

Caste System Reinvented in the United States

Daeun Kim

Foothill College

Appearances of living organisms wildly vary in different parts of the world. These living organisms include everything from flowers to ants and humans. All species mutate in response to the changes in the environments they live in and the culmination of the process is referred to as evolution. In the case of humans, people who live closer to the equator and therefore receive more sunlight and more importantly ultraviolet radiation developed higher melanin levels than people who receive less intense sunlight. The higher melanin levels are a gradual genetic alteration where the resulting phenotype appears as more pigmented hair and skin color to which enables people to avoid and reduce the risks of UV radiation.

Similarly, the typical body size and shape vary depending on the climate they live in. Bergmann's Rule gives that species tend to be larger in cold climates while being relatively smaller in warmer places; this rule in conjunction with Allen's Rule that suggests that animals tend to have shorter appendages in colder climates explains the contrasting physical features of different races. Since it is easier to emit heat with larger surface areas, species that inhabit hot areas typically have longer appendages that increase surface area, and vice versa. This phenomenon can be observed with the morphed appearances of the genus *Lepus*, which is composed of hares and rabbits. *Lepus arcticus*, which the name suggests that they live in the Arctic, have noticeably shorter ears and limbs, and thicker layers of fat and white fur compared to the other species of the same genus such as the *L. californicus* and *L. alleni*. However, the *L. arcticus* is no smaller than the mentioned species, in fact, they are slightly bigger, and their thick coat of white fur serves to camouflage themselves in the snow, and the same goes for the other species that inhabit the deserts or mountains; their fur appears to be more brownish and darker, in response to their environments.

But we have to note that humans came up with the taxonomy and nomenclature for these species. Although speciation has occurred for the different species of *Lepus*, they can still be crossbred, resulting in hybrids. Such diversification in physical traits is beneficial to the survival of the entire species because it enables them to populate more land and thereby avoid extinction even when disasters strike. The same need for diversity in evolution applies for all species on Earth and humans are not exceptional, we have diversified as well and populated unnaturally large portions of the planet and developed societies, cultures, and finally, the concept of race. Humans are not that physically diverse in relation to other species. Unlike the previously mentioned *Lepus arcticus*, which has significantly improved chances of survival in extremely cold weather, all humans have against cold is shivering. *Homo sapiens* has not developed very effective thermoregulation strategies other than shivering and sweating, and the latter is not the best because it causes dehydration very quickly. While it is true that humans became functionally naked as they emigrated out of equatorial Africa and lost the need to retain heat, but rather found the necessity to release heat, some diversity was lost in the process (Jablonski & Chaplin, 2017). Therefore, the most significantly beneficial physical factor for survival that humans have developed is perhaps the resistance to solar radiation through ample production of melanin. But while the phenotype characteristics of racial diversity are definitely worth noting, the concept of race involves additional complex connotations. All races, some more than others carry preconceptions assigned to them beyond what the biological and physical traits provide.

If we were to put aside both positive and negative impressions and approach entirely scientifically, then race would be a biologically significant concept. However, connotations about races have deep roots. Not in the sense that racism has rational reasons behind it but more so regarding history. People are culturally educated and conditioned to have many beliefs and

assumptions in both their communities and societies and it is not surprising how many of such beliefs are irrational. However, when people do get a chance to test their presumptions and when their assumptions turn out to be true, racial connotations are reinforced, making it very difficult to convince them otherwise, that what they have experienced was an exception, not a rule. Constructing stereotypes for groupings of people, let alone race, is dangerous because it fosters a platform that encourages hate and bigotry in place of understanding and acknowledging diversity. Taking race out of its context of racism from conversations has become virtually impossible in this day so I would say that the lately defined concept of race is no longer a biologically meaningful concept. However, it is socially significant.

Racial biases have been developed throughout history with a purpose and Isabel Wilkerson (2020) explains this by revisiting the meaning of caste and introduces the concept into the ongoing racial discussion in the United States. She claims that race drives the caste system in the country, justifying existing social inequalities (Wilkerson, 2020). The so-called pillars of caste from India exist in the United States as well only with slight adjustments so that it does not read as outright segregation. The original first pillar of caste asserts that social stratification is beyond human control and is only natural. The United States has a modified version that sounds slightly more democratic: racial phenomena such as residential segregation are natural occurrences because people tend to “gravitate toward likeness” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Deep down, these two statements hold the same sentiment despite being from two very different countries. Bonilla-Silva (2018) in his book *Racism Without Racists* also claims that minimization is another popular defense tactic for racism, that discrimination is no longer a significant factor in today’s society, and that anyone can succeed if they work diligently, comparing the present to the times of slavery, and that minorities are only “playing the infamous race card” to take

advantage of past discrimination (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Similarly, American sociologist William Julius Wilson claimed that it was class, not race that mattered, unlike before (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). These are all efforts to maintain the caste—the current infrastructure that favors the privileged—or the societal hierarchy that deceitfully hides the still existing discrimination.

Another pillar suggested by Wilkerson is dehumanization and stigma that deny the individuality and dignity of people of the lower-castes. As stigma and prejudice are central to the racial debate in the United States, this is another pillar we share. Cultural stereotypes have existed ever since different cultures started existing. Many people who claim to not be racists assume that Hispanic people typically have relaxed work ethics—or that they are lazy workers—and that is where they find the explanation for the higher poverty rates for them. By internalizing the fault of higher poverty rates within that racial group, calling people lazy workers somehow turns into an attempt trying to reason a social phenomenon. Another common stigmatization is that Black people do not put much emphasis on education and therefore are more likely to be poor. According to Bonilla-Silva, Blacks and dark-skinned racial minorities are “about three times more likely to be poor than whites, earn about 40 percent less than whites, and have about an eighth of the net worth that whites have . . . housing, black-owned units comparable to white-owned ones are valued at 35 percent less” this displays the occupational hierarchy of the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). The American caste system—institutional racial discrimination—is certainly not identical to that of India, but is rather brushed off as the results of the market system and capitalist economy. Systematic inequality is minimized as individual problems regarding their levels of education or competence.

Then comes in the pillar of inherent superiority and inferiority of castes. This is what takes features that are purely biological and turns into a channel for racialism. People in the 19th

century were eager to find out evidence that different races had contrasting brain capacities and suggested that intellectual abilities followed suit. They wanted to find a scientific basis that clearly demonstrated the inferiority and therefore legitimized segregation. However, modern science has denied a direct correlation between brain size and intelligence in the last century. German-American neuroscientist Christof Koch wrote that the IQ of males and females are not that different despite the 150 grams heavier brain in males, similarly, Homo neanderthals had brains that were 150 to 200 cubic centimeters larger than modern humans, but did not exhibit intelligence levels above humans, and finally, even if we look at the brain-to-body ratio, we are outmatched by shrews—small mammals that look like moles—the human brain-to-body mass is only about 2 percent where the shrews have a 10 percent ratio (Koch, 2016). The compilation of his findings leads to the conclusion that bigger brains do not result in higher intellectual abilities, which directly rejects what the 19th-century racists were claiming. However, some still argue about the intellectual superiority of certain races because we do not know what exactly causes differences in such abilities.

In addition, directing beauty standards is another common strategy in derogating racial minorities. We think society has come above the racist marketings like Cook's Lightening Soap and no longer market through creating a hierarchy within skin color and hair texture but advertisements from Dove and Nivea still receive criticisms that condemn their racist campaigns. Although these companies have apologized and claimed that they support racial diversity, the repetitive accusations they get for racism makes their supposed mistakes not so benign. Such campaigns enforce the caste system, often resulting in internalized ideologies of white supremacy for people of color as well, which is the optimum result when enforcing the particular inherent superiority and inferiority caste.

To sum up, race in modern society has lost its biological focus and is more directed towards cultural and hierarchical stratification. Racial diversity still is a living proof of evolution and an indication that marks divergences of a species. But, as mentioned earlier, race is a socially constructed concept and therefore misses the key markers of evolutionary divergences. Skin and hair color typically determines the races of individuals and this ignores other genetic information that may not have appeared as phenotypes. Nonetheless, race has been a signifying categorization that influenced many aspects of human lives and beliefs, often weaponized for and against different races. In short, race omits much important information about the biology of people and thus is not that meaningful biologically. Similarly, the invisible caste system of the United States is also a force that is weaponized for and against people and is prevalent in today's society.

Reference Page

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2018). *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Jablonski, N. G., & Chaplin, G. (2017). The colours of humanity: The evolution of pigmentation in the human lineage. *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B*, 372, 1-5.

Koch, C. (2016). Does brain size matter?: Turns out some species are better endowed than we are in key cognitive regions. *Scientific American*. Retrieved from <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/does-brain-size-matter1/>

Wilkerson, I. (2020). *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. New York: Random House.