

Introduction to Race and Ethnicity

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Key concepts, definitions, and scholarly perspectives

1. Basic Definitions

Term	Core Idea	Typical Usage
Race	A socially constructed classification based on perceived physical differences (e.g., skin color, facial features).	Often linked to historical power hierarchies and legal categories.
Ethnicity	A group’s shared cultural traits—language, religion, customs, ancestry, and self-identification.	Emphasizes cultural affiliation rather than physical appearance.
Race? ethnicity	The combined way societies categorize people, acknowledging that race and ethnicity intersect but are not interchangeable.	Used in demographic surveys, public policy, and academic research.

2. Historical Development

- Pre-modern societies** – Identity tied to tribe, clan, or locality rather than “race.”
 - Colonial era (15th–19th c.)** – European powers created racial categories to justify slavery, conquest, and resource extraction.
 - Scientific racism (18th–early 20th c.)** – Pseudoscientific attempts to rank “races” biologically (e.g., craniometry, eugenics).
 - Mid-20th c. civil rights movements** – Shift from biological determinism to a social constructionist view of race.
 - Contemporary scholarship** – Emphasizes race as a *structural* and *institutional* phenomenon that shapes life chances.
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3. Theoretical Perspectives

Perspective	Main Claim	Representative Scholars
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Biological essentialism	Racial differences are rooted in genetics and biology.	Early 20th-century eugenicists (now discredited).
Social constructionism	Race is created and maintained through social processes, language, and power relations.	W.E.B. Du Bois, Michael Omi & Howard Winant ("racial formation").
Intersectionality	Race interacts with gender, class, sexuality, etc., producing unique experiences of oppression or privilege.	Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins.
Critical race theory (CRT)	Racism is ordinary, embedded in law and institutions; challenges the "color-blind" myth.	Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado.
Ethno-symbolic approach	Ethnicity is a symbolic system of meanings that individuals negotiate.	Fredrik Barth, Anthony D. Smith.

4. Key Concepts

- **Racialization** – The process by which societies ascribe racial meanings to groups or phenomena.
 - **White privilege** – Unearned advantages conferred on people identified as "white" in many societies.
 - **Color-line** – Metaphor for the social and economic separation of races (Du Bois).
 - **Assimilation vs. multiculturalism** – Different policy approaches to managing ethnic diversity.
 - **Ethnic boundary making** – The ways groups delineate "us" vs. "them" (Barth).
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5. Measuring Race & Ethnicity

Method	Strengths	Limitations
Self-identification (census, surveys)	Captures personal sense of belonging; flexible.	May change over time; influenced by question wording.
Observer classification	Useful for historical records where self-report isn't available.	Prone to bias; reinforces external labeling.
Genetic ancestry testing	Provides biological ancestry data.	