

What is a social construct and how is it connected to race?

In the late 18th century, German anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach created five categories to group human beings based on physical appearance and the geographic origin of their ancestors.¹ The establishment of different “races”—using physical identifiers such as skin color, hair texture and eye shape—altered human history in far-reaching ways. Social hierarchies and emerging pseudoscientific theories based on race have been used to justify exploration, colonization, forced removal, slavery and genocide.

In his celebrated *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), Thomas Jefferson wrote: “The first difference which strikes us is that of colour.” He argued that Black people were inferior to both white people and Native Americans.² The false notion of white supremacy helped the nascent United States resolve the contradictions inherent in enslaving Africans and African Americans while proclaiming the ideals of liberty and equality. Deeply rooted beliefs about white superiority and Black inferiority fueled centuries of slavery, lynching and Jim Crow segregation. Current problems—such as neo-Nazi gatherings like the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA, and the aggressive policing that led to the unnecessary death of George Floyd in 2020—show that race remains a salient and often lethal way of sorting human beings.

Though we live in a racialized society, there is actually no scientific basis for race. As noted in the documentary *Race—The Power of an Illusion*, “There are no characteristics, no traits, not even one gene that distinguish all members of one so-called race from all members of another race.”³ The program highlights that most human variation occurs within and not between “races,” so two random Koreans are likely to be as genetically different as a Korean and an Italian. Moreover, most traits are inherited independently of one another, and “the genes for skin color have nothing to do with genes for hair texture, eye shape, blood type, musical talent or athletic ability.”⁴

Race is a social construct. It tells us nothing about a person’s ability or character, yet it is often the first thing we notice about others, especially people of color. Race is not real, but racism is very much a reality. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley reminds us that “racism is not about how you look, it is about how people assign meaning to how you look.”⁵ The meaning of race has been created and sustained not by science, but by historical, social, economic and political practices that have created unequal access to opportunities and resources. Race remains significant because of widespread and shared social perceptions that it has value and meaning. Understanding that race is a social construct provides a critical lens through which we can better understand how racism operates and how to act to dismantle it.

1 Raj Bhopal, “The beautiful skull and Blumenbach’s errors: the birth of the scientific concept of race” *BMJ* 335, no. 7633 (2007): 1308, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2151154>.

2 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Richmond: 1853), pages 149-152, 155.

3 California Newsreel, “Race Literacy Quiz,” <http://newsreel.org/guides/race/quiz.htm>.

4 PBS, “What is Race? / Is Race for Real?,” https://www.pbs.org/race/001_WhatIsRace/001_00-home.htm.

5 American Anthropological Association and Science Museum of Minnesota, “Race—Are We So Different?,” <https://www.understandingrace.org/LivedExperience>.