nor scientific,” and “Many of our institutions are based upon the tacit assumption that one racial group is biologically superior to another...” The authors then reviewed comparative scientific evidence, noted that some people called “white” were actually darker than some called “black,” and concluded: “Biologically, man is one.”

There were many academic debates for about 40 years. By 1955, leading biologists asserted that there was no evidence supporting race-based biological differences. In the mid 1990s, the American Anthropology Association acknowledged that the concept was scientific mythology, purely a social construct. In 2007, the association introduced an exhibit, which now has three editions on national tour, that addresses this history

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and how “race” was used to misrepresent humanity by creating a color-based social hierarchy.⁴

In the academic world, there has been extensive recent work on “critical race theory,” much of it leading today to discussion of the most helpful academic, social – and, ultimately, political – response to the coupled concepts of “race” and “whiteness.” Many have noted that the two concepts evolved interdependently, are equally fallacious scientifically, and are socially damaging or, often, destructive.⁵

An emerging argument today is what the wisest course of action would be:

1. to transform the concept of “whiteness,” educating people called “white” how to act in anti-racist ways and to work for institutional and systemic changes affirming racial justice; or
2. to seek the abolition of “whiteness,” acknowledging that its most destructive characteristic is the presumption of supremacy inherent in its linguistic use, and that, ultimately, the only socially helpful course of action would be to eliminate it as a way to identify human beings.

Some have also made the point that these two goals are not necessarily competitive; transforming individual and group social consciousness is a necessary step toward the ultimate, inter-generational elimination of “whiteness” as we know it.

It is important to use careful judgment about how much of this information is useful to disseminate with a particular audience. Personal introductions and early discussion should provide some hints about the level of awareness present among those entering your workshop. In some instances, it will be most productive to emphasize the basics, and to share information about current academic discussion only with selected individuals, if at all.

On Race vs. Ethnicity

As the narrowly-conceived German citation noted at the beginning of this worksheet illustrates, “race” needs to be distinguished from “ethnicity.” Ethnic identity reflects historic culture of one’s family or group and their national or tribal identity. In most common usage in the USA, “race” is understood as defined by skin color.

Ethnicity is not explicitly related to color, although that association is common in popular understanding. From the 17th through 20th centuries, “white” color was thought to imply roots in Europe. In later years, it was assumed for anyone of European origins – except when American law denied “white” identity for Irish and Italians. For a much longer period, it was denied to Jews. Roots in Africa always were understood to make you black, in north and east Asia, as yellow, and in south Asia as brown. Indigenous roots made you black in Australia but red in the Western Hemisphere.

Common usage increasingly is merging race and ethnicity. As dictionaries reflect, the language is sufficiently ambiguous that the two words are often considered synonymous. In 2010, the US Census clearly implies that they are.

⁴ Dialogue continues among some medical professionals about the predominant propensity for some medical conditions within certain racially identified groups; but there tends to be widespread agreement that environmental factors are the cause rather than inherent racial identity.

⁵ A number of scholars have traced the development of “race” and the power of language. Some of the leading resources not already noted include *Race, Whiteness and Education* by Zeus Leonardo, *The Heart of Whiteness* by Robert Jensen; *Toward the Abolition of Whiteness* by David Roediger; *Systemic Racism and Racist America: Roots, current realities, and future reparations* by Joe Feagin, and the PBS three-hour video series, *Race: The Power of an Illusion*.