

Introducing Race, Human Variation, and Racism



Figure 1.1 White supremacists in Charlottesville, VA, 2017. They marched through the streets while shouting “White Lives Matter!” and “Jews Will Not Replace Us!” The Charlottesville protests spurred the need to better understand race, racism, and human variation (Getty Images).

Telling me that I'm obsessed with talking about racism in America is like telling me I'm obsessed with swimming when I'm drowning.

Hari Kondabolu

I don't see color. People tell me I'm white and I believe them because police officers call me "sir."

Stephen Colbert

Talking about race or being afraid to talk about race; talking too much or too little. It doesn't matter. We never seem to get very far.

How do we get out of this gridlock? How do we get beyond misunderstandings?

Our answer: Start asking and resolving different questions about race.

Most people think race is real, and they are obviously right. *Race is real*. But race isn't real in the way we have come to think of it as being real: as deep, primordial, and biological. Race, rather, is a powerful idea about biological variation that has been used to separate and rank groups.

The purpose of this book is to lead readers to understand how race is and is not real. Simply focusing on diversity and acceptance, as is common today, misses the deeper roots of race, racial thinking, and overt racism. On the other hand, a purely scientific and objective approach to human variation fails to tell the full story of how the idea of race has shaped historical events and continues to be a powerful influence on all our lives. Importantly, it does not provide insight into the varied ways that being "raced" is experienced by individuals in different places and over time. Neither approach helps much in dislodging centuries of racial thinking and distrust.

In this book, we aim to bring together a combination of science, history, and personal experiences. The result we are hoping for is surprisingly liberating. Race has come to be a knotted ball of history, culture, identity, and biology. We aim to untangle that ball. Once unraveled, we hope you, the reader, will come to better understand the origins and significance of the biological differences among us and how the idea of race – how we misguidedly came to conceive of those differences – became such a formidable worldview.

We know that race seems obviously real to anyone immersed in North America's dominant culture. Race seems visually real. Every day, one can observe difference in outward form between individuals. Interestingly, rather than biology, race is real because of the everyday ways in which we

interpret differences and invest *meaning* into them. It might seem counterintuitive, but race is also biological because living in a racial society with differential access to resources has effects on the body. The constant stress of racism and the economic effects of living in a racial society continue to lead to gross racial inequalities in nearly every measure of health and longevity. If race is an illusion, then it is an unusually powerful one.

Yet, what we have internalized as evidence that we have seen with our own eyes the "facts" of race, such as differences in skin color and other so-called markers of race, simply have no inherent or deeper sociopolitical significance other than what our culture attaches to them. There is human linguistic, cultural, biological, and genetic variation. But such variation is not racial in that it does not "naturally" partition individuals into races.

A key insight from anthropology is that what we see as real is often due to what our worldviews predispose our minds to see. In much the same way that we used to think the sun revolved around the earth, we see variation as race only because the idea is all around us and is unquestioned. As former Spellman College president Beverly Tatum says, race is like smog. If we are in it, it is all we see. Moreover, it obstructs a clear vision of the true nature of difference. It is time to lift the smog.

If you are white, generally speaking you do not need to think much about your race. You might be able to think race is about others. The comedian Stephen Colbert jokes that he doesn't see race or color. Because he is white, he does not daily confront race. But then he says, "People tell me I am white and I believe them because police officers call me 'sir'." Colbert, here, demonstrates an insight into the fact that he does have a race. But, of course he does. It is just that his white race is "unmarked."

While white individuals may not see or understand the salience of race, the United States and the world are most certainly enveloped in racial smog, as Tatum says. Or, to use another metaphor, race in the United States is like water for fish: it is

everywhere. As Hari Kondabolu says, “Telling me that I’m obsessed with talking about racism in America is like telling me I’m obsessed with swimming when I’m drowning.”

In this book, we hope to show how the idea of race continues to have consequences, every day, for all of our lives. Race is not just a *social construct*, it is a *social contract* that has changed our minds, our bodies, and our world. The Constitution of the United States listed enslaved Africans as three-fifths of a person. While the Thirteenth Amendment changed this formulation,¹ the racial worldview is much deeper than laws and “official” statements. It is particularly enduring because the idea of race is deeply etched into our minds and institutions. We want to expose the social contract and thereby the deep roots of racial thinking. Just as weeds will return if they are not pulled out by the roots, so we will not get beyond racism unless we pay attention to its foundational ideas.

Since the first edition of this book in 2012, a series of events and actions have shown all too clearly that racial thinking is alive in well. In 2017, we witnessed the Unite the Right march in Charlottesville, with the death of Heather Heyer and chants of “Jews Will Not Replace Us” (see Figure 1.1). And in just one week in October 2018, Trump railed against immigrants from Central America and the Middle East, two African Americans were shot in a supermarket, and eleven Jews were shot in a temple in Pittsburgh.

As fundamentally woven into our minds and institutions as the idea of race is, we can change the way we understand it, and even how it is embedded in institutions. We will not do so by avoiding race or pretending that it is not salient. Rather, we will do so by engaging with the science of human variation, the history, culture, and politics of race, and everyday lived experiences of race and racism.

Our students and those who visit the exhibit that helped launch this book often have “a-ha” moments in which they come to forever see race differently. Suddenly, race is not natural but an idea and a product of culture. Amazing! Fortunately, these insightful moments do not require advanced training in genomics, anthropology, philosophy, or

any other discipline. Rather, the only requirement is openness to questioning assumptions that one thought were obviously true.

Imagine that you have lived your life in a landscape that has never led you or those around you to question that the earth is anything but flat. You go to a mountaintop and you look into the clear distance and notice that the horizon appears to bend down. That bend is a sign that the earth is round. It is time to pay attention to signs like that. However, be forewarned. The results are mind-bending. Changes like going from seeing the earth as flat to round are what scientists call paradigm shifts. A paradigm shift, or a change in worldview, can be disorienting, and it takes a while to readjust. The good news is that paradigm shifts are how societies can become more just and how science advances.

The book in your hands aims to be a fundamental primer on the idea and reality of race and how it connects to institutional and everyday racism. Human races, we argue, are not “out there, in nature.” Rather, humans invented race. This book is organized around sections on history, science, and lived experience. The main themes are that: (1) race is a recent human invention; (2) race is about culture and not about biology;² and (3) race and racism are imbedded in institutions and in everyday life.

Combining insights and examples from the realms of science, history, and individual stories, our aim was to write and assemble a book that is serious yet engaging and lively. Our main goal is to move readers beyond the false dichotomy of human races as being real or not. We want readers to appreciate *how* contemporary social and biological analyses show that race is real and how they show that it is surprisingly outmoded (chiefly, as a way to think about genetic differences among us). We want this to be a book that deeply transforms its readers. We want everyone to have an “a-ha” moment.

Five central arguments of this book are as follows:

- 1 *The idea of race was invented.* Race was invented as a way to categorize and rank groups and, by extension, individuals. The invention did not happen in an isolated laboratory or at one place and one time. Rather, this scientific and social

² Paradoxically, race is not a biological or genetic construct, but it does have biological consequences. Some of these consequences of race, especially for health and wealth, will be highlighted in this book.

¹ Additional laws were also passed by most states against miscegenation (interracial marriage).

idea slowly took hold and became more and more real through European exploration and colonization, and slavery in the Americas. In the 18th century, race may have made sense because the physical (or phenotypic) differences between Europeans and others seemed to be great.

While just a human invention, as explored in the first part of this book, the idea was politically powerful because the belief in separate and unequal races was the only potentially moral and ethical justification for the inhumanities of colonization and slavery. In Part 1, we will tell the gripping story of the interlinked social, religious, political, and scientific histories of race. Closely following the exhibit, the story is outlined in four parts.

- 2 *Human biological variation is real, obvious, wonderful, and necessary.* We do vary. Part 2 provides a primer on human genetic variation; that is, how variation is patterned within individuals and among individuals and groups. Evolutionarily speaking, even if it is not the spice of life, variety is certainly a required ingredient for the survival of our species.
- 3 *The idea of race does not explain human variation.* The biggest myth of race is that we humans have biological races and that on a biological or, more precisely, a genetic level our race determines a good deal about how we differ from one another and our potentialities. The science of human variation, however, tells us otherwise. Race-as-genetic-variation is a myth.

Race neither explains variation, nor is it a useful genetic construct. In this book, we will use a number of interrelated examples to show why this is so.

- 4 *Race is both stable and protean.* The idea of race is something we all share – to a degree. We argue that race today is much the same, on a fundamental level, as it was a hundred or even three hundred years ago. But the realities of race – how the ideas get into lived experiences – morph from place to place and time to time. Here, we have the opportunity to explore how some of those diverse lives were lived racially. What was it like to be a Native American and to see Europeans for the first time? What was it like to be a Japanese American during World War II? It is our expectation that understanding how race differs among diverse groups provides a deeper understanding of each group and about the idea of race itself.
- 5 *We own the future of race.* How we continue to understand and use race is up to us. We hold the core belief that our book will contribute to a fundamental overhaul of how various publics think and talk about race. By explaining how the power of race was used in the past to divide us, we will show how this knowledge provides the power to understand and reunite. Once we understand what race is and is not, it ceases to become a ready excuse for the intolerable differences in our wealth, health, and other core indicators of equality and life experience.

Race is a Recent Human Invention

It's only a few hundred years old, in comparison to the lengthy span of human history. Although not scientific, the idea of race proposed that there were significant differences among people that allowed them to be grouped into a limited number of categories or races. Yet, are we so different? All humans share a common ancestry and, because each of us represents a unique combination of ancestral traits, all humans exhibit biological variation.

From the beginning, the idea of race was tied to power and hierarchy among people, with one group being viewed as superior and

others as inferior. Despite disproving notions of hierarchy and removing social, economic, and political barriers, the legacy of race continues to shape the lives and relationships of people in the U.S. and around the world.

This book may challenge popular understandings about race, raise questions, and spark critical thinking. We hope the exhibition, public website, and educational materials produced by the *RACE* Project will foster dialogue in families and communities around the U.S. and help better relations among us all.

From American Anthropological Association (AAA) Exhibit on RACE

RACE Exhibit Introductory Video Transcript (2007)

Race.

What is race?

What do we really know about race?

Here's what we do know: Race is a short word with a long history in the United States of America. Think of the history of America and our ideas of race together, mixed up, and ever changing. Just like this painting, race was created. It is a powerful idea that was invented by society.

Race is an enduring concept that has molded our nation's economy, laws, and social institutions. It is a complex notion that has shaped each of our destinies. Many of the ideas we now associate with race originated during the European era of exploration.

Europeans like Christopher Columbus traveled overseas and encountered, and then colonized or conquered, peoples in Africa, Asia, and the Americas who looked, talked, and acted much differently from them. Naturalists and scientists then classified these differences into systems that became the foundation for the notion of race as we know it today.

In the American colonies, the first laborers were European indentured servants.

When African laborers were forcibly brought to Virginia beginning in 1619, status was defined by wealth and religion, not by physical characteristics such as skin color.

But this would change.

Over time, physical difference mattered, and with the development of the transatlantic slave trade, landowners began replacing their temporary European laborers with enslaved Africans who were held in permanent bondage. Soon a new social structure emerged based primarily on skin color, with those of English ancestry at the top and African slaves and American Indians at the bottom.

By 1776, when "all men are created equal" was written into the Declaration of Independence by a slaveholder named Thomas Jefferson, a democratic nation was born with a major contradiction about race at its core. As our new nation asserted its independence from European tyranny, blacks and American Indians were viewed as less than human and not deserving of the same liberties as whites.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the notion of race continued to shape life in the United States. The rise of "race science" supported the common belief that people who were not white were biologically inferior. The removal of Native Americans from their lands, legalized segregation, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II are legacies of where this thinking led.

Today, science tells us that all humans share a common ancestry. And while there are differences among us, we're also very much alike.

Despite these advances, the legacy of race continues to affect us in a variety of ways.

Deeply held assumptions about race and enduring stereotypes make us think that gaps in wealth, health, housing, education, employment, or physical ability in sports are natural. And we fail to see the privileges that some have been granted and others denied because of skin color.

This creation, called race, has fostered inequality and discrimination for centuries.

It has influenced how we relate to each other as human beings. Consider how your view of a painting can change as you examine it more closely.

We invite you to do the same with race. Examine and re-examine your thoughts and beliefs about race.

