

21A.240
Race and Science
Spring 2004 MIT

INTRODUCTION

Lecture 2. February 12

Plan: develop a vocabulary for talking about biology, society, classification.

Crash Course in Category of Race as Biological Phantom and Social Reality

Gould, Stephen Jay. 1977. Why We Should Not Name Human Races — A Biological View. In *Ever Since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History*. New York: Norton, (pp. 231-236).

Race has long been considered a biological category of human difference. People thought that humanity was divided into major lineages that had radically different evolutionary histories and that "race" described these divisions. Most biologists at least since the 1950s, however, do not view race as a biological category. It tells us nothing about the evolutionary history of the species. Gould's articles summarize why.

Gould writes: "I contend that the continued racial classification of *Homo sapiens* represents an outmoded approach to the general problem of differentiation within a species" (p. 231).

Why? Well, what is a species? The most common definition of a species is a group of organisms that is reproductively isolated from other species; that is, can't breed with other species (e.g. dogs and cats). What this means, according to Gould, is that dividing species into subgroups, into subspecies, into races (all these things are equivalent) requires that the person doing this division must make a decision about what sorts of characters will be of interest. The person who is classifying these characters needs to choose what they will be.

So, naming subspecies is a largely subjective affair.

As Gould puts it, "There is no requirement that a species be divided into subspecies. The subspecies is a category of convenience" (p. 233).

But of course, one might argue that there is obvious geographical variation among populations of humans. But the question then becomes — do racial categories help or confuse our understanding of this variation?

Take one example of a character that is often used to classify race: skin color.

Can skin color serve as a useful index of subspecific differentiation?

Maybe, but the problem is that this is only one character among many that could be used to group human populations. When one begins to add other

characteristics — blood types, eye color, for example, the categories get fuzzier, not neater.

Gould puts it this way: “variation in single traits is a pale shadow of patterns in variation that affect so many features simultaneously. Moreover, the classical problem of ‘incongruity’ arises. Maps constructed for other single traits almost invariably present different distributions” (p. 234).

Further, is a difference in skin color really a difference? Differences in skin color simply result from the productive activity of melanocytes in the skin — not from their presence or absence, nor from differences in their number, for example. The fact that humans *have* skin color is a similarity rather than a difference. (albinism, is the result of melanocytes not producing melanin, not of the absence of melanin.)

Gould, Stephen Jay. 1985. Human Equality Is a Contingent Fact of History. In *The Flamingo’s Smile: Reflections in Natural History*. New York: Norton, (pp. 185-198).

Now, in “Human Equality is a Contingent Fact of History”, Gould adds a few more steps to the argument against race as a biological category.

And the title is worthy of comment. What does it mean? It means that it COULD have been the case that humans could have had strong differentiations — it could have been possible that *Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens*, for example, could both still exist. But that’s not the way it turned out. Humans don’t exhibit strong differences between populations (as in, say, dogs, where humans have enforced breeding lineages in line with ideas about what should count as a “purebred” One might make an argument for dogs as racialized — but really only because the subjective categories of breeders have been reinforced in practice, in projects of breeding that have been much more rigorous than anything ever done in humans).

In this article, Gould gives THREE reasons why there are no subspecies in humans:

1. “discordance of characters” — which I’ve already mentioned: “We might make a reasonable division on skin color, only to discover that blood groups imply different alliances,” or acidity of saliva, or presence of absence of sickle cell (which does NOT vary by latitude, as does skin color; doesn’t line up. it’s associated with malaria) or ability to roll your tongue. There is NO CLUSTERING of traits in humans.
2. “fluidity and gradations” “We interbreed wherever we move, breaking down barriers and creating new groups.
3. “convergences” “similar characters evolve independently again and again.” So, for example, high concentration of melanin has developed independently in various tropical populations. As has particular facial structure, limb proportions.

Quick digression on the evolution of melanin concentration;
darker skin shields from high UV rays, in areas with a lot of sun
cancer

lighter skin lets more vitamin D in, in areas with not as much sun
rickets

Let me give you an example that I think illustrates some of these points pretty well. Think about the evolution of dark skin in populations in sub-Saharan Africa and in aboriginal Australia.

Now, these are independent events. Australia was not originally settled by humans who came straight from Africa. Direct ancestry in sub-Saharan Africa is *not* a reason that many Australian aboriginals have dark skin. In terms of genealogical relationship, Australian aboriginals have a more recent history in common with the people of mainland Asia — people in India, China, Laos, etc, with whom they share the most recent common ancestry. As you'll note by these examples, there's a very high probability that the ancestors of aboriginals developed darker skin as their relatives in Asian populations developed somewhat lighter skin.

So, here we have

CONVERGENCES: same traits developing in different populations

DISCORDANCE: looking at skin color similarities in some African and Australian populations will blind you to other differences. Maybe a different categorization, say by blood type, would lead to a different grouping.

In many ways, both African and Australian aboriginal groups have come to be seen as "black" because of a common history of colonization by the British. And this has also affected the way they've come to see themselves. In fact, many Australian aboriginals have linked themselves up with global black power movements. You might imagine a scenario, then, in which two people from these populations come together and happen to have children. What is the "race" of that child? This gets to Gould's point about FLUIDITY and GRADATIONS, humans interbreeding wherever they go, breaking down barriers and creating new groups.

Now, examining GENETIC DATA can help us understand all of these things — and curiously, genetics, a tool that developed out of a concern with genealogy, actually has served to unravel, shatter, many popular social beliefs about who is related to whom, and how populations cluster.

Gould on variation within and between groups:

"We can measure so much variation among individuals within any 'race' that we encounter very little new variation by adding another race to the sample. In other words, the great preponderance of human variation occurs within groups, not in the differences between them" (p. 196). If some disaster occurred that killed all the human race except some very small group, we'd still have 80 percent of human variation.

And keep in mind that these "groups" are socially and historically designated! At different times in history, racial groups have been quite various. Irish and Italians have not always been white in the US for example. We'll talk about the history of such variation in social racialization in this course.

QUESTIONS?

Marks, Jonathan. 1995. Racial and Racist Anthropology. In Human Biodiversity: Genes, Race, and History. New York: De Gruyter, (pp. 99-116).

Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. 1994. Racial Formation. In Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s, Second Edition. New York: Routledge, (pp. 53-76).

If race is not a biological category, and is rather historical and social, how should we understand it? Even if we are persuaded that there is no “biological” reality, how can we account for the regularities (and irregularities) of its use? Omi and Winant suggest the idea of RACIAL FORMATION (and this is something they develop for the US). We want to try to adopt their model as we look at the history of race in this class.

Omi and Winant ask us to consider the creation of racial categories socially and historically. So, clearly, they want us to avoid thinking about race as an ESSENCE (they base this contention on their reading of arguments like Gould’s). At the same time, though, they argue that we must not see it as an ILLUSION; just because it is socially produced does not mean it isn’t real. What does that mean?

They try to explain this through a concept they call RACIAL FORMATION:

“We define *racial formation* as the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.” (p. 55) Own words?

Importantly, racial formation is a process that is both symbolic and structural; they write “we argue that racial formation is a process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized.” (p. 56). “from a racial formation perspective, race is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation” (p. 56). Racial formations are made of racial projects. A racial project is “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (p. 56).

So, for example, there was a *racial formation* during American slavery that *represented* the bodies of slaves as firstly uniformly “black” (even if particular slaves may have come from very different areas of Africa or have had a white father) and secondly as capable of hard labor in a way white bodies were not, and thirdly as less than fully human. These representations were articulated to a social *organization* in which enslaved persons were commodities who could be bought and sold, and in which norms of paternity, maternity, and family that applied to white people — that applied to slave HOLDERS — did not apply to slaves, newly racialized as “black.” The children of a slave woman were not hers, but rather the property of a master.

Other examples?

the conquest of the Americas by Europeans
dispossession of Native Americans

eugenics movements
segregation
Asian exclusion acts
Japanese internment

but also civil rights
affirmative action
black power
back to Africa
la raza Chicano movements.

All of these projects represented what race was, organized resources accordingly and importantly **CREATED** the categories of their own concern.

And note that not all projects of racial formation are *racist*.
What is racism?

What's the difference between an awareness of "race" and "racism"?
What do you think?

Omi and Winant, have a helpful definition:

"a racial project can be defined as racist if and only if it creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race" (p. 71). "In order to identify a social project as racist, one must in our view demonstrate a link between essentialist representations of race and social domination" (p. 71).

So, back to Africa movement in 1920s? depends: may have essentialist understanding of race, but is not linked to domination.

Ku Klux Klan? has essentialist notions and seeks to reinforce structures of domination.

bell curve and idea that different racial groups have different IQ? yes.

Farrakhan? potentially yes, since it is essentialist and depends in part on demonizing Jews. Even so, black supremacism, while racist, is not necessarily as powerful and frightening as white supremacism.

affirmative action? no — not essentialist and not dedicated to preserving hierarchy. (p. 72).

So, how does science fit in? How have scientific projects been part of racial projects, been part of racial formation? Can you think of examples? 18th century ranking of races, eugenics

note that Stephen Jay Gould's work is also engaged in racial formation — in this case, by saying that there is no biological basis for race — he's engaged in REPRESENTING RACE as biologically ephemeral. And he's got a notion that society has been organized around a misapprehension of how race works.

So, read the Omi and Winant carefully and think about how you can apply it to the different moments that we'll examine.

Ethnicity? Often the self-defined, rather than externally ascribed, categorization of peoples; so "black" is racial, while Liberian, Afro-Caribbean, Sea Islander, West Indian are perhaps more ethnic. "White" is racial, while German, English, Irish, are ethnic. Tricky though — and obviously something that changes over time and context; i.e., Jewish.

Bowker, Geoffrey C. and Susan Leigh Star. 2000. The Case of Race Classification and Reclassification under Apartheid. In *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*. Cambridge: MIT Press, (pp. 60-64, 195-225).

This article centers on a different sort of deployment of science in making "race" than biology. Here, the focus is less on heredity than the *technologies of classification* through which race becomes manifest (or not).

And I've given you some pages in their book in which they write about Aristotelian versus prototypical classification. Can we try to figure these out?

"Aristotelian classification works according to a set of binary characteristics that an object being classified either presents or does not present. At each level of classification, enough binary features are adduced to place any member of a given population into one and only one class" (p. 62). [like Linnaean classification in Marks]

example: the idea that there are distinct races that can be sorted (Europeans, Asiatics, coloreds, "natives"/Bantus/Africans)

Prototypical characterization: go from abstract example to object. We have a rough idea and then see if it maps onto the object in question.

example: classification of a given person into a race.

Everyday classification of race in South Africa partook of *both* ideas.

So, what I'd like you to do now is divide into four groups and do the following task for me:

Take a racial category from South Africa

Asian
White
Bantu/Black African
colored

and together with your group, be prepared to tell the class

1. how the category is defined in theory and seems to work in practice
2. a story about how particular people's lives were affected by the category (go through chapter for examples). Think here about stories of racial reclassification.
3. describe how you think the category functioned prototypically and/or according to an Aristotelian logic as well as offering a broader view of what you think RACIAL FORMATION was like in Apartheid South Africa.

1. how the category is defined in theory and seems to work in practice

pay attention to Population Registration Act and the Group Areas Act.

Both of these Acts assumed that races were natural kinds, that racial categories were Aristotelian in character, the result of sorting out mutually exclusive traits through histories of clean lines of descent. The policy of "separate development" was based on "loose eugenic basis that each race must develop separately along its natural pathway and that race mixing was 'unnatural' "(p. 197)

But when it came to enforcing these Acts, what happened?

Pop Reg Act assigned people to "lower" race of the two parents when they reached age 16. But Group Areas Act asked that people be classified according to father's race in order to live in same household.

There are potentially conflicting ideas about descent and inheritance here. How do you explain this? Bowker and Star say that when it came time to classify INDIVIDUALS, Prototypical categories were used. So, a child of two parents falls into race of lower parent, but a child must live with its father. What's going on? Is this a conflict between Aristotelian categories and Prototypical ones? Or are there two different Aristotelian frames with different assumptions about gender?

2. a story about how particular people's lives were affected by the category (go through chapter for examples). Think here about stories of racial reclassification.

Why was it possible, given the sense that races were pure immutable types, for people to be reclassified?

One factor is of course the fact that individuals are classified prototypically in practice to avoid endless inquiries into their descent (Think about the Race Reclassification Board). As Bowker and Star point out, many white south Africans did not want to face the possibility of being disenfranchised by finding "black blood" in their past (this is a real contrast to the one-drop rule!). (p. 208)

So “In the case of apartheid, we see the scientific belief in race difference on an everyday level and an elaborate formal legal apparatus enforcing separation [based on Aristotelian convictions]. At the same time, a much less formal, more prototypical approach uses an amalgam of appearance and acceptance and the on-the-spot visual judgments of everyone from police and tram drivers to judges to perform the sorting process on the street” (p. 201)

Another factor is that the Aristotelian categories themselves explicitly contain their own sabotage in the category of “colored.” What do cases of the reclassification of colored people tell us about the categories?

Totally based on prototypical ideas. Where you’ve been to school, etc. And technologies used inconsistent and crude (combs, etc.).

3. describe how you think the category functioned prototypically and/or according to an Aristotelian logic as well as offering a broader view of what you think RACIAL FORMATION was like in Apartheid South Africa.

Omi and Winant write: “from a racial formation perspective, race is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation” (p. 56). Racial formations are made of racial projects. A racial project is “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (p. 56).

How can we bring the strategic inconsistency of racial classification — of racial representation — that Bowker and Star point into dialogue with Omi and Winant’s attention to the politics of representation? What does inconsistency add?

Helps show how contradictory forces work in representational practice.

Bowker and Star write that “the prototypical and the Aristotelian are conflated, leaving room for either to be invoked in any given scenario” (p. 223). And why are they conflated? Because “the pure types existed nowhere and racism existed everywhere” (pp. 201-202).

Further, “The conflation [of Aristotelian and prototypical] gives a terrible power of ownership of both the formal and informal to those in power” (p. 204). When racial categories oscillate back and forth between these two modes, the consistency that has emerged has been less at the level of categories than in at the level of securing privilege.

Next time:

PART 1: THE ALCHEMY OF RACE: MAKING AND UNMAKING SCIENTIFIC RACISM

3. February 19

Blood, Sex, and Skeletons: Colonialism, Climatic Determinism, Cranial Capacity, and the Rise of Monogenist and Polygenist Scientific Racism

SKIM Darwin!

Come to class with a page of thoughts about how RACE and SEX work together in the readings.