

Race is a Cultural Construction

Joshua Evans | ANTH 103 | Homework 3 | Due 2024-05-01

A cultural construction is a belief, behavior, or symbol that is ingrained into the culture such that it *feels* natural to those who are part of it – even if it is entirely fabricated (or constructed) by that culture. “**Race**” is one of the most impactful cultural constructions to have ever been developed, and still shapes all of our lives from the moment we are born. The concept of “race” has no basis in biology, and even when there is (erroneous) reason to believe there is some biological basis for race – it is rejected if the “science” doesn’t align with popular sentiment, as we will see.

With the above definition in hand, my goal is to identify where the documentary [The House We Live In: Race – The Power of an Illusion](#) supports the idea that race is a cultural construct. Most of the film discusses the consequences of this illusion, as the title implies, but there are a few significant arguments for the constructed nature of race that are worth pointing out. I will identify timestamps and include quotes from the film provided by the very convenient transcript, as well as other related sources.

Firstly, even in the nadir of our racist past, different regions could not agree on how to even define a person’s “race”. From 12:57 – 13:22, spoken by Dr. James Horton:

“And here's where it really gets interesting. You've got some places-- for example, Virginia.

Virginia law defined a black person as a person with 1/16 African ancestry. Now, Florida

defined a black person as a person with one eighth African ancestry. Alabama said, you're

black if you've got any black ancestry, any African ancestry at all.”

Dr. Horton then goes on to make the astute observation that, at the time, somebody's "race" depended entirely on where they happened to stand – which is anathema to the idea that race is somehow natural or obviously built into our being. If somebody's race was obvious, everyone should be able to agree on the definition of a race.

Next, the documentary points out the hypocrisy of the 1923 Supreme Court in their decision in United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind. Rather than quote from the film, I will quote directly from the opinion issued by Justice George Sutherland:

"But, in this country, during the last half century especially, the word ["race"], by common usage, has acquired a popular meaning, not clearly defined to be sure, but sufficiently so to enable us to say that its popular, as distinguished from its scientific, application is of appreciably narrower scope. It is in the popular sense of the word, therefore, that we employ is as an aid to the construction of the statute, for it would be obviously illogical to convert words of common speech used in a statute into words of scientific terminology when neither the latter nor the science for whose purposes they were coined was within the contemplation of the framers of the statute or of the people for whom it was framed."

This makes clear that even those who have a vested interest in perpetuating race and racism admit that it is defined entirely by "popular meaning" and has no biological or inherently obvious basis.

Finally, and most significantly, when we actually measure different people – accounting for financial status and wellbeing – there is no identifiable difference between "races".

From 50:22-50:55, spoken by Dr. Dalton Conley:

“When you make the right comparison, when you compare a black kid from a family with the same income and wealth level as the white kid from the similar economic situation, rates of college graduation are the same. Rates of employment and work hours are the same. Rates of welfare usage are the same. So when we're talking about race in terms of a cultural accounting of these differences or a genetic accounting of these differences, we're really missing the picture. Because we're making the wrong comparison.”

These “apples-to-apples” comparisons make clear that there is no identifiable difference between different “races”, which continues to be the ultimate argument for their constructed nature.

It’s clear (and becomes clearer all the time) that race is a cultural construction. The arguments listed above are just a few picked from this single related documentary. It should be remembered, however, that cultural constructs are still “real” to the people who live with them and, despite their metaphysical nature, very much impact people’s lives – which this documentary aptly demonstrates. As stated in the first words of the film:

“It is all around us. It is an illusion and yet profoundly real.”

Sources

The house we live in: Race—the power of an illusion. (2003). In Films On Demand. Films Media Group. <https://digital.films.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=239336&xtid=49736>

United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind, 261 U.S. 204 (1923). Justice George Sutherland. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/261/204/>