

# Race and Ethnicity: Prejudice and Racism

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the sociological concepts of race and ethnicity, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Race
2. Ethnicity
3. Prejudice, Stereotypes and Racism

## 1. RACE

Race and ethnicity are often thought of as being synonymous, but in fact, they express different ideas. **Race** is a socially constructed meaning of human traits such as skin color, facial shape, eye color, and hair texture.

Humans are biologically the same all over the world; they are all part of the same species, yet these traits mean nothing in and of themselves until human societies and human groups come along and give them meaning. Humans live in a world of meaningful objects--they are meaning-making machines--so they ascribe specific meanings to racial categories in each society.

### IN CONTEXT

Racial differences are an adaptation to the environment. Skin color is an adaptation to the intensity of the sun in the environment. Sun is the most intense on the equator and is less and less powerful as you move towards the poles. Humans originally evolved in Africa, where it was very hot and where the sun was very intense. In Africa darker skin was more naturally advantageous in the Darwinian sense because it prevented people from absorbing too much sun. Therefore, your original human ancestors had darker skin.

As the human population started to disperse, initially to Europe and later to Asia, the climate was different and it began to naturally select for people with lighter skin traits because they needed to absorb more sun to be healthy. Eventually, as people populated the Americas, and even the Arctic, they evolved to have lighter skin. In South America, skin color changed yet again.



### BIG IDEA

Humans adapt to their environment. Despite being members of the same species, they have developed different trait variations in response to the environment. These traits don't mean anything in and of themselves, but are given meaning in human society.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** In Spain, being black or white doesn't mean the same thing as being black or white in America. Furthermore, there's a historical component with trait variations, meaning that being black and white in America in 1858 didn't mean the same thing that it does now. Each society gives these biological traits meaning, which is what society calls 'race.'



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Race

The socially constructed meaning of human traits such as skin color, facial shape, eye color, and hair texture.

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## 2. ETHNICITY

**Ethnicity**, a similar yet distinct concept, refers to shared cultural characteristics or ancestral origins. Ethnicity is defined based on language, ancestry, religion, or culture. The United States is a multi-ethnic society--there are members of many different ethnicities living in the United States.



#### HINT

It's important to note that both race and ethnicity are products of social construction. Race is a socially constructed meaning given to biological traits, whereas ethnicity is a social construction and meaning of cultural traits and ancestry in society, such as "Irish."



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Ethnicity

Shared cultural characteristics, or shared ancestral origins.

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## 3. PREJUDICE, STEREOTYPES AND RACISM

The social construction of racial categories are often given negative meanings that result in prejudice, stereotypes and even racism.

A **minority** is a group of people that differ from the dominant majority. A minority is often defined based on race, sex, ethnicity, etc., and is often smaller in number relative to the majority, though it doesn't necessarily have to be that way. It can also be 'smaller' in terms of power, meaning that a minority group lacks power relative to the majority group.

**Prejudice** is an attitude or judgment about another group, usually involving stereotypes. **Stereotypes** are widely held and oversimplified beliefs about the character and behavior of all members of a group.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** When you apply oversimplified, blanket generalizations about a group in society--either positive or negative--you are using stereotypes. Some stereotypes are good, but they are stereotypes nonetheless.

**Racism** places ideas of prejudice and stereotypes into action. The key to distinguishing racism from prejudice and stereotypes is to understand that racism involves action in the world, whereas prejudice and stereotypes are more often thought of as ideas about racial categories. Racism involves discrimination and widespread mistreatment of people based on their racial characteristics.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Minority**

A group that is different from the dominant majority, usually judged according to race, ethnicity, or gender.

##### **Prejudice**

An attitude or judgment about another group usually involving stereotypes.

##### **Stereotype**

A statement of questionable validity that is indiscriminately applied to all members of a group.

##### **Racism**

Prejudiced ideas and stereotypes put into action.



#### SUMMARY

Today you learned about the sociological categories of **race** and **ethnicity** as well as the related concepts of **prejudice**, **stereotypes**, and **racism**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



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