



THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE

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INTRODUCING BRAP BRIEFINGS

This is the eighth in a continuing series of brap 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.

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“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 brap, 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, brap 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

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brap is transforming the way we think and do equality. We support organisations, communities, and cities with meaningful approaches to learning, change, research, and engagement. We are a partner and friend to anyone who believes in the rights and potential of all human beings.

The logo for brap, consisting of the lowercase letters 'b', 'r', 'a', and 'p' in a bold, rounded, yellow font. The letters are spaced out horizontally.

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