

Discussion Protocol Outline:

Cultural and Biological Variability in the Social Construction of “Race”

Class topic: Race in the context of cultural and biological variability

Purpose: To help students understand the concept that “race” is a social construct and not a matter of biological fact, and to apply that information to themselves and their community.

Learning Objectives: By the end of the session, students should be able to:

- Understand the cultural reasons for describing racial divisions
- Understand that it is biological reality that physical characteristics do not vary concordantly (in a collective set) but that every attribute varies independent of others
- Understand how individual identity is influenced by cultural and biological differences

Introduction: In the last lecture (or two) we have discussed evolution and human adaptation and variability. We have also learned about early classifications of race put forward by Carolus Linnaeus and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach in the 18th century. Today we will discuss the basis of these classifications, the reasons they are perpetuated, how they influence our culture and our identity, and why biology does not support racial distinctions.



Questions for the Discussion:

- How many races of humans exist today?
- How many categories of humans (“races”) have been described by scholars? Scientists? Governments? In what contexts?
- What function is served in society by describing “racial” divisions?
- Has that function changed over time?
- How might it change in the future?
- Are racial divisions hierarchal? Do they need to be? Why?
- How is “race” different from “racism?”
- What physical characteristics are used to identify a “race?”
- Which of these characteristics to you think are most indicative of a person’s “race?”
- In what ways are a person’s identity associated with the color of their skin?

- How does culture impact your interpretation of a person's "race?"
- How are racial divisions perpetuated in the media? How well do these portrayals match real life?

Comments and questions when students make a good point:

- That is a helpful perspective
- I like that interpretation
- Thank you for sharing your experience

Comments and questions when students should elaborate:

- Can you think of an experience you've had that illustrates that?
- How has culture reinforced that idea?
- Can you explain what you mean by that?

Comments and questions to encourage more input:

- Do you think that is always true?
- How have the people around you behaved in that situation/context?
- Do you think that is accurate or is that a stereotype?

Comments and questions for when students are inaccurate:

- What might be another interpretation?
- Is it possible that your interpretation is based on your experience, not necessarily science?
- How does a particular culture influence your thinking about this?

Assessment: Students will write a few sentences in response to the following questions:

- Based on our discussion today, how do you perceive your own identity in the context of cultural and biological variations?
- Has this discussion changed or not changed your perceptions of race/racial identity?

Closing: More than anything else that we discuss, I hope you will remember that your individual worth is not based on external characteristics of either culture or biology. Every one of us was born with a set of biological characteristics that were inherited from hundreds of generations of ancestors from many regions of the globe. Our culture is constantly changing and adapting. The only thing that is fixed is that you are a human being that has value and worth. You are the only one who gets to decide what that means.

