Tutorial Ten: Is Race a Useful Concept?

Having read some of the evidence about the dangers and inaccuracies of thinking with ‘race,’ what sorts of policies might we advocate for labelling people’s appearance? Under what circumstances, and in what way, does it make sense to talk about ‘race’? Which evidence is most persuasive in support of the position that humans are inherently very different? Which evidence is most persuasive in convincing you that humans are more alike than different?

Which evidence is most persuasive in support of the position that humans are inherently very different?

Which evidence is most persuasive in convincing you that humans are more alike than different?

Knowing what you now know about human biological differences, under what circumstances, and in what way, might it make sense to talk about ‘race’?

The following traits are ones which humans vary on. Some traits are more discrete (you have them or not) and others are continuous. Try to evaluate yourself and see if the same traits cluster compared to other students. Do these traits correspond to ‘racial’ groups?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRAIT</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lactose tolerant?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>widow’s peak?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hitchhiker’s thumb?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>detached earlobe?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tongue curl?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>skin colour</th>
<th>very light (1-7)</th>
<th>light (8-15)</th>
<th>medium (16-25)</th>
<th>dark (26+)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>thumb print</td>
<td>loop</td>
<td>arch</td>
<td>tented arch</td>
<td>whorl</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Felix von Luschan Skin Color chart (1927) by Colin M.L. Burnett (CC BY SA)
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If you were able to design a human body to withstand cold, what traits would you give it? How about for extreme heat?

Since the rise of modern humans, our species has had to adapt to a range of different selective forces, affecting the variation we find in our species. List the forces that have been crucial for shaping humans, especially their variation, in the past 200,000 years.

Questions for reflection:

• What advantages does a polymorphic or biologically diverse species enjoy?

• What are some of the ways that our contemporary culture misleads us about the nature of human genetic difference?

• What are some of the difficulties of using intelligence tests to understand human potential?

• Do you think infectious disease plays a role in current human evolution?

Key terms:

- Gene flow
- Founder effect
- Subspecies
- Paraphyletic category
- Social Race
- Cline
- Phenotype
- Genotype
- Endemic disease
- Independent assortment
- Culture
- Ethnicity
- Genetic, phenotypic and cultural adaptation
- Flynn effect
- Melanin
- Rickets
- Sickle-cell anaemia
- Convergent evolution
- Skin colour
- Lactose tolerance
- Bergmann’s rule
- Thomson’s nose rule
- Allen’s rule
- Race