RACE IN SOCIETY

THE ENDURING AMERICAN DILEMMA

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Race
A Thoroughly Social Idea

Race is a pigment of the imagination.
—Rubén Rumbaut (2009a)

OBJECTIVES
• Understand the historical origins of the “one drop rule”
• Connect the emergence of racial thinking to its historical origins
• Be able to criticize the idea of race as biologically or genetically based
• Situate racial classification systems in their historical and social context
• Understand race as a social construction
• Explain the concept of racial formation
Suppose that one day a stranger comes to your door and tells you that she discovered that a huge bureaucratic mistake was made when you were born. She says that your birth certificate was bungled at birth, and it records you as a different race from what you have thought all of your life. You are being given the opportunity to change your race, but you must decide by the end of the day.

You are not the only person in this scenario. A very wealthy gentleman is willing to give a very generous sum of money to anyone who agrees to change his or her race to match the state records. Nothing else about you would change. Your ideas, thoughts, level of education, job: Everything else would remain the same, but you would from then on be known and recognized as a member of your “new” race. You would live the rest of your life as a person of a different race.

This hypothetical situation assumes, of course, that a person’s race can be changed. As you will learn here, race is a complex social reality and is not solely about appearance. Whether race can be “changed” is also a more complicated matter than you might think. But what if you could change your race? How much money would you want to change your race?

A scenario like this has actually been studied by researchers who were interested in White people’s perceptions of the “cost of being Black” (Mazzocco et al. 2006). The researchers were interested in White people’s perceptions, so they only included White people in their research sample. They presented a hypothetical situation similar to the one above to research subjects. In the actual study, the authors found that White Americans did not want too much money to become Black; on average, Whites wanted about $1,500 a year to change their race—far less than the $1 million subjects wanted to never watch television again. The researchers concluded that White Americans vastly underestimate the cost of being Black in the United States.

If you could change someone’s race, how much do you think a White person should want to become Black? A Latino to become Asian? A Black person to become White? In a class taught by this book’s author, some Black students said they would not take any amount of money to be White. White students wanted large sums of money to become Black. All students agreed that you couldn’t pay them enough to give up television!

Aside from the monetary award, what would it mean to change your race? Would you only change your appearance? Would your attitudes change? Your neighbors? Your friends? Your job? In other words, how would your life be lived differently if you were of a race other than what you have assumed all your life? Such questions help you start to think about the significance and consequences of race. This chapter examines the meaning of race and how it is connected to society.

The One Drop Rule

In some ways, changing race is not as farfetched as this opening scenario suggests. Consider the actual case of Susie Guillory Phipps. Susie Guillory was born in Louisiana in 1934. She grew up White, never thinking of herself in any other way. She married a White man, Andy Phipps. In 1977 she applied for a passport so that she and her husband could travel to South America. When she went to the Division
of Vital Records in New Orleans to do so, she was told that her birth certificate recorded both her parents as “col,” that is, “colored”—or black (Trillin 1986; Wright 1994). Oddly enough, her children’s birth certificates listed her and her two children as “white.” Imagine her surprise on learning that the state considered her to be “black.”

Susie Phipps tried to get her birth certificate changed to reflect what she believed to be her true identity—“white”—but the state clerks would not budge. As it turns out, Susie Guillory Phipps’s great-great-great-grandmother (named Marguerite) was a Black slave—five generations back.¹ A 1970 state law in Louisiana defined anyone with a trace of black ancestry as “black.” At the time, it was believed that each race had its own blood type. Blood type was also thought to be correlated with other physical and social features—an idea that we now know to be ludicrous but that nonetheless governed the laws of southern states for years.

Susie Phipps sued the state of Louisiana to have her birth certificate changed. She lost her case in 1983. The law was not overturned until years later.

Louisiana was not unique among southern states in defining a person’s race by the one drop rule (more formally known as hypodescent). The one drop rule refers to the notion that a certain amount of so-called black blood legally defined someone as “black.” States varied in the particulars. Mississippi classified individuals as “black” if they had “any appreciable amount of Negro blood.” North Carolina, Florida, and Texas defined “black” as anyone having one eighth Black ancestry.

Oddly enough, you might be considered a given race in one state and not in another. In Virginia, even as late as 1963, you were considered Indian if you lived on a reservation and had at least one Indian grandparent. Off the reservation, you would be considered Black (Cumminos 1963). Your official identity could even change over time within a given state. In 1785 Virginia, any person with “one-fourth part or more Negro blood” was deemed a “colored” person, but in 1910, the proportion was changed to one sixteenth. In 1924 the Virginia Racial Purity Act decreed that having any trace of African ancestry meant you were Black (California Newsreel 2003).

You might be surprised to learn that many of the state laws defining people in one race or another were not enacted until the early twentieth century—1911 in Texas and Arkansas, 1923 in North Carolina, 1924 in Virginia, 1927 in Georgia and Alabama (Murray 1997). Why then?

Known sardonically as the “Golden Age of Racism,” the early twentieth century was a period of dramatic change in the racial social order of the United States. Slavery had ended with the close of the Civil War and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865. The period of Reconstruction in the South (1865–1877) had given newly emancipated Black Americans hope for full rights.

¹ Marguerite was the slave of the wife (Marie Jeanne LaCasse) of a French planter (Joseph Gregory Guillory). After LaCasse’s death, Joseph Guillory fathered four children with Marguerite, but she was still listed as Marie Jeanne LaCasse’s property. LaCasse’s white sons sued Joseph Gregory Guillory for all of LaCasse’s property, including Marguerite, and Marguerite was turned over to the eldest son (Jean Baptiste Guillory). Joseph went to his son’s home and kidnapped Marguerite at knife-point. Joseph then freed Marguerite (through what is known as manumission), on the condition that she stay with him until his death, which she did. When the sons attempted to have Marguerite returned to them, Marguerite sued in court and won, ensuring both her freedom and that of her four children.
Part I • The Social Construction of Race

of citizenship but, following Reconstruction, the nation remodeled a system of racial inequality that disenfranchised Black Americans in every aspect of life (Foner 1988).

Retrenchment to a revised system of racial subordination was cemented with the 1898 Supreme Court decision in Plessy v. Ferguson that legally sanctioned strict racial segregation. Jim Crow segregation,² that is, the separate and fully unequal treatment of Black and White Americans, would govern the American South for years to come. That enactment of racial classification laws is an example of how extreme forms of racism tend to emerge during periods of rapid social change in the preexisting racial order, such as in the one that characterized the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States. Racial backlash occurs when there is a movement to reestablish a social order defined along lines of race even when social trends have begun to dismantle the prior racial system (Roberts 2012).

Looking at Jim Crow segregation from today’s vantage point, the laws and practices seem capricious, but they were taken for granted at least by dominant groups. They constituted one of the mechanisms that maintained and protected a racial order that assured white supremacy in all aspects of life. We are familiar with separate schools, separate restrooms, and separate seating on public buses, but the extremes that the laws went to are sometimes still stunning. For example, a 1935 North Carolina law decreed, “Books shall not be interchangeable between the white and colored schools, but shall continued [sic] by the race first using them” (1935, c. 422, s.2; cited in Murray 1977:331). Another example can be found in the state of Delaware, where law mandated not only separate schools for Whites and Black but also for those identified as Moors or Indians (Murray 1997). The degree to which these Jim Crow laws governed daily life is hard to overemphasize.

Why were laws defining race so important? They were important for several reasons. They defined citizenship and, for African Americans, they had defined ownership under slavery. Such laws were also designed to prevent intermarriage. Racial intermarriage was illegal in all southern states until 1967 when the Supreme Court ruled in a case poignantly named Loving v. Virginia that laws prohibiting racial intermarriage were unconstitutional. We will examine interracial marriage later in this book, but the point now is to see how the definition of race emerges for very specific societal reasons.

The meaning of race is deeply tied to systems of racial inequality—that is, social systems where dominant groups control, exploit, and define subordinate groups (Higginbotham and Andersen 2016). Putting briefly one of the most important lessons of this book, race is a social construction. The remainder of this chapter explores in more detail what race as a social construction means.

The Myth of Biological Race

When you encounter a person, most likely one of the first things you notice about the person is race; at least this is so in the United States. On what do you base this? Is it physical appearance? Skin tone? Facial features? Hair? Most people think they

² The term Jim Crow is said to originate from a white minstrel-show performer who appeared in blackface and danced a ridiculously stereotypical jig, an insulting performance that became a standard part of minstrel shows in the mid-nineteenth century in the United States.
can “see” race because physical features are what make race “visible” to others. Scratch the surface, though, and you will discover that race is not as simple as it may seem.

Even now, with years of research to tell us the contrary, many think that race is somehow rooted in biological or genetic differences. Is this true? Using the technique of DNA sequencing, scientists working on the human genome project have mapped the over twenty thousand extant human genes and have soundly concluded that there is no such thing as a race gene. Of course, there are identifiable physical differences among human populations, and some of those physical characteristics are produced through genetic expression. A brief lesson in genetics, though, helps you understand that even genetic traits are not as simply determined as you might think (Bonham 2015; Feldman 2010).

The genotype of any organism, including humans, is the full set of genes found in a given organism, including the human body. An organism’s phenotype refers to its observable characteristics. The genotype influences the phenotype, but the phenotype is also influenced by an organism’s environment or culture (see chapter 3). Some genotypic traits are discrete and fixed, that is, they are directly expressed, producing a particular outcome. Blood type is an example: A person is either A, B, AB, or O. Most observable characteristics in people, that is, their phenotype, fall along a continuum, influenced by inherited characteristics and the environment. Height is a good example. You might inherit the tendency to be tall or short, but your environment will significantly affect your actual height.

Skin color is a phenotypic trait. That is, although it is partially based on inherited genes, in any human grouping it is also influenced by environmental factors. Scientists now understand that skin color is likely determined by as many as six different genes. Genes also interact with each other. Even if skin color alone defined race, it would not result in discrete categories as does blood type.

Most people do not understand the complexity that geneticists are now discovering. The mass media generally oversimplify research studies about genetics, leading the public to think that there is a direct causal relationship between particular genes and a given condition. This simple causal relationship is generally not true. For example, there can be correlations between genes and particular diseases, but this does not necessarily mean that genes are causal determinants of disease (Brooks and King 2008). Health and disease are influenced by all kinds of social factors, including lifestyle, access to quality health care, and diet—all social and environmental factors, not genetically determined ones.

What about so-called race-based diseases, such as sickle cell anemia? Sickle cell occurs in offspring where both parents carry the sickle cell genetic trait. In the United States, sickle cell anemia is a disease that is most common among African and African American populations. But the genetic trait that produces sickle cell anemia has developed over time as a resistance to malaria. Thus, sickle cell anemia was first found in populations where malaria was most common, in such places as the Middle East, India, Greece, southern Italy, southern Turkey, and West Africa. Certain African populations actually have a very low rate of sickle cell disease. Again, even when a condition like sickle cell anemia is more common in a given population, the trait for it developed earlier in response to environmental conditions. Note that we
do not call sickle cell an Italian or Turkish disease. Sickle cell, then, should not now be considered an African American disease either.

Likewise, Tay-Sachs is a disease that is associated with Ashkenazic Jewish people. It is a recessive genetic disorder, but it is not exclusive to Jewish populations. Tay-Sachs is also found among French Canadians, Louisiana Cajuns, and the Pennsylvania Dutch. As in the case of sickle cell anemia, a combination of a population’s ancestry and geographic location will condition the likelihood of manifesting this trait (Brooks and King 2008; Villarosa 2002).

Simply put, although there may be some genetic influence on what we call race traits, none of the characteristics we have used to define race (such as skin color, hair texture, or body form) corresponds to any true genetic difference between human populations. You simply cannot look at genes and then separate people into discrete, supposedly “racial” categories based on their genetic makeup. Biologists define a race as “a population that has significant genetic differences from other populations such that it can be considered a subspecies” (Graves, cited in Villarosa 2002). Unlike in the animal kingdom, where you can separate animals into distinct species, there are no separate species of human beings.

At the level of genetic composition, scientists now know that there are far more similarities among people than there are differences. If you take any two people (including two people from supposedly different races) and analyze their genetic composition, you will find that they are more alike than different. This is a very important point for anyone who thinks of race as a biological given. So-called racial traits do not exist in discrete categories—a condition that would be needed to take any species and divide it into so-called race groups. The fact is that genetic variation among human beings is indeed very small. There is only one human race.

This truth has not stopped people over the years from trying to categorize people into so-called race groups. Over time people have created many different schemes for dividing human beings into races. At one time, some even thought that earwax could be used as a “marker” of race (Snipp 2010)! The schemes that have been developed throughout history reflect the racial politics and social systems of the time far more than any true scientific facts.

Notions about how many races there are and what race means have also changed dramatically over time. This is because the meanings that humans have given to race reflect social, not biological, conditions. Contemporary scientists conclude that the “lay concept of race does not correspond to the variation that exists in nature” (Graves 2001:5).

The idea that human beings can be separated into races corresponds closely with the development of social institutions that have exploited people for the profit of others, such as slavery (Graves 2004; Jones 2013). The idea that humans can be divided into so-called races only makes sense within the context of a system of racial inequality. Such exploitation could only be justified (at least by the dominant group) if the group being oppressed is defined as something less than fully human (Fredrickson 2002). To understand the meaning of race, then, you must understand the social context from which the idea stems.

If race is false as a biological notion, then is there no such thing as race? Yes and no. There is no biological reality that divides people into separate races, but race is very real in its vast and significant human impact. As summed up by sociologist
Ann Morning, who has extensively studied scientific constructions of race, there is a “longstanding belief that race is etched on the human body” and, as she continues to say, this “has far-reaching physical, social, economic and political consequences” (Morning 2011:7). You will see the consequences of the social construction of race throughout this book but, for now, understand that the consequences of race reach into every dimension of our society. In other words, race is real, but it is real in its social origins and consequences.

Race: A Modern Idea

It might surprise you to learn that race is a relatively modern idea. Over the ages, people in society have held negative ideas about those perceived as “other.” The term xenophobia ("fear of foreigners"), for example, stems from ancient Greece where Greeks thought that all non-Greeks were barbarians (Graves 2004). In the Western world, there is ample evidence that some of the earliest cultures had definitions of groups that ranked them by descent and seeming physical differences (Bettencourt 2014). There is a big difference, though, between seeing strangers as outsiders or “others” and establishing a social system in which people perceived as different are defined as less than human and believed to be innately inferior. Although the ancient Greeks did have slaves and disliked outsiders, whom they defined as somehow different, possibly even innately different, slaves were not treated like property in a formal, state-sanctioned system of slavery (Fredrickson 2002).

It seems that the term race was first used in the Middle Ages, but it only referred to animal breeds. With the advent of the scientific revolution, though, early scientists became obsessed with observing and classifying what they saw in nature. It did not take long before they tried to differentiate human groups based on presumed differences in their physical characteristics (Ferber 1998). An uneasy alliance was then forged between budding scientific thinking and the emergence of modern racism. Historian Winthrop Jordan locates the origins of the idea of race in the early European conquest of African people. Jordan meticulously shows that when European explorers encountered Africans, the Europeans thought of Africans as primitive and savage. This belief was then used to rationalize what became the development of slavery in the New World (Jordan 1968).

Swedish botanist and physician Carolus Linnaeus (1707–1778) was the first to develop elaborate taxonomies of plants and other parts of nature. He organized the plant and animal kingdoms into different species, according to the shared characteristics of these living organisms. Linnaeus identified human beings (Homo sapiens) and primates as part of the genus, Homo. He further differentiated Homo sapiens into four groups: Europeans, American Indians, Asians, and Africans. Although he did not explicitly rank them, he did color-code them white, red, yellow, and black. Further, he described each group in what we would now see as a highly value-laden, Eurocentric perspective (Fredrickson 2002; Roberts 2012), describing Europeans as “gentle, acute, inventive . . . governed by customs” and Africans as “crafty, indolent, negligent . . . governed by caprice” (West 1982:56, cited in Ferber 1998:28–29).

Incredibly, the color scheme that Linnaeus invented persists to this day as people continue to describe human groups in terms of presumed color. Following Linnaeus,
various other Europeans developed different schemes for classifying human beings as if they were of different biological types. While the Atlantic slave trade was flourishing, pseudoscientific thinkers developed various racial schemes to give supposed legitimacy to a highly unequal and oppressive system of human life.

In the early eighteenth century, French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707–1788), introduced the term *race* into the scientific lexicon to categorize human beings. Buffon thought that human variation was the result of differences in the climate where groups lived. He elevated people with white skin to the top of the hierarchy he created, writing that they were the essence of humanity. Absurdly enough, he thought that white was the “natural” color of human beings and that African people were dark because of their greater exposure to the sun. He even thought that if Africans would only move to Europe, their skin would lighten over time (Ferber 1998).

The idea that human beings could be divided into races culminated with the work of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1841), a German physician and naturalist. Like other naturalists of the time, Blumenbach believed you could classify humans into a taxonomy of types. He thought there were five separate “varieties” of human beings: Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American, and Malay. Blumenbach was particularly smitten with the people of the Russian Caucasus, who were mostly blond and light-skinned. He believed them to be the most beautiful people in the world. He placed them at the “top” of his alleged racial hierarchy of human beings.

Most people now have never heard of Johann Blumenbach, but his racist ideas persist. Have you ever referred to White people as “Caucasian” or checked a box marked “Caucasian” to indicate your race? Now that you know the origin of this label, perhaps you will cringe the next time you hear it. Would you ever have imagined that this term came from one man over two hundred years ago, whose ideas about people from the Russian Caucasus seem so outlandish to us now? This shows how intractable some of the racist thinking of the past is in influencing our lives today.

Where would such menacing ideas come from? Remember that at the time, the Atlantic slave trade was flourishing. Dutch, Spanish, and British empires had colonized much of the world—primarily for purposes of trade and the acquisition of wealth and profit. Human trafficking was pivotal to this system. Within such an economic system, the world was ripe for the scourge of racism. It is no coincidence that ideas about innate human differences were developed as part of the Atlantic slave trade and the development of an institutionalized system of slavery in North and South America. Slavery was a system that depended on classifying some groups as innately inferior to White European Americans. Only if some people could be considered something less than fully human could a system of racial subordination emerge.

The racism that was developing in the eighteenth century emerged alongside Western movements for democracy, namely, the French and American revolutions. It may seem inconceivable now that proclamations of equality, at least for men, could exist side by side with a flourishing system of racism. As historian George Fredrickson (2002) argues, aspirations for equality went hand in hand with racism. How? As people were rejecting old notions of traditional order, they had to have some rationalization, if only for themselves, for the exploitation and mistreatment
of others. The idea of race filled that need. If differences between two groups who are unequal were defined as “natural,” then there was no need to question the social order.

Antiquated as early thinking about race seems now, its legacy lives on. Many people continue to think of race as somehow reflecting meaningful differences between people, differences that get socially coded by “color.” Even very modern technology reflects this thinking: Think of the emojis that people use on the Internet and their smartphones. Developed in Japan, the icon was originally a nonhuman-looking character depicted only in yellow, but it was soon developed to show people in five different colors, ranging from a pink tone to very dark brown (see photo). Not until very recently did developers change the technology so users could shade the human icon, choosing from 151 different options. What is interesting, however, is how color has become the standard for defining human diversity (Phillip 2014).

**Who Counts? Racial Classification Systems**

Even without there being separate human races, over time, people have put a lot of effort into classifying people into racial categories. The many different ways they have done so are intricately connected to the racial politics and interests of powerful groups in society at given points in the nation’s history. This fact reveals how deeply social the concept of race is.
The first attempt to count different populations in the United States came in 1787 with the writing of the U.S. Constitution. Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution mandates that the population be counted every ten years in order to determine taxation and representation in the government. Which people were counted and how they were counted were critical in establishing the political structure of the nation. To this day, the decennial census determines state representation in the U.S. Congress.

As written in 1787, Article I of the U.S. Constitution decreed that apportionment of the states in the national government would be “determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three-fifths of all other Persons” (Anderson 1988:9, cited in Rodríguez 2000:66). With this mandate, Black slaves were constitutionally defined as three fifths of a person. Indentured servants, who were White, were to be counted as free persons. Most Indians were not counted. So-called taxed Indians, those living in European settlements and likely including Indian women married to White men, were few (Rodríguez 2000:66). From the start, race was inscribed into the U.S. Constitution as a category of citizenship (Snipp 2010)—or, in the case of African Americans and Indians, non-citizenship.

Although the first census in the United States in 1790 did not mention “race” per se, it classified people into four groups: free White males, free White females, slaves, and all other free persons, including indentured White servants, free Blacks, and taxed Indians. As the nation developed, census categories evolved to reflect changes in the population and White people’s reactions to the growing immigrant population. The 1820 census was thus the first to categorize the “foreign born” population, reflecting concerns about the so-called stock of new immigrant groups (Snipp 2010). This designation still appears in the census today. The 1820 census was also the first to categorize people by color; you were either White, Black, or American Indian. Which category you fell into was the work of census enumerators who were instructed to note a person’s “color”—presumably based solely on appearance.

In 1850 the national census added the category “mulatto,” the first official acknowledgment of racial intermarriage between Blacks and Whites and between Blacks and American Indians. Thus, the child of a Black-Indian relationship would be counted in a different “race” box than either parent.

“Chinese” and “Asian Indian” were added to the census of 1860, the result of the large-scale immigration of Chinese and other Asian workers who provided so much of the labor for an expanding nation. In 1870, “Japanese” was added as a racial-ethnic category, following the group’s widespread immigration, often as contract labor.

Near the turn of the twentieth century, White anxieties about racial purity fueled many of the changes made in census classifications. Even though “race-mixing” has been common throughout U.S. history—through both involuntary and voluntary relationships—dominant ideologies have extolled “racial purity.” Concerns about racial purity peaked by the 1890 census, when yet other categories denoting race were added. If you were counted in the 1890 census, you would have been either White, Black, Chinese, Japanese, American Indian (taxed or nontaxed). If you were mixed race, you would have been tallied as mulatto, “quadroon,” or “octoroon.” Reflecting the one drop rule, these categories used “blood” as the
marker of race. A mixed person was one-half Black; a quadroon, one-quarter; an octoroon, one-eighth.

Racial categories in the census changed again in 1900. Then you would be classified in one of five race groups (White, Black, Indian, Japanese, or Chinese). Mulatto and “other” reappeared in 1910. How was your race determined? You didn’t check a box, as you would now. Instead, census counters simply looked at you and were told that “a person of mixed White and Negro blood was to be returned as Negro, no matter how small the percentage of Negro blood; someone part Indian and part Negro was also to be listed as Negro unless the Indian blood predominated” (Bennett 2000:169–70, cited in Snipp 2003).

Change came again in 1930 with new categories labeled Mexican, Hindu, Korean, and Filipino. Such fluctuating categories seem odd to us now, but they followed a racial logic that made sense at the time because of the social definitions imposed on various groups (Lee 1993). These shifting census categories show that one way race has been constructed is through the apparatus of the government—what sociologist C. Matthew Snipp calls “administrative definitions of race” (2010:110).

From 1940 to 1960, the census took little note of race. After the 1960 census the federal government started collecting more information about race, largely the result of the civil rights movement and subsequent efforts to monitor racial discrimination. The proliferation of federal agencies that collected data on race fostered great inconsistency in how race was counted. Because of this confusion, in 1977 the federal Office of Management and Budget adopted a policy of requiring agencies to tabulate race using five groups: (1) American Indians and Alaska Natives, (2) Asians and Pacific Islanders, (3) non-Hispanic Blacks, (4) non-Hispanic Whites, and (5) Hispanics of any race.

Consistent with this directive, in 1980, the census included a designation for Hispanic origin for the first time. Advocacy groups, however, argued that some groups were being omitted from the census categories. Arab Americans, for example, fell into none of the census categories. Others, such as native Hawaiians, argued that they should not be lumped together with Asians and Pacific Islanders. How the census classified people into groups was a quite political matter.

As a result of political pressure, in 2000 the federal government once again modified its racial designations, developing designations that are still in place. There are five basic groupings in the census now: White, Black, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander. Because Hispanics can be found in any racial group, for the first time in 2000, the census added a separate check box for Hispanic origin, identified as an ethnic group and separate from so-called racial groups (Snipp 2010).

Doesn’t it seem a little odd to you that Native Hawaiians would be considered a “race” but Hispanics would not? For that matter, why is it so important to designate races? Perhaps you will quickly conclude that we just shouldn’t count people by race and ethnicity at all. But what would this do to our ability to monitor discrimination or to study such things as patterns of disease, school enrollment, voting rights, and the countless other matters that depend on some racial and ethnic designation?

Starting with the 2000 census, a person could also check more than one box to indicate racial heritage. Even though the census now allows people to identify as multiracial, the census still counts Hispanics as a separate ethnic identification
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NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 5 about Hispanic origin and Question 6 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.

5. Is this person of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?
- No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
- Yes, Puerto Rican
- Yes, Cuban
- Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin — Print origin, for example, Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on.

6. What is this person’s race? Mark [X] one or more boxes.
- White
- Black, African Am., or Negro
- American Indian or Alaska Native — Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.
- Asian Indian
- Japanese
- Native Hawaiian
- Chinese
- Korean
- Guamanian or Chamorro
- Filipino
- Vietnamese
- Samoan
- Other Asian — Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.
- Other Pacific Islander — Print race, for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.
- Some other race — Print race.

FIG. 1.1  The 2010 Census Hispanic Origin and Race Questions

(figure 1.1). Within the Hispanic category are various ethnic groups (Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Colombians, and so forth), just as the Black category includes a wide range of ethnic identities (Haitians, African Americans, Nigerians, to name a few). Diversity in human identities often gets disguised by the generation of single labels, such as those created by the census.

These various classification systems, including the one used currently by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, show you how changeable and complex the process
of defining race is. As we will see, these categories also indicate the complex relationship between race and its sister concept, ethnicity.

**Defining Race and Ethnicity: Intersecting Ideas**

The distinction between race and ethnicity is complex and blurry—and is also quite specific to a given culture. What race means in the United States, for example, would not hold up in other parts of the world. In fact, people from outside the United States typically find the U.S. conception of race to be quite strange.

Sociologists have long defined race and ethnicity as different concepts. The usual definition of an *ethnic group* is an identifiable group of people who share a common culture, language, regional origin, and/or religion. Ethnic groups also have a definition of themselves as a collective or “we.” Jewish Americans constitute an ethnic group, as do Irish Americans, Italian Americans, and Arab Americans. You can see right away, though, that groups considered to be racial groups in the United States also share a common culture, African Americans being a good example. African Americans are certainly considered a racial group in the United States, but they can also be thought of as an ethnic group—sharing a common history, common cultural characteristics, and sometimes a unique dialect. Hispanics are typically defined as an ethnic group, although some may not even speak Spanish. These examples point to the fact that although race and ethnicity are treated as separate concepts, the line between the two is not always firm.

Race is also constructed in relationship to ethnicity, meaning that race and ethnicity can reinforce each other. To explain, immigrants to America have historically faced a Black versus White type of divide. Outsiders themselves, immigrants navigate this terrain in complex ways. Some may have their ethnic identity imposed on them by others, such as Vietnamese immigrants coming to the United States following the Vietnam War. They become “Asian,” even though they may never have defined themselves in this way (Kibria, Bowman, and O’Leary 2014).

The meaning of whiteness has also emerged in the context of the nation’s history of immigration and race. Some immigrant groups eventually come to be defined as White even though they may have been defined in other terms before (Roediger 2002). Both race and ethnicity have been created in the United States in the context of each group’s placement within the nation’s system of inequality. People have been sorted into categories that correspond with their placement in the labor market. For example, some Latinos may now be perceived as White if they hold high-status professional jobs, while those in the most menial occupations are perceived as “colored,” that is, brown.

Even with a soft distinction between race and ethnicity, ethnicity can be just as damaging as is race. It can turn into *ethnocentrism*, the belief that one’s group is superior to all other groups (see also chapter 2). When taken to extremes, ethnocentrism can have murderous consequences. Tragically, there are countless examples of such ethnic hatred: the Jewish Holocaust, the Turkish massacre of Armenians in World War I, the genocide of American Indians, the mass execution of Sunni Muslims in Syria under the rule of President Bashar al-Assad, the suggestion that Muslims should be banned from entry to the United States, and many more.
Ethnicity can, however, also be somewhat mild compared to race, for example, when it is symbolic ethnicity, allegiance to an ethnic group that is felt without incorporating ethnicity into one’s daily behavior (Gans 1979). Everyone can feel Irish on St. Patrick’s Day or Creole during Mardi Gras, but this identification with ethnic celebration or pride comes without cost or consequence.

Both ethnicity and race must be understood in the context of how groups are treated in society. The distinction between them underscores yet again that both are social constructions (Kibria, Bowman, and O’Leary 2014). That is, groups may share a common culture, history, and heritage, but how they come to be defined in society is a social process. Moreover, as we will see, there are times when an ethnic group may become defined as a racial group, depending on the circumstances in society at the time.

In this book, race is defined as a group treated as distinct in society based on presumed group characteristics that have been interpreted as signifying inferiority and superiority. The designation of a group as a race is then used to produce a social order of domination, power, and exploitation (Higginbotham and Andersen 2016, adapted from Wilson 1973).

Several ideas are included in this definition:

* It is the treatment of groups, not their individual attributes, that defines race and makes it meaningful in society.
* Race in the United States has been constructed through a history of conquest and exploitation.
* Understandings and definitions of race, both formal and informal, are fluid and change over time.
* Race is contextual; that is, you must understand the circumstances in which definitions of race arise to fully understand the idea of race.
* Race is both an individual identity and a collective process (Omi and Winant 1986; Omi and Winant 2015).
* The meaning of race is unstable and can be transformed through political struggle (Omi and Winant 1986).

To further understand the complexity of race and ethnicity, let’s go back to the opening scenario of this chapter. How would you describe your race and your ethnicity? People regularly note their race on various official forms—not just in the census but also on credit applications, college admissions forms, driver’s licenses, opinion polls and surveys, and any number of other places. Each may reflect a different scheme for counting and defining race and ethnicity.

If you were checking your racial identity on the census form shown in figure 1.1, what would you mark? For some, this may be a simple exercise. For others, not. What if you have a White parent and a Black parent? Would you check Black or White? What if one parent is Asian and the other Hispanic? What race and ethnicity are you?

As you answer these questions, you may see that the one drop rule is still flourishing, even many years after its elimination from the law. Is your understanding of your race based on your appearance? Socialization in your family? Your ancestral past? Your attitudes and behaviors? If you are White, do you regularly think of yourself as even having a racial identity? Certainly, African American and Latino
people think of you that way, but White Americans generally do not have to think about their race, as whiteness is a taken-for-granted racial identity. Are there places, other than standard forms, where a White person’s race becomes more apparent? What does this suggest to you about race as a contextual identity?

In fact, it is difficult to establish a single definition of race that reflects its multidimensional and social meaning (Taylor 2008). What are the various ways that one can define race?

- There can be biological definitions of race, no matter how problematic they are. Most people think of race as a fixed attribute of a person—something that cannot be changed.
- There are also administrative or state-based definitions of race (Snipp 2010; Rodríguez 2000). A good example is the federal acknowledgment process that determines whether a person formally “counts” as an American Indian. Managed through the U.S. Department of the Interior Office of Indian Affairs, this elaborate process requires that you extensively document your membership in one of 554 recognized Indian tribes. Whether you ultimately count administratively as “Indian” may be inconsistent with how you actually define yourself.
- Race can be defined by how you define yourself. Racial identity, examined in more detail in chapter 4, is a powerful part of people’s self-concept. People can take great pride in their racial identity, placing a high value on being Chicana or part of a long legacy of African American heritage. In fact, people actually “perform race” as part of their daily expression of self, such as by displaying certain symbols or behaviors that signify race to others. “Doing race” (Markus and Moya 2010) can signify your membership as part of a racial group, and you may even be judged by others as “not being black enough” or as not “authentically black” if you do not exhibit certain attitudes and behaviors. In the past, an African American who was very light-skinned might decide to “pass” for White to escape the oppression of slavery of Jim Crow segregation. Interestingly, passing also required some effort by those around you who were willing to keep your secret (Hobbs 2014). This shows again that the definition of race, including how one presents oneself, is a highly social process. Simply put, “how individuals publicly identify is powerfully shaped by the norms of the time and place in which they live” (Saperstein and Penner 2014:188).
- Your race may also be defined by how others define you. An interesting experiment reveals how others’ stereotypes about race may actually influence how they see and define race. This has been shown in a clever set of research studies by sociologists Aliya Saperstein and Andrew Penner (Saperstein and Penner 2014; Penner and Saperstein 2008, 2013). Saperstein and Penner have studied how interviewers classify a person’s race based on certain social statuses. They have conclusively found that a person is much more likely to be classified as Black if he or she is unemployed, on welfare, poor, or incarcerated—all stereotypes associated with being Black. People who are married or living in the suburbs are more likely to be classified as White. This research shows that one’s social status can actually define race, at least in the eyes of others.
- Race may be influenced by social class. There is a high correlation between skin tone and social class status, most notably in Brazil and Mexico, where, as the
saying goes, “Money whitens” (Schwartzman 2007). Lighter-skinned people in these complex systems of racial definition may be more likely to be perceived as White or possibly to perceive themselves as White. At the same time, shifts in racial politics, such as movements that emphasize racial pride, may lessen this tendency.

Finally, racial politics shape the definition of race. The Black Power and Chicano movements, as examples, encouraged people to embrace pride in their racial group membership. Even the language used to describe race changed as a result. Terms such as people of color and even the change from Negro to (eventually) African American reflect the collective political identity that social movements for racial justice can inspire.

As you think about these multiple ways of defining race, you will see that race is not as simple as one might think. One thing becomes especially clear as we have worked through a definition of race: “The actual meaning of race lies not in people’s physical characteristics, but in the historical treatment of different groups and the significance that society gives to what is believed to differentiate so-called racial groups (Higginbotham and Andersen 2016:1). In other words, what is important about race is not biological difference, but how groups are treated.

A multidimensional definition of race emphasizes racialization, the social process by which a group comes to be defined as a race (Omi and Winant 1986). Some groups become “racialized”; others do not.

The classic example of racialization is Nazi Germany. During his dictatorship, Adolf Hitler racialized Jewish people. He simply made up the idea that so-called Aryan (white, blue-eyed, and blond) people constituted a superior race; he defined Jewish people as inherently inferior. The extreme anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany, that is, the hatred of Jewish people, was based on racializing both groups. Racialization was an explicit racial policy of the Nazi state and had murderous consequences. Over six million Jewish people were exterminated, as were millions of gays, lesbians, disabled people, gypsies, and others who were perceived as unfit or inferior. If you ever doubted that race is a social construction, the Nazi Holocaust is strong evidence of the horrid human acts that can stem from racialization.

Race Is a Process, Not a Thing: Racial Formation

By now you should see that race is not a “thing” or some fixed attribute of individual people. Again, race is a social construction, created through the actions and beliefs of people, most often those with a vested interest in devising and maintaining a system of racial inequality. This idea has been well formulated in the concept of racial formation developed by sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986, 2015).

Omi and Winant define racial formation as the “process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and/or destroyed” (Omi and Winant 1986:64). What they mean is that race is created through the actions of people, especially those with the power to shape race within social institutions. In this sense, race is not an objective thing, but a subjective construction. As Omi and Winant put it, “racial categories and the meaning of race are given concrete expression by
the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded” (1986:60). We have seen that the meaning of race changes at different points in time although, for most of U.S. history, race has been defined in fairly rigid black/white terms.

The framework of racial formation emphasizes several important sociological points:

• Racial formation is a process. That is, race is not a fixed attribute of particular people or groups but, rather, develops in the context of how groups are treated and perceived by others.
• Race is an emergent concept—an idea that develops through the course of history.
• The formation of “race” happens at the macro level of society through powerful social institutions. Although race is reinforced at the micro level of society, that is, in everyday interactions, it is structured into social institutions.
• Race is contested. That is, groups can challenge dominant definitions of race such that race can change, for example, through the political efforts of social movements and social protest.

The process of racial formation helps you also understand how a given group comes to be defined as a race. Asian Americans, for example, have been racialized at various points throughout American history. Asian American is a term, like Hispanic, that lumps together people who come from very different societies and cultures—indeed, societies that have at times even been at war with each other. Moreover, each group’s history in the United States differs. Asian Americans are not a monolithic group. Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Filipinos, Korean Americans, and more recently, Asian immigrants from Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, among other places) are much more ethnic groups than they are racial groups, but how they are regarded in American society shows the power of racial formation.

Omi and Winant’s concept of racial formation shows that race is not fixed, but rather it changes over time. Think about how different racial-ethnic groups are defined. Would you say that Hispanics are a race? Hispanics have been typically identified as an ethnic group, based on shared cultural characteristics of language and national origin. Included in the category of Hispanics, however, are very different groups who may not share the same histories or current experiences. Some groups even disagree about what they want their group to be called. Hispanic or Latino groups are as diverse as the peoples who figure in these designations—Chicanos/as, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and a variety of Central and South Americans.

With such different origins and histories, should Hispanics even be considered a single group? Hispanics have some but not all cultural characteristics in common. Chicanos, for example, are native to U.S. soil and are only defined as Chicano because of their lands having been confiscated by the U.S. government following the Mexican-American War (1846–1848). Puerto Ricans both on the U.S. mainland and on the island of Puerto Rico hold U.S. citizenship as the result of the 1917 Jones Act. Movement back and forth between the U.S. mainland and the island of Puerto Rico has marked Puerto Ricans’ history in the United States.
In short, groups become racialized not because of some inherent characteristics, but because of their position in the U.S. racial hierarchy. Groups can become racialized because of their low status in the social and economic structure of U.S. society, as some would say is happening to many Hispanics (Bonilla-Silva 2004).

Furthermore, race can be deconstructed as well as constructed. That is, some groups previously designated as people of color may be perceived as “whitened” by gains in social and economic status. European immigrant groups in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were sometimes initially defined as something other than White, but their ultimate success in America led to a perception of them as White. Asian Americans may also come to be considered White by their social and economic success. Sociologist Min Zhou cautions, however, that perceiving Asian Americans as White—the “model minority” stereotype—overlooks the persistent discrimination and racism that Asian Americans experience. As Zhou says, “Speaking perfect English, adopting mainstream cultural values, and even intermarrying members of the dominant group may help reduce this ‘otherness’ for particular individuals, but it has little effect on the group as a whole” (2004:35).

When you understand race as a process, not an individual attribute, you can see that races are created, changed, and potentially destroyed through the actions of human beings. This framework also helps you understand that the construction of race is now changing, especially as different groups now shape the American racial landscape. No longer is race just about a black-white divide. Even though the black-white divide is still significant, race in the United States—along with ethnicity—is becoming increasingly complicated, as we will see throughout this book.

**Conclusion**

When you understand that race is a social construction, how does your thinking about race change? This is a question that you can answer as this volume unfolds. Race and the racism that accompanies it are embedded in social practices that are a part of society.

To some people, race appears to have lost its significance in society. The election of the nation’s first African American president led some to proclaim that we are now a post-racial society. Additionally, the increasingly complex and diverse character of U.S. society leads many to think that race will become less important over time. Images around you suggest that racial integration is here, but reality is different.

Race and ethnicity continue to shape all matters of human life, including opportunities, income, health, housing, education, criminal justice—as well as interpersonal relationships and group identity.

We have seen in this chapter that race is manufactured by human beings as they construct powerful institutions. Race is a social construction and thus is in some ways a false construct. Still, its effects remain very real, as we will see in the chapters to come. The culprit in the problems of race and racism is a combination of human beliefs, attitudes, and actions, not something inherent in different groups or individuals. What is so dangerous about the formation of race and ethnicity is that they are so deeply enmeshed in the formation of prejudice and racism—subjects to which we turn in the next chapter.
Key Terms

anti-Semitism, 16  
ethnic group, 13  
ethnocentrism, 13  
genotype, 5  
hypodescent, 3  
one drop rule, 3  
phenotype, 5  
race, 14  
racial formation, 16  
racialization, 16  
symbolic ethnicity, 14  
xenophobia, 7

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Having read this chapter, what would you now say to someone who declared, “We are all just human beings. Race doesn’t matter anymore.”
2. How does the one drop rule continue to influence people’s understanding of race?
3. What are the key points in understanding that race is a social construction?

Student Exercises

1.1: As described in the opening scenario in this chapter, ask yourself how much money you would want to change your race. How much would you want to give up your smartphone or to quit watching television? If you can, ask students or friends of different races how they would answer these questions. What do their responses and your own tell you about the value people place on their racial (or ethnic) identity?
1.2: Go to the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) website for the film, Race: The Power of Illusion, and do the “Sorting People” exercise. The link is http://www.pbs.org/race/002_SortingPeople/002_00-home.htm.

Answer the following questions:

1. How many did you get right?
2. What did you look for to identify people?
3. When you first meet someone, do you immediately note the person’s race? If so, what do you look for to do so?
4. What do you learn about the definition of race from this exercise?

Challenging Questions/Open to Debate

Should we “count” race?
Some think that people should not be asked to indicate their race on the many and various forms where this question is asked. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer in detail.