Race & Ethnicity: Crash Course Sociology #34

Crash Course: Sociology
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How do you define race?

If you had to describe why you think you're a member of one race and someone else was a member of a different one, you'd probably focus on appearances. Your skin, your hair, maybe even the structures of your bodies and faces.

But most of the time, those physical criteria mean different things depending on the culture you're a part of. An obvious example is skin color. We use the words "white" and "black" to describe two races, but the distinction in skin color between those races isn't as clear cut.

A white person who spent the summer at the beach might come home with tan skin, but getting a tan doesn't change their race. And light-skinned black people may have skin that's not all that darker than that tan.

Clearly, race is about more than just the literal color of someone's skin. So, let's talk about race and why it's a topic that goes more than skin deep.

===== Intro (0:45-0:56) =====

Much like gender, race is a socially constructed category. In this case, it's used to categorize people who share biological traits that a society thinks are important.

So you might be wondering, "How can race be both a social construct and something based on biology?" Well, the key part of that definition of race is the last part: what a society thinks is important.

Sure, skin color varies widely across regions of the world, but so does eye color and we don't consider people with blue eyes a different race than people with brown eyes. And while physical traits are often used to describe or identify a race, they're not always applied consistently.

Take for example, the so-called 'one-drop' rule in the United States, where even the smallest amount of African American ancestry is enough to classify someone as black rather than white.

The opposite, however, isn't true. Someone with one black parent and one white parent is almost never considered white. Plus people from different places or different time periods have defined people differently.

Nowadays, white skinned people of European descent are typically considered white in the United States. It doesn't matter whether your heritage is British or Irish or Italian or Polish or German, you're just white.

But that wasn't the case a century ago. In the early 1900s, anyone who wasn't white Anglo-Saxen Protestant was considered "ethnic". So for example, if you were Italian or Irish, you weren't considered white.

Likewise, today, being Jewish is often seen as an ethnicity in the United States but Europeans are more likely to think of being Jewish as a race. So that raises the question: what's the difference between ethnicity and race?

Well, ethnicities are socially constructed categories based on cultural traits that a society finds important rather than strictly biological traits. Essentially, an ethnic group is a group that has a shared cultural heritage.

Language, traditions, religion... These are all types of culture that can determine your ethnic background. Two people of different races might share an ethnicity and, conversely, two people of the same race might be of totally different ethnicities.

Japanese and Vietnamese people are both considered Asian, but they come from different cultural backgrounds. In fact, a term that many people think refers to race, Hispanic, actually refers to ethnicity.

To explore this a little more, let's go to the Thought Bubble to talk about the difference between the terms Hispanic, Latino, and Latin American.

===== Thought Bubble (3:01) =====

The term Hispanic first appeared as a racial category in the US census in 1970 as a way of describing those whose heritage originated in a Spanish-speaking country.

Before then, the census referred to those people as Spanish Americans. Even though tracing back their origins to Spain would mean going way way back for many of them. And for others, it would be totally inaccurate.

But in day-to-day conversation, most people from Spanish-speaking background were usually referred to by the country of their heritage. Like Mexican American or Cuban American or sometimes, more broadly, as Latin American. This last term is also where we get the word "Latino" and the degendered "Latinx".

It's a shorter version of the Spanish word latinoamericano and it refers to someone whose heritage originates from nations in the Americas that are south of the United States, including Mexico, all of South America, and the Caribbean.

Now, not all Hispanics are Latino. Being from Spain, for example, makes you Hispanic, but not Latino. And not all Latinos are Hispanic. Brazilians speak Portugeuse, meaning that they are not considered Hispanic.

But regardless of which term you're using, Hispanic or Latino, neither of these distinctions are based on physical appearance. Unlike race, which is based on observable, physical traits, ethnicities aren't. And in fact, two people of the same ethnicity can be entirely different races.

For example, both Cameron Diaz and Rosario Dawson and Cuban Americans, which means they are both Hispanic. But Cameron Diaz is white and Rosario Dawson is black.

Thanks Thought Bubble.

===== End Thought Bubble (4:21) =====

Though race is more commonly used by society as a way to organize people and distribute power, both race and ethnicity play a role in how people are perceived and therefore the opportunities that are available to them.

A person's race influences a whole host of social outcomes from their education to their income to their experiences with the criminal justice system. But which races or ethnicities are advantaged or disadvantaged depends on when and where we're talking about.

For example, in the United Kingdom, there's been a lot of unrest about immigration from Eastern Europe, especially Poland. Instances of hostility and violence against Polish immigrants have increased in the wake of the UK's exit from the European Union.

But while Eastern Europeans are considered an ethnic minority in the UK, people in the US are much more likely to think of Eastern European immigrants as just white. They're not thought of as a minority.

And that's because what constitutes a minority is more complex than you might think. Sociologists define a minority as any category of people, who are distinguished by physical or cultural difference, that a society sets aside and subordinates.

Now, notice that there are two important parts of that definition. First, minorities share a distinctive identity based on physical or cultural traits. Second, minorities occupy a lower status in society and have less access to the levers of societal power.

Notice how that definition doesn't say anything about the size of the group. In sociology, a minority group's relevant size isn't important.

For example, women are considered a minority, even though they make up about 51% of the United States. And a group that's a minority in terms of size can still be a majority in terms of power.

South African apartheid is an example of this. From 1948 to 1994, a white minority maintained a system of racial segregation and discrimination against black South Africans.

Right now, non-Hispanic whites are the majority group in the United States in terms of sheer size, making up 61% of the US population. But that's rapidly changing. As of 2015, babies of color being born now outnumber non-Hispanic white babies. And 5 states are already minority-majority states: California, Texas, New Mexico, Nevada, and Hawaii.

How can a state or country be minority-majority? Isn't that, like, an oxymoron? Well, for one thing, even if non-Hispanic white Americans no longer make up more than half of the country, they'll likely remain a larger group than any other single race.

But also, to be a minority in the sociological sense of the word, a group must be in a position of disadvantage. And, as we've discussed many times before, non-Hispanic white Americans tend to have higher incomes, live in better neighborhoods, and are more likely to have more prestigious jobs and better educations than racial and ethnic minorities.

But before we can make comparisons between different racial groups in the US, we should talk about the races that make up the United States. The US census uses six different categories of race when collecting data about the demographics of the country.

White refers to anyone who reports their origins as being from Europe, the Middle East, or Northern Africa. So Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Iranian, Moroccan, they're all ethnicities that go under the heading of white.

Yes, you heard me right, people of Middle-Eastern descent are categorized as white by the census even if they are often aren't treated as if they're white. Why? Well, what's now become known as white originates from a term to refer to people of Indo-European descent. The Caucasion race.

The term Caucasion started as a reference to the Caucus Mountains, which run through the modern-day countries of Russia, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Back when race was understood as purely biological phenomenon, everyone from Europe, all the way down to India, was lumped into one Caucasian group.

So yesterday's Caucasian contained most of the people who count as today's white, but also captured groups that nowadays get labeled as Asian, such as Indians or Pakistanis.

Now, many Hispanic-Americans are also counted as white in the census. Hispanic is considered an ethnicity, not a race, for census purposes. So in the 2010 census, 52% of Hispanic Americans identified themselves as white while 36.7% identified themselves as some other race and smaller percentages identified themselves as one of the other racial groups.

Black or African Americans are the second largest racial group in the United States and are defined as individuals with African heritage. Including those who are Afro-Caribbean. Since many African American's ancestors were forcibly brought to the United States as slaves, the countries that their ancestors originated from are often unknown.

To this day, the remnants of slavery in the Southern plantation systems can be seen in the geographic distribution of black Americans around the country. Though many black Americans moved to northern cities during the great migration of the early 20th century, most remained in the South in a region has come to be known as the Black Belt of the United States.

The third racial category used in the census is American Indian or Alaska Native, which refers to anyone whose origins are indigenous to the contiguous United States and Alaska.

Though Native Americans numbered in the millions when Europeans first arrived in the 15th century, today they control only 2% of the country's land area, make up just 0.2% percent of the US population, and remain severely disadvantaged in terms of access to education and income.

The fourth census category for race, Asian, refers to origins in Eastern Asia, South-East Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, including China, India, Japan, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

The largest subgroup of Asian Americans are those of Chinese ancestry, who make up a little less than 1/4 of the total Asian-American population.

The fifth census category is Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, which refers to people whose origins are from Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands. As I mentioned before, Hawaii is one of the states where a minority race is the majority race for the state and, in fact, it's the only state that has always been minority-majority.

The last census category is just a catch-all, Some Other Race. You might remember that about 1/3 of Hispanic Americans fall into this group. If a person lists a country of origin that doesn't fit into one of the other categories, they get stuck in this group.

You might be thinking that these categories don't seem like the racial groups you typically think of. And that's okay. In all likelihood, the way that the government defines races will continue to change to incorporate our society's changing notions of race and ethnicity.

And something that should be clear from everything we've talked about today is that races aren't fixed, immutable categories. They are defined by societies.

===== Outro (10:03) =====

Today we learned the difference between races and ethnicities, we discussed how definitions of races and ethnicities have c hanged over time and across places. We also discussed the terms minority and minority-majority and we finished up by discussing how races are defined in the United States.

===== Credits (10:17) =====

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