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# The Social Construction of Difference: Race, Ethnicity, Nationality and Religion

‘You deserved that – you’re one of them!’

### Learning aims

- To understand how the idea of race and racial differences came into being. This provides a conceptual base with which to understand some of the ideas discussed in later chapters. It also provides a cognitive basis from which to begin changing your own prejudices and biases.
- To cultivate critical professional awareness by understanding how our professional ancestors contributed to the creation of race.
- To appreciate that the politics of inclusion and exclusion is inherent in the construction of race.
- To reflect on the construction of your own racial identity.

The previous chapter discussed the psychological impact of being subjected to hostility on the basis of a perceived 'difference'. These 'differences' are often believed to be 'natural' – some groups are thought to be 'naturally' different from others – different in nature, essentially different. These 'differences' are neither natural, nor essential, but rather ideas that have become ingrained in our way of seeing the world.

There is, for example, nothing 'natural' about race. The idea that the human race can be sub-divided into different races of people who are biologically alike and different to people of other races is nonsense. However, until recently, most people were brought up with this idea and so have a vague understanding that racial differences are biological. They are not.

This can be difficult to understand given that the colour of your skin, the texture of your hair and the shape of your eyes are clearly biological attributes, and so this chapter explains the social construction of race at some length. It ends by clarifying the distinctions between race, ethnicity, nationality and religion.

## The invention of race

Modern race theory began as European colonialists came into contact with people in different parts of the world. Naturalists – philosophers of the natural world and early scientists – categorised people on the basis of where they came from and what they looked like. The differences that these early – and subsequent – race theorists observed were not a mere description of what was there, but a matter of perception. We are so used to thinking in terms of race, that racial differences can seem self-evident. They are not; they depend upon perspective, as evidenced by the fact that different observers saw from 2, to 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 15, 16, 22, 60 and 63 different races, or to use the terms more prevalent at the time, 'types', or 'species'.

Five of the racial categories that are commonly used today when studying human migration and identifying human remains – Caucasian, Mongoloid, Malay, Negroid and American Indian – were created (and I do mean 'created' rather than 'identified') by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach between 1793 and 1795; Australoid was added in the 1940s, and the Capoid race (i.e. the Khoi and San people of Southern Africa) was added in 1962.

Despite the air of scientific authority that these categorisations have conferred on the concept of race, racial categorisation remains a matter of perception. In Britain, 'Asian' usually means that you, or your forebears, come from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka or another country in South Asia, whereas in the USA 'Asian' usually means that you, or your forebears, come from China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines or another country in East Asia.

How race is assigned has varied over time and place. In some countries, it is or was based upon heritage, and in other countries upon appearance. The same person may still be considered black in one place and white in another. It is one thing to understand this cognitively, and another thing to experience a challenge to your perception. You may find the following exercise disconcerting.

### Reflective exercise

Listen to: <http://stateofthereunion.com/pike-county-oh-as-black-as-we-wish-to-be/>, and/or do an online search for images of William Cross, the African American scholar whose work on developing a positive black identity is introduced in Chapter 3.

Professor Cross is indeed the white-looking man with a nose so sharp it could cut paper. If you came across the YouTube video of him giving a Distinguished Psychologist Address (Fairchild, 2012) and got past the first few minutes of acknowledgements, you will have heard him talking about looking different to the rest of his family, along with whom he grew up, as black, under 'Jim Crow', the laws that segregated black and white people after the abolition of slavery in the USA.

The 'one drop rule' decreed that anyone who had any African ancestry was black (or, rather 'negro', since Cross and other activists were yet to replace the term with 'black'). In Britain, race is determined by what somebody looks like – their racial phenotype. Having 'negro blood' did not make Cross 'look black' and looking white did not make him white. Race is a social experience, not a biological fact.

Shah (2019) confirms that the family in the state of the reunion audio file suggested above, all of whom have pale skin and red hair, have birth certificates that say that they are black because of the 'one drop rule'. Most of the family consider themselves black and are considered to be so by others, yet one of the daughters considers herself to be white, and, when at school in another town, is considered by others to be white. 'Race' is a community perception.

Race theory was not merely a matter of arranging people into categories: these categories had – and still have – social meaning. Early naturalists arranged the 'races' or 'types' into hierarchies of humanness, civilisation and proximity to the Divine. Lives were valued accordingly: human over the bestial; civilised over the barbaric; Christian over heathen.

The model for this racial hierarchy – the medieval notion of a 'Great Chain of Being' in which all of Creation is related in a strict hierarchy with God at the top, followed by angels, people, animals, plants and rocks at the bottom – was influential in race theory. The idea that non-European peoples were a missing link in the Chain between human beings and animals was used to justify the brutalities of colonisation, slavery and genocide. A 'savage' was not fully human. Indigenous peoples were hunted as animals are, and it was perfectly acceptable to kill a slave just for the hell of it until the Catholic Church, and some time later, the Protestant Church, eventually conceded that slaves (who were, by then, exclusively African) also have souls, and are therefore human.

Many naturalists thought that the different races they had identified must have different origins, and in fact, the word 'race' comes from the Latin for 'origin'. The naturalist and zoologist Georges Cuvier, for instance, thought that Adam and Eve were Caucasian and that the other races came into being after survivors from

a major catastrophe fled in different directions and subsequently developed in isolation from each other (Jackson and Weidman, 2005). Others, including Charles Darwin, thought that all human beings had a common origin. Even after Darwin's theory of evolution had become widely accepted, the debate continued, the question becoming whether we all became human at once or whether different races emerged from different ancestors. The multiple origin theory has not entirely gone away. Carlton Coon (Coon, 1962), the President of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists argued, as recently as 1962, that different races evolved into *Homo sapiens* separately, and the idea is authoritatively touted on the Internet.

Race theorists became interested in *how* races differed as well as *why* they differed. Skulls were measured by craniometrists; body parts measured by anthropometrists; and bodily fluids analysed by serologists. Race became about biology. The idea that difference was innate and could be located in our blood – or skulls – had been growing in strength since the end of the Middle Ages. The idea that children had the same 'blood' as their parents laid the foundation for ideas about the 'purity' of 'bloodlines'. These ideas racialised hatreds that had previously been about religion. The Spanish Inquisition, for instance, didn't care if a Jew had converted to Christianity – they still had to prove the 'purity' of their 'blood' (Hannaford, 1996).

## Slavery and the birth of white privilege

The idea that people who look different *are*, in some way, profoundly different was instrumental in racialising slavery. Until the invention of race, those who worked in the plantations and grand houses of the Caribbean and the USA were mainly from Ireland, Africa and Scotland. Some were indentured labourers, who, in theory at least, were free to leave once they had worked off their debt, and some were slaves. As rebellion fomented amongst the workers, the plantation owners adopted a divide and rule policy. The plantation owners cast the Africans as different, as inferior – and the other workers as superior because they belonged to the new legal category of 'white'. White people could no longer be enslaved. Only Africans could be slaves.

The white workers on the plantations went up a rung as an even lower rung was put beneath them. They were given small privileges, positions of authority, and were encouraged to see themselves as superior – to stop identifying with the Africans with whom they worked and to identify instead with the white landowners for whom they all worked. White privilege came into being as some workers gained status simply because they were white. The African workers on the other hand lost what few rights they had ever had, including any eventual hope of freedom, either for themselves or their children. By the mid-eighteenth century the idea that all black people, whether a slave or not, were inferior to all other races had taken hold.

Alliances changed as indentured workers identified as white rather than as exploited. The plantation owners, whose huge economic advantage had been built on the backs of these indentured workers, quietened rebellion by dividing

white from black. The economic privilege was still with the plantation owners – there was no economic or social equality built into this new concept of ‘white’. The only privilege that the white workers actually had was the belief that they were superior to black people, and the authority to express this belief with violence. The plantation owners had consolidated their power by creating a middle management to enforce obedience.

### Modern Slavery

Slavery and indentured labour is still very much a part of the world’s economy. There are more slaves today than ever before – over 40 million (Global Slavery Index, 2019). Enslaved labour still picks our cotton (cotton production almost always involves slavery at some point). Enslaved children mine the minerals used in our electronic devices (and the profits are often used to fund civil wars). It is, if you live in Britain, entirely possible that you’ve eaten eggs collected by a slave, particularly if it was a ‘Happy’ egg, or, even more ironically, a ‘Freedom’ egg (Lawrence, 2016). Nail bars, car washes, construction, agriculture, food processing, the sex trade and the care industry are all frequent exploiters of slaves (Anti-Slavery, 2019).

Will Kerr, the director of the National Crime Agency says that the number of modern-day slaves in the UK (including indentured workers) is likely to be tens of thousands and that, in contemporary Britain, many of us are likely to come into contact with someone who is enslaved (Lawrence, 2016). As counsellors we should be particularly good at noticing if someone seems fearful, depressed, submissive and withdrawn. Of course, this does not necessarily indicate that they are being kept against their will, but if the person also allows someone else to speak for them, if they avoid making eye contact, look unkempt, malnourished and/or show signs of physical restraint or injury, your suspicions should be aroused. It is easy to do something if you suspect that someone is being forced to work against their will. Just go to [www.modernslaveryhelpline.org/report](http://www.modernslaveryhelpline.org/report) and fill in a form. It doesn’t take long and you don’t have to give your name if you don’t want to.

However, helping, or trying to help, always happens within a larger context. Before taking any action, it may be wise to find out how the Home Office is currently treating those who have been enslaved. This has, recently, been very badly (Bulman, 2019a, 2019b). The help that we can give another, whether in therapy or in another context, is limited, or even sabotaged, if the larger environment is hostile. Addressing this hostility by supporting campaigns (to, for instance, not send freed slaves back into the hands of gang masters) or taking other forms of political action that help make the environment less hostile is an appropriate and necessary aspect of therapeutic work.

### Race and psychology

Once in the blood, race entered the heart and mind. As skulls were measured, theories were constructed about the relative innate intelligence and morality of the different races. Race became a matter of psychology as well as biology,

Blumenbach concluding that ‘negroes’ were intelligent and intellectually sophisticated (Blumenbach, 1865) and that differences in skull shape could be explained by cultural practices such as swaddling babies to a board. This aspect of his thought was discarded, whilst his research measuring skulls was foundational to developing race theory and still provides the racial categorisations we use today.

The idea that race is biological became the idea that racial differences are genetic. The Eugenics Movement facilitated the development of this idea from the 1880s onwards. The Eugenic agenda aimed to preserve ‘purity’ of ‘blood’ and so give ‘the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing over the less suitable’ (Galton, 1883). It was also concerned with intra-racial purity, and so 30,000 people who were considered defective in some way were sterilised in the US. The Holocaust took Eugenics a step further. Jews were legally defined by ‘blood’ in the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, as were Roma and Poles and ‘Asiatic’ peoples of the Soviet Union, who were killed in vast numbers during the Holocaust – along with disabled people, gay people, inter-sex and transgender people, political prisoners and Jehovah’s Witnesses (who refused to swear an oath to the regime or perform military service).

Although deeply unfashionable after the Holocaust, this determination to prove that intelligence is determined by race persisted into the twentieth century, with the publication of psychologist Richard Herrnstein and the political scientist Charles Murray’s *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* in 1994. Herrnstein and Murray argue not only that intelligence is affected by race, but that since intelligence is (in their view) inherent, any efforts to improve educational opportunities for those not doing so well is a waste of resources, a claim robustly debunked by a host of social and political theorists.

## The uses and abuses of research

There is a complex relationship between research and the society in which it is produced and used. The early European naturalists generally got their data not from direct contact with the people they were studying, but from those involved in the slave trade – and those naturalists were instrumental in sustaining that trade. These researchers varied in the theories they set forth and in the degree of hostility they expressed towards other peoples. Some of them held other peoples in high esteem, yet their work was instrumental in developing the foundation of racism – the idea of racial difference.

Darwinism is a particularly telling example of the relationship between scientific theory and the time and place in which it is produced and consumed. Darwin’s biographers, Desmond and Moore (1991) suggest that his work was heavily influenced by his strongly abolitionist background and by his horror of what he had seen of the aftermath of a slave rebellion while voyaging on *The Beagle*. The attitudes that Darwin brought to his scientific work were, I imagine, also influenced by his having had a black teacher. John Edmonstone taught taxidermy at the University of Edinburgh – and was a freed slave. Taxidermy, which proved to be an indispensable skill in his later research, was not a part of Darwin’s medical studies at Edinburgh, but he had the foresight to arrange private lessons with

Edmonstone, who lived a few doors away. Darwin says that they spent many hours in conversation and that he considered Edmonstone, whom he describes as intelligent and very pleasant, a close friend.

Darwin's *The Origin of Species* argues that all human beings have a common origin, yet by the late 1860s, his theory of evolution was being used to support the idea that we have *different* origins (Stephan, 1982). Darwin responded by using *The Descent of Man* to argue that all human beings have one common human origin. The biological similarities between the different races were, he said, too great for the idea that we have different origins to be plausible; and the physical characteristics used to define race were superficial, and not due to evolution. There is no sudden lightening or darkening of skin tone as one moves across the globe. It is gradual. Darwin thought human variation to be so diverse that it would be impossible to ever fully systemise it – and that there was little point trying to do so as it is not of any scientific significance.

However, Social Darwinists transposed Darwin's theory of biological evolution onto the social world and in doing so replaced the old divinely ordained racial hierarchy with one that sounded scientific (but isn't). It was not Darwin, but the Social Darwinist Herbert Spencer who, in 1874, first coined the phrase 'survival of the fittest'. He suggested that human societies operate according to the principles of natural selection just like biological species. He saw racial conflict as the key to social progress because, as he saw it, conflict allowed the more powerful to overwhelm and drive out those less powerful (Greene, 1963).

I said, in a previous publication (Tolan with Cameron, 2017), that science did not discover race – it invented it. This is an over-simplification. Science serves, and is served by multiple political, economic and social agendas. The relationships are complex. Science is both misused and misunderstood. The relationship between race and medical science is currently entering a new chapter. The outcome is yet to be decided.

## Race is still not biological

Having shied away from race for several decades after the Holocaust, science has finally announced that race is *not* biological. The first human genome researchers stood with President Clinton as he announced, in 2000, there is no biological foundation to race. The message was clear and decisive. It is, then, potentially confusing that race is now at the top of genome researchers' agenda. This has happened for two reasons. Firstly, genome researchers have identified 'clusters' of genomic similarity that relate to geographical areas, and they are looking for a term to use for them. Some researchers think that 'race' is as good a term as any. When race theory started out, the term 'race' was used synonymously with 'type', and this is the usage that these scientists are using when trying to re-introduce the term. Others feel that using the term 'race' in this way is not only confusing, but that it sweeps the history and social legacy of race theory under the carpet.

The second reason that the term 'race' is being used in genomic research is that genome researchers are in a very good position to tackle racial inequalities



in health – and are very keen to do so. Race is not a scientific reality, but science was instrumental in making it a social reality. Race may be a scientific fiction but it is very real in the sense that it impacts what sort of housing you are likely to live in, how likely you are to be taken into care as a child, your experience of education, how you are treated by the police and the courts, the kinds of jobs you might be welcomed into (or not), how likely you are to be given a psychiatric diagnosis and how long you're likely to live.

Race also affects what you are likely to die of. This is partly because the genetic mutations that cause particular diseases, or a vulnerability to particular diseases, are acquired through genetic inheritance. 'We all inherit some genetic variations from one or both parents, and if a relatively small population of people, with all their genetic variations, gets separated from other populations, they'll pass down those variations to their descendants. Eventually, those particular variations become more common in that particular population and particular diseases become more common in particular populations' (Cameron, 2017: 130). This is different to biological race theory. Genomic research does *not* support the idea that the members of any particular race share some biological feature that makes them alike and different to the members of other races – or that some races are superior to others. There are many different genetically significant 'clusters' within continental populations and within perceived racial groups.

People in different parts of the world get different diseases, not because they are of different races, but because they come from particular geographical regions. Sickness does not recognise race. Sickle cell anaemia is commonly thought of as a disease that only affects black people. It isn't. It also affects people from Central and South America, the Middle East, Asia and the Mediterranean. Nor does it potentially affect all black people. The sickle cell trait is an immune response to malaria and so shows up most frequently in people from, or descended from, malarial regions of Africa – or Central and South America, the Middle East, Asia and the Mediterranean.

Science now has the potential to stop some of the harm caused by the legacy of scientific race theory. However, in order to begin doing so, genome research has had to address some unintended racism. Having proved once and for all that race is not biological, the early genomic researchers ignored race and did not make a point of including black or Asian people in their research. The unintended result of this was that they knew far more about the diseases Europeans tend to suffer from, but rather little about anyone else. Genome research has now moved from being a 'race-free' science to being what the sociologist Catherine Bliss (2015) calls a 'race-positive' science and is trying to even up the playing field by understanding more about the kinds of genetic variations carried by people from other continents, and their descendants.

This re-pairing of race and genetics has mutated a little as it has been taken into public consciousness. Race seems to be back, but it is as illusory as ever. DNA testing companies can't tell you what your racial heritage is. They can tell you who you are related to now. They do this by comparing markers in your genes to markers from those other people around the world that are in their databases. Your 'ancestry' is decided on the basis of who you share DNA with now, not a century ago. Forensic anthropologists don't know what race the murder victim



was, only what part of the world their ancestors came from. They then deduce the race that the victim would likely have been, if race was real (they are well aware it is not, see Sauer, 1992). Many people use inverted commas when writing about 'race' to indicate that they are aware that it is not a scientific reality, and I will do this in the rest of this book.

Although the whole notion of 'race' is a fiction, it is a fiction that has been accepted by so many for so long, that it has become a fact. The *idea* that there are 'races' of people who are in some way biologically alike and different from other 'races' has created a *social* reality. 'Race' was invented – and now it is real. Another way of saying this is that race is not real, but racism is. We fail racially marginalised clients if we allow ourselves to be ignorant, or downplay the realities of life in a hostile environment. We also fail racially marginalised colleagues.

The notion of 'race' ensnares us in paradox. 'Race' is not scientifically real, yet the *idea* that it is, in itself, created something that *is* real and affects all aspects of life for all people in racialised societies. Those lower down the racial hierarchy are made aware of this on a daily basis. Those at the top may glide through an entire lifetime without ever being aware of how their 'race' shapes their life, but it does. Chapter 9 discusses this in more detail.

### Reflective exercise

Depending on whether you are working alone or with others, think, write or talk about how you became aware that people are categorised according to 'race' and how you became aware of your own racial identity. Who talked to you about 'race' and what ideas about 'race' were communicated to you?

## Ethnicity

'Race' and ethnicity are not the same – you can be beaten up one day because you are black, and beaten up the next day because you are Tutsi or Karo (this happens, especially when asylum seekers are rehoused without any thought as to who they have fled from). Although it is often used to do so, ethnicity should not imply 'race' (in the sense of someone looking or sounding 'ethnic'). We're all ethnic. We all have at least one mother tongue, land, history, mythology and traditions that we identify with.

These identifications constitute ethnicity in everyone, but tend to be used only when making people 'other'. The term 'ethnic' was, for instance, used in the early twentieth century to make the refugees arriving in the USA from Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean different to the existing white population. 'Ethnic' is still mostly used in the process of presenting some groups of people as different, although the term 'minority ethnic' rather than 'ethnic minority' is used in an attempt to counter this and emphasise that everyone is ethnic.

Ethnicity is clearly a social construction rather than a biological reality. Our genes do not make us speak a particular language or like a particular kind of food; our tastes, values and the way we express ourselves result from the ways in which we are socialised.

However, ethnicity is also a social construction in a more abstract way. The term 'ethnic group' originates in anthropology, and contemporary anthropologists are realising that some so-called 'ethnic groups' may have been identified in a way that does not match how they themselves identify. In these instances, ethnicity is an imposition – the kind of imposition that attacks a person or a people's sense of themselves. It might be wise to remember that the box your client ticks on your agency's equality monitoring form may not match your client's actual ethnic identity.

### **Self-awareness exercise**

Depending on whether you are working alone or with others, think, write or talk about how aware you are of your ethnicity, and why. Do you think that other people identify your ethnicity in the way that you do? What feelings do your answers provoke?

## Nationality and nationality status

Although ethnic groups are usually associated with a particular place, ethnicity is not the same as nationality. Yoruba is an ethnicity and Yoruba people live in Nigeria – and Benin, Toga, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast. Nationality can be used as an identity – one can be proud or ashamed to be British, for example – but nationality is essentially a legal relationship in which a country takes responsibility for your safety and assumes authority over you.

Like 'race' and ethnicity, nationality as an identity can be used to 'other' – one may hate Germans, or the French – and often is used in this way when relations between countries are hostile. However, it is nationality as a legal status that is the current focus of difference-making throughout the economically privileged countries of the world. People so desperate that they risk their lives and endure horrendous conditions in the hope of living in a safer country are denied basic human rights like dignity, fairness, equality and respect before they can even ask for legal rights. Those denied the legal right to protection are forced to choose between destitution or returning to whatever they had fled from. This denial of human rights is the most fundamental form of making someone 'different'. Denial of basic human rights is a denial of someone's humanity.

### Case study

Khalid, who had been smuggled out of his home country and had arrived in the UK as an unaccompanied child, had been seeing Leila, a counsellor at his school, for three years. Khalid still had nightmares about his family's home being searched and his father being found and then taken away. He was extremely anxious in situations in which he was not in control. Leila was aware that Susan, his social worker, was being careful not to inflame his anxiety in relation to the asylum claim that she was helping him make to secure his right to stay in the UK once he had turned 18. Leila tried to support Susan's efforts by taking a 'there's no point worrying about what hasn't happened yet' approach. This helped Leila manage her own anxiety, but was of little help to Khalid, whose claim was denied and who was forced to return to a still simmering country with which he no longer had any ties.

## Religion

Nor are ethnicity and religion the same – usually. The Bantu, for example, are Muslim in Somalia and Christian in Kenya, and lots of different ethnic groups identify as Muslim, or Christian, the world over. But sometimes ethnicity and religion are not separable. I missed both when working, for just one session, with a young Iraqi woman. She was so full of what she had to bring that it was not appropriate to ask her about her background, but I was curious. I have spent a lot of time with Muslim friends in different contexts and I am (I think) fairly well attuned to cues that announce a Muslim identity. I was struck by their absence. It was not until I saw the chilling news footage of the Yazidi stranded on a mountaintop in Iraq (Chulov, 2014) that I realised that she may have had an ethnic and religious identity with which I was not familiar. Because religion is conflated with ethnicity, and ethnicity with race, religion and race are also often conflated – as many Sikhs, Hindus and Thomasine Christians have found in the current Islamophobic climate.

## Conclusion

'Race' is a social experience, rather than a biological fact – but it, or rather racism, is only too real. Using 'ethnicity' as a euphemism for 'race' denies this reality. Racism is about 'race'. Many people also face hostility on account of their ethnicity, their nationality, their religion and/or their nationality status. It is important to recognise that a client may face hostility from several intersecting directions (there is more about 'intersectionality' in Chapter 5) and to properly acknowledge each when appropriate.

## Further reading

- Akala (2018) *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- McGarry, A. (2017) *Romaphobia: The Last Acceptable Form of Racism*. London: Zed Books.
- Morning, A. (2014) 'And you thought we had moved beyond all that: Biological race returns to the social sciences', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 37(10): 1676–85.