

Birmingham Race Action Partnership
9th Floor 3 Duchess Place Edgbaston Bham B16 8NH
E: brap@brap.org.uk
T: 0121 456 7400



b:RAP briefing

no. 9

The Social Construction of Race

November 2005

Introducing b:RAP briefings

This is the 8th in a continuing series of **b:RAP briefings**. The purpose of these briefings is to examine key issues in public policy *from a clear and practical race equality perspective*.

While some briefings will cover topics that have a very clear and evident relationship to race equality others will take less obvious issues and examine them afresh, teasing out the race equality dimension.

Each briefing will identify the key issues involved, highlight current trends in thinking and recommend practical action and solutions.

Joy Warmington

Chief Executive, b:RAP
November 2005

b:RAP Briefings

Earlier b:RAP briefings, short occasional papers and other reports, are all available to b:RAP Affiliates on our website at:

<http://www.brap.org.uk/>

Briefing No. 1	Community Consultation
Briefing No. 2	Race Equality Schemes
Briefing No. 3	"Do They Mean Us?" - BME Community Engagement in Birmingham
Briefing No. 4	Community Cohesion: The Emperor's New Clothes?
Briefing No. 5	'Myth and Maxim': myth busting report on asylum seekers and refugees
Briefing No. 6	From 'Anti-Racism' to 'Diversity': Revisiting the race equality agenda
Briefing No.7	Community Cohesion and Asylum
Briefing No.8	Islamophobia: Echoes of the Past?

Occasional papers

Community Solidarity – the First Casualty when the 'Race Card' is played	April 2004
Equality – the foundation for better 'race' relations	April 2004
Ethnic Monitoring – Why Bother?	June 2004
A 'Compact' built on equality and anti-discriminatory practice – too good to be true?	June 2004
'Dishonour' on the stage – and in the streets?	February 2005

“Much of the history of the genetics of race turns out to have been prejudice dressed up as science..... Individuals, not nations and not races, are the main repository of human variation.”

Steve Jones (1991)

The premise that ‘race’ is a social rather than biological construct is based upon recent and contemporary social and physical scientific research and knowledge that has challenged and undermined earlier epistemologies. Their endeavour has revealed that there is no scientific basis for any conception of biological ‘races’ in human populations.

Biology, genes & race – naïve science

During the 18th and 19th centuries, as a consequence of both European colonial expansion and the formal adoption of slavery, scientists sought to both explain the observable physical variations between people and provide a rationale for the social hierarchy that emerged.

Overt and obvious **physical differences** (such as skin colour, hair type and facial characteristics) were subsequently linked to **cultural differences** – **both** being defined as consequences of distinct and separate racial characteristics – the origins of which were to be found in the genes, and were thus, it was claimed, inescapable.

Challenges

Developments in human knowledge and understanding, particularly in the field of biology and genetics, have revealed the erroneous assumptions underpinning this naïve ‘scientific’ interpretation.

1. The observable physical manifestations of ‘difference’, which have become so inextricably associated with the concept of ‘race’, are actually the result of the complex interplay of a range

of genetic, biological, geographical and environmental variables over time.

2. The clustering of genetic differences found in different human populations is actually the consequence of reproduction within these populations, over past times. Crucially, these clusters or patterns of biological difference **change as the boundaries of the population change**, over time. The massive global movement of people in recent centuries has contributed to the decreased incidence of such clusters.
3. **Individual differences** in genetic characteristics **within** 'ethnic' groups are actually **greater** than the differences between 'ethnic' groups. Compared with other animal species, human beings are – on average – **genetically homogeneous**. There are **no identifiable subspecies**.
4. Broad racial classifications mask great genetic diversity within them. Thus sickle-cell anaemia is prevalent in people whose ancestors came from malaria-rife regions, including the Mediterranean coastline, not simply Africa. Similarly, Ashkenazi – but NOT Sephardi – Jews have a higher risk of Tay-Sachs disease and breast cancer.

However, although recent science has demonstrated that 'race' cannot be regarded as a serious or useful scientific concept, it persists in public and private vocabularies – for a variety of reasons. One of the main reasons for this is ignorance; the vast majority of people are unaware of the above developments. A second reason is because it is central to those political beliefs that draw on now discredited scientific theories to *racialise* social differences and justify discrimination and exclusion (note, for example, arguments / justification for increased and targeted immigration controls). A third reason, applicable to b:RAP, is that whilst discrimination based upon ideas of racial

difference / hierarchies – i.e. racism – persists, action against this will involve discussion of and challenges to the concept of 'race'.

To conclude, then, 'race' is a social construct, employed in everyday talk, policy and practice. Although 'race' has been – and is – often used by many as a way of categorising 'the other', such has been the power of the term that many oppressed groups have, since the 1970s, attempted to use this concept to construct what, ironically, are perceived to be more positive identities for themselves. In doing so, they contribute to the persistence of not only a discredited, but also divisive concept.

So, b:RAP argues that the weight of evidence supports the idea that 'race' is not a biological construct. The concept of 'races' was conceived primarily to enslave and persecute people. Challenging our own and others' thinking around this issue is a crucial mechanism in challenging our past and current approach to tackling the causes and effects of racism in our society.

Suggested reading

Gilroy, P (2000) Between Camps

Richard Dyer (1997) White, Routledge

John Solomos (1989) Race & Racism (in Contemporary Britain 2000)
Macmillan

J. Fulcher & J. Scott (1999) Sociology, Oxford University Press

G. Bolaffi, R. Bracalenti et al (2003) Dictionary of Race & Culture, Sage
Publications

Haralambos, M. & Holborn, M (2000) Sociology: Themes & Perspectives.
Fifth Edition, Collins