Two Different Ways to Think About Race

• **Essentialist**: the notion that there is some easily observable set of characteristics possessed by individuals that allow for their classification into a small number of biological groups
  - Subspecies
    - Evolving lineage
    - Geographic group

Two Different Ways to Think About Race

• **Constructionist**: the notion that race is not a biological phenomenon based on properties of the individual, but rather it is a set of social categories culturally constructed for largely political purposes
  - Social/Cultural Construction
  - Ideology or Worldview

Subspecies: Evolving Lineage

• A subspecies (race) is a distinct evolutionary lineage within a species
  - Requires genetic differences due to barriers to mating that have persisted for long time (thousands of generations)
  - Must have historical continuity in addition to current genetic differentiation
  - Human population genetics demonstrates that this is not the way genetic variation is patterned in our species
How different is different?

- Biologists argue that races constitute geographic segments of sexually reproducing species differing from each other to a reasonably practical degree
  - The rule of thumb is that they must differ by at least ~75%
  - Or we must be able to classify individuals into the correct race 75% of the time

Subspecies: Geographic group

- Geographically circumscribed populations within a species that have sharp boundaries separating them from the rest of the species
  - Common threshold is that two populations with sharp boundaries are considered to be different races if ≥25% or more of their genes reflect population differences
  - This is not the way human genetic variability is patterned as we will see in the second part of this course

So Let’s Classify Humans

These are the five racial categories recognized by the U.S. census:
1. White
2. Black or African American
3. American Indian or Alaska Native
4. Asian
5. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/meta/long_RHI125213.htm
So do humans meet the 75% rule?

• Class sorting results

• Why?

What does social construction mean?

Jon Marks, biological anthropologist

• Race ... is the intersection of difference and meaning
  – Race cannot be discovered by examining human differences, since all people are different
  – Race, instead, is constructed by deciding that certain differences are more important than others
  – Somehow the difference between a Norwegian and a Saudi Arabian is not as significant as that between the Saudi Arabian and a Sudanese
• We don’t discover race "out there"; rather, we construct it "in here" [in our heads]

Social Construct


• [The development of precise tools to measure hereditary characteristics was] instrumental in allowing the Western, socially constructed concept of race and the biological concepts of race to diverge. None of the physical features by which we have historically defined human races—skin color, hair type, body stature, blood groups, disease prevalence—unambiguously corresponds to the racial groups that we have constructed.

• The lay concept of race does not correspond to the variation that exists in nature. Instead, the American concept of race is a social construction, resulting from the unique political and cultural history of the United States.

Worldview

• Worldview refers to a culturally structured, systematic way of looking at, perceiving, and interpreting various world realities

• In the United States, Australia, South Africa, and many other areas of the world, race is a cosmological ordering system that divides the world’s peoples into what are thought to be biologically discrete and exclusive groups. The racial worldview holds that these groups are by nature unequal and can be ranked along a gradient of superiority—inferiority.

Smedley, 1999:18-19
Race changes as culture changes

- Race is neither a static biological certainty nor a reflection of our genes
- Instead, race is an historical and cultural phenomenon—an analysis of human biological difference mediated by the politics, culture, and economics of a given historical moment and by the individual or society in that moment


Genetic Variation in Humans

~0.1% difference in DNA between any two people

99.9% shared DNA between any two people on the planet

Race and Genetic Variation

This is 4% of the 0.1% of DNA that varies between races for ≤0.004% of human DNA sequences!!!!

~3% Between Populations
~93% Between Individuals within populations

Perception of Human Biological Diversity

- European
- Asian
- African
Actual Distribution of Human Biological Diversity

- European
- Asian
- African

Bottom Line

- Humans differ from one another biologically (even identical twins have biological differences)
- These biological differences are patterned by ancestry and history in complex combinations
- Socially constructed race categories do not describe the patterning of human biological differences that exist, so we argue that race is not biological reality
- However, socially constructed race categories **ARE** profoundly important in affecting both social and biological aspects of people’s lives