

An Anthropology of Race



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It's less a question of nature or nurture than about the things that people do with the debate, writes Rosabelle Laville

What is race? Many social anthropologists would argue that it is a figment of the human imagination, a category dreamt up by pseudo-scientists to explain human variation in both cultural and biological terms. In the space of three hundred years, 'race' assumed realistic proportions in South Africa, and its adjunct, racism, became a part of daily human experience. Anthropological analyses of human society and culture, however, reveal what many social scientists and humanists already know — that 'race' is essentially a social construct. As a construct, it has specific objectives and, depending on one's interests or experiences, it may be perceived as real.

"Scientific" analyses of race are most commonly associated with the work of 18th century European and American scientists and taxonomists. These studies emphasized the supremacy of nature over nurture. In 1758, Carl Linnaeus classified human beings (i.e. *Homo Sapiens*) along with six other types of humanoids. These individuals were 'small, large, infertile, conical-headed, flat-headed or beardless' — categories which would be meaningless to us today. Linnaeus' findings were subsequently improved upon and developed by other scientists, who claimed that they could differentiate between human beings based on perceived physical and cultural features.

By the 1950s, IQ tests were definite indicators of racial difference. Proponents claimed that the tests could measure human intelligence and, by drawing on cultural variables in European society to ascertain the intellectual capacity of indigenous people and non-European migrants, they confirmed racial prejudices and ideas about human difference.

Ideas about intelligence were taken further by Arthur Jensen. Writing in 1969, Jensen, a psychologist, maintained that 80% of human intelligence is determined by genes and 20% by our environment. He argued that the human brain (like the human body) is not exempt from evolution and, as a result, there must be a similar genetic distribution of mental differences among the 'races'.

In contrast to 'intellectual justifications of scientific racism' in Europe and America, Emile Boonzaier has written that "in South Africa, the racist paradigm emerged without direct recourse" to scientific racism, and that "similarly, the demise of scientific racism had little impact on popular assumptions about



AKHONA MLISANA

b. 1985

Ixama litolwengaba-Twa — the Hartebeest has been shot by the Bushman

The proverb means that once an action has been taken, the one who is shot at is at the mercy of the one who did the shooting. I believe that at the time of the British coming to the Eastern Cape, they saw the amaXhosa people more like animals than as humans. They would shoot at them in the same way that you shoot an animal. I show an isiXhosa warrior going into battle while the British man on the other side would look at the warrior and thinks that he is an animal. Many Xhosa warriors were killed at this battle and I think that for many years afterwards the British continued to see the amaXhosa like animals.

racial difference and superiority". Still, articles in academic journals such as the *Bantu Studies Journal* (ca 1930s), indicate that social scientists in Southern Africa have attempted to identify biological differences in human groups and, have generally explained these in racist terms.

Current paleoanthropological researchers

suggest that human beings do vary biologically from one geographical region to another, but they also state that there are no definite racial boundaries between human groups. In addition, it is argued that biological variation is no basis for assuming that one human group is superior or inferior to another, it simply indicates the great diversity of the species.

Recent genetic research in human populations worldwide supports the biological diversity argument. It has been shown for example, that genetic variation in the Congo basin shows the greatest variety compared to genetic variation between the inhabitants of this region and populations elsewhere. Such research suggests that, actually, there is more (biologically) that unites us across 'race' groups than within them. More important, anthropologists have recently critically analyzed what we do with such 'scientific' knowledge. Several critical studies have been done on the questionable data produced by 19th and 20th century scientific racists, which colonists used in order to justify the perpetuation of violence against indigenous peoples.

This research recounts how colonial actions manifested in the form of crude racism. Indigenous people were exterminated on a massive scale to prevent the contamination of 'pure' race groups. Others were forced to abandon their livelihood in the European quest for social and economic evolution. The studies show that indigenous people did not simply submit to European violence and stereotypes, they responded by creating their own dialogues and their own ideas of difference.

At the beginning of the 21st century, anthropologists (among others) note that racism has retained its more subtle and insidious characteristics. This is apparent on a global scale. The persistence of racism in the workplace, the media and other contexts forms a part of our real experience, and is a result of many generations of accumulated prejudice, separation and misunderstanding on the part of all human beings.

Today, most anthropologists would probably agree that important ways to deal with racism include clearing up misconceptions about human biology, instituting critical analyses of our social views and the implementation of policies to bring about social justice.

In an era where science is rapidly consolidating its hold over humanity, it may be difficult to dispute the power of nature over nurture. However, anthropologists would argue that it is not so much whether nature or nurture has a greater role to play in the shaping of human beings — but rather what we choose to do with such knowledge.