

## I *Ethnic and Racial Identity*

YOU MAY BE SURPRISED TO LEARN THAT RACE AND ethnicity are not as easily distinguished from each other as is commonly assumed. Even though we use these terms in everyday conversations, most of us don't have an accurate understanding of what they really mean and how imprecise they actually are.

When we identify someone as a member of an **ethnic group**, we mean that she or he belongs to some identifiable group within American society. This is the most important component of ethnicity: membership in a subgroup within an environment dominated by another culture.

Ethnic subgroups are defined by many complex, often variable traits, such as religion, language, culture, customs, traditions, physical characteristics, and, probably most important in this country, ancestral origin. Ancestral origin is the reason we often label ethnic groups as "hyphenated-Americans": African-Americans, German-Americans, Filipino-Americans, Chinese-Americans, and so on.

"Wait a minute," you are probably saying, "some of those groups are racial, not ethnic." Don't be so sure.

One definition of **race** in *The American Heritage Dictionary* is "any group of people united or classified together on the basis of common history, nationality, or geographical distribution." In

this sense, race does not differ substantially from ethnicity. Scientists identify race solely in terms of physical characteristics, such as skin color, texture and color of hair, and other attributes, especially facial features. However, these attributes are not as discrete or self-evident as it might seem at first. From earliest times, human populations have migrated and intermingled, mixing and blending their biological makeup. Precise lines of racial demarcation are blurred, so that, at best, systematic classifications of race are complex and must be carefully qualified.

For this reason, many people have come to believe that race is less a scientific actuality than it is a **social construct**—a classification based on social values. Consider, for example, a child whose mother is black and father is white or one whose mother is white and father Japanese. Even though both are half white, in America the first would be categorized as black and the other as Asian. This racial assignment reflects social assumptions rather than either child's genetic composition. In other words, each child's race is socially constructed. An even more glaring example of the absurdity of our racial classification is the U.S. Census Bureau's policy of assigning Native American status to anyone with as little as one-eighth native lineage.

Today many of us tend to think of African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Native Ameri-

cans as racial groups and Jewish-Americans, Italian-Americans, and Irish-Americans as ethnic groups. In the early part of this century, however, each of the latter three was called a race and was said to have distinctive physical features that marked group identity, a belief that now strikes us as quaintly absurd.

Although we tend to consider both ethnic and racial identity to be fixed and unalterable, in fact, they are fluid and quite subjective. You may call yourself German-American because your forebears came from Germany, but they may have seen themselves instead as Prussian or Bavarian, or members of one of the many other nation states that only later were united to form the Germany we know today.

Our current racial and ethnic groupings reflect another blind spot in social thought: our insensitivity to the realities of cultural heritage. The label European-American, for example, camouflages the differences between Scandinavians and the French and between those two groups and the Poles, the British, and the many other distinct European cultures. Most Native American Indians identify themselves as Sioux or even Lakota Sioux, Arapaho, Laguna, and so on, not as a categorical "Indian" or "Native American."

Similarly, when we classify all African-Americans as one homogeneous group, we ignore the extreme divergence of African cultures. Ethiopian Plains culture differs tremendously from that which developed in Morocco or West Africa; moreover, like Native Americans, Africans are more likely to consider themselves Zulu, Ibo, Hausa, or Yoruba than South African or Nigerian—or even African. Finally, today there are at least nineteen Asian and Pacific Island populations lumped together under the Asian-American label. These include the Hmong, Cambodians, Laosians, the Sikh, and Burmese in addition to the more widely recognized groups representing Japan, China, Korea, India, and the Philippines.

Finally, it is important to note that all these subgroups exist within the American context, and every subgroup has been transformed by the influences of this larger society. Nevertheless, even when many historical features of the subgroup have been lost or altered, members may continue to identify with the recreated group. These are the hyphenated-Americans.

## **RACE - The Power of an Illusion**

# **Ten Things Everyone Should Know About Race**

Our eyes tell us that people look different. No one has trouble distinguishing a Czech from a Chinese. But what do those differences mean? Has the idea of race always been with us? Is skin color more than skin deep? How does race affect people today?

There's less – and more – to race than meets the eye:

1. **Race is a modern idea.** Ancient societies, like the Greeks, did not divide people according to physical distinctions, but according to religion, status, gender, class, even language. The English language didn't even have the word 'race' until it turns up in 1508 in a poem by William Dunbar referring to a line of kings.
2. **Race has no genetic basis.** Not one characteristic, trait or even one gene distinguishes all the members of one so-called race from all the members of another so-called race.
3. **Human subspecies don't exist.** Unlike many animals, modern humans simply haven't been around long enough or populations isolated enough to evolve into separate subspecies or races. Despite surface appearances, we are among the most similar of all species.
4. **Skin color really is only skin deep.** Most traits are inherited independently from one another. The genes influencing skin color have nothing to do with the genes influencing hair form, height, blood type, musical talent, athletic ability or forms of intelligence. Knowing one trait, like skin color, doesn't necessarily tell you anything else about a person's other traits.
5. **Most variation is within, not between, "races."** Of the small amount of total human genetic variation, 85% exists within any local population, be they Italians, Kurds, Koreans or Cherokees. About 94% can be found within any continent. That means two random Koreans may be as genetically different as a Korean and an Italian.
6. **Slavery predates race.** Throughout much of human history, societies have enslaved others, often as a result of conquest or war, even debt, but not because of physical characteristics or a belief in natural inferiority. Due to a unique set of historical circumstances, ours was the first slave system where all the slaves shared similar physical characteristics.
7. **Race and freedom evolved together.** The U.S. was founded on the radical new idea that "All men are created equal." But our early economy was based largely on slavery. How could this anomaly be rationalized? The new idea of race helped explain why some people could be denied the rights and freedoms that others took for granted.
8. **Race justified social inequalities as natural.** As the idea of race took hold, white superiority became "common sense" in white America. It rationalized not only slavery but also the extermination of Indians, exclusion of Asian immigrants, and the taking of Mexican lands by a nation that otherwise professed a deep belief in liberty and equality. Racialized practices became institutionalized within American government, laws, and society and persist even though *de jure* segregation ended.
9. **Race isn't biological, but racism is still real.** Racism is a powerful social force that gives people different access to opportunities and resources. Our government and social institutions disproportionately, albeit often invisibly, channel wealth, power, and resources to the "unmarked" race - white people. This affects everyone, whether we are aware of it or not.
10. **Colorblindness will not end racism.** Pretending race doesn't exist is not the same as creating equality. Racism is more than stereotypes and individual prejudice. To tackle racism, we need to identify and remedy social policies and institutional practices that advantage some groups at the expense of others.

RACE - The Power of an Illusion is California Newsreel's acclaimed three-part series broadcast by PBS that challenges one of our most fundamental beliefs: that human beings come bundled into a few distinct groups. But just because race isn't innately biological, doesn't mean it isn't real. The series also scrutinizes where the idea of race came from, how it took such a hold over our minds, and why race still matters.