



opposing perspectives*

Using the Word *Race*

The term **race** is used to categorize people via physical markers, particularly outward appearance. Historically, most North Americans believed that race was the outward manifestation of inborn biological differences. Fifty years ago, races were categorized by skin color: white, black, red, and yellow (Coon, 1962).

It is obvious now, but was not a few decades ago, that no one's skin is really white or black or red or yellow. Social scientists are convinced that race is a social construction, that society used color terms to exaggerate differences in skin tones.

Genetic analysis confirms that the biological concept of race is inaccurate. Although most genes are identical in every human, those few genetic differences that distinguish one person from another are poorly indexed by appearance (Race, Ethnicity, and Genetics Working Group of the American Society of Human Genetics, 2005).

Skin color is particularly misleading because dark-skinned people with African ancestors have "high levels of genetic population diversity" (Tishkoff et al., 2009, p. 1035) and dark-skinned people with non-African ancestors (such as indigenous Australians or Maori in New Zealand) share neither culture nor ethnicity with Africans.

Race is more than a flawed concept; it is a destructive one. It is used to justify racism: Slavery, lynching, and segregation were directly connected to the conviction that race was inborn. Racism continues today in less obvious ways (some highlighted later in this book), impeding the goal of our study—to help all kinds of people fulfill their potential.

Since race is a social construction that leads to racism and distracts us from recognizing other social problems, some social scientists believe that the term should be abandoned (Gilroy, 2000). It is no longer used in many nations.

A study of 141 nations found that 85 percent never use the word *race* on their census forms (Morning, 2008). Only in the United States does the census still distinguish between race and ethnicity, stating that Hispanics "may be of any race."

Because of the way human cognition works, such labels encourage stereotyping (Kelly et al., 2010). As one scholar explains:

The United States' unique conceptual distinction between race and ethnicity may unwittingly support the longstanding belief that race reflects biological difference and ethnicity stems from cultural difference. In this scheme, ethnicity is socially produced but race is an immutable fact of nature. Consequently, walling off race from ethnicity on the census may reinforce essentialist interpretations of race and preclude understanding of the ways in which racial categories are also socially constructed.

[Morning, 2008, p. 255]

Perhaps to avoid racism, the word *race* should not be used.

But consider the opposite perspective (Bliss, 2012). In a society with a history of racial discrimination, reversing that cultural

race A group of people who are regarded by themselves or by others as distinct from other groups on the basis of physical appearance, typically skin color. Social scientists think race is a misleading concept, as biological differences are not signified by outward appearance.



Young Laughter Friendship across ethnic lines is common at every age, when schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods are not segregated. However, past history has an impact: These two girls share so much that they spontaneously laugh together, unaware that this scene in a restaurant could not have happened 50 years ago. Many of the youngest cohorts have trouble understanding lynching, poll taxes, separate swimming pools, or even the historic March on Washington in 1963.

heritage may require recognizing race. Although race is a social construction, not a biological distinction, it is powerful nonetheless. Particularly in adolescence, people who are proud of their racial identity are likely to achieve academically, resist drug addiction, and feel better about themselves (Crosnoe & Johnson, 2011; Zimmerman et al., 2013).

Many medical, educational, and economic conditions—from low birthweight to college graduation, from family income to health insurance—reflect racial disparities. To overcome such disparities, race may first need to be recognized.

Indeed, many social scientists argue that pretending that race does not exist allows racism to thrive (e.g., sociologists Marvasti & McKinney, 2011; anthropologist McCabe, 2011). Two political scientists studying criminal justice found that people who claim to be color-blind display "an extraordinary level of naiveté" (Peffley & Hurwitz, 2010, p. 113).

According to some scholars the election of President Obama revealed racial prejudice, and uninformed anti-racism unearths new forms of racism (Sullivan, 2014; Hughey & Parks, 2014). Perhaps race must be named and recognized before it can fade.

*Every page of this text includes information that requires critical thinking and evaluation. In addition, almost every chapter contains an Opposing Perspectives feature that highlights conflicting views of a developmental issue.