Racism in America

http://www.umich.edu/~kshawkin/talks/20050512.pdf

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Before I begin

• I don’t really like PowerPoint. If you don’t either, or you’re interested in finding out why I don’t like it, read Peter Norvig, “PowerPoint: shot with its own bullets,” http://www.norvig.com/lancet.html.

• But I’m using it today because some people read English better than they understand it when spoken.
What is race? (1)

- Let’s start by defining *race*.
- *Race* is a term invented during the 18th century, referring to local populations encountered during this era of European colonialism, as opposed to the colonizers.
- It has always been used to justify unequal distributions of power between two groups.

What is race? (2)

- Use of the term *race* often focuses on inherited physical characteristics, but geneticists have confirmed that “there is greater variation within ‘racial’ groups than between them.” That is, there’s no genetic justification for racial classification.

- In America in particular, *race* was used to justify the continuation of slavery and the conquering of Native Americans (Indians).

Legal definitions of *race* in the US

- Following the abolition of slavery (1865), many US states passed laws that defined a person’s race based on ancestry.
- These laws made various forms of discrimination and segregation legal, but all such laws were overturned by the Civil Rights Act of 1964.
- Today, many documents ask people to *self-identify* by race, but by law you are never required to answer this question.
1997 federal standard

• In 1997, a federal rule change required federal government agencies to use a minimum of the following five race categories on forms to be filled out by citizens:
  – American Indian or Alaskan Native
  – Asian
  – Black or African American
  – Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
  – White

• You self-identify (choose your own race), and you may choose more than one.
Census 2000: race and ethnicity

• The US Census in 2000 had a sixth race category: Some other race. We’ve realized that the five historically based categories don’t work.

• There was a separate question for ethnicity:
  – Hispanic or Latino
  – Not Hispanic or Latino

Census 2000: ancestry

• You can also indicate your ancestry from a long list, including:
  – Acadian/Cajun
  – American
  – Arab
  – British West Indian
  – French Canadian
  – … and many more, including almost every European nationality.
A note on “Jewish”

- Note that “Jewish” is considered a religion, not nationality, in the US.
- The US Census is forbidden from asking about religious confession.
So, what is racism?

- Generally speaking, *racism* is the holding of a prejudice against someone based on race (a social classification) and acting on this prejudice by discriminating.

- In counseling psychology as studied in America, *racism* includes only discrimination dependent on social, economic, or other power. So *reverse discrimination* is not a form of racism.
Effect of Civil Rights Movement

- The American Civil Rights Movement, particularly since the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision (1954), has made people more aware of discrimination and prejudice.

- The movement grew out of the struggle for equal rights for Black Americans; however, many have been trying to expand discussions of race in America beyond “black versus white.”
Use of language

• Today, it is not appropriate to mention a person’s race, but it can sometimes be used as an identifying characteristic, as you would for hair color or height. Culturally aware people try to avoid doing this.

• Likewise, you should not identify someone by ethnicity, ancestry, religion, and—for those not born in the United States—country of origin, unless it’s directly relevant.
Race as social construction

• As you can see, *race*, especially in the American context, is almost entirely a social construction: a cultural concept rather than one that exists abstractly.

• Among younger generations, race has become more of a social identification with a weak connection to physical characteristics.
Race for young people

• Various impolite expressions and slang terms:
  – “acting white”
  – “acting black”, yo
  – oreo, coconut
  – banana

• These are based on the way you:
  – dress
  – act
  – talk
Contentious issues

• Discussions of race are always very contentious in America:
  – Is Barak Obama black?
  – *Racial profiling*
  – *Affirmative action* (preferential access)
  – *Reparations* for slavery
Does racism still exist in the US?

• While racism may rarely be overt any more, it still exists in more subtle forms:
  – *Redlining* (discriminating in offering loans or insurance based on where a person lives)—illegal if based on race
  – Names on résumés (2003 study): black-sounding names were 50% less likely to be called for interviews
For more information

• UnderstandingPrejudice.org: www.understandingprejudice.org
• Anti-Racism.net: www.antiracismnet.org
• Институт толерантности: http://www.tolerinst.ru/