

Classifying Race

What is race?

The concept of 'race' is deeply embedded in our thinking. Many of us take it as a matter of fact that people can be grouped into 'races' according to their origins and appearance. 'Race' asks us to define ourselves and each other by dividing characteristics such as skin colour.

But, biologically speaking, human beings are in fact just one species or 'race'. We are one of the most genetically similar species on the planet. The small amount of genetic difference between humans that does exist often has little to do with where someone comes from. There can be more genetic variations between two Chinese people, for example, than between a Chinese and an African person. 'Race' is in fact a social idea that has evolved over time, and not a genetic truth.

Race and racism

During 'The Enlightenment' (see 'The Enlightenment and its impact on medicine') biologists and philosophers developed racial ideas that drew on the ancient idea of 'The Chain of Being'. This theory suggested that the universe was naturally ordered in a series of hierarchies. Some thinkers believed

humans could also be placed in hierarchies where different physical characteristics indicated moral virtues. A popular view developed, that 'natural' inequalities existed between different 'racial' groups,

These theories were the starting point for modern racism, and contributed to the political use of 'race' as a method of social and cultural segregation.

Race, politics and science

In the 17th and 18th centuries the economies of Europe and America were largely dependent on the use of African slave labour. Yet slavery went against the basic human rights of freedom and equality that were supposedly championed by American and European societies. Racial theories were used to overcome this contradiction and justify why black Africans could be enslaved and treated badly. By classing Africans as 'less than human' it was easier to argue that 'human rights' did not apply to them.

The Swedish naturalist **Carl Linnaeus** believed that the human species comprised four distinct races: Europeans, Africans, American Indians and Asians – a theory known as polygenism. Linnaeus presented Europeans and Africans as extreme

opposites. Fair-skinned Europeans were considered civilized, intelligent and 'ruled by religious custom' while black Africans were portrayed as lazy, savage, crafty and 'ruled by authority'.



Carl Linnaeus

Petrus Camper, a Dutch anatomist believed that the angle of the face of different peoples showed that black Africans were more like apes than white Europeans. However, Camper did believe humans were one race and openly opposed slavery, famously stating that 'all of us are black, only more or less'.

A scientific understanding of difference

Today's anthropologists (who study the origins and characteristics of human beings) do not use race to classify humans. However, while different 'races' do not exist, human beings do of course vary. Genetics is helping us understand those differences and put them in context by allowing us, for instance, to identify those of us who are susceptible to certain diseases (see 'An Introduction to Genetics').