

RACISM – THE REAL CULPRIT

By Rod Matthews

The biological definition of the term ‘race’ was used to describe the sub-species of a population that has been isolated geographically. Isolation has led to discernable differences in populations.

In 1779 Johann Friedrich Blumenbach published a highly influential classification system of humans based on research into the shape of their skulls.ⁱ The five races he identified were:

- Caucasian (white race)
- Mongolian (yellow race)
- Malayan (brown race)
- Ethiopian (black race)
- American (red race)

The difficulty with this definition is that, taxonomically, it is incorrect. All humans belong to the sub-species *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

Also, there is no genetic relevance to the term ‘race’ as there is insufficient DNA difference to identify distinct races.

Many people argue that the term ‘race’ is purely a social construct, and as such is riddled with problems. In common usage, ‘race’ is often confused with ‘sub-species’.

Jonathan Marks, an author of biological anthropology, put it well when he said:

‘By the 1970s, it had become clear that:

- most human differences were cultural
- what was not cultural was principally polymorphic – that is to say, found in diverse groups of people at different frequencies
- what was not cultural or polymorphic was principally clinal – that is to say, gradually variable over geography and
- what was left – the component of human diversity that was not cultural, polymorphic or clinal – was very small.’ⁱⁱ

On occasions it serves us to re-label things in order for us to think differently about them. The term 'race' has come to be associated with making distinctions between people and their abilities, values and beliefs based on some visual characteristic. This is clearly invalid.

What is true is that our genetic make-up responds to the environment. As such, social scientists and economists can make some predications on our abilities, values and beliefs based on the environment in which we find ourselves. It would not be difficult for us to find a child who is able to use his feet to keep a soccer ball in the air for over three minutes if we were in South America, but we would be unlikely to find such a child in Samoa.

As global transport, education and international relations allow us to move between, and even settle in, countries other than our birth, the idea that a single person is 'Australian', 'Ethiopian' or 'Polish' is slowly diminishing. People are becoming an endless mix and in the process our cultural differences are homogenised.

Race, racism and human misery – the real culprit

There have, of course, been countless unspeakable acts committed by people who have used the concept of 'race' to justify their actions. These include:

- limiting access to resources/opportunity/privilege
- limiting rights
- slavery
- lynching
- 'scientific' experiments
- war
- genocide

Same, same ... but different ...

Let me start by saying that the idea of judging someone to be in any sense less than we are based on their physical differences is, of course, nonsensical. We are all different and yet we are all the same. At the specific level, we are all individuals with our own hopes, dreams, desires, fingerprints, faces and psychology. And yet at the global level we are all the same. We share the same DNA, we are all 9.5% carbon and 63% hydrogen, we all bleed, we all feel joy. The point at which we consider that similarity or difference to begin and end is highly subjective.

There is no doubt that many an atrocity has been carried out by people on other people based on a belief that one race was superior to another race.

In-group/out-group

Even if we remove the concept of ‘race’ from our consciousness we will still see a preference to determine ‘in-group/out-group’ characteristics. This has been the case throughout history. Distinctions on who is ‘one of us’ and who is ‘one of them’ have been made using many different tools, including race, religion, state, city, postcode, hobby, politics, genetics and relationship.

Evolutionary psychologists would suggest that we determine who is ‘one of us’ and who is ‘one of them’ based on a principle of ‘proximity to self’. The closer to myself that I see someone the more likely I will see them as part of the ‘in group’.

The real culprit here is our preference to make ‘in-group/out-group’ decisions. The evolutionary benefit of doing this is that if there are limited resources and I have to choose who I want to live or die, I will choose the person who has the most say in whether my genes survive beyond the current crises (my family). It simply makes evolutionary sense to do this.

Decide first, then justify

Have you ever played those games where you are faced with a decision about who gets to stay alive? You know – you are trapped in a boat with a priest, a nurse, a scientist and a policeman (I know, I know ... it sounds like the start of a bad joke). You have to choose who gets thrown overboard first to save the lives of everyone else. What inevitably happens when you play these sorts of games with groups is that they will choose who they see as being most unlike them in the first place and then spend hours justifying the decision.

We all do it at some level

So while racism is a terrible thing that has indeed brought untold misery to individuals and entire groups, my concern is that blaming the concept of racism could be blaming the tool and not the user of the tool. It is a bit like blaming a poorly built house on the fact that the builder used a cheap hammer. It allows individuals to abdicate responsibility for their actions and it distracts us from the fact that we all make distinctions about others based, unconsciously, on similarity and difference. We all then exhibit behaviours based on those distinctions.

For more information, read *Whistling Vivaldi* by Claude M. Steele.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Blumenbach, Johann Friedrich, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Friedrich_Blumenbach (last modified 11 June 2012)

ⁱⁱ Marks, Jonathan (2010), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_\(human_classification\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_(human_classification)) (last modified 1 July 2012)

ⁱⁱⁱ Steele, Claude M. (2011), *Whistling Vivaldi*, Norton, New York