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Race as a Social Construct Essay

Defining the word “race” is much more difficult than simply opening a dictionary. There exists a seemingly endless amount of definitions, many of which disagree with one other. One definition may stipulate that race is purely biological, while another may argue that society defines ones race. To answer the question of which idea is correct, it is necessary to start from the beginning.

According to “Is Race Real?” during a period of time from 1880 to 1920 massive waves of European immigrants came to the United States. These newcomers were not easily accepted, and in many cases were seen as members of separate races. The racism of the immigrants by those living in the United States at this time is ironic. Many of those who engaged in the racism were also of European origin, the only difference being they were from a different location in Europe. Peoples who today are popularly considered “white” were seen during this time as distinct and inferior.

The example above clearly demonstrates that “race”, as a term, is adaptable and changeable. Biological traits encoded into human DNA are not subject change. Knowing this, it is inconceivable to imagine race as having any biological ties whatsoever.

In attempting to clearly define race, it is necessary to understand its difference between that of another term: ethnicity. Generally, people refer to race and ethnicity as going hand in hand, both with identical meanings. This is not true from a sociological perspective, nor does it make logical sense. Ethnicity tends to be a category that people choose for themselves. Hispanic, Asian, and Caucasian are a few examples. Defining ones ethnicity gives a chance to break away from societal views and define oneself and one sees fit. While ethnicity may also be a social construct just as race, the difference lies in being able to clearly define oneself. Clearly defining ones race seems, at the moment, a distant dream.

“Is Race Real?” states that many scientists have hoped to make this dream a reality, and have made considerable leaps in the last few decades. Scientists have started to argue that even if surface physical features are not a reliable indicator of race, genetic characteristics reveal the existence of human racial groups. Companies analyze clients’ DNA to estimate the racial makeup of their family tree. The flaw with this method is that before looking at a customer’s DNA sample, scientists have to decide which characteristics of the DNA will be indicative of which kind of racial ancestry. In other words, the scientists themselves, who are prone to bias, must define each race before it can be looked at. The “definitions” used while logical, are not always correct.

Much of what race is currently considered is what is easily visible to the human eye, however not everyone sees the same. In a recent episode of Radiolab, a study was conducted to illustrate this very point. David Sharron, a first year teacher at Facing History Charter School, put together a simple guessing exercise for his class of freshman students. Eight faces were projected onto the wall of the classroom, and the students attempted to agree on what race the people were by merely looking at the face. Only minutes into the exercise the students began to argue about the faces. One student saying the picture was obviously African American; while another saying it was Asian. By the end of the study, the students only got three out of the eight faces correct. This simple study shows race is subject to change based upon the situation, and the person. Later in the day, during lunch time at the school, the Radiolab reporter had lunch with the students. The reporter asked the students what race they considered themselves, and the responses were surprising. Most students responded with the name of a country, not a racial distinction such as black or white. The responses of the students offer evidence yet again that race is a social construct, not biological.

The idea of race is changeable and adaptable, and always has been. For example, South Koreans’ idea of race today reflects a mixture of ideas brought by U.S. military personnel stationed there since the mid-twentieth century. This is true of any two people from different cultures interacting with each other on a regular basis. As long as humans continue to communicate socially, race will continue to evolve and change; no biology required.