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## How We Divide the World

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W. E. B. Du Bois wrote that the great problem of the 20th century is the color line, the division of men into races, but he also wrote that there are no biological races and no natural differences between humans marked by our system of racial classification. Racial differences, he maintained, are invented and yet no less real than any in nature.<sup>1</sup> How can this be? Can a category of our own making be a real kind?

Most realists say "no". Were there no biological races, race, on their view would be a myth or an illusion, and racial classification would have no place in science; for unless race is biological, 'race' is not a term of difference but only a trope.<sup>2</sup> My aim, in this paper, is to explain how a social category, a kind like race, can be both invented and real and how the distinction between blacks and whites can have a place in science without having one in biology.

## I

The rates of many diseases, including major infectious diseases, many cancers, diabetes, asthma and strokes are significantly different between races

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<sup>1</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, Signet, 1969, and "The Conservation of Races," in African-American Social and Political Thought 1850-1920, ed. Howard Brotz, Transaction Publishers, 1992, pp. 483-92.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Illusions of Race," in In My Father's House, Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 28-46, and "The Conservation of 'Race'," Black American Literature Forum, 23 (Spring 1989), pp. 37-60 and Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Race", Writing and Difference, University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 4-5.

in the U.S. today.<sup>3</sup> Blacks are seven times more likely to die of tuberculosis than whites, three times more likely to die of H.I.V.-A.I.D.S and twice as likely to die of diabetes.<sup>4</sup> The diseases are biological but the racial differences are not; How is this possible? How can a social position be a cause of a bodily ill? No mystery. Race affects income, housing and healthcare, and these, in turn, affect health. As a result, race can enter into many statistically robust biomedical generalizations even though there are no biological races.<sup>5</sup>

Social scientists routinely use racial categories in their research, for school attainment, marital status, labor force participation, arrest and conviction rates, residence and political affiliation, as well as morbidity and mortality, vary considerably with race in the U.S. By using this system of classification, by classifying their subjects by race, they discover that 60% of all female headed households are black, while only 18% are white or that the inmate population is 50% black, and only 35% white. Good taxonomy supports significant generalizations, and, in this respect, the social scientists' racial taxonomy is good.<sup>6</sup>

Racial generalizations, while only statistical, are broad; they cover most of American life, our health, wealth and politics. Moreover, racial differences in social or economic status or in rates of disease have a common cause; they

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<sup>3</sup>Oliver Fein, "The Influence of Social Class on Health Status: American and British Research on Health Inequalities," Journal of General Internal Medicine, Vol. 10 (October 1995), pp. 577-86.

<sup>4</sup>Andrew Hacker, Two Nations, Ballantine Books, 1992, pp. 225-36.

<sup>5</sup>See R. S. and David R. Cooper, "The Biological Concept of Race and Its Application to Public Health and Epidemiology," Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law, 11 (1986), pp. 97-116, and J. S. Kaufman, R. S. Cooper and D. L. McGee, "Socioeconomic Status and Health in Blacks and Whites: the Problem of Residual Confounding and the Resiliency of Race," Epidemiology, 8 (1997), pp. 621-28. Though there are no biological races, even genetic diseases can vary with race, for racial discrimination can distribute genetic as well as environmental risk factors (e.g., high doses of nuclear radiation as well as bacilli) unequally.

<sup>6</sup>William Whewell, The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences, Vol I, John Parker, 1847, p. 495.

arise from racial discrimination in employment, housing, education, health care and the criminal justice system. That is, much of the variance between the races in socioeconomic standing, as well as health and disease, is explained by past or present acts of discrimination based on race.

Social scientists routinely employ racial taxonomies in their research because their subjects routinely employ them in their lives. Had we in the U.S. not divided ourselves by race, there would be no differences in income or incarceration based on race for an economist or sociologist to discover. We divided ourselves where nature did not, and, though race is not nature's category, there are now many racial generalizations for the sciences to uncover; the system of racial classification routinely employed in the social sciences was unearthed rather than imposed by the sciences, for once invented by us, the category is here for a social scientist to discover.

Race is like crime. No one would be guilty of theft had we not invented or recognized the relevant laws or drawn any property lines. However, given that we did, given our history, social scientists divide us along discernible boundaries when they employ these categories in their descriptions or explanations of crime and punishment here.

We invented race and crime, but we did not invent them out of nothing; our categories have a history and rely on prior practices and understandings. Our current categories of swindler and racketeer depend on an advanced economy and system of economic regulation and our racial categories depend on active speculation about human origins and biological differences between human populations. There would be no bank fraud now had we not years ago established the Securities and Exchange Commission and regulated our financial markets, and there would be no blacks or whites had there been no theories of race in the 18th and 19th centuries or arguments concerning the

native varieties of the human species.<sup>7</sup> As Marx wrote in the Eighteenth Brumaire:

Men do make their own history, but do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.<sup>8</sup>

Social classifications are historical, for they rely on a society's having adopted a particular form of organization or body of belief in the past. As a result, invented does not mean optional or arbitrary. Our categories of race are our choice rather than nature's but are not chosen as we might choose a brand of soap or select a new password for our computers. We choose to divide ourselves by race under the circumstances of our segregated past and in response to our old efforts at racial science.

Some systems of classification used in the social sciences are simply myths or illusions. Psychologists in the late nineteenth century like William Krafft-Ebbing used categories of sexual deviance in their research. They divided their subjects into zoophiles and zooerasts, but these categories captured no generalizations, for they did not mark any biological differences between their subjects nor any differences their subjects had themselves invented; these categories were entirely the psychologists' invention; they were nowhere to be discovered, not in nature or in their subjects' own ways of dividing the world. As a result, these categories did not capture any generalizations about the subjects' behavior but only fed Krafft-Ebbing's imagination.

Subjects must invent their categories for researchers to discover them, but not all of their inventions are worth discovering or of any use to science. Here in

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<sup>7</sup>See Race: The Origins of an Idea, 1760-1850, ed. H. F. Augustein, Thoemmes Press, 1996.

<sup>8</sup>Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in Karl Marx: Selected Writings, ed. David McLellan, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 300.

the U.S., we divide ourselves by race and zip code but only race says much about us. Though we divide ourselves by both, research in the social sciences routinely sorts us into black or white but not postal zones, for while we differ significantly in school attainment, marital status, labor force participation, arrest and conviction rates by race we don't by zip code.<sup>9</sup>

Social scientists do not simply copy their subjects' categories; they often sharpen or redraw them. In Europe in the sixteenth century, people divided adults from children before the experts discovered childhood there, but having discovered the line between adult and child, the experts embellished the category and made the distinction between adults and children deeper.<sup>10</sup> Experts sorted 4-12 year olds together as a single age group in order to educate and protect them. Once the category was invented, information about children was collected and recorded, differences between children and adults were measured and policies or procedures for controlling or educating children devised. With the construction of children, came the discipline of children and the disciplines of childhood education, juvenile justice, pediatrics and child psychology.

## II

Were realism simply about generalizations, race would be real. However, the biomedical or social generalizations into which racial categories enter are local. Blacks are seven times more likely to die of tuberculosis in the U.S. but not in Great Britain. While in the U.S. 60% of all female headed households are black today, many fewer here were black fifty years ago. The rates of marriage

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<sup>9</sup>Zip codes would matter only if they matched differences in race or income; in such a case, the social scientist would try to discover why a high percentage residents in one postal zone were black and a low percentage in another.

<sup>10</sup>Phillipe Aries, Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life, tr. Robert Bladick, Alfred Knopf, 1962.

and disease vary with time and place, for, among other reasons, the categories do. An individual with sickle-cell disease can be black in the U.S, but white in Brazil, for the category of black or white is defined differently here and there.

Race does not travel. Some men who are black in New Orleans today would have been octoroons there one hundred years ago or no race at all five hundred years ago. Membership is decided by the population then. The racial categories used to classify a population must be cognitively accessible to the members. Since yesterday's races --octoroons and quadroons-- are not accessible to us today, they no longer divide us.

Biological categories are different; they needn't be accessible. Whether we are homo sapiens, male or Rh positive does not depend on how we categorize ourselves or what we understand of biology.<sup>11</sup> With sex and blood type, how people are classified, the category they belong to, does not depend on their self conceptions or on whether they recognize the category, while with social classification self-conceptions are central.<sup>12</sup> A group of people must divide themselves by race but not blood type in order to have one.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Michael Ghiselin and David Hull have argued, recently, that biological species are not spatiotemporally unrestricted classes. On their view, species are historical entities and defined by evolutionary lineage. According to their conception, two genetically identical organisms would belong to different species given different evolutionary histories. Thus, I am a human being here, but had I a genetically identical twin on some other planet, he would not be. See David Hull, "A Matter of Individuality," *Philosophy of Science*, 45 (1978), pp. 355-360. Given such a conception of species, species are more local than sex or blood type but not as local as race and, most importantly, membership does not depend on how the members divide themselves. Thus, even on the historical account of species, the category of species, unlike race, does not depend on the history of the category but only the history of the individuals within it.

<sup>12</sup>The social sciences employ some naturally occurring or biological (as against invented) categories in their research. Most, for example, classify their subjects by age and sex. However, the generalizations these categories capture depend on the social significance rather than the biological basis of age or sex, for it is not a person's mating type that affects how others treat her as much as what they make of it.

<sup>13</sup>I give the name 'internalism' to the doctrine that the categories used to classify a group of subjects must be cognitively accessible to them and 'externalism' to the doctrine that they need not be. Internalism is a reasonable doctrine for the social but not the biological sciences.

Because social categories or human kinds are local, generalizations in the social sciences are spatially and temporally restricted. However, according to conventional wisdom, categories or kinds are real only if they enter into spatially and temporally unrestricted generalizations.<sup>14</sup> By this measure, few categories in the social sciences are real. By this measure, race or marital status and gender are, in the U.S., no more real than postal zones or telephone area codes.

But such a conception of realism is too narrow. Though well suited to many kinds in the natural sciences, e.g., the periodic table of elements, the conception prevents us from construing any of our talk about the social world realistically.<sup>15</sup> Even if the categories routinely used in research in the social sciences are invented rather than natural, they are not all metaphysically the same. Some invented categories are more real and have more of a role in the social sciences than others.

### III

How is race real in the U.S. today? Though our racial categories capture some generalizations, the generalizations do not make the categories real. In the social sciences, real taxonomy is less about generalizations and more about regulations; we divide ourselves not by discovering our differences but by requiring ourselves to be different. What has divided blacks and whites in the

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<sup>14</sup>See, for example, David Hull, "Units of Evolution: A Metaphysical View," in Genes, Organisms, Populations, eds. Robert Brandon and Richard Burian, MIT Press, 1984, pp. 145-46, and Ronald de Sousa, "The Natural Shiftiness of Natural Kinds," Canadian Journal of Philosophy, XIV (1984), p. 575, who writes: "no interesting natural kinds can be determined without reference to laws" or Hilary Putnam who writes, in "Reference and Truth," in Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 3, p. 71, that a natural kind is a kind included in a systematic interconnected web of laws of nature.

<sup>15</sup>See David Ruben, "Realism in the Social Sciences," in Dismantling Truth, eds. Hilary Lawson and Lisa Appignanesi, Wedenfeld and Nicholson, 1989, pp. 58-75.

U.S. so deeply and for so long is not biology but norms of racial separation and difference.

Social categories, unlike those in the natural sciences, are normative. Kinds of elements or compounds in chemistry simply are, there is no way that a drop of water or bit of hydrogen ought to be. Water and hydrogen don't enter into our laws but into nature's laws. Race is different. In the U.S. in 1970 only 1.3% of all lawyers and 2.2% of all electricians were black. This statistic describes black employment because the norms used in training or hiring directed union leaders, law school officials or employers to exclude or prefer white applicants to black.

However, unlike laws of nature, norms are sometimes observed in their breach, and so in 1970 there were some blacks in each profession and trade; to say that blacks, as a rule, were not doctors, lawyers or university professors is to express a norm rather than a generalization. Some were, but, of course, not with impunity. Blacks on the "whites-only" train had to struggle to enter and fight to remain; the message from the white riders was clear: you don't belong here.

A naturally occurring category K is real if and only if K makes extrapolations of many discoverable traits possible across all K things. Such categories are obviously well made for scientific generalization.<sup>16</sup> Where K is a social category, extrapolation across all instances is often not possible, but normalization is, for if real, K prescribes how all K things ought to be. As result, these categories are well made for social regulation. With classification in the natural sciences, real categories sort individuals on the basis of what they are (by nature), while in the social, they sort on the basis of how, according to the subjects, they ought to be.

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<sup>16</sup>See David Wiggins, "Substance," in *Philosophy*, ed. A. C. Grayling, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 220-21.



Society's categories are different from nature's not in being less real but in being man-made. What is unique about humans, as John Dupre explains, is not that they contravene but that they create a causal order.<sup>17</sup> They create a causal order when they invent ways of dividing themselves and, once invented, conform to their own divisions. But the order they create is local and unstable and supports, at best, only restricted generalizations, and, as a result, the predictive power of real social categories is weak. Nevertheless, some have great explanatory power, for a social scientist can explain why blacks are under-represented in some trades or professions by citing a past or present rule or regulation which says to keep blacks out..<sup>18</sup>

There is order in both the physical and social world but, as Jon Elster argues, the source of the order is different.<sup>19</sup> In nature, constant conjunction ensures order, but in society order is based on norms and regulations. Societies are held together by the divisions drawn by their members. These do not ensure the constant conjunction of race and occupational segregation or childhood and child protection, but they require it. In the U.S. during Jim Crow, the laws of racial separation acted like cement in the southern States; they kept the blacks together and the blacks and whites apart; the races were never so real as when enforced by the law. With the elimination of these laws, the divisions between the races are less sharp and our racial norms more contested or disavowed and more often flouted. But race is still real here.

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<sup>17</sup>John Dupre, The Disorder of Things, Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup>In contrast, residents of a postal zone might also be under-represented in an occupation, but since the kind is not real, there are no regulations excluding them by zone and nothing for the scientist to explain; the correlation is spurious.

<sup>19</sup>Jon Elster, The Cement of Society: A Study of Social Order, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 287.

## IV

Race is not biological, but in the U.S. race is biologically rather than culturally transmitted. That is, the biological offspring of two members of race R are members of R, while the adopted children of two members of R are not unless their biological parents (or at least one of their biological parents) are. We can adopt children of other races, but, given our current system of racial classification, we do not make them members of our race by adopting them no matter how much of our culture we impress on them or how eagerly they embrace it.

Our system of racial transmission rests on the false belief that there is some genetic property, a race gene or gene cluster, that individuates the races and explains a number of alleged racial differences in behavior or morphology. There aren't such genes, but, nevertheless, the practice of classifying people by race in the U.S. proceeds as if there were. Our criteria for being black or being white rests on two biological beliefs, one false and one true.

(1) People of different races have different race genes.

(2) Biological parent pass their genes to their children, while adoptive parents do not.

The practice of basing race on one's biological rather than adoptive parents rests on (2), a truth. But the reason why (2) is taken to be relevant to race is a belief in (1), a falsehood.

Race in the U.S. is different from citizenship, for there are both naturalized and natural born citizens here but only naturally born blacks or whites. So while, some residents can convert from Canadian or Haitian to American citizenship, none can convert from black to white. Some can pass as black or white, but passing is not being. A naturalized American citizen does not pass as one, but is one.

Race is based on perceived rather than real biological differences, but there is a difference between race and perceived race, for a person who passes for black or white only passes. Were being and being perceived the same, race would be a myth or an illusion. Difference in health or socioeconomic standing correlate with perceived race, and were racial generalizations our only interest, the difference between race and perceived race, between being and passing, would not matter at all.

Our practice of racial sorting could change. We could conserve race and let go of biological transmission. Adopted children could be classified as the same race as their adopted rather than biological parent. In addition, we could develop procedures for renouncing our present race and becoming a naturalized member of another. The change in race could proceed in steps. First, you become a resident alien in your new race, and then, upon completion of a course of study or work on behalf of your new group, you become a naturalized member.<sup>20</sup>

Though, according to the present system, your racial identity is not chosen, the reality of race depends on what we (collectively) make of race and, in particular, whether we regulate or discipline each other by race. Should we divide but not regulate by race (think of zip codes), we would retain the races but not conserve their reality.

Issues of authenticity arise only where race is real. Were we to divide ourselves by race but not prescribe how the races should differ, there would be no reason to say that some blacks or whites are more authentic than others. To be authentically black, we need a norm or ideal of blackness -- a proper way to look and behave. Such comments invite controversy. Who decides the proper

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<sup>20</sup>Race has no essence, but division by race has so long been based on biological beliefs, e.g. (1) and (2) above, that naturalized race does not look like race at all, for were race culturally transmissible, race would become indistinguishable from ethnicity.

way? There is no distinctive or uncontested black or white experience or voice, but where many agree that blacks ought to favor blacks or whites favor whites, we can speak of authenticity, for, given such agreement, to mix is to be racially inauthentic and subject to disapproval.

Many people here identify themselves or are identified by race. Racial categories are commonly given in response to questions, reminiscent of Aristotle's queries, "Who is he?" or "What is he?". But people have no essence or single-identity; they have criss-crossing identifies. Each person belongs to many prominent or encompassing groups, and each category modifies or inflects the others. I am a white man, but to be so is not simply to be a man and white. My way of being white is different from my mother's or sister's. Human kinds or social categories are not simply additive. Moreover, though there are ways for whites to be white or men to be men, we often disagree over what they are or ought to be.

Race is an unruly system of classification, but there are rules, even though contested, for how blacks or whites are to look or behave. Individuals who flout them are black or white inauthentically. As Anthony Appiah has written:

The large collective identities that call for recognition come with notions of how a proper person of that kind behaves: it is not that there is *one* way that gays or blacks should behave, but that there are gay or black modes of behavior. These notions provide loose norms or models, which play a role in shaping the life plans of those who make these collective identities central to their individual identities.<sup>21</sup>

With systems of human classification reality is prescriptive, and, so, members of a real human kind can be more or less genuine or act more or less like they should. Not every human kind enters into talk of authenticity, but the real ones

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<sup>21</sup>K. Anthony Appiah, "Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction," in Multiculturalism, ed. Amy Gutman, Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 159. The emphasis is his.

do, for the forces that make them real support the distinction between authentic and inauthentic members.<sup>22</sup>

# V

In the U.S., the Bureau of Census, Office of Manpower and Budget and other federal agencies classify residents by race and collect racial statistics.<sup>23</sup> The categories vary from agency to agency, but a directive of OMB, Directive 15, is meant to guide every agency, and, according to this directive, race is different from ethnicity and there are four races in the U.S. today: American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black and White.<sup>24</sup> The statistics gathered by these federal agencies are employed in both the biomedical and social sciences.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Naomi Scheman, in a series of recent papers, writes about how social kinds are policed and the interests variously located people have in maintaining the boundaries and adjudicating authenticity; she explains how different kinds of people, e.g., women and jews, have different sorts of rules for membership. See, for example, her paper "Queering the Center by Centering the Queer," in Feminists Rethink the Self, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers, Westview, 1996.

<sup>23</sup>"Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reportings," in Statistical Policy Handbook, Office of Federal Statistical Policy and Standards, U. S. Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C., 1978.

<sup>24</sup>Hispanics, for example, are officially an ethnic group, and members can be of any race. The government's racial categories change; many of today's ethnic groups (Hindu and Mexican) were and two of today's four races (Alaskan Native and Pacific Islander) were not official races one hundred years ago.

<sup>25</sup>The federal directives guiding birth statistics are different; they assume that race is biologically transmitted. Until 1989, only infants with two white parents were officially white, while an infant with only one white parent took the race of the parent whose race was other than white. Beginning in 1989, the infant had the race of its mother. The change increased the number of white and decreased the number of non-white infants substantially. For a discussion of differences and changes in the official practice of assigning race see "The State of Federal Health Statistics on Racial and Ethnic Groups," Journal of the American Medical Association, Vol. 267, No. 2 (January 8, 1992), pp. 268-71. The changes in official racial classification are of great concern to epidemiologists, for to compare the relation between race and disease at different times and places, classification by race must remain the same. Such changes are equally devastating to social scientists, for their use of racial categories also assumes that the official categories they rely on are, for the most part, uniform. In short, though research in the social and biomedical sciences routinely employs racial categories and treats race as an independent variable in explaining biomedical or socio-economic differences within a population, the research usually relies

Directive 15 is controversial. The four racial categories are treated as exclusive and exhaustive, and the directive spells out the categories without defining them.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the four categories do not match the way many Americans think about race. Though there is no one way we divide ourselves by race, we often equate race and ethnicity or take Jew or Hispanic to be a racial category.<sup>27</sup>

The fact that the official categories do not match folk categories should be a special concern to social scientists, for when they classify their subjects by race, they routinely use the official categories, but the reality of those categories depends on public and not merely official recognition. If only the OMB divides Americans as black or white, then these races are illusions and use of these categories in sociology or epidemiology is not science but superstition.

But the OMB's categories are not simply their own inventions. Americans do divide themselves into a black and white race. Moreover, since the official categories enter into government's policies and regulations, and many Americans conform to them, folk and official categories merge. Had the OMB's four races begun as myth, by entering into the nation's civil and rights laws, system of affirmative action, housing and educational policies, and voting rights act, they would be myths no longer.

By employing categories like race in their research, social scientists help to conserve them, for even if they believe that racial classification is illegitimate, by dividing their subjects by race, they contribute to those racial divisions. In describing criminal arrest rates by race, for example, a sociologist herself

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on official categories which are not clearly or consistently defined or do not match the way subjects classify themselves by race.

<sup>26</sup> When filling out a census form, respondents are allowed to choose, but census takers sometimes decide to place the respondent into some other category.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth B. Mackay and Manuel de la Puente, "Cognitive Research on Designing the CPS Supplement on Race and Ethnicity," in Proceedings of the Bureau of the Census' 1995 Annual Research Conference, Rosslyn Virginia, 1996, pp. 326-337.

racializes crime and by correlating IQ and race, a psychologist deepens the line her subjects draw between blacks and whites in schooling and employment.

Whether a social category is real is separate from whether it is legitimate. A category is legitimate when it ought to be used to sort people into kinds. Race is real in the U.S. today, but assimilationists argue that it ought not to be. They maintain that given the individious use of racial classification, the harms or wrongs done in the name of race, people here ought not to divide themselves by race and that a race-blind is preferable to a race conscious society.

Du Bois claimed that race was real in the U.S. in 1897, but he also argued that it ought to be conserved --that, despite America's bleak racial history, more social advancement would come with racial classification than without it. The very issue marks the difference between the categories of the social and natural sciences, for no one debates whether she should conserve the periodic table or our four blood types. Since to persist, social divisions must be continuously recognized, whether to continue to recognize the races is a reasonable question.

Social scientists can employ racial classification in their research and remain silent on the questions of conservation and legitimacy, but their use of race does contribute to the racial consciousness of their subjects. Were we to conclude that race should not be conserved in the United States, we would want the social sciences to stop their practice of classifying us by race. Informing us that 60% of all female headed households are black, while only 18% are white or that the inmate population is 50% black, and only 35% white increases the likelihood that the racial future will be like the past even if that is no part of a social scientist's intention.

## Conclusion

There are no biological races, but that does not answer the question whether race is real or simply a myth. Race is real in the U.S. as long as we are race-conscious here. I have offered an account of realism that is friendly to the social sciences and explains how, with social or human kinds, with kinds like race, what is real is dependent upon rather than independent of how we think and talk about ourselves. Laws of nature do not make race real, we do. While the social sciences can explain how or why we so divide ourselves, we need to decide whether we ought to.