

Is Race Real?

Ebony Vandross

“There is no such thing as race. None. There is just a human race – scientifically, anthropologically. Racism is a construct, a social construct... it has a social function, racism.”¹

No such thing as race? Then what does it mean? Is it biological? Sociological? Psychological? Is it ascribed? Assigned? Achieved? What does race mean to Mariah Carey? To Tiger Woods? To Barack Obama? To me?

Racial categories have no basis in science. As philosopher Paul Boghossian states, “This thing could not have existed had we not built it.”² In other words, race is a social construct, which means that people have decided what it is and what it means for millions of people worldwide.

Throughout history, there have been plenty of scientists who tried to make the case that there is a scientific basis to classifying people by race. Nine-

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teenth century natural scientist Samuel George Morton popularized the idea that white people are more intelligent because their skulls are larger and therefore “hold” more intelligence.³ In 1994, researchers Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray argued that whites generally have better jobs and more wealth because they are naturally more intelligent than blacks.⁴ And in 2014, science journalist Nicholas Wade published a book where he argued that differences in economic success are in part due to race.⁵

Many scientists criticize these arguments, claiming that proponents of racial difference related to intelligence complete their studies under unconscious racial bias. In other words, these scholars already believed there was a natural hierarchy between the races, and their (sometimes questionable) research only serves to support their already biased notions.

Other scientists, such as Stephen Jay Gould claim that there were “many errors piled together into Morton’s experiments.”

But, he says, “the most important error is the primary fallacy of categorization. To think that intelligence, which is a word we use to encompass all these hundreds of different cognitive skills, to even think that ... it’s one quantity which can be measured in terms of the cubic centimeters of some stuff you have in your head, it’s such a naïve notion.”⁶

Another scientist, Alan Goodman, states that you need commonly measurable variables to produce credible scientific findings. About race, he asks, “Where is your measurement device? We sometimes [measure] by skin color... [But] what’s black in the U.S. is not what’s black in Brazil or what’s black in South Africa. What was black in 1940 is different from what is black in 2000. ... In 1920, as a Jew, I was not white then, but I’m white now.... There’s no stability and constancy.”⁷

Consider, for example, some well known people who defy easy categorization.

Professional golfer Tiger Woods, who is one-fourth black, one-fourth Thai, one-fourth Chinese, one-eighth white, and one-eighth Native American, has expressed that “black” does not sufficiently describe his identity: “Growing up, I came up with this name. I’m a ‘Cablinasian.’ And in reference to checking both African American and Asian on school forms, Woods says, “Those are the two I was raised under and the only two I know. I’m just who I am... whoever you see in front of you.”⁸

Performing artist Mariah Carey has also described her identity in more specific terms: “Ethnically, I’m a person of mixed race. My father’s mother was African-American. His father was



from Venezuela. My mother is Irish. I see myself as a person of color who happens to be mixed with a lot of things..." However, amidst controversy surrounding her description, coupled with her management initially misrepresenting her as "a white girl who can sing," Carey later stated that she is "a black woman who is very light skinned."⁹

And finally, President Barack Obama, who is of multiethnic background states: "[I'm] An African-American, but not grounded in a place with a lot of African-American culture."¹⁰ In his memoir,

And what about me? I claim the identity of Black-American.

he noted that "when people who don't know me well, Black or white, discover my background (and it is usually a discovery, for I ceased to advertise my mother's race at the age of twelve or thirteen, when I began to suspect that by doing so I was ingratiating myself to whites), I see the split second adjustments they have to make, the searching of my eyes for some telltale sign. They no longer know who I am."¹¹

And what about me? Although I don't believe in race as a biological concept, I claim the identity of Black-American. I do so because I recognize the significance of race as a social marker, and that the experiences of racial groups are unbalanced. At the age of 11, I was called a racial slur. I was vacationing with my family and one day while playing outside with a friend, a young white girl shouted, "Why are you two n----- on our property?" I felt shock and confusion, and my friend and I went inside and told our parents.

Their reaction surprised me because they simply sighed and shook their heads, calling the girl "ignorant." At the time, I didn't understand their apparent indifference, but as I got older they shared stories about growing up in the very segregated southern United States. They told us about being terrified to integrate into white schools, harassment, and discrimination on the job, and why their own parents and grandparents kept guns in the house to protect themselves from violent racists. To them, slurs were mild.

My identity as a Black-American woman has shaped my life experiences, and will continue to be an important part of my journey. That little girl who insulted us may not have known about the lack of "science" behind race, but her casual use of such a hurtful word communicated the superiority she felt as a white person. Thus, although I do believe that race is a social construct and that it is often used to oppress some and benefit others, I am also aware that the issues I face are consistent with the experiences of other black Americans, and I choose to join the fight to improve the status of black and other marginalized groups.

Endnotes

1. Toni Morrison (3:35): <www.cc.com/video-clips/9yc4ry/the-colbert-report-toni-morrison>.
2. "What is a Social Construct?" Paul A. Boghossian: <philosophy.fas.nyu.edu/docs/IO/1153/socialconstruction.pdf>.
3. Morton, Samuel George. *Crania Americana: or a comparative view of the skulls of various aboriginal nations of... America*. J. Dobson, 1839.
4. Herrnstein, Richard J., and Charles Murray. *Bell Curve*, Simon and Schuster, 2010.
5. Wade, Nicholas. *A troublesome inheritance: Genes, race and human history*. Penguin, 2014.
6. Stephen Jay Gould: <www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-01-09.htm>
7. Alan Goodman: <www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-01-07.htm>
8. Younge, Gary. "Tiger Woods: Black, White, Other." *The Guardian*. 28 May 2010. <www.theguardian.com>.
9. Brockes, Emma. "Mariah Carey: 'I Try Not to Be a Jerk. I Really Do,'" *The Guardian*. 9 Oct. 2009. <www.theguardian.com>.
10. Maron, Marc. "Episode 613: President Barack Obama." *WTF with Marc Maron*. 22 June 2015. www.wtfpod.com
11. Obama, Barack. *Dreams from my father: A story of race and inheritance*. Canongate Books, 2007.

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Do Races Differ? <partners.nytimes.com/library/national/science/082200sci-genetics-race.html>

Bill Nye the Science Guy talks about race: <bigthink.com/think-tank/bill-nye-race-is-a-social-construct>