**The Myth of Race**

<https://cete.osu.edu/socialization/>

You may think you know exactly what race you are, but how would you prove it if someone disagreed with you? The fact is, even though race drives a lot of social and political outcomes, race isn't real.

One of the first people to attempt to categorize humans according to race was a German scientist around 1776. He came up with five different groups according to physical appearance and geographic origin of their ancestors. Americans of European descent, eagerly bought into this type of thinking around the same time.

Some historians have said the idea that there were different races helped them resolve the contradiction between a natural right to freedom and the fact of slavery. If whites were their own distinct category, then they could feel a lot better about denying freedom to people who they labeled black and decided were fundamentally different.

But as political priorities change, definitions of race in America adjust right along with them. For example, if you are of Mexican birth or ancestry in the United States in 1929 you were considered white. Then the 1930 census changed that to non-white to limit immigration. Later, when the US needed to increase its labor force during World War II, these people were switched back to white. And what it took to be Black once varied so wildly throughout the country, from one quarter to 1/16 to the infamous one drop of African ancestry, that people could actually change races just by crossing state lines.

Then suddenly, in 2000, the government decided that Americans could be more than one race and added a multiracial category to the census. This has left many Americans scratching their heads when it comes to selecting who they are. As many as 6.2% of census respondents selected some other race in a 2010 survey. The idea that someone might look one way and identify another way, or that they might be really hard to place in a racial category, is not new.

This is why there was a public debate about whether MSNBC is Karen Finney could say she was Black, or how we can't even agree on the racial label assigned to the President of the United States. Of course, many people feel their racial identity is very clear and very permanent, but the fact that some people have changed theirs and that no one can really argue with them, shows how shaky the very idea of race is. This is all because there isn't a race chromosome in our DNA that people can point to. It simply doesn't exist.

When the medical community links race to health outcomes, it's really just using race as a substitute for other factors. Such as where your ancestors came from, or the experiences of people who may have been put in the same racial principle. Dorothy Roberts explains that sickle cell anemia is a prime example of this. The disease is linked to areas with high rates of malaria, which includes some parts of Europe and Asia, in addition to Africa. It's not actually about race at all.

This, of course, does not mean that the concept of race is hugely important in our lives. The racial categories to which we're assigned can determine real life experiences. They can drive political outcomes, and they can even make the difference between life and death. But understanding that racial categories are made up can give us an important perspective on where racism came from in the first place.

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