

NOTES

DEMONSTRATING THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE*

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THE IDEA THAT race is socially constructed is widely accepted within social science disciplines (Haney Lopez 1996; Omi and Winant 1986; Waters 1990). Relating this concept to students, however, can present a serious challenge. Students, like most people, tend to view their world as an objective reality divorced, in many ways, from interpretation or constructed meaning. This is also true of the racial categories that are presented and reified throughout society, but which are nonetheless, socially defined. Through the use of an abstract exercise, removed from ingrained notions of race, the absence of natural groupings and the social construction of such categories can be more clearly presented. In this paper, I describe such an exercise and demonstrate how the insights achieved can then be easily applied to concepts of race, offering students a better understanding of race as a social construct.

Most social scientists recognize that existing racial categories developed due to particular historical circumstances (Haney Lopez 1996; Omi and Winant 1986; Waters 1990). Yet, students often think of race as a given biological fact based on established scientific distinctions, ideas that are strongly reified throughout society by the media, through government policy and by individuals who often embrace a racial identity. According to Omi and Winant (1986), "Everyone learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification...often without

obvious teaching or conscious inculcation. Race becomes 'common sense'" (p. 62). The seemingly consistent categorization of people based upon identifiable physical attributes reinforces the notion that these categories are objective groupings. This can be seen in the fact that students often resist the idea that "white" or "black" or the other racial classifications, as they are commonly conceived, are not objective, scientific, biological categories, but rather, that they represent notions that developed historically and that have no biological significance beyond the meaning attributed to them by the members of society. Enabling students to overcome this conceptual framework and to see the social embeddedness of racial understandings can be very challenging.

The social construction of race is, in many ways, more difficult to present to students than the constructed nature of other social categories such as that of gender. Unlike race, gender has the corresponding biological category of sex. While the biological categories of sex are evident, students can recognize how the roles and characteristics associated with the sexes are, in many ways, unrelated to biology. Thus, when addressing this issue, the biological categories of "sex" serve as a reference point from which to demonstrate the socially constructed categories of "gender." However, unlike the relationship between sex and gender, race has no parallel in terms of natural biological categories. Most students can easily understand the social nature of racial prejudice and stereotypes. Yet unlike explaining the biological category of sex and the social basis of gender, here we must convey the notion that not only are racial stereotypes the product of social processes, but that race, *itself*, is likewise socially constructed. In nature, no races exist. Nature only provides a vast array of physical variations that have

*I developed this technique while teaching at Santa Monica College. I would like to thank Kathy Shamey for making that possible. Please address correspondence to the author at the Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin, 1180 Observatory Drive, Madison, WI 53706; e-mail: obach@ssc.wisc.edu

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been used to construct categories that are ultimately ascribed meaning far beyond the hazy physical differences that serve as their basis.

The socially constructed nature of racial categories can, in part, be demonstrated by reviewing historical developments in which the commonly used racial categories were established in addition to showing the way in which those categories and their meanings have changed over time. Several useful accounts can be utilized for this purpose. In *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986), Michael Omi and Howard Winant focus on how political struggles have led to the redefinition of racial identity. Other scholars have drawn attention to the way in which economic conditions contributed not only to the development of racial identities, but also to the historical construction of racial categories themselves (Ignatiev 1995; Zinn 1980). Perhaps most useful for demonstrating the social construction of race is Ian Haney Lopez's *White by Law* (1996). Haney Lopez traces the legal rulings by courts in the United States that received the onerous task of separating the members of various ethnic backgrounds into the inherently ill-defined racial categories. He documents the court's reliance on shifting "scientific" designations of race and the ultimate embrace of a "common knowledge" standard, which in many ways only restated existing prejudices and ad hoc theories of race. In the process, many groups saw their race change with each court ruling.¹ Changes in Census categories and the vacillating claims of "raciologists" are also useful issues to raise in presenting the social nature of race and the absence of any natural biological significance of the concept.

The Social Construction of Race: Discussion Topics

Reviewing the historical conditions under which racial meanings were constructed and

¹For example, Asian Indians were determined by the courts to be non-white in 1909, white in 1910 and 1913, non-white in 1917, white again in 1919 and 1920, but non-white after 1923.

analyzing the factors that underlie racial and ethnic conflict are essential components of any treatment of this topic. However, before analyzing *why* racial categories were constructed as they were, it is first necessary to establish the point that race *is*, in fact, socially constructed. The exercise that I present in this paper offers one way of relating this concept. However, I have found it useful to first introduce discussion questions that challenge basic understandings of race.

One discussion strategy is to ask students to categorize ethnic groups of somewhat ambiguous race, such as those from the Middle East or the Pacific Islands, into the commonly used racial designations. Inevitably, disagreements arise. Some students argue that Middle Easterners are a race in themselves, while others insist that they are white, and still others believe them to be Asian based on their geographic origin. Categorizing Pacific Islanders raises similar debates, as do Latinos and those from Northern Africa. Many students have claimed that all Latinos are white, since they originated from Spain, while some disagree, claiming Latinos to be a separate race or something other than a race. In the face of such disagreement, students must examine the basis of their beliefs and recognize inconsistencies and ambiguities in all systems of racial classification.

In my experience, debate often ensues when students are asked to simply list the racial categories themselves, again revealing the subjective aspects of race. Many can identify the categories presented on the Census or other government forms, but some offer additional categories or alternative designations. One student insisted that Turks represented a distinct race and several have suggested that Jewish people are a race. Other students have claimed that there are four fundamental races specified by color (black, white, red, and yellow), and that everyone else is some combination of those. Some defend the Census categories, taking the government as the final arbiter. Others cite anthropological evidence. But most are

unable to offer any basis for their beliefs other than having "heard it somewhere."

International students can bring interesting perspectives to the discussion, as many other cultures do not often refer to the racial classifications commonly used in the United States. Many Asian students report little consideration of racial categories, instead focusing on ethnic differences among the Asian groups present in their countries of origin. Israeli students have reported that Ashkenazi and Sephardic are salient categories in their country, a distinction unfamiliar to most other students. A Moroccan student explained that while she was considered to be white in Morocco, here in the United States she was considered non-white. She also amazed the other students by explaining that in her homeland, variations in skin tone can result in a child being of a different race than her or his parents or that siblings within the same family may be considered to be of different races. Of course, these international perspectives require the presence of a diverse enrollment. My classes tend to be fairly large (35 to 50 students) and very diverse, however, some of these issues are likely to yield disagreements and fruitful discussions even in less diverse settings.

I have also found it useful for students to list the characteristics used to distinguish racial categories, thus generating an accounting of the commonly used features of skin color, hair, eyes, and so on.² While all believe these to be consistent measures of race, I then confront them with such seemingly arbitrary categorizations as a blond-haired, blue-eyed, fair-skinned "white" person from northern Europe with a black-haired, brown-eyed, dark-skinned "white" person of southern European descent.

All of these discussion techniques can introduce students to the concept of the

social construction of race. Each one challenges students to seek out and analyze the basis of their beliefs about racial groupings. Many realize upon reflection that the basis for the distinctions was never explicitly clear to them. As Omi and Winant (1986) point out: "Everyone 'knows' what race is, though everyone has a different opinion as to how many racial groups there are, what they are called, and who belongs in what specific racial categories" (p. 3). Students often believe that they are able to easily identify a person's race, yet most are never challenged to identify what it really means or to defend the underlying basis for the claim.

While these discussions can provide a foundation for understanding the socially constructed nature of race, more participatory exercises are often better at fostering a deeper understanding (Dorn 1989). Some educators have developed techniques for actively involving students in the analysis of these issues. Marisa Alicea and Barbara Kessel (1997) describe an exercise in which students circulate around the classroom guessing one another's racial or ethnic identity. Then they contrast these speculations with each individual's own chosen identity. Those contrasts demonstrate some aspects of the social character of race and ethnicity. However, students may still feel that, despite the varying interpretations of some individuals, "real" racial categories do exist, even if they are not universally recognized. While these other discussions raise questions about the social nature of racial identity, the following exercise demonstrates the lack of any biological foundation for racial categories. Thus, it reinforces the idea that race, itself, is a social construct.

The Social Construction of Race: A Graphic Exercise

In this lesson, I ask students to separate a

²This (in addition to the Latino question raised earlier) also provides an opportunity to distinguish between the concepts of race and ethnicity. Some students have suggested accent, language, or style of dress as a basis for determining race.

I ask them to consider what kind of accent I could have or which clothes I could wear that would lead them to believe that I am of another race. This introduces the notion that race is based on physical attributes while ethnicity is culturally rooted.

series of six patterned circles into two categories (the categories, it will later be revealed, are analogous to races). I print the circles on a small piece of paper and distribute them to each student in the class. The circles each have a unique pattern (see Figure 1), but some similarities exist among them. They vary by internal pattern (filled, empty, or lined) and the way in which the circle is divided (halved, quartered, or whole). Some are rotated in such a way as to blur their similarities. I instruct the students to divide the circles into two categories, A and B, by labeling each circle with the letter of its category. They do not have to be divided into two even categories of three and three, but can be separated into groups of four and two or even five and one. The key instruction is that each student divide the circles into two categories based on whatever characteristics they deem most significant.

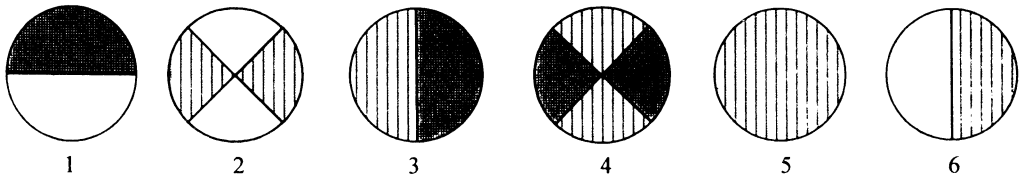
An important aspect of this exercise is that, based on the way in which the circles are patterned, there is no single "correct" way to divide them. Depending on the characteristic selected as most significant, the circles could logically be divided any number of ways, which is analogous to the inconsistent designation of racial categories in different societies. The possibility for various logical divisions is important in that students will most likely divide them according to different characteristics. Using these patterns, no more than two thirds of my

students have constructed the same categories. In some instances, they have offered three or more different categorization schemes.

Once students have created their categories, volunteers describe the logic behind the way in which they separated their circles. Reproducing the circles on the board enables the instructor to list the different categorizations offered by the students. In my experience, there have always been at least two different categorization schemes offered. However, if by chance every member of the class offered the same categories, the instructor could easily introduce others. When all the students have explained their categorizations, I reveal that the circles represent the human species and the categories that they have created represent races. I then use the circles to demonstrate the fact that the racial categories, themselves, lack any scientific or objective biological basis.

A good way to begin the discussion is to first ask students which categorization strategy is the right one. This is a trick question in that there is no definitively correct way of separating the circles. Each circle is unique and, depending on the characteristic selected, there are several "correct" strategies. If students did not realize this when they were creating their own categories, it becomes clear to them as other students explain the logic of their alternative classification schemes. After students understand this simple principle, I introduce the parallel

Figure 1. A Graphic Exercise for the Social Construction of Race



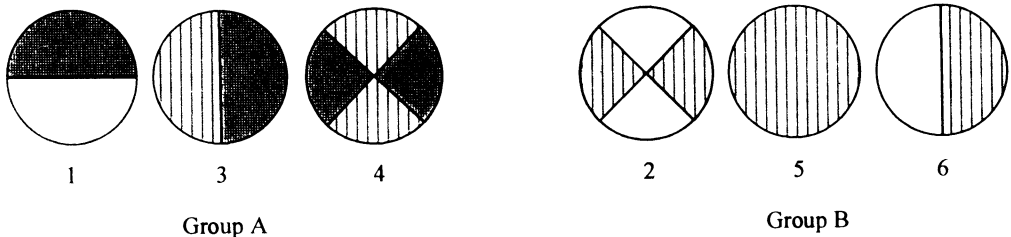
Students are asked to divide these circles into two categories. The circles are patterned such that there are several different ways to group them. Students create categories based on whether circles contain a completely filled area (grouping circles 1, 3, and 4 together) or, alternatively, whether they contain any completely unfilled area (grouping 1, 2, and 6). They also separate the circles based on whether they are divided in half (1, 3, and 6). Several other possibilities exist for creating categories depending on the characteristic one selects as most important. The characteristics of the circles are analogous to the variation in human physical attributes, and the categories that students construct are analogous to "races."

with humankind and the lack of any natural racial categories. The diverse range of human physical characteristics that could be used as a basis for creating racial categories are analogous to the different characteristics of the circles. Those human physical characteristics that are selected out as a basis for designating racial categories (i.e., hair texture, eye color, etc.) are just a few among many characteristics that *could* be used to distinguish groups, just as it is possible to conceive of several different circle categories depending on the characteristic that one chooses to emphasize. It is useful to reinforce this possibility by raising the fact that other cultures utilize alternative racial categories based upon different combinations of physical characteristics.

The non-scientific basis for creating categories can also be revealed by demonstrating the variability within the groups that students created. In my experience, the most common strategy used by students is to group the three circles that have some completely

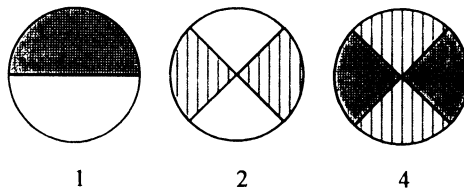
filled areas together (see Figure 2), leaving the remaining three as the other category. I ask the students who utilized this strategy if the quartered circle with the filled quarters (number 4) is more similar to the halved circle (number 1), which also contains a filled area, *or* to number 2, the other quartered circle (see Figure 3). In other words, in only looking at two quartered circles and one halved circle, would they still group them based on the fact that two contain some filled area? The answer has consistently been that they would not group them based on the fact that two contain some filled area, and that the characteristic of being quartered seems more salient. The two quartered circles, they acknowledge, seem to have more in common than the two containing some filled area. In essence, they are discovering that there may be some members of one category that actually appear more similar to members of the other category than to those with which they were initially placed. Again, I highlight the parallel to racial

Figure 2. Common Grouping of Circles



The most commonly used strategy is to group circles 1, 3, and 4 based on the fact that they all have a completely filled area, leaving the others to constitute the other group.

Figure 3. Alternative Grouping of Circles



In comparing circles from different groups, it is often acknowledged that some circles of one group are actually more similar to circles from the opposite group than they are to those of their own. In considering the categorization scheme depicted in Figure 2, students often acknowledge that circles 2 and 4, which had been placed in opposite groups, are more similar to one another than circles 1 and 4, which had been categorized together.

categories. As suggested above, some members of the "white race" more closely resemble some members of the "black race" than they do some other "white" people.

At this point, the racial definitions, which students initially see as objective biological classifications, begin to appear more fluid. The lack of any natural categorization can clearly be seen in the diverse ways in which students grouped the circles and in the inconsistencies in each strategy. While this simulation is carried out in the abstract and categories are created individually, it enables students to recognize that racial groupings are in no way naturally given, and that social processes ultimately underlie the creation of such classifications. As discussed earlier, it is important to dedicate time to reviewing the historical developments that led to the creation of racial categories as they are currently conceived. However, this exercise enables students to first overcome a significant mental hurdle to developing such understanding: the idea that racial categories themselves have no natural basis and that they are purely the product of social processes.

CONCLUSION

That students find the notion of the social construction of race difficult is often evident in the discussion around this issue. Reviewing historical developments related to the construction of race and raising questions that challenge students to defend racial categorization as a consistent and objective process can facilitate an understanding of the socially constructed nature of racial categories. However, in my experience, this participatory exercise has proven to be helpful in further clarifying this concept. Many students have told me about how much they enjoyed this exercise and how the visual presentation helped them to grasp the concepts. In a year-end survey, 96 percent of the students identified the exercise as useful in enabling them to understand that race is

socially constructed with 60 percent indicating that it was "very useful." Several students of mixed or ambiguous race have even thanked me for helping them to understand where they fit or why they fail to fit clearly in the racial typologies commonly used.

Students come to class with the notion that racial categories have objective biological significance. These categories are constantly reified throughout the culture. Given how entrenched these beliefs are, it is often difficult to get students to see beyond this through a discussion of race alone. By altering the context using this simple graphic exercise, students see the lack of any natural basis for creating categories among the circles. This insight can then be easily transferred to an understanding of race. Once the idea that nature determines race has been overcome, students can comprehend the principle of the social construction of race more readily.

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