The Biological and Social Constructs of Race and Ethnicity

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Abstract

  Educators are often impeded by their own privilege, which is reaffirmed by the institutions they work in. From these conditions, we can often see how institutional racism perpetuates itself. Many educators or researchers do not consider how ingrained presumptions of how learning works can negatively affect people of other ethnicities. Therefore, educators must attend to their own gaps in knowledge about the needs of the minorities in the classroom and take action to create curricula and content that is better suited to the needs of all students in the multi-cultural classroom they teach. Drawing attention to privileged positions and hegemony within social constructs, this paper discusses how teachers and institutions might be able to change the classroom dynamic, creating an environment where students can feel safer to address privilege from their own personal perspectives as well.

Keywords : Social constructs, Race, Ethnicity, Multi-cultural classrooms, Curricula

1．Introduction

"The United States has a long history of constructing race as biological and utilizing science to support distinctions to archive inferiority and superiority" (Fergus, 2016, p. 22), placing whites at the top of the hierarchy as a comparison for the rest of society. In this fashion, researchers like Hocutt (2002), would contest that race is unavoidably a biological aspect of human existence. That is, race is a fact, thus, it is not logical to attempt to suppress the scientific basis in order to avoid racial discrimination against minority groups (2002). However, as Graves (2010) makes clear, "biological ideas of race were born 'bad.' Their original formulation was tied to the expansion of European colonial power over non-Europeans. Thus, [sic] the naturalism of race in the 15th through 20 th centuries never fully escaped" (p. 47). To this end, Lipsitz (2013) makes clear that rather than being biological, "race is a cultural construct, [and] one with sinister structural causes and consequences" (p. 78). This is quite worrisome, as researchers today still utilize the biological definition of race in many interdisciplinary fields in order to gather data, inauspiciously placing minorities as inferior to dominant groups (Wilson & Arendale, 2011; Winant, 2000; Yang, 2000). Furthermore, the education system has done little to combat the institutionalized racism inherent to the curriculum; thus, perpetuating discrimination over the generations (Arce, Luna, Borjian, & Conrad, 2005; D'Amico, 2016; Fiel, 2013). To expose these inadequacies, critical theories and whiteness have demonstrated how racial oppression works between the dominant and subordinate groups both in society and in schools (Fergus, 2016), ultimately explaining the multifaceted issues of race (Hartmann, Gerteis, & Croll, 2009). With that being said, since the eugenics movement infiltrated both American research and policy in the early 20th century, the

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idea of genetic determinism being associated with race has been difficult to eradicate; nonetheless, the destabilization of this ideology coupled with the growth of critical approaches have ultimately shown that race is a socially constructed phenomenon rather than a biological one.

2. Race Classified Biologically

To understand where the ideology of race being related to biology began, we have to understand where it came from and the effects it has had on the idea of race and superiority. To begin, the idea of race has always contained some forms of classification based on physical features, geographical location, and heredity (Graves, 2010). "Before Darwin, all naturalist thought on varieties (race) was creationist and typological" (Graves, 2010, p. 44), i.e., Carolus Linnaeus (1707–1778), who first classified the different variations of humans, "used a morphological scheme to classify the varieties of man according to their behavior. . . . [and] implied that there was a physical linkage between the outward physical appearance of the human varieties" (p. 44). However, to no surprise, Linnaeus, a white, Swedish naturalist, delineated a number of non-white varieties of Homo sapiens through a crude, racist lens (Smith, 2009). "Thus Linnaeus saw a hierarchy of perfection in the physical and intellectual characters of the human varieties, with H. europaeus representing the apex and H. afer [dark skinned] the abyss [and lazy]" (pp. 44-45). It was not until Charles Darwin, that race was described more scientifically (Graves, 2010; Smith, 2009). "He argued that the inter-fertility of human races, as well as the fact that they graduated into each other independently as well as through intercrossing vitiated the notion of their separateness" (p. 45). This means, even in his time, before DNA, he

realized that there were no actual pure races because humans had already mixed so much that it was inconceivable to try and draw a line. However, this did not stop many that came after him in the anthropological world.

Eugenics was first introduced by Galton (1904), who drew on a bastardized form of Darwinism proposing that desired traits existed and the human race could be improved by selectively breeding to create positive genetic makeup. In America, this ultimately led to the scientific justification for discriminatory policies based on racial categories (Graves, 2010). That is, focusing on the negative or undesirable traits, eugenics in the United States ultimately laid the groundwork for the majority of the bigoted interracial marriage laws, immigration acts, and citizenship rules leading all the way up to World War II where people from low-economic standing (typically minorities) were deemed inferior (Fergus, 2016; Graves, 2010; Winant, 2000). For example, "the white races would maintain their superior position only if they remained relatively pure and avoided diluting their stock by breeding with the inferior yellow and brown races" (Smith, 2009, p. 12). However, the method of classifying humans into racial categories using the theories from On the Origin of Species was brutally inconsistent (Graves, 2010). Namely, Darwin guarded against making sweeping generalizations about humans and race in "his chapter on The Races of Man . . . debunk[ing] the claims of the polygenists who believed that the races of humanity should be treated as distinct and separate species" (Graves, 2010, p. 45). Nonetheless, it was not until the end of the second World War that eugenics wavered. Fortunately, "the association of fascism with eugenics . . . forced choices upon democratically and progressively inclined publics, both intellectual and political" (Winant, 2000, p. 177)

to begin rethinking the effects of placing one racial group superior to others.

Although the white supremacist ideologies set forth by Linnaeus and Galton have been discredited, some researchers in America, even today, abide by the concept that race is biologically predetermined (Brown & Armelagos, 2011; Graves, 2010; Smith, 2009). Like this, Hocutt (2002) states that race is a matter of heredity, "because genes often manifest themselves in visible differences, members of a race can sometimes be identified by their salient features" (p. 121). That is, he believes, like dogs, we are different breeds of humans who look different due to our ancestry (2002). In this way, biological schemes which are still intact today are using typological definitions to classify people into essentialist research categories (Graves, 2010; Smith, 2009), which utilize whiteness as a boundary to categorize traits (Brown & Armelagos, 2011). Because of the shortcomings of research into race and ethnicity as a biological construct, the idea that society is the main constructor of race has gained the attention of many theorists (Donnor, 2011; Graves, 2010; Harris, 2007; Hartmann et al., 2009; Winant, 2000; Yang, 2000). That is to say, "while one can still debate the utility of the term race . . . almost no one defends the idea that the 19th century racial categories Caucasian, Mongoloid, or Negroid are of much use in 21st century research. In the current state of affairs, it is now widely accepted that the idea of race is constructed," (Graves, 2010, p. 43) political, and open to interpretation depending on the historical and social context.

3．Race as a Social Construct

Recent DNA research is starting to shed light on the reality of race and ethnicity from a genetic

perspective by disproving the actual existence of race altogether (Brown & Armelagos, 2011; Graves, 2010). "Protein studies demonstrated that about 85% of the genetic variation in humans could be found within populations, while about 5% was between populations within the same continent, and 10% existed between continents" (Graves, 2010, p. 51). This means that "studies that attempt to define individuals on the basis of racial or 'geographical' location are both flawed in design and easily misinterpreted" (Brown & Armelagos, 2011, p. 38). In this regard, social scientists make the case that it is our perception of each other and the motivation for power that are the driving forces for defining race, rather than our actual genetic composition. "[Hence,] unease about the meaning of 'race', in particular, has led to the practice of . . . [using] the term 'ethnicity', which suggests a more socially situated, less biological concept" (Smith, 2009, p. 9). Like this, critics of the biological essentialism hold that the assignment of race is usually politically motivated and is used by dominant groups to disenfranchise minority groups (Smith, 2009).

According to Winant (2000), race as we know it today did not exist before it was invented by the British and other European empires as a tool for colonialization. "The idea of race began to take shape with the rise of a world political economy. The onset of global economic integration, the dawn of seaborne empire, the conquest of the Americas, and the rise of the Atlantic slave trade" (p. 172). In this way, although the biological standpoint utilizes features as is premise of race, from a socially-constructed route, establishing terms for different races only appear when its politically and economically beneficial (Graves, 2010; Winant, 2000). "Definitions of race [then,] . . . are historically unstable, constantly invented and reinvented to suit a range of

political, economic, and social circumstances" (Harris, 2007, p. 3). This is exemplified by Smith (2009), who explains that "In medieval Europe, religious hatred and suspicion was mixed with ideas of racial difference in Christian hostility towards Jews, and later towards Muslims from the Middle East and North Africa" (p. 10). In more recent times, we can also see the construction of race happening in the way that Europeans who used physical features to justify superiority to the indigenous populations in both Africa and Northern America (2009). "Reducing people to a single dimension of who they are separates and excludes them, marks them as 'other,' as different from 'normal' . . . people and therefore as inferior," (Johnson, 2013, p. 16) which makes it possible to establish stereotypical, exotic, or romantic ideologies of different minority groups; thus, placing them in a lesser position to the privileged group.

4. Critical Race Theory and Whiteness

In America today, systems of oppression operate at many different levels and dimensions within society. However, many critical conceptual and theoretical frameworks illuminate the fact that otherness and whiteness are prevailing factors used in establishing dominant and subordinate groups (Tate, 1997; Taylor, 2006; Warren, 1999).

Critical race theory (CRT), which arose out of the works of the critical legal studies, is often linked to the aftermath of the civil rights movement beginning in the 1970s (Tate, 1997). "The intellectual continuity of CRT should . . . be viewed as a shift in paradigm from critical legal studies (CLS). The distinctions between CRT and CLS are important for those interested in how race and racism are framed in discourse" (Tate, 1997, p. 198). CRT draws on the legal and political institutionalization of racism in both the past and modern context, but also advocates that racism is ingrained into American society and exists to maintain white privileges as well as white supremacy (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Moses, 2011; Tate, 1997). "In addition, the field of CRT allows for a more critical examination of the concept of race, how it operates, and its socially constructed existence" (Mcknight & Chandler, 2012, p. 93).

Similarly, whiteness shares a lot of the foundations of CRT. To this end, "The goal of whiteness studies is to reveal and to share new knowledge about a seemingly under-investigated social phenomenon; namely, the social construction of whiteness" (Guess, 2006, p. 653). In White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack, Peggy McIntosh (1990) lists privileges of different institutions and social settings that whites often take for granted. "'[W]hite' skin in the United States opens many doors for whites whether or not we approve of the way dominance has been conferred on us" (Mcintosh, 1990, p. 35). However, even in the face of credible counter-arguments, many have difficulties accepting whiteness as a socially occurring phenomenon. That is to say, due to whiteness, Americans are socialized with ill-informed conceptions of how race plays into terms of advantage—such as racism is connected to morality—skewing their world-view and causing them to evaluate society in terms of white superiority (Yeung, Spanierman, & Landrum-Brown, 2013). Like this, "Lipsitz (1998:1) argues that simple-race 'identity politics' often leave 'white people unmarked, never acknowledging the particular role whiteness plays 'as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations'" (as cited in Pollock, 2004, p. 47). Consequently, only through personal reflection, where "whiteness studies . . . serve as an effective way of challenging white power and

dominance, " (Warren, 1999, p. 187) can the playing field be leveled for people from all walks of life (Charbeneau, 2015; Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Corcoran & Silander, 2011).

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