

Race/Racism

Race is a marker of difference among humans based on physical features such as skin color or hair color/texture. Historically race was treated as a biological or “scientific” method of human classification, in which racial “groups” were defined by the presence or absence of particular inheritable traits. This argument was tied to failed theories like Social Darwinism – which applied Darwinian notions of competition between species to competition within the human population, and Environmental Determinism – which argued that particular social traits were inherent to people living in particular places due to the environmental and climactic characteristics of each place. These theories were developed during the colonial era and were used by those in power to rationalize the exploitation or extermination of particular ‘racial’ groups. The scientific basis for race has since been refuted, as multiple studies have shown that there is greater genetic diversity within racially defined groups than exists between those groups.

Simply put, there is no biological basis for race. Yet, despite its failings as a scientific concept, race today exists as an extremely important socially constructed conceptualization of difference among humans. That race is such an important concept is the result of Racism. Racism is the ideology of difference, which takes as its foundation the idea that particular (usually negative) attributes regarding behavior, intelligence, or culture are inherent within particular racial groups. This ideology is then used to justify arguments for the superiority of one racial group relative to another, which leads to the production of inequality between racial groups.

The normative understanding of racism is limited to individual acts of violence, malice, or economic exploitation that are motivated by racial prejudice. Examples of these types of racism would be hate-based crimes, or an employer choosing not to hire an individual based on their race. This definition of racism is extremely narrow, and does not acknowledge the informal ways that racist ideology has been incorporated into economic, legal, educational and other societal structures. In fact, the incorporation of the limited definition of racism - as individual acts of discrimination - into the legal system is an example of structural racism.

The following sections discuss the dominant theoretical engagements with race and racism in Geography, as well as some of the methodological challenges inherent to research on race/racism issues.

CRITICAL ‘RACE’ STUDIES IN GEOGRAPHY

Critical racial theorists engage in a type of ethically motivated anti-racist research agenda. Rather than treating race as an objective category, they utilize social construction theory to illustrate the way that the idea of race is mobilized in various contexts to exploit, disadvantage, or otherwise disempower particular racially defined groups of the population. In critical racial theory, the idea of race acts as

foundation for Racism, and racial categories provide the framework for a set of power relations that protects the dominant group's position of power. The process through which racial ideology is applied to social actors (who should be understood as not just people, but also places, landscapes, systems of governance, education or any other socially produced phenomena) is known as *racialization*.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE

The argument that race is a socially constructed ideology rather than a biological or "natural" method of human classification is based on social construction theory. Social construction theory challenges arguments for the "naturalness" of human organization systems, the categories within those systems, and the ideologies upon which the systems are founded. In this perspective, the argument for the "naturalness" or "common sense" use of particular methods of social categorization is rejected outright. These ideologies are then subject to critical examination, which can serve to expose the power relations which make clear the basis for defining the concept in a particular way given the specific historical and geographic context. In the case of race, critically examining the way that racial groups are defined varies geographically and has varied significantly throughout history. These variations and historical re-definitions invariably serve to rationalize the exploitation of one population by another.

It is interesting to note that the term 'race' has been applied almost exclusively for the purpose of rationalizing the subjugation of one group by another, regardless of the particular characteristic by which the supposedly inferior group was defined. For example, the British comfortably interchanged the concept of race with political nationality in their subjugation of the Irish "race". The Nazi Party in WWII sought to exterminate the Jewish "race", despite the fact that religion is not a biologically inheritable trait.

That race only exists as a social construct does not lessen the power of *Racism* as a mode of social organization. The fact that people believe and behave as if race does exist makes it a social reality with material effects.

GEOGRAPHIC CONTINGENCY OF RACE/RACISM

One of the ways that Geographers have contributed to research on race and racism is to illustrate how *racialization* processes are geographically contingent. Racialization refers to the process by which one comes to be viewed and/or view their self as belonging to a particular racial group. The way that people are racialized is highly dependent on where this process takes place. Socialization processes are both embedded in place and connected through space such that socialization processes and geography are interdependent, not simply complementary. Geographers understand *places* as socially produced as well. Within this framework, places are not lifeless boxes within which social production occurs. Racialization processes are themselves shaped by, and affect the social construction

of places. This constitutive relationship between social process and place creates a larger racialized landscape, which provides context for how racial categories are normatively defined.

Critical theorists argue for a relational understanding of race and racism. This means that the way racial categories are understood, the meanings attached to a specific racial group, can only be understood as they relate to other races. This relational understanding allows for a movement away from understanding race as a binary relationship (civilized/uncivilized, white/non-white) to an understanding of racism as a set of power relations acting in a specific time and place. These power relations restrict individual and group access to power and resources relative to the dominant group, which in Western societies is most often defined as Whites. The severity of this disempowerment depends on the particular racial identity of the group in question, as well as the geographic context.

Relational perspectives on race understand racism as the result of *racial hierarchies* within a social system of *White Privilege*. White privilege refers to the set of power relations that supports the status quo position of whites as the recipients of any number of advantages simply due to their being White. In this system 'Whiteness' is the norm against which all other races are understood as different-than. These privileges are wide ranging and include access to better educational and economic opportunities, access to better housing than equally-qualified minorities, and being under-exposed to pollution relative to minority groups, just to name a few. Geographers have done a great deal of research investigating how these types of inequalities are spatially distributed and maintained through spatial relations. Economic relations, segregation and housing, and environmental racism are research themes that guide geographic research investigating each of the specific material effects of racism and white privilege listed above respectively.

Racial hierarchy is a metaphor used by advocates of the relational perspective to map the effects of power relations on multiple racial groups in a particular time and place. In a racial hierarchy, racial (or ethnic) groups are positioned in a hierarchical manner based on their disempowerment relative to all other racial groups. Within the social system of white privilege, whites would be at the top of the racial hierarchy with all other racial groups somewhere below. Racial groups' positions conceptualized as distinct, but subject to change in particular geographic and historical contexts. The ability to affect the position of other racial groups within the racial hierarchy is yet another aspect of white privilege.

Racialized Landscapes

Processes of racialization are not limited to human bodies and processes of identity formation. Because race is a hegemonic ideology in contemporary society, all elements of social life are racialized. Processes of racialization attach racial understandings to places and landscapes at every scale: continents, nations, states, cities, neighborhoods, and even within the home. Racialized landscapes are a

particularly important part of Geographical understandings of race and racism, because popular understandings of landscape provide context for people's life experiences. Therefore, racialized understandings of landscape shape the way that individuals interpret their own life experiences, and simultaneously serve to reinforce existing hegemonic understandings of racial categories. A few common examples of racialized landscapes in the United States are "the Ghetto", "the Border" which are "minority" landscapes, and "Suburbia" which is a "white" landscape. These racialized understandings of landscape police who or what "belongs" in a particular place and have material effects on a wide range of social issues, from property values to law enforcement practices.

QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES TO 'RACE' STUDIES IN GEOGRAPHY

Despite the widespread acknowledgement that race is a socially constructed and problematic method of human classification, many researchers still use race as a social category for quantitative analysis. In quantitative research race is treated as an objective category and method of human differentiation. This is not to say that these researchers are unaware of the problematic nature of defining racial categories. There is a wide spectrum of researchers involved with race-based research, within which there are great disparities in level of critical engagement with the *idea of race*. What all quantitative approaches to race studies have in common is their dependence on race counting.

Among those engaged in *anti-racist* work, there is considerable debate regarding the merits of race counting. On one hand, racial counting provides quantitative data that researchers and activists can use to demonstrate the material effects of racism in society. On the other hand, the practice of recording data according to race supports the very ideas about racial difference upon which racism is based. Herein lies the greatest challenge for those who wish to eliminate racism as a hegemonic form of social organization in society. For example, it would be impossible to demonstrate the extent of residential racial segregation without collecting data that categorizes residents by racial group. One could demonstrate *spatial* inequalities in access to public transit or economic opportunities without using racial data, however without using data that categorized people according to race, it would be impossible to demonstrate that those spatial inequalities disproportionately affect neighborhoods with a high percentage of minority residents. Anti-racist researchers are thus faced with an ideologically contradictory choice, because they cannot quantitatively demonstrate the material effects of race-based disempowerment in society without implicitly supporting the idea of race as a system of social categorization.

ASSIGNING RACE – COUNTING RACIAL GROUPS

History of recording racial data for enumeration purposes firmly based on institutional racism during the pre-civil war era in the United States. The first United States census included racial data, in accordance with the 3/5ths compromise. The 3/5ths compromise was negotiated between Southern states, in which slavery was

legal, and the Northern “free-states” where it was illegal. The purpose of the compromise was to increase Southern political representation in congress. In this agreement each African-American slave was to be counted as 3/5ths of a person for the census and representational purposes.

The racial categories used for population research varies depending on the scale and location of the survey. Over time, the United States census has been adapted to better incorporate “new” races such as “Native American” or “Asian or Pacific Islander” and to allow for members of any racial group to self-identify as ethnically Hispanic or non-Hispanic. For the first time the 2000 Census allowed respondents to self-identify as more than one race. The incorporation of multi-racial responses on the 2000 US Census created 63 racial categories. This creates new challenges for geographers and demographers attempting to project changes in the racial composition of a population. Because of the seemingly constant adaptations being made to the racial enumeration process, some argue the way in which racial categorization is done says more about the racial politics of the era than any future trends that can be projected based on the data created. If this is indeed the case, then the recent changes to the U.S. Census can be understood as a government response to the collective demand of individuals who identify themselves as multi-racial for more accurate representation in census records.

Some have argued that the increasing complexity of race-counting processes will inevitably lead to “the end of race” because quantitative population projection models simply cannot account for shifting cultural perspectives on interracial marriage and inter-racial birthrates, death rates, infant mortality etc, all of which are vital to the accuracy of population projections. In this limited sense, society may indeed be nearing the end of race-based studies. It would be quite premature however to argue that the failure of models that depend on racially differentiated data sets is indicative of “the end of race” in society. In fact the diversification of racial counting practices can impede the efforts of anti-racist activists. Racism is not the result of self-selected identity categorizations. Rather racism is a system of differentiation in which dominant groups *assign membership in a particular racial group to individuals*. For example, individuals with parents of different “races” may view themselves as multi-racial, and still face the same discrimination and disempowerment as those who self-identify as belonging to a single minority racial group. Therefore, racism cannot be eliminated as a hegemonic system of social organization simply by altering the ways in which individuals understand their own racial identity, or by expanding the number of racial categories in a census.

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See also Identity, Geography and; Critical Human Geography; Population Geography; Post-structuralism

Further Readings

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