SESSION D1

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<th>Insights from Philosophical, Spiritual, and Cultural Analyses</th>
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<td>Beyond Biology or Disparity: A Harder Way of Thinking about Race</td>
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<td>Speaker(s)</td>
<td>Camisha Russell, Ph.D.</td>
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<td>Friday, April 12, 2019</td>
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<td>Time</td>
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SESSION D1 OBJECTIVES

- Familiarize participants with three typical ways of thinking about race (as biological, as socially constructed, as a driver of culture).
- Introduce a fourth way of understanding race, as an organizing social idea so pervasive that it influences the very framework of scientific theories.
- Offer examples of this framing power of race to urge participants take deeper account of its influence in their own research and professional practices.

SESSION D1 SPEAKER

Camisha Russell, Ph.D.
Dr. Camisha Russell joined the Philosophy faculty at the University of Oregon in 2017. Her first book, The Assisted Reproduction of Race: Thinking Through Race as a Reproductive Technology (Indiana University Press, 2018) explores the role of race and racial identity in the ideas and practices surrounding assisted reproductive technologies. Her primary research and teaching interests are in Critical Philosophy of Race, Feminist Philosophy, and Bioethics. She received her PhD in Philosophy from Penn State University in 2013. Before attending graduate school, she served as a Peace Corps Volunteer for the Girls’ Education and Empowerment program in Togo, West Africa. When not on campus, she enjoys the company of her wife and her energetic and loquacious 3-year-old.
Beyond Biology or Disparity:
A Harder Way of Thinking about Race

Camisha Russell, PhD
Kinsman Bioethics Conference
April 12, 2019

What is “race”?
Outline

- Three approaches to race
  - Biological
  - Social constructivist
  - Cultural driver of history
- Implications of each approach:
  - For racism
  - For science and medicine
- An alternative approach: Race as organizing social idea
- Implications of this alternative
  - For science and medicine
  - For bioethics
  - Example: Race and Assisted Reproductive Technologies

Three Approaches to Race

- Race is biological (or genetic)
Race as Biological

• More than the idea that physical traits are hereditary
• The idea that people can be meaningfully grouped biological/genetically
• The idea that racialized physical traits are markers of membership in discrete groups
• The idea that the racial categories we use are biologically or genetically meaningful
• In other words, racial categories are a feature of the natural world humans discover and that science allows humans to understand

Race as Biological: Implications for Racism

• What Paul Taylor calls “classical racialism”:
  1. “The human race can be exhaustively divided into a few discrete subgroups”
  2. “Each of these smaller groups possesses a unique set of heritable and physiologically specifiable traits”
  3. “These distinctive sets of physiological traits vary with equally distinctive sets of moral, cognitive, and culture characteristics”
  4. These groups “can be ranked along graduated scales of worth and capacity”
  5. “The features that distinguish these races are passed down as part of a racial essence that shapes the character, conduct, potential, and value of each individual member of each race.”

Race as Biological: Implications for Science/Medicine

• Prompts investigations of what race is, for example:
  • Is race real in the scientific sense?
  • What, if any, biological, physiological, or genetic features demarcate different racial categories?
  • What, if any, is the most scientifically accurate way to divide people into racial categories?

• Answers to which would shape scientific practices, as in:
  • How, if ever, should a concept of race be incorporated in human research?
  • Or pharmaceutical research?
  • Or medical practice?
  • For example, the use race-based medicine as proxy for personalized medicine

Three Approaches to Race

• Race is biological. The science no longer supports this
• Race is a social construction
Race as Social Construction

• To be socially constructed is not necessarily not to be real
• Not a scientifically verifiable product of the natural world
• Analogy to money:
  • With money, societies take items found in nature (precious metals or paper) and assign them an exchange value that, though initially arbitrary, cannot be subsequently changed by individuals at will.
  • We must learn and use the rules of money to function in society.
  • With race, societies take natural physiological differences between people and assign them social meanings that, though initially arbitrary, cannot be easily changed or thrown off by individuals.
  • We must learn and use (at least to some degree) the rules of race to function in society.

Race as Social Construction: Implications for Racism

• Racism comes to be construed as irrational
• May seem to propose the solution to just stop talking about race
• Must keep money analogy in mind to how intractable a social construction can still be
Race as Social Construction: Implications for Science/Medicine

• As compared to white Americans, African Americans in particular experience:
  • poorer health
  • earlier death
  • reduced access to health care
  • inferior treatment when accessing health care
  • decreased likelihood of recovery from various illnesses


Race as Social Construction: Implications for Science/Medicine

• Doctors and scientists can either help account for this issues or take these issues into account in their practices

• If the explanation is not biological, then causes are either:
  • socioenvironmental
    • social health risks
    • environmental toxins
    • lack of grocery stores and pharmacies
  • psychosocial/behavioral
    • the “weathering hypothesis”
    • “John Henryism”

Three Approaches to Race

• Race is biological: The science no longer supports this
• [Race is a social construction]
• Race is culturally and historically crucial for human well being and progress ← White Nationalists ❤

Race as Cultural Driver of History

• The view that the temperaments and talents of certain races (and the nature of interactions between different races) determine the path of human progress (or decline)
• Historically important view of continuing relevance that rarely appears in these sorts of discussions
• More accurately describes thinking around the emergence of the race concept than the idea of race as biological
• Epitomized by British statesman Benjamin Disraeli’s 1852 statement that: “All is race. In the structure, the decay, and the development of the various families of man, the vicissitudes of history find their main solution.”*
• Remains quite present in the background of various nativist and white nationalist movements around the globe.

* Benjamin Disraeli, Lord George Bentinck: A Political Biography (London: Colburn, 1852), 331.
Race as Cultural Driver of History: Implications for Racism

- Connects race to other powerful concepts:
  - Cultural preservation
  - Cultural thriving
  - Patriotism
  - The Nation
  - National progress
  - National prosperity
- Makes the race idea a powerful political tool
An Alternative Approach

Race is an organizing social idea

Race as Organizing Social Idea

- Takes seriously the second concept, social constructionism
- Keeps track of (and interrogates) the important effects of the first and third concepts
- Elsewhere in my work, I call this race as technology
- More simply put: shifting one’s focus from questions about what race is to analyses of what race does.
Race as Organizing Social Idea

• Eric Voegelin, a German-born political theorist working in Austria during the rise of National Socialism, makes a useful distinction:
  • race theory: scientific theories of race in natural science
  • race idea: race as powerful political symbol used to define and shape communities

• Attempts to offer scientific theories of race persist (despite being discredited) because the sense of race as central and meaningful in our social relations endures the rise and fall of various racial theories.

• The essential task to undertake is to study systematically the way that the race idea operates in various contexts.


Race as Organizing Social Idea: Implications for Science/Medicine

• Explains why scientists continue to “look for” race
• Suggests it is not enough to pronounce race scientifically unreal
• Important work for scientists regarding race lies in making their own social positions as researchers more transparent to themselves in order to reflect critically on their deepest background assumptions and the very framing of their research questions.
Race as Organizing Social Idea: Implications for Bioethics

• Typical approach to bioethics:
  • focused on determining which practices are ethically permissible in biomedicine and biomedical research
  • thinking in terms of individually-conceived ethical rights, duties, obligations or prohibitions
  • limits of ethical permissibility involve specific harm to the personal freedom of other individuals
  • can easily recognize that racist policies or racial discrimination in medical or scientific research and practice are ethically impermissible due to the harm they cause the individuals targeted by the discrimination
  • but little to say about the idea of race itself

Race as Organizing Social Idea: Implications for Bioethics

• Suggests need to consider things like:
  • historical context
  • social values
  • often intangible harms to socially defined groups
  • even in areas they might consider purely objective and scientific

• Important work for bioethicists regarding race lies in making their own social positions as academics more transparent to themselves in order to reflect critically on their deepest background assumptions and the very framing of their ethical questions.
Bioethicists should be helping scientists think about race

An Example: Race and Assisted Reproductive Technologies
Instead of asking whether there is a scientific basis for the labeling of donor gametes with the self-reported racial identity of the donor.

Explore why it is that people care so much about the supposed racial properties of donor eggs and sperm, and what effect that continued caring has on our popular understandings of race and racial identities.
While questions of access to reproductive technologies for diverse social groups are important, there are also crucial questions to be asked about which medical treatments and interventions get developed to treat which sorts of infertility problems and why.
Traditional Division of Labor

**Scientist**

What types of reproductive technologies can be developed and made safe?

**Bioethicist**

When and how should such reproductive technologies be used?

What are the social and historical contexts in which genetically-related children (or children that could pass for genetically related) are highly sought after and prized above all other forms of kinship?
Recap

- Three approaches to race
  - Biological
  - Social constructivist
  - Cultural driver of history
- Implications of each approach:
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- Implications of this alternative
  - For science and medicine
  - For bioethics
- Example: Race and Assisted Reproductive Technologies

Bioethicists should be helping scientists think about race
Questions?

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Interests: Critical Philosophy of Race, Ethics (esp. Bioethics), African American Philosophy, Feminist Theory
Curriculum Vitae

Course Links
Fall 2018
PHIL 307 Social and Political Philosophy
PHIL 407/507 Critical Epistemology

Spring 2019
PHIL 103 Critical Reasoning