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Mixed-Race: The Future's Bright, The Future's Blended

Dr Nathalie Van Meurs



It's easy to think in black, white, yellow, red. Human beings like to take thinking short cuts while making sense of the world. One of the easiest ways to categorise people is by how they look: the way they dress, what biological sex they are, and what skin colour they have.

However, it is perilous to draw conclusions about a person based on what we see or know (e.g., someone's nationality or sexuality). For example, we may use race to monitor discrimination as a social phenomenon by asking people from different racial backgrounds how they experience class bullying but we cannot make inferences about a person's intelligence, personality, or likes and dislikes based on the colour of their skin. This is stereotyping, which is a by-product of social categorisation. It is an essential process of our cognitive structure. Everybody uses stereotypes. But the next step is associating emotions (like and dislike) with the stereotype, which results in prejudice. Finally, if you act upon your cognitive schemas, and negative emotions, discrimination (a behaviour) ensues.

Is 'race' a useful concept?

Minkov (2007) argues that there is enough scientific evidence to suggest that there are genetic differences across human groups and that this has biological consequences with cultural implications. For example, if a 'racial group' is prone to certain illnesses, this is because our biological heritage interacts with experiences mediated through socialisation and enculturation (who we choose to mate with). But other psychologists argue that race, like gender, is a social construct (Segall et al, 1999, p.23): There are cultural differences, but no racial differences. If there are likes and dislikes among a racial group, this is due to the norms and values that are shared within the community. They argue that our external features are not reliable markers: We have become taller, balder, and bigger, and what use is a category when the markers change over time? Furthermore, facial features can be placed on a continuum: it is difficult to draw division lines (see figure below), yet it is easier for us to enforce boundaries.



Facial features can be placed on a continuum: it is difficult to draw division lines. Image from All of us are related; Each of us is unique, Syracuse University

Many biologists and anthropologists now agree that race is not a useful biological concept at the human level. Minkov (2007) calls this a difference between a polythetic vs. monothetic construct. The "human

race can be defined as a group of people in which every individual shares a lot of biological features with many other individuals in the same group [polythetic], which are not typical of other groups, but there is no single feature that is possessed by all members of the group and is not found in any other group [which would be monothetic]" (p. 33). For example, it makes no sense to cluster all sub-Saharan Africans together as Blacks as they are too diverse, biologically and culturally, to be lumped together. However, Minkov argues, it is possible to group humans into small clusters based on genetic patterns that are more prevalent in one group than in another. Furthermore if it is scientifically agreed that racial differences are clinal (i.e., genetically inherited traits often gradually change in frequency from one geographic region to another - that is, they change in clines) and not categorical, then why are we still using race as social categories?

Group membership and social identity

People's sense of social identity is derived from various group memberships that give them a sense of belonging and also makes them feel that they are distinct from other groups. The main difference between personal identity and social identity is that personal identity refers to self-categories that define the individual as a unique person in terms of individual differences from other persons (e.g., I like blue cheese and I play the violin). Social identity refers to self-categories that define people in terms of their shared similarities with members of certain social categories in contrast to other social categories (out-groups) (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) (e.g., I support Manchester United and I am a Muslim). Interpersonal comparisons are about me versus you. Social comparisons are about us versus them.

Belonging to a certain racial group is thus an example of belonging to a social identity. The reason why people choose a partner within their racial group may be, among other things, due to ethnocentrism, which is "the belief that our ways, because they are ours, must be closer to truth, goodness and beauty than are the ways of others" (Shweder, 1991, p.27). Others describe it as "the tendency to see one's own group more favourably than the out-group and to show preference for the in-group in reward distribution" (Judd et al., 1995, p.461). We look after 'our own' and try to better or maintain their wellbeing. This kind of behaviour is not necessarily a natural tendency: it does not appear until children are 5 years of age but then reaches significant levels; it is strongly related to developing social cognitions (Aboud, 2003) (i.e., understanding how relationships work).

Human beings are cognitively lazy and have a tendency to stereotype and use short cuts. When we see someone in uniform we can easily recognize their function. When we see that someone is a man or a woman we make quick inferences on what their behaviour will be like. At the moment those of mixed race are in a minority group that is difficult to categorise for people. The concept of race is so strongly ingrained that those of a mixed background are discriminated against by those who do fit into a distinct group. What next?

The question that is relevant to this conference is whether eventually mixing 'races' rids us of the socially created division between the racial groups. It resolves the genetics argument (e.g., Minkov) because if we don't feel obliged nor the need to mate within our 'race', genetic differences particular to a race will disappear. Furthermore, mixed race complicates categorisation to such an extent that the short cut of racial stereotyping will be eradicated.

Finally, already many people elect not to abide by the census categories and opt to be 'other' or refuse to indicate a racial category full stop. If we have created the categories, we can choose to ignore them. Eventually, it will not make sense to identify people by their racial background.

Or is it the case that people are likely to mate with similar others, and this evolutionary process is likely to dominate for a long time? Even if some identities are disappearing (e.g., White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), are group dynamics likely to become exacerbated and will racism continue? Furthermore, will people just be more precise in their discrimination by differentiating between shades of black (e.g., as already happens in Latin America, India, South Africa)? Moreover, if human beings have such an ingrained need for categorisation, will we eventually employ another distinguishing feature other than skin colour?

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to link some socio-political questions to the (psychological) research that is out there and raise questions about how we look at race as a construct. We can celebrate mixedness or talk about the plight of people with a mixed race background but this paper was written to look at mixedness from a slightly unusual perspective: Is mixing race amplifying the fact that there is no such thing as racial categories in a biological sense and therefore should we not question the usefulness of race

as a concept all together? Finally, if governments and the media are the 'experimenters' at a national level, what responsibility do they have in terms of manipulating discrimination through consistent categorisation and what can they do to enhance cooperation and understanding?

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