IDENTITY:

In psychology, identity is the qualities, beliefs, personality, looks and/or expressions that make a person (self-identity) or group (particular social category or social group). The process of identity can be creative or destructive.

https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/identity

"We contain multitudes," wrote Walt Whitman, referring not to the highly contested diagnosis of dissociative identity disorder but to the fact that we see ourselves radically differently in different contexts. Everyone struggles with that existential plum, "Who am I?" For people who are overly concerned with other people’s impressions, or who feel a core aspect of themselves, such as gender or sexuality, is not being expressed, this struggle is acute.


How do you define your own identity?
We are all born into cultures, families and communities with certain values we naturally inherit. But in order to figure out who we are, we have to revisit those inherited values, and decide for ourselves what to believe, or what to value. Simply believing something because our parents or teachers did assumes they were right, and if they made the same assumption about their parent’s and teachers, when exactly did someone sit down and consider the alternatives?
How can a person define their own identity? Is it good to do this? Why or why not?

http://changingminds.org/explanations/needs/identity.htm
The need for a sense of identity
Maslow’s hierarchy of needs

https://www.facinghistory.org/civic-dilemmas/new-concept-identity
Excellent excerpt from book about identity as it relates to global migration (with audio reading of excerpt – very good)

https://www.ted.com/talks/robb_willer_how_to_have_better_political_conversations
TED talk on political identity that divides

http://www.npr.org/2013/10/06/229879937/identities
TED Radio
Identities – who we are

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORW_e8P8RcY
Being Black in Canada
CBC Television
Our Canada: Are We Racist?
CBC The National

Angelica Dass TED Talk on skin colour
Fascinating; a bit hard to understand the speaker's accent

Discussion with graphs of word usage and connotation
labels of REFUGEE, MIGRANT, IMMIGRANT, EXPAT

Section of a research paper discussion how the mind creates our identities from stored information

Colour Code: podcast series from CBC Radio about race and racism in Canada
Very open, discusses various ‘communities’

One South Asian person’s experience with changing identity as an immigrant

Gender fluidity and identity

Article about 'ethnic fraud' relating to Joseph Boyden claims of belonging

Article on national/cultural identity in the Canadian reality
Gordon Hodson Ph.D, Without Prejudice

Race as a Social Construction

We often hear that race is a social construction. But what does that mean?

Posted Dec 05, 2016

Trevor Noah, host of the Daily Show, recently released an autobiography entitled Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood. As a biracial man born and raised in South Africa, he shares fascinating insights into how we racially categorize people, and the consequences of such categorization. He recounts how, as the son of a Black mother and a White father, his biracial status put him in a middle ground, considered “inferior” by half of his family and “superior” by the other half. After all, in South Africa there have historically existed many gradations of whiteness and blackness as social categories, each of which comes with different social standing. For instance, Noah describes how his Black grandmother was much less severe with him, relative to his Black cousins, given his privileged status as half-White. He also explains how under the apartheid system one’s racial category or status could change, both socially and legally.

This is in sharp contrast to how race is conceptualized in the US, where the “one drop rule” has long dominated. Although American culture recognizes the biracial category, people are generally considered Black (and treated as such) if they have descended from any Black relatives to any degree. That is, even a “drop” of Black blood has rendered someone Black (but even this varies depending on whether the perceiver is White or Black, among other factors). As such, even being 1/16th Black historically resulted in your categorization as Black. (Incidentally, the Nazis held similar views, where having Jewish ancestry, even in a distant sense, categorized one as Jewish). This is known as hypodescent, a process whereby a biracial person is categorized fully or primarily in terms of the lower status (or disadvantaged) social group. The fact that status plays a role in social categorization clearly demonstrates that categorization (e.g., as White, as Black) is a social construction.

Yet when I talk about race in class it becomes apparent that students grapple with the notion of race as a social construction. Some will say “But I can see race. I can see that you’re White, that she is Asian, and that he is Black”. Others, including those in the media, are suspicious of the notion of race as social construction, fearing that such ideas represent a left-wing ploy. A trick. A trap. But recognizing race as a social construction does not make race less “real”. Marriages are social constructions, but they have serious legal, cultural, and interpersonal implications. Oftentimes the social aspect is what makes a phenomenon so central to our lives. So what do we mean by social construction in the racial context? Rather than draw on scientific or philosophical discussions of race and essentialism, my goal here is to describe some concrete examples that might help to elucidate what is meant by race as social construction.

Let’s start with President Barack Obama. When he was running for president we witnessed a range of responses from the voters and pundits. To some he was clearly “too Black”. For others he was clearly “not Black enough”. Even within social groups there were disagreements. For some Black Americans he was not Black enough because he did not descend from slavery in an American context (i.e., his father moved from Kenya). The fact that there exists disagreement, whether between Whites and Blacks, or within Whites and Blacks, drives home the point of this article: race is a social construction with no true or absolute biological basis. If we can disagree about whether someone is of Race X or Y, and if there are consensual rules for determining such designations (e.g., based on social status, slave history), and if such a designation can change over time or across cultures (e.g., US vs. South Africa), then we are dealing with a social construct not a biological one. As a society we develop cultural rules about race and then we apply these rules when psychologically categorizing people.

Need more convincing? Let’s turn to some interesting science. Kemmelmeier and Chavez (2014), using a variety of different methods across studies, exposed White participants to a range of photos of Barack Obama. Cleverly, the researchers darkened or lightened the photos systematically. The task of the participant was to identify which photo reflected Obama’s true skin colour. In both studies, those higher in symbolic racism (i.e., feeling resentment toward Black demands for equality; denial of anti-Black discrimination) selected the darker photos to reflect his true colour, and this was true both before and after each election cycle. Interestingly, those with stronger identification as a Republican supporter also perceived Obama’s skin to be significantly darker, but this latter effect was observed only prior to the election, not after the election.

Think about that for a minute. Political partisanship predicted “how Black” Obama is, but only in the context of a political race where a Black man might subsequently take or retain power of the White House. In the words of the authors, “…partisan biases in the perception of skin tone are activated as a function of political intergroup conflict” (p. 149). Put simply, Obama’s “blackness” was systematically determined by racial biases of the perceiver, by the political
partisanship of the perceiver, and by the temporal proximity of the testing session to an election. These patterns reflect social construction of race. If Obama were Black or biracial simply as a matter of biological race, we would not see such patterns, whereby his degree of Blackness is a moving target and a topic of debate. Obama is who he is, but people categorize him as more or less Black as a function of their own psychological processing. When the target stands still but his categorization “as X” or “as Y” moves, there is a reasonable conclusion: categorization is a social construction with psychological roots.

And let’s keep in mind some basic differences between cultures in how they think about race. In the US, one has historically been considered “Coloured” (although that term is becoming increasingly disavowed) to the extent that one has Black ancestry. In South Africa, “Coloured” refers to someone of mixed White-Black background, not someone of a Black-only background. In South Africa, therefore, Black is Black and Coloured is mixed White-Black. Comparing these countries it is clear that being “Black” (or not) varies as a function of social and cultural conventions not biology. Obama is widely considered as Black in the US, but as Coloured (and higher status) when he steps off of Air Force One in South Africa. Prior to becoming an international symbol and one of the world’s most powerful men, he would have also been treated very differently as a result of being Black (US) or Coloured (South Africa). Again, race is a social construction, where societies generate informal or formal rules about what we see (i.e., perception) and how to act and treat others (i.e., discrimination).

Scientists generally do not recognize races as biologically meaningful. Yet scientists, including me, discuss race and describe the racial composition of our samples. To be clear, I am not advocating that we ignore race. In fact, there are many dangers in ignoring race as a social topic. Race is “real”. But race is socially real, not biologically real. Socially important categories can be very real and meaningful, but arguably nonetheless arbitrary in nature. From a Social Dominance Theory perspective, “the arbitrary-set system is filled with socially constructed and highly salient groups based on characteristics such as clan, ethnicity, estate, nation, race, caste, social class, religious sect, regional groups, or any other socially relevant group distinction that the human imagination is capable of constructing” (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 33). Like race, nations are arbitrary but real. What we call Belgium is not biologically or essentially Belgium; what is called Belgium is a region that the international community agrees is Belgium. It is socially constructed. It might not have the same boundaries in the future, and it certainly did not in the past. This doesn’t make Belgium unreal. On the contrary, it has very real meaning and is of psychological, political, and legal significance. But humans created it as a concept. Belgium itself has no essence in a biological sense, and race works much the same way.

As I’ve argued, the degree to which a person is categorized into a racial category can vary as a function of the social context (e.g., power differentials between groups; temporal proximity to elections), personal factors (e.g., racism in the perceiver; political partisanship in the perceiver), or an interaction between personal and social factors. And how the person personally identifies is yet another valid factor to consider (as is the case with sexual identity, a topic I may revisit in a future column). All of this renders “race” a social construction. We make it, we agree on it, we reward and punish people as a result of it.

References

(for a lengthy interview with Trevor Noah).

