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## The Concept of Race in Contemporary Anthropology

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### INTRODUCTION

What is race? First of all, “race” is a word, and like many words it has a variety of meanings. Some of these occur frequently in everyday life, as we talk about “the human race” or about American “race relations.” Other meanings are used in government offices and forms, as when Americans note which of a number of races they belong to for the Census. Yet other meanings of the term “race” are more technical, when for example a biologist talks about different races of a particular species of plant or animal. The meanings attached to this word “race” are different in all of these contexts, sometimes very different, but in everyday use we continually blur the differences between these meanings. This would be a recipe for confusion in any case but, given the history of this term “race” in the United States, the potentials for uncertainty and discord are especially great in this country. “Race” is a loaded word in part because people use that word in very different ways but assume that they are talking about the same thing.

Anthropologists often use the word “race,” as well. One of the most important tasks of anthropologists is the examination of the biological and cultural variability that exists within humanity. We look at the customs of societies in different parts of the world, seeking to find the common elements that define our shared existence and the differences that lend variety to our lives. We study the biological characteristics of different human populations, our relations with our relatives—the apes and monkeys, and the evolutionary history of our species. We use archaeology to examine human prehistory. We examine the role that language plays in helping us define our worlds—and we try to put all of this knowledge to use in the wider world around us.

Every human occupies a position in a complex of groups with different sizes, constructions, and purposes. These groups can include families, bands, villages, religious organizations, fraternities, tribes, companies, and nations. Our membership in these different sorts of groups

adds a vital structure to our lives, allowing us to learn how to be human and placing us in a dense web of relationships with family, work-mates, friends, strangers, and enemies. Anthropologists study, among other things, how humans create these groups. Questions of racial identification are extremely important in these interactions, and are especially significant in modern, multicultural societies. Given these investigations into the nature of human groups, we could expect that anthropologists would have a lot to say about race as it applies to human beings. After all, we might argue that races are among the largest and most inclusive of such human groups, and many people seem to base expectations of other people's behavior on their racial identities.

The study of human races has been an important part of anthropology since its origin as a professional discipline in the nineteenth century (see Chapter 2). Physical anthropologists have in the past studied the physical characteristics of members of different races; archaeologists and paleoanthropologists have studied human evolution with the goal of identifying the origins of these races; and cultural anthropologists have studied the ways that people use racial identifications to control social interactions around the world. Anthropologists have certainly had a lot to say about human races, and the results of our research sometimes reflect—and sometimes challenge—the various meanings given to this word “race” by nonanthropologists in the United States.

This chapter will summarize some of the conclusions of anthropological research on human races—on their origins, on the ways in which people have been identified with different races, and on the ways in which race can affect interactions between individuals and groups. Anthropologists working within the different subfields of our discipline have different conceptions of race and the meaning of racial identifications, and like nonanthropologists they sometimes use the term without specifying exactly what they mean. Among the questions that this chapter seeks to answer then, are: What are anthropologists talking about when they talk about race, and are they always talking about the

same thing? Are there common elements in all anthropological usages of the term *race*, or are these usages sometimes contradictory? Perhaps most important, what are human races, and how do they originate and function? This chapter will focus on the biological concepts associated with race, and especially on the relationship between biological and cultural definitions of human races.

## BIOLOGY AND CULTURE

Anthropologists consider the meaning of the word “race” in two different ways. First, physical anthropologists look at the *biological* characteristics of human populations in different areas of the world. They compare these populations to one another, with the goal of understanding the patterning of human biological variation. In the nineteenth century, anthropologists studied the external features of people: their skin color, the color and configuration of their hair, the proportions of their limbs, the features of their faces and bodies. In the twentieth century, studies of more subtle variation—of blood groups and antibody types, and most recently and more fundamentally, of genetic material—has added new levels of detail and complexity to that research. Physical anthropologists talk about the scales at which this human physical variation exists, from tiny, local communities to groups found across whole continents. Race for these anthropologists implies the existence of a number of fundamental biological populations into which all humans can be sorted. This concept was a central part of studies of humanity from their beginning almost two centuries ago. The question before anthropologists in this case is: do human races exist as *biological* groupings, and if so what are their characteristics?

Other anthropologists, in their study of human cultures and behavior, look at race from an entirely different perspective. In this case, the emphasis is not on the biological characteristics of human populations, but rather on the ways in which people divide their *social* worlds into various groups of humans. In Europe and North

America, these divisions have often used language that focused on physical and geographical differences: “Black,” “White,” “Nordic,” “African,” and so on. Anthropologists have established that ingrained prejudices have often had far more to do with these racial definitions than have the real physical characteristics of people. “Race” in these investigations by cultural anthropologists is conceived of as a *cultural* construction, not a biological fact. It is in reality a kind of *ideology*, a way of thinking about, speaking about, and organizing relationships among human groups: Who is your friend, or enemy? Who is a neighbor, or a foreigner? This ideological understanding of race may use the *language* of physical features when talking about group differences, but biology is not fundamentally important to the ways that these groups are defined. The question before anthropologists in this case is: how and why do people use *cultural* criteria to define human races, and how have these definitions changed through time?

These two ways of thinking are obviously very different. If race is examined as a *biological* concept, then we must think about the physical features of humans, the external ones that we all can see as well as our internal biological and genetic makeup. We would probably examine biological races by seeking to trace their evolutionary history over long periods of time, using data from genetics, from physical anthropology, and from archaeology. If race is examined as a *cultural* concept, then we must think about attitudes and cultural categories, ideas that exist within people’s minds and that are acted upon in the real world. These attitudes and ideas can change very quickly indeed, so that we can probably trace the evolution of cultural categories of race over much shorter time periods—centuries, or perhaps even decades. Our data will mostly be derived from cultural anthropology and historical research.

It is important to remember that the objects of study—*biologically defined races* of humans and *culturally defined racial categories* of humans—are not the same in these different approaches. This means that the existence of one kind of race does not necessarily imply the

existence of the other. Biological races might exist among humans, without having any cultural significance: if, for example, people were settled in one place and only saw neighbors who looked just like them, then their definitions of social groups would probably not include a racial component. (This is a hard situation for us to imagine today, where we constantly see people from all around the world.) Similarly, people may use language that talks about physical features to divide people up into races, but that does not mean that membership in those races are necessarily based on those physical features. We can see this in the United States by thinking about how many “whites” and “blacks” actually have skin that is white or black in color. *The fact that people talk about “race relations” in the United States today does not imply that those races are real biological units, any more than the fact that people tell ghost stories implies that ghosts really exist.*

For the most part, anthropologists examine race from one or the other of these two perspectives, and only quite rarely do they mix them up. One important exception involves forensic anthropologists, who study human skeletal remains in order to provide information for legal proceedings—the sort of work we might watch on *CSI* or similar shows. These anthropologists examine skeletal remains carefully, gathering data on age at death, sex, stature, population affiliations, and a number of other possible characteristics of the individual(s) who died. However, for that information to be *used*, they then have to translate this information into the racial categories that are used by the police, the legal system, and by members of the general public. As we will see, this raises interesting question of the relations between biological and cultural conceptions of race. In the rest of this chapter, I will examine some of the evidence for these different kinds of races, seeking to answer a number of the questions that have been posed above. I will pay particular attention to biological concepts of race, because much of the evidence for race as a cultural concept will be examined in other chapters of this textbook.

## BACKGROUND OF THE TERM

The precise origin of the word “race” is unknown, but it seems to originate in a Latin root, *ratio*, with a meaning similar to terms like “species” or “kind” (of thing) (Smedley 1999:37–41). Five hundred years ago, “race” was occasionally used in English to designate groups of humans marked by their common origins or shared characteristics, physical or otherwise. Over the next 200 years, the word was increasingly used in English in ways similar to words like “group,” “nation,” “people,” and so on. This general meaning of the word “race” is more or less obsolete today. We still talk about “the human race,” but we almost never encounter people using terms like “the race of Smith’s” or “the race of baseball players,” although such uses were fairly common 150 years ago.

Over the last two centuries, a more restricted meaning of the word “race” has become common in English. In this case, a race designates one of a number of fundamental divisions within the human species. These races are usually described in *biological* terms, although people have most often claimed that *behavioral* and *cultural* differences between races exist as well. The number of races identified according to this meaning of the term has varied, but Europe, Africa, and Asia are often identified as the homelands of three of these races, and people talk about “Europeans” (or “Caucasoids”), “Africans” (or “Negroids”), and “Asians” (or “Mongoloids”) as if those three groups constitute fundamental units of humanity.

In North America today, this is the meaning that the general public usually associates with the word “race”:

- a. human races are extraordinarily *important*;
- b. they are based on *biological* differences;
- c. they are ancient and (relatively) *unchanging*; and
- d. they are *easily distinguishable* from one another.

Scientists, including anthropologists, contributed a great deal to the popularization of

this idea of human races through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These scientists gathered a great deal of data on human physical diversity and on the cultures of societies around the world, but their interpretations were very much colored by their own prejudices. They furnished what appeared to be support to these biological models of human races but, as a variety of scholars have noted (Baker 1998; Barkan 1992; Hannaford 1996; Jahoda 1998; Smedley 1999), these researchers were themselves very much influenced by stereotypes of different groups and the relations between these groups that were pervasive in their own societies.

The history of scientific racism has been covered in Chapter 2, but two things should be made clear at this point. First, through much of the history of anthropological studies of human races, such studies were concerned with *hierarchy* and not only with classification. Scientists who compared human populations from different areas of the world were trying to distinguish such populations from one another, but they usually *ranked* these groups with reference to one another as well. Such rankings might be based on notions of intellectual superiority and inferiority, of savagery and civilization, of greater and lesser degrees of evolution, but they have almost always placed Europeans (almost always upper- and middle-class European males) at the pinnacle of human development. Africans, Asians, Native Americans, and other people had to be content with lower rankings, at varying distances from those “superior” specimens of humanity.

Many of these scientists had never had any contact with the people who they described in their writings and when they did, these people from other parts of the world were most often servants, slaves, or objects of curiosity. Perhaps the ultimate expression of these prejudices was the concept of *polygenesis*, which held that the human races actually had originated and evolved separately from one another—that Africans, Europeans, and Asians were, in fact, separate species. Such a theory seems absurd to us today, with so much more known about human

evolution and with the concept of a species as a biological population that can interbreed accepted as commonplace. At a time when evolution was not well understood and when bigotry against non-Europeans was nearly universal, polygenesis seemed a reasonable theory of human origins and development.

These studies frequently mixed up *biological*, *behavioral*, and *cultural* characteristics when defining human races, just as nonscientists continue to do today. In the middle of the eighteenth century, Carolus Linnaeus defined the different races not only upon their *physical* features (skin and eye color, type of hair, and so on) and their *temperaments* (melancholy, lazy, timid, and so on), but also by the type of *clothes* they wore and the characteristics of their *governments*. The latter are cultural characteristics, and—as we know—very subject to change. Such an approach can cause people to mistake more or less transitory cultural influences, characteristics that exist for a short period because of the environment that people are brought up in, for permanent biological characteristics.

We may, for example, laugh at Linnaeus for trying to define races based on whether people wear loose or tight clothing. However, we run the same risk today when, for example, we think of people of African descent as “natural athletes.” A century ago, Africans and African Americans were excluded from many athletic competitions and considered simply incapable of playing many sports; today, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of these people excel in sports around the world. There is nothing “natural”—that is, biological—in the cultural changes that have accompanied this transformation in athletic success. We have to try and keep biological and cultural influences entirely separate when we evaluate whether such population units exist.

## BIOLOGICAL RACES

Advocates of “scientific” racialism sometimes claim that questioning the existence of biological races is the same as denying the existence of

biological variation among human beings. This is nonsense. Everyone, including anthropologists, knows that biological variation exists. I resemble my brothers and sister in some ways, but there are many physical features that distinguish us. Males and females, and old people and young people, differ physically in a variety of very significant characteristics—and these differences are predictable. We can make a reasonable guess about whether someone we see in the street comes from Norway or Italy, or whether they are Moroccan or Senegalese, although there is often a good chance of making a mistake in such cases. We recognize that populations of Nuer people from the Sudan are on average much taller than are Mayan people from Guatemala. No one would argue that each of 6 billion human beings is a member of his or her own private race, or that I belong to a different race than does my daughter because I am 48 and male and she is 16 and female, or that 6-footers belong to a different race than do people who are 5 feet tall. If the term “race” is to have any meaning within anthropology at all, it must involve something more exact than just physical difference.

The primary questions remain, then: *how do physical anthropologists define races*, and what criteria have they used to define them? How many human races have been defined? What are the origins of such human races?

The answers to these questions depend very much on the definitions of “race” that researchers have used when investigating human biological differences. This is a difficult problem, because races are not precisely defined within biology as a whole. The *species* is the fundamental unit of evolution, characterized by the ability of members of one species to successfully interbreed and thus to share genetic innovations and adaptations. There are, however, no such clearly defined units below the level of the species, and it is unclear how researchers should divide species up into subunits—including races. Thus, Ernst Mayr (1963:453–460) notes that a whole variety of different kinds of biological populations have been identified as races, and that these different kinds of populations vary considerably in their characteristics.

There have been approximately as many *anthropological definitions of races* as there have been physical anthropologists who have studied the question, but we can divide such definitions up into three types, one of which is now entirely obsolete. Polygenists thought of populations originating in different areas of the world—Africans, Europeans, Asians, and so on—as different *species* of humanity, each with their own origins and with limited abilities to interbreed. Africans and Native Americans were even at various times described as species intermediate between “real” humans and apes (Jahoda 1998:75–76). This claim stemmed in great part from the vicious bigotry toward these other people that many Europeans and European Americans held in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It would be comforting if we could dismiss polygenesis as a fantasy of the nineteenth century, but the well-known British geneticist and racist Reginald Ruggles Gates (1948:366) still claimed that Africans, Asians, and Europeans were different species in a book published just after World War II. Traces of polygenesis are still to be found in the writings of racist organizations today, but no reputable anthropologist believes that such theories have any connection with reality at all.

More recently anthropologists have conceived of human race in one of two different ways. Some researchers have conceived of biological races as well-defined, stable *types of human beings*—real biological groups in and of themselves. We could also call this a *subspecies* model, because it implies that races in humans are what we would call subspecies among animals: populations that are isolated from one another and somewhat different, but not so much so that they have lost the capability to interbreed (Futuyama 1986:107–109). Other physical anthropologists, in contrast, have conceived of races as simple expressions of difference in the *physical features of different populations* of people. In this case, any group of humans that can be differentiated from other groups based on some physical characteristic or characteristics can be considered a race. A possible alternative term for this second definition

would be a *statistical* model of human races, because it depends on the statistical distribution of physical features within and between different human groupings. There is no expectation of isolation or significant difference between these populations in this case.

The difference between these two concepts is one of degree, not of kind. At the same time, these *typological* and *population* models tend to yield different views of human biological variability, and they are subject to different sorts of criticisms.

### Races as Types

... A race is a great division of mankind, the members of which, though individually varying, are characterized as a group by a certain combination of morphological and metrical features ... which have been derived from their common descent ... [Hooton 1946:446]

Many anthropologists have in the past claimed that there exist (or existed) a limited number of geographically distinct groupings of humans, each of these groups possessing a more or less well-defined set of physical characteristics, and have called these types *human races*. These races are often linked with a particular continent, although their territories are not in fact contiguous with continents. These researchers have believed that these human races occupied these different parts of the world through very long periods of time, and that they evolved their unique physical characteristics as adaptations to the particular environments of these regions. Thus, “Negroids” evolved in sub-Saharan Africa, and a number of physical features—dark skin, everted lips, tightly curled hair, a long skull, and so on—are characteristic of Negroid populations and adaptations to African environments. Similarly, “Caucasoids” (Europeans, but also people living in North Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia) evolved somewhere in Eurasia and a limited number of physical features—light-colored skin, noneverted lips, straight or curled

hair, a narrow nose, and so on—are both characteristic of “Caucasoid” populations and adaptations to the environments where the “Caucasoid” race evolved (wherever that might have been). The same would be the case for “Mongoloid” populations, supposedly associated with Asia and sometimes with the Americas.

There are two important characteristics of this model, and these two characteristics are closely related. First, this model is *geographical*. Each race is associated with a particular region of the world, where it is supposed to have developed in relative isolation and in adaptation to the particular environments of that region. Geographical isolation is often important in biological definitions of *subspecies*, populations of a single biological species that have been isolated from one another by some geographical barrier that prevents interbreeding. This genetic isolation might eventually lead to the separation of the two subspecies into separate species. This has not, of course, happened with humans.

Second, this model of human races views such races as real biological *types*. As noted, these different fundamental types of humanity are held to have evolved over very long times in the geographical heartlands of each race. Thus, each race is relatively stable and long-lived, with boundaries that were in ancient times comparatively easy to define—although they may have become rather more blurred in recent times. Each race also has a set of distinctive and essential characteristics, physical adaptations to the particular environments of the regions where that race evolved. The humans belonging to any particular race share this set of characteristics, although they may be expressed differently in each individual. The racial identity of every human is then supposed to be detectable through an examination of these characteristics. More generally, the different features of humans within one race are supposed to occur together: we may think of a race as a well-defined group of people sharing a well-defined group of traits.

In the most extreme of these typological theories, race is conceived almost as a substance, the *essence* of a group of people, which in pure

form or when intermixed determines the characteristics of any individual. Joseph Deniker (1912:8) writes of race as “. . . once met with in a real union of individuals, now scattered in fragments of varying proportions among several ethnic groups, from which it can no longer be differentiated except through a process of delicate analysis.” This view often led anthropologists to the conclusion that “pure races” had existed in the past, but that the migrations, conquests, and colonizations that we know of through recorded history had resulted in the disappearance of these “pure races” through admixture. Biological race is then an almost purely abstract concept, and has very little to do with the actual physical characteristics of humans.

Human races conceived of as subspecies would have a number of specific features, and we can look for those features as we try to decide whether these models are realistic. First, if races developed more or less in isolation, then the boundaries between those races will be relatively clear-cut and generally will fall along the obstacles (deserts, oceans, mountain ranges, and so on) that divide them. It is of course possible that more recent population movements would have obscured such clear boundaries. Second, the essential characteristics of each race would be widely shared, because these characteristics would be adaptive responses to the environmental conditions within which each race evolved. Third, we would expect that the processes of isolation, adaptation, and differentiation that generate races would yield a fairly consistent hierarchy of such races through time. If human races are essentially subspecies, we could expect that races are relatively well-defined, stable entities, and that their definition and analysis should be a fairly straightforward process.

How well do these implications match up against real human variability? We can draw on data from physical anthropology, genetics, geography, and archaeology to look at this issue. What we find is just the opposite of this well-ordered model. We find that the populations identified by researchers as human races have been extremely variable, that there is a huge amount of disagreement about their

characteristics, and that even their associations with particular regions and sorts of environments are often quite weak.

Perhaps the most basic question that we can ask is simply: *how many human races are there?* Answers to this question have been very diverse indeed. Many researchers have identified three primary human races—the “Negroid,” “Caucasoid,” and “Mongoloid” races noted above—although sometimes using different and/or overlapping terms (see for example Hooton 1946:569; Bean 1926; von Eickstedt 1950:496). This definition seems to originate in the popular typologies of race that have been established in Europe and North America since the nineteenth century. As European and American knowledge of other parts of the world grew, other populations were either fit into one of these three categories, or put forward as independent races. Thus, a variety of aboriginal peoples living in South and Southeast Asia were lumped together as “Negritos” and either classified as part of the “Negroid” race (which assumes that they came there from Africa at some time in the past) or as a separate “Negrito” race. Australian Aboriginal people were frequently classified as a separate race (“Australoids”), sometimes alongside populations from New Guinea and sometimes not. Pacific Island groups were sometimes classified as “Mongoloids,” sometimes as “Australoids,” and sometimes as their own race. Anthropologists established a bewildering variety of classification systems in order to divide humanity into races and subraces, major and minor races, and so on. Hooton (1946:575–650), for example, identified three “primary” and about 20 “secondary” races of different sorts. The geneticist William Boyd identified six races in *Genetics and the Races of Man* (Boyd 1950), but increased this number to 13 some years later (Boyd 1968). Keith (1948:235–244) identified two basic human groups, races in all but name. In 1950, three other well-known researchers (Coon et al. 1950) identified 30 human races. Coon (1965:7) himself later identified “. . . five full-sized subspecies and . . . two dwarfed subspecies” of modern humans, and

called these “subspecies” races. Different researchers have at one point or another identified between 2 and 200 of these “fundamental” human groups (Garn and Coon 1968:9). Not only that, these elaborate classifications conflict with one another, in the number of races identified, in the characteristics of particular races, and in the racial affiliations of particular peoples.

Paralleling this question of race number is a question of geography: *do the boundaries between races correlate with barriers to human interaction*, which might isolate them? In fact, in many cases there is no correlation between race and geographical boundaries. Perhaps the most striking example is on the continents of Europe and Asia, where the two races known as Mongoloids and Caucasoids are supposed to have evolved. The boundary between Europe and Asia is more or less theoretical, since both continents are part of a single landmass, usually called Eurasia. No substantial barrier to human interaction exists between Europe and Asia, as we can see from the ancient presence in Central Asia of people speaking Tocharian languages, related to English and other Indo-European languages (Adams 1984), and of Asian genetic contributions to populations in Northwestern Europe (Zerjal et al. 1997). If “Caucasoids” and “Mongoloids” really evolved in isolation, what factors were enforcing that isolation between them?

The geographical origin of the “Negroid race” may seem more clear-cut: after all, Africa is a continent mostly surrounded by oceans and seas. However, northern Africa is inhabited by people traditionally referred to as “Caucasoids” (like Europeans), but “Caucasoids” indigenous to Africa. These are primarily Berber-speaking peoples. The geographical factor enforcing isolation in the African case is supposed to be the Sahara Desert, and “Negroids” are supposed to have evolved in the tropical lands south of the Sahara. Yet, even this is not as clear-cut as we might think, because the Sahara is not a permanent feature of the African landscape. Eighteen thousand years ago, it was larger and drier than it is now, but by 9,000 years ago the



desert had disappeared, replaced by grasslands and inhabited by large numbers of people. At that point, it was a fertile corridor between the Mediterranean and equatorial Africa, not a barrier to interaction. Such conditions had existed in earlier times, as well, as did corridors along the Nile Valley (van Peer 1998) and between Ethiopia and Arabia.

The isolation mechanisms associated with races in other areas of the world are equally obscure. We might think about Australian Aboriginal people as isolated on that island continent, but with the drastically lowered sea levels of the last Ice Age Australia and New Guinea were one land mass, called Sahul. This island continent was separated from mainland Asia by quite narrow areas of open water, and Australia was settled by at least 35,000 years ago. The first unequivocal evidence of open-ocean voyaging, from about 25,000 years ago, comes from the Solomon Islands off the east coast of New Guinea (Wickler and Spriggs 1988). Such seafaring culminated in the expansion of Austronesian populations to occupy islands as far apart as Madagascar and Hawaii over the last few thousand years. Further to the north, peoples from Asia entered the Americas at some point during the last Ice Age. The processes by which the ancestors of Native Americans occupied the New World are not well understood today, but there is some evidence for multiple immigrations in to (and possible out of) the continent over the last 10,000 years (Greenberg et al. 1986; Kozintsev et al. 1999; Starikovskaya et al. 1998). Alaska and Siberia are not, after all, very far apart.

In all of these cases, we could probably come up with some sort of speculations about ancient populations being isolated at particular times and evolving into the ancestors of modern races. However, we would have to test such speculations, and no one has ever confirmed any such ideas about how races were formed. When examination of skeletons more than a few thousand years old is undertaken, what we often see is that the characteristics of such skeletons do not fit *any* modern race, that they are in fact

sometimes subtly and sometimes drastically dissimilar to the skeletons of modern peoples (see, for example, Henneberg 1988; Ozolins et al. 1997; Powell and Rose 1999). This indicates that, skeletally at least, the modern races that researchers have talked about are not ancient subdivisions of humanity, but rather fairly recent configurations of the human body in response to changing selection pressures, which can be environmental and/or cultural.

More generally, the archaeological information we have all points to one overriding fact: *human beings are travelers, and we have been so for a long time.* Our ancestors could not jump on an airplane and travel thousands of miles in a day, but over centuries and millennia they gradually changed their territories, they encountered new peoples, and sometimes they went on voyages of exploration and migration that covered substantial distances. They moved around a lot, over longer distances than we often think, and they developed the technologies necessary for such movement further back in prehistory than we sometimes expect. If that is the case, then where would the isolation necessary for race development take place? We do know of a very few populations that seem to have been isolated for long periods of time. Tasmanian Aboriginal people seem to have been isolated on that island through most of the last 10,000 years, for example (Pardoe 1991), but such small groups are usually not considered as separate races of humans. Some supporters of typological race models recognized that the geographical isolation demanded by these models did not exist in the past (see, for example, Coon 1965:29–30) and instead invoke cultural barriers to such contact between human communities. This explanation is even less convincing than that of geographical barriers: what kind of differences in culture would isolate people from their neighbors for not merely centuries, but thousands of years?

This constant human movement has left its traces in one fundamental element of our physical beings: our genes. Humans are quite homogeneous genetically, which is certainly due in great part to the constant interaction between populations in

different regions. All six and a half billion of us, spread across the continents and islands of the entire world, contain within ourselves somewhat less genetic variation than do small populations of chimpanzees living in different parts of Central Africa (Becquet et al. 2007). Genetic diversity between human populations is low compared to that of other large mammal species that are spread over large areas of the world, or indeed compared to those found in quite small areas (Templeton 1999:182). When we compare the genetic variability among human populations to that of subspecies in many other large mammal species, we see again that these animal subspecies are more different from one another than are the most distant of human groups.

These genetic studies have also substantiated earlier work on human populations, which indicated that the biological characteristics of racial groups do not covary. Recall that if races originated in the adaptation of isolated human populations to particular environments, we would expect to see a set of characteristics shared by members of that particular race but considerably more rare outside of that group. These traits would derive from varying combinations of adaptations to those environments, descent from common ancestors, and/or mutations that appeared in the isolated racial group. Biologically, members of a particular race would, in that case, share a fairly well-defined bundle of biological traits, both externally visible and invisible. These might include combinations of traits for particular skin color, hair type, facial features, blood types, genetic markers, and so on. The boundaries of that race's territory would be comparatively abrupt, although possibly somewhat blurred by interactions and exchange of genetic material with neighboring communities of other races.

This is not what we see when we examine human groups. The various characteristics of human populations do not form such nicely defined sets, and that characteristics that we think of as limited to one race are often far more widely shared. Thus, dark skin color is not only often taken as distinctive of "Negroid" peoples originating in Africa, but is also found among "Caucasoid"

populations in South Asia and "Mongoloid" and "Australoid" groups in the Pacific. Recent, large-scale surveys of the genetic characteristics of human populations in different parts of the world showed a very complex set of relationships, probably traceable to many episodes of long-distance migration and more local population mixture—but no evidence for continental human races (Hunley et al. 2009; Tishkoff and Kidd 2004). Furthermore, the distributions of these genetic characteristics are not very concordant: knowing the distribution of one feature tells researchers quite little about the distributions of others. We see an extraordinary variety in biological features among populations grouped together in particular races, and significant similarities between neighboring populations across what are supposed to be racial boundaries.

As C. Loring Brace (2000) has noted, our perceptions of human racial variation is conditioned by the ways we see people in different parts of the world. Today, we can look at pictures of people from Stockholm, Lagos, and Bangkok, and we see that they tend to be physically very different. Centuries ago, European explorers and merchants sailed around the world, but the encounters they had with different populations were in many ways similar to our modern, electronic voyages; they simply took more time to move from port to port. However, the very fact that such voyages move from one point to a distant point means that travelers do not see the gradients of difference that separate these places. If a person could *walk* from Lagos to Stockholm, or to Bangkok, they would see a progressively shifting spectrum of physical characteristics, reflecting the constant interactions between neighboring communities through many thousands of years. These interactions yield biological relationships between populations that are complex, and that are often *clinal* (Livingstone 1962; Serre and Paabo 2004): that is, there is a gradual transition in characteristics between the groups involved, not any sort of sudden racial boundary between them.

If our hypothetical traveler could look beneath the skin of the people she met, at their blood types, at the forms that their proteins

take, and at their genetic material itself, the situation would become even more complex. Humans have historically grouped people into races on the basis of visible characteristics, but of course there is no reason to exclude these other, invisible but equally fundamental traits when we think about dividing humans into groups. Human groups defined on the basis of these invisible traits in many cases do not, however, resemble races defined on the basis of external characteristics. Plots of the frequencies of blood types will in some cases group particular populations of Native Americans with Australian Aborigines, and sub-Saharan Africans with Central Asians. Similar plots for particular variants of the Rh blood system will group Africans with Southeast Asians, with Native Americans intermediate. The gene for lactose absorption links Europeans with African pastoral groups, while the hemoglobin S mutation is found in West and Central Africa, Saudi Arabia, and South Asia (Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1994). Other examples of such connections and similarities across traditional racial boundaries are very common. Furthermore, the level of distinction at which humans are classified into different groups, racial or otherwise, is arbitrary (Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1994:19). We could, using the same genetic data, claim that there are 2, or 3, or 5, or 9, or 21 “races”—and none of those reconstructions would be more or less valid than any others. The authors of this research are not, needless to say, believers in the reality of human races.

The conclusion seems obvious. Whatever races might be, they are not fundamental biological types of humanity. The clinal nature of human biological traits, the relative genetic homogeneity of humans, and the archaeological evidence for ancient human population contacts do not reflect the existence of ancient population isolates over the periods when races were supposedly developing. The lack of concordance of human biological characteristics does not indicate long-term adaptation of such isolated racial groups to particular original environments. We should remember that *this is not a denial that*

*human biological variation exists*: it obviously does. However, the scope of human physical variation is far too complex to be accommodated within simplistic typological race models.

### Races as Populations

A race is: a division of a species which differs from other divisions by the frequency with which certain hereditary traits appear among its members. [Brues 1977:1]

Typological models of race are still common in the United States, but anthropologists have developed more sophisticated models of human biological variation. In some cases, however, the term “race” is still used for these systems. Such models define human races as groups of humans that can be distinguished from other groups *based on the frequency of some heritable characteristic(s)*—as distinct biological *populations*. For example, elevated frequencies of red hair, fair skin, and freckles (if such exist) might allow anthropologists to define an “Irish race”; short stature, epicanthic folds, extreme hair curvature, and steatopygia might allow the definition of a “Khoisan race”; and straight dark hair, dark eyes, epicanthic folds, and comparatively short arm and leg length might allow the definition of an “Eskimo race.” A huge number of such populations might exist, and the features used to define them do not have to be externally visible. The elevated frequency of Tays-Sachs Syndrome and Gaucher’s disease among Ashkenazi Jewish populations (O’Brien 1999), or of the MNS\**M*, HLAB\*18 and b<sup>39</sup>-thalassemia alleles (Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1994:274) among Sardinians, would help define those populations as a “Jewish race” and a “Sardinian race,” respectively. The suntans found among Australians of European descent are the result of particular behaviors, not heredity, and so we could not define an “Australian race” on that basis—at least until such behaviors have resulted in natural selection for resistance to skin cancer on that continent.

This is a very different concept of human races than that seen in the typological models

discussed above. It does not involve assumptions about the origins of races in isolated ancestral populations, or about the stability, age, and internal homogeneity of those groups. Stanley Garn (1971:6) notes that “A race is a race whether it goes back unchanged for six millennia or whether it resulted from admixture after 1850.” Population models of racial variability locate the definition of races primarily in the perceptions and goals of the observer: what is the *purpose* of looking for “race,” and what choice of characteristics will best suit that purpose? For this reason, research can be undertaken at many different levels of detail, and a single biological characteristic might be used to define different races for different purposes! In general, advocates of population models of race are less interested in detecting primordial types of humans than they are in examining the processes by which human populations become different from or assimilated to one another.

The definition of human races in population models is to some degree *instrumental*: one defines races in order to do things. (Of course, people have often identified typological races in order to do things as well—to study human variability or to justify racism, for example—but the assumption in those cases was that the races under study were primordial.) Researchers examine human variability in order to investigate particular phylogenetic, biological, historical, or even medical problems. Why do Basque populations have very unusual Rh blood group distributions and somewhat unusual head shapes? What accounts for the elevated levels of breast cancer among some Jewish populations, and how might knowledge of that fact be used in early detection and treatment? Why do Inuit and Nilotic peoples have proportionally different limb lengths? Why do African American men tend to have greater frequencies of high blood pressure? The varying questions asked by researchers will drastically affect both the level of detail of the racial definition and the characteristics under examination.

Garn (1971:15–26) and Brues (1977:2), two of the most influential American advocates of population models of races, have both emphasized

the hierarchical nature of their race definitions: researchers can define racial groupings at a variety of population levels, from the most general and widespread to the most specific and localized, depending on the goals of their work. An anthropologist might in some cases study “Caucasoids” as a major race, but could also subdivide that grouping and compare “European” and “South Asian” races, and in still other research might look within Europe at the differences between, perhaps, “Italian” and “Polish” races. Garn (1971) makes this hierarchy very explicit. He identified nine “geographical races,” including “Amerindian,” “African,” “Melanesian-Papuan,” and “European,” each of which is found over a significant area of the Earth. Within each “geographical race” is a number of “local races,” including, for example, “Northwest European,” “Northeast European,” “Alpine,” and “Mediterranean” groups within Europe. Garn (1971:168) claims that these “local races” are true units of evolutionary change, and that *thousands* of “local races” exist. Within each “local race” are again many “micro-races,” which correspond essentially to any communities between which physical and/or genetic difference can be detected. There would presumably be *tens or hundreds of thousands* of such “micro-races” in the world today.

Population definitions of race escape many of the criticisms that can be directed at typological definitions of race. They make no assumptions about the primordial nature of human races, or about the degree of their isolation from one another, or about the limited set of essential characteristics that typological definitions of race require. Races are conceived of simply as the continuing results of population interaction, gene flow and interruption of gene flow, and adaptation, rather than as distillations of ancient racial essences. Disagreements between racial identifications made by different researchers are less important, if those identifications are made only in order to do particular kinds of research.

At the same time, there are different problems associated with population models of race, and these need to be examined. First, the relationships

between different levels of the racial hierarchies in population models are often not particularly clear. According to Garn's definitions, "local races" are true units of evolutionary change, corresponding to human breeding populations. In that case, it becomes difficult to say exactly what kind of units "geographical races" and "micro-races" actually are. "Geographical races" correspond to the major continents and island chains (Garn 1971:18), and their distinctiveness is supposed to be caused by geographical barriers to gene flow between human communities. At the same time, four of the nine "geographical races" (the "Asian," "Polynesian," "Melanesian-Papuan," and "Micronesian" races) are scattered across island chains, which is itself evidence of the human ability to cross geographical barriers. Garn's "geographical races" seem to be little more than relics of earlier typological classification systems. "Micro-races" would presumably be the result of restrictions in gene flow within "local races," which calls into question the status of the latter as fundamental evolutionary units.

Second, the characteristics used to define races are frequently difficult to determine. Population models of race tend to rely on a restricted list of traits for the definition of each racial unit, just as typological models do. Why choose those particular traits instead of the many other traits that each of us humans possesses? As I said, these traits can indeed be chosen according to the objectives of a particular research project—sickle-cell trait when looking at adaptations to malaria, limb length and cold adaptations, and so on—but the racial models advanced by Garn, Brues, and other anthropologists are supposed to be general descriptions of human variability. There is little discussion in these works about the reasons for giving priority to some traits and not others when defining races, especially at large geographical scales. Garn (1971:169–178) gives examples of a variety of "large local races" that are defined according to a stew of physical, genetic, linguistic, religious, regional, and traditional criteria, with no real indication of why these definitions are most important.

Third, definitions of "race" that just call for the presence of some difference in trait frequencies

between human groups also risk extending the race concept to impossibly local levels. In principle, races would be identifiable in any cases where any differences in biological characteristics—even extremely minor changes in gene frequencies—exist between any groups of people. We can easily imagine a situation where people living in a particular district or neighborhood might display very minor differences in trait frequencies, and so would be called a separate "race." Such minor differences are also the basis of many folk typologies. These are informal classification systems used in various parts of the world to assign people to particular groups. Thus, in the Cape Verde Islands off the west coast of Africa, a complex folk classification links particular islands and their traditions of European contact with particular physical and behavioral characteristics (L. De Andrade, personal communication, 2000). The people of Sao Vicente, for example, are believed to have dark skin, black and very straight hair, and sharp facial features, as a result of the intermarriage of West Africans with people from Portugal and England, while people from Brava are ruddy-skinned and fair-haired because of French settlement on that island. At the most detailed levels of analysis, the boundary between "micro-races" and such folk typologies begin to blur: if "races" are to be defined on the basis of their detectability, then are such folk typologies supposed to define races as well?

Populational models of race can designate any biological population, from continental to local, as races. However, this definition of "race" is so far from common understandings and from earlier anthropological definitions of the term that it risks causing a great deal of confusion. The idea that people living in a single neighborhood of a single town might be defined as a "race" implies that hundreds of thousands (or millions) of other "races" exist in the world today. As we have seen, previous anthropological usage, and continuing popular use in North America, involves typological definitions of "race" that are very different indeed from these definitions that designate any distinct human population as a separate race—so should we use

the same word “race” for both definitions? The precision required of scientific research demands the use of correspondingly precise terminologies. From this point of view, anthropologists should not use the term “race” as a synonym for biological populations.

### **INTERSECTIONS OF RACE, CULTURE, AND HISTORY**

Biological variability among humans certainly exists, as anyone can see. Peoples in different areas of the world differ in vastly different ways. Moreover, anthropologists and biologists can group humans into populations on the basis of a variety of physical and genetic features. On the other hand, *no rule says that we have to call such populations “races,”* or that we have to use the term “race” at all in any biological sense. The history of science is full of terms that have become obsolete, because the theories behind them were proven false. Three centuries ago, chemists wrote about “phlogiston,” which was thought to be a kind of essence of fire, contained within all substances that burn and released upon burning. Researchers eventually learned that no such substance existed, and they stopped using the term “phlogiston.” A century ago, physicists used the term “aether” to denote a substance that permeated the entire universe and provided the medium through which light waves propagated, much as sound waves move through air or water. Researchers eventually learned that this was an inaccurate explanation of the properties of space, and they stopped using the term “aether”. Sentimental attachment to an ancient term did not save either “phlogiston” or “aether,” and so these terms were not reused to describe the scientific concepts that eventually replaced them. From a biological point of view, “race” appears to be another one of those terms whose time has passed, ripe for replacement by words that carry less, and less pernicious, historical baggage. In fact, one researcher, Ashley Montagu (1969:xii), called the race concept “ . . . the Phlogiston of our times . . . ”

If this is the case, why does the term “race” continue to be used by anthropologists? Anthropologists continue to talk about race because their study is human culture in general, and because in different areas of the world people talk in the language of physical characteristics and geographical origins when they are dividing other humans up into social groups. In the United States, this is done in the course of everyday social interaction, when terms like “black,” “white,” “Asian,” and so on are used to describe a whole range of people who are, in fact, Americans. Bureaucracies like the Census use a complex terminology (e.g., *American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, black/African American, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and white and Hispanic*) that mixes ethnic affiliation, supposed physical characteristics, and geography when defining race and ethnicity for governmental purposes.

These classifications have little to do with real biological characteristics, or human origins. Traditionally, racial identification through most of the United States was defined according to a hypodescent, or “one-drop” rule, where a mixed race child was identified with the racial grouping of the lower status parent—in the American case, almost always an African or African American woman. Furthermore, the degree of racial admixture is more or less irrelevant; “one drop” of African blood was enough to identify a person as black. This has nothing to do with actual ancestry or biological characteristics of a human being. It was simply a way of enforcing racial hierarchies in the United States, and the “one-drop” rule was a part of American legal systems until the middle of the twentieth century. In parts of Central Africa, populations are referred to as being “black” or “white,” exactly the terms used in North America. All of those people are Africans, however, coming from the same area of the continent. The distinction between them is made on religious and cultural, not physical, grounds: people who are Muslim (or, increasingly, Christian) call themselves “whites” and call nonbelievers “blacks.” In some countries in South America, racial identity is based in part on

socioeconomic status, and may vary from person to person depending on how well-off they are (da Costa 1977:297–298).

Anthropologists study the ways in which these classification systems work within cultural systems, as we will see throughout the other chapters in this book. The situation is even more complicated than this, however, because of the ways in which biological and cultural notions of race are intertwined even beyond explicit systems of classification. Anthropologists are no more immune to confusion about these questions than are other people. To illustrate the complexity of some of these issues, I want to turn to some examples of the difficulties that we may encounter in distinguishing biological and cultural concepts of race.

### **Race in Forensic Anthropology**

Many of us have at one point or another watched TV shows like the *CSI* series or read novels about forensic anthropologists, where experts are able to tell a great deal about a dead person from the characteristics of his or her skeleton: his or her sex, age at death, stature, physical condition, and sometimes even the person's occupation or the diseases and chronic conditions that he or she had endured during life. It always seems very impressive, an illustration of the power and sophistication of research techniques. Very often, such analysis will include determination of the race of that individual, as well. Prominent forensic specialists, physical anthropologists who study human skeletal remains in order to provide information for legal proceedings, have affirmed that human biological races exist, and stated that the race concept is fundamental to their research (see, for example, Gill [1990, 1998]). Surely such experts must be taken at their word?

In fact, the circumstances in which race is identified in forensic research are very complex. Forensic anthropologists, more than most other practitioners of anthropology, function in cooperation with nonspecialists: law enforcement officers, legal specialists, and members of juries. These people for the most part do not have a

background in anthropology, and so their views of biological variation tend to be those of the North American public—they accept traditional racial divisions, and they hold typological views of race. Forensic anthropologists must report their results in terms that are meaningful to their nonanthropological audience, and they have adopted traditional race categories as the most effective way of doing that. As Gill (1990:viii) says, “Providing answers for the attribution of race solves cases just as much as providing a useful age bracket or living stature for the individual. Law enforcement agencies know this, and request simple, straight answers. Any anthropologist who contends that races do not exist and provides a vague answer as to ancestry of an unidentified skeleton, or launches into a discourse on ‘ethnic groups,’ will likely never be called upon again to assist in solving a case.” A major reason for the use of racial categories by American forensic anthropologists is thus pragmatic: their target audience wants to hear about race.

Forensic anthropologists in other countries do not seem to feel the same need to talk about “race,” and to avoid mentioning “ethnic groups” in forensics (see, for example, Evison 1999). The author of an important British textbook on the analysis of the human skeleton (Mays 1998) managed to go through the whole book without referring to race once; he wrote about human populations instead. Even some American forensic anthropologists seem less than committed to the concept (Kennedy 1995; Sauer 1992). More to the point, the “races” that forensic anthropologists identify vary according to local demographic and social conditions. Thus, in the southwestern United States a great deal of attention has been given to distinguishing the skeletons of Native American people from those of people of European descent, while in the southeast differentiation of Americans of African descent is at least as important. Among southwestern American samples that include people of European descent, Rhine (1990) distinguishes between “Anglo” skeletons and those of “Hispanics.” That distinction might well be of importance to law enforcement and other

government agencies in that area, concerned with the accurate identification of local people in terms that local people recognize—but no physical anthropologist would argue that “Anglos” and “Hispanics” are separate biological races.

Similarly, forensic anthropologists try to distinguish skeletons from Southeast Asian, East Indian, and Nubian populations, not because these groups are ancient “races” but because modern North American urban populations include people from these groups (Brooks et al. 1990:45). In other cases, the variability in skeletons of particular races (Native American peoples, for example) has confounded attempts by forensic anthropologists to develop techniques for archaeological identification (Fisher and Gill 1990). In Britain, forensic anthropologists work at differentiating people of Western European descent from South Asians, while in France the forensic identification of peoples of Western European, North African, and Southeast Asian descent might attract comparable amounts of attention. In all of these areas, investigators are concerned that the increasing mobility and multiethnic backgrounds of peoples from all over the world will make their job more complex.

Forensic anthropologists examine the skeletal variability of different human populations. They investigate a variety of traits, recognizing that not all of these characteristics are distributed in the same way through the different populations under study, and that the reliability of their results may vary drastically depending on the relations between those populations and available comparative samples. These different identifications are not made because these groups are fundamental biological types of humans (Relethford 2009). They are made because human populations are physically variable in all kinds of detectable ways, because the remains that are found often reflect the makeup of local populations, and because both law enforcement agencies and communities at large need to know the identities of the dead. We might argue that forensic anthropologists should be trying to educate their clients about the complexities of human physical variation and

the difficulties of grouping humans into well-defined populations, but they in turn could (and do) as well argue that the necessity of providing well-understood information to everyone from local sheriffs to war-crimes tribunals takes precedence. Far from substantiating a view of human races as important biological groupings, as the claims of some researchers would imply (Gill 1998, 2000), the work of forensic anthropologists actually testifies to the complexity and range of variation in human populations—and to the important ways in which social classifications and social pressures can mold the outcomes of scientific enquiries.

### Race and Running

The United States is a nation obsessed by sports, as well as by race, and it is no surprise that race relations in this country have often been played out in the arenas of amateur and professional athletics. International sport has equally acted as a field for competition between societies, nations, and political systems. (The constant sports metaphors—e.g., “played out” and “field of competition”—demonstrate just how much sport pervades our everyday life.) Probably any of us can think of famous images and slogans that have brought race into athletics, and athletics into race: Jesse Owens at the Berlin Olympics in 1936, Jackie Robinson as the first black player in major league baseball, “white men can’t jump.” In all of these cases, and many others, people make assumptions about the physical and intellectual abilities of the athletes in competition, and by extension about the communities that these athletes come from. Some of these—like the early twentieth-century idea that Jewish people are “natural” basketball players and boxers—are quite unfamiliar to us today, while others—the idea that black American men do not have the intellectual ability to play quarterback in football, for example—are more recent.

We can look at some of these issues through the lens of a book published some years ago, Jon Entine’s (2000) *Taboo*, which examines the relations between race and athletic success around





the world today. The book is a controversial one: Entine takes the stance that race is a biological reality, that biological differences between races are reflected in differential success in particular sports, but that many Americans do not talk about these differences because they fear a slippery slope down to the vicious racism that has bedeviled so much of the history of the United States. The book is also a polemic, examining the issue from just one point of view; the author begins it convinced of the existence and importance of biological races, discounts any arguments made against the concept, and ends the book with, again, the conclusion that white men (and so presumably white boys) can't jump. At the same time, *Taboo* is somewhat different from many of the works written on the topic from earlier in this century. Entine devotes a good deal of attention to the pernicious effects of traditional racist thought, in sports and in society in general,

and he also rejects the widespread assumption that athletic and intellectual ability are inversely related to one another—a destructive idea that has particularly followed people of African descent.

The usage of race language in the book is, however, quite interesting. Entine (2000:341) writes about “black athletic superiority,” but it seems that this superiority is actually a very complicated phenomenon. In the first place, it essentially encompasses two different sets of abilities. Entine claims that West Africans are good at sprinting and, it appears, at a variety of professional sports that use similar abilities, while East Africans are good at middle- and long-distance running. These appear to call for quite different forms of musculature and cardiovascular development, so the idea of one unitary kind of athletic superiority seems to be wrong. Neither of those geographical terms is entirely accurate, either. “West African” in this case encompasses not for the most part people from West Africa, but instead anyone born in the New World or Europe who has any noticeable African descent, on the assumption that all of their enslaved ancestors must have been from West Africa.

In fact, *West Africans themselves* have not been notably successful in Olympic sprinting and related sports, even though the population of that area is about the same as that of the entire United States. Ironically enough, although Entine and similar authors claim a “West African” biological superiority in sprinting and related sports, their only explanation for the lack of success of West Africans is cultural: people from West African countries have not had the benefits of the training and coaching that would allow them to excel. In Entine's (2000:241) book, the best-known “West African” sprinter actually from Africa is Frankie Fredericks, who has won a number of Olympic medals and run the 100 m dash in less than 10 seconds 27 times. However, Fredericks is from Namibia. Namibia shares a border with the Republic of South Africa, and both countries are—unsurprisingly—in southern Africa. Namibian populations, environments, and economies are very different from those

found in the countries of West Africa. One might equally call Moroccan or Egyptian runners “West Africans.” All of the intervening countries of Central Africa appear to have been eliminated, perhaps because they do not appear to have produced any elite track-and-field athletes.

Similarly, most East Africans are not champion distance runners. Success at middle- and long-distance running is concentrated in two countries, Kenya and Ethiopia, and among particular ethnic groups. In Kenya, Kalenjin cattle pastoralist populations are especially well represented among elite distance runners, although Kikuyu, Kamba, and Kisii runners are also significant. Ethiopian runners have come from a variety of different populations, with, for example, a number of successful Amhara runners. Of these particular communities, the Kalenjin peoples—among whom distance-running success has been most marked—have only been considered a distinct ethnic group since the 1940s; before that, and still today, the term “Kalenjin” referred to a group of related languages. (The distinction is important, equivalent to that between “the English” as a population and “English-speakers” as a population. The fact that a Sri Lankan, a Nigerian, and a Scotsman all speak English does not mean that they are members of one ethnic group.)

Entine (2000:47–50, 285–286) uses Kalenjin running success as a central argument for the existence of black athletic superiority, and thus for the reality of biological differences between racial groups as traditionally conceived of in North America. He argues that Kalenjin domination of distance running is so great that it cannot be completely explained by environmental factors: the availability of good coaches and good training, cultural practices that encourage young people to run a lot, the example of earlier runners, and so on. Instead, running success among Kalenjin speakers is supposed to be due to some genetic advantage, possibly related to selection for speed on foot when engaged in cattle raiding, or to the altitude at which Kalenjin people run. As with West Africa, cultural factors can be kept in reserve, however; Entine (2000:325–326) uses

such factors to help account for the lack of domination of *women’s* distance running by Kenyans.

These explanations seem, on the face of it, rather unlikely. There are a number of other groups of people in East Africa who engaged in cattle raiding, but who have not generated champion runners. Kalenjin-speaking communities are known to have exchanged group members, through migration and intermarriage, with many surrounding, non-Kalenjin populations; we would expect this to disperse any “genes for running” over neighboring areas in Kenya, but so far this does not appear to have happened to any great extent. More than that, other Kenyan peoples who have had success in international distance running—the Kikuyu and Kamba, for example—are Bantu-speaking farmers, not Kalenjin-speaking cattle pastoralists, and they live some distance away from the latter group. To the degree to which East African running success is concentrated among Kalenjin-speaking people, it is probably most realistic to think of it as the results of cultural factors. The specific biological adaptations that are supposed to contribute to “West African” sprinting success are never really addressed at all.

That being said, there is no reason to think that biological differences between populations could not contribute to success (or failure) in particular sports. At the extremes, this is obvious. It is not likely that people from groups with a short average height, like Guatemalan Maya or Aka people from southern Cameroon, would succeed as professional basketball players; people from populations that are on average very tall, like the Dinka of Sudan, are more likely to do so. (Manute Bol, former center for the Washington Bullets, is a Dinka.) Anthropologists have documented a huge variety of physical differences between populations in different parts of the world, and it is quite conceivable that the height of Nilotic peoples like the Dinka, or the oxygen uptake capacities of some Tibetan populations, might have implications for athletic success. The likelihood of more subtle effects may be even greater, especially given that extremely minor differences in performance can spell success or failure in elite athletics—but such

effects must be demonstrated to exist, not merely assumed. It may be that at some point some such biological adaptations will be proven to have a genetic basis among Kalenjin people (Larsen 2003; Saltin 1996)—although this has not happened to date.

The question remains: what does all this have to do with race? The scale of human groups under analysis shifts back and forth constantly in Entine's book, from "black athletic superiority" at the most general level, to "West" (in fact, mostly African American) and East African abilities in a variety of sports, to the tremendous successes of Kalenjin runners. But does one of these imply the others? Can we say that, because Kalenjin are very successful marathoners, all East Africans will be very successful marathoners, or all Africans? Of course not. These are very different kinds of human groupings—yet all of this variability is supposed to be simply biological, and each level is supposed to imply the others. No one would seriously claim that the Kalenjin comprise a separate race from other East Africans, and the particular kinds of athletic success that Entine examines are in fact very unevenly distributed among populations of African descent, within and outside of the continent (Entine 2000, Figure 4.1). Entine gives no explanation for "black athletic superiority," apart perhaps from some fairly vague musings on the history of hunting and cattle herding on that continent—much of which is simply proof that the geneticists that Entine uses as sources are not very well-informed historians. Success in particular athletic events is associated with fairly specific groups of people, and it appears to be traditional, typological views of race that lead Entine to generalize innate athleticism to all Africans and all people of African descent. Unfortunately, this view can lead to a lack of interest in the conscious commitment and planning that play a central role in so much of elite athletics. Chapter titles in *Taboo* like "Nature's experiment: the 'Kenyan miracle'" and "Winning the genetic lottery" illustrate this danger, with their implication—consciously made or not—that African athletic success is not due to the efforts of athletes themselves but to some unearned genetic legacy.

## Anthropology and the Politics of Race

In the early twenty-first century, the concept of race retains its central place among American preoccupations, in society at large, and in anthropology more particularly. Publication of controversial books like *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray 1994) and *Race, Evolution and Behavior* (Rushton 1995) has focused renewed attention on questions of race in America, and fuelled debates about the biological and cultural meanings of the word. These books attempt to resurrect the race hierarchies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, primarily through varying claims that Africans and especially African Americans are on average less intelligent, more violent, and generally less civilized than people from Europe or Asia. At the same time, some anthropologists continue to argue that biological races are real and important entities, usually claiming that disbelief in the existence of such biological units amounts to nothing more than "political correctness." "Political correctness" is rarely defined in such claims, but one of two general meanings is usually implied. It means either an inappropriate interest in the experiences of women, people of color, and the disadvantaged, or an inappropriate wariness about the objectivity of certain kinds of scientific research.

Recently, a well-known anthropologist and a journalist published a book entitled *Race: The Reality of Human Differences* (Sarich and Miele 2004), one that linked these two threads of debate in ways that illustrate some of the complexities touched upon in this chapter. The authors argue that races are real biological entities, designating them as "... populations, or groups of populations, within a species, that are separated geographically from other such populations or groups of populations, and distinguishable from them on the basis of heritable features" (Sarich and Miele 2004:207). They note the multilevel nature of this definition: races are "fuzzy sets," and the exact number of races defined depends on the level of detail into which individuals and groups are sorted, and the goals of the sorting

exercise (pp. 209–211). This is, of course, a quite conventional populational definition of biological race, similar to those put forward by Garn and Brues (see above). Fair enough, so far.

The question becomes, however, what do the authors actually do with that unexceptionable definition of race? In fact, the treatment of race in the modern world throughout the rest of the book is almost entirely typological. John Entine is quoted approvingly on race and sports—and so again Kalenjin people from Kenya become bearers of the “racial essence” of African running ability (Sarich and Miele 2004:174–184). Kalenjin people win marathons; Kalenjin people live in Africa; therefore, Africans are natural athletes. This is a logical fallacy, and a pretty straightforward one. Similarly, the authors’ primary sources on race and behavior are academics like Philippe Rushton and Richard Lynn, both of whom have married denigrating images of Africans and African Americans with entirely typological models of race. The last half of the book deals with modern racial characteristics, and in that section the conventional, continental racial types—Asians, Europeans, and Africans—are treated as homogeneous units of human evolution. Historical sources are quoted to claim that these continental racial types are primordial (Sarich and Miele 2004:34–56), as if we would not expect that ancient peoples would be as likely to note any kinds of physical difference as we are, and ignoring the fact that—usually negative—descriptions of all sorts of foreigners are common in such texts. The Sahara is supposed to be a “geographical filter,” an “ancient boundary,” between “Caucasians and Negroes” (pp. 209–210)—even though the authors themselves note that it was in the relatively recent past fertile, and inhabited by large game and humans (p. 56).

This seems perplexing: why do we find a *populational* definition of race in this book, accompanied by an entirely *typological* description of variation between races? In fact, the explanation for this is quite straightforward. It is hard to see how the sorts of disparities in ability

and intelligence that the authors claim exist could have arisen without recourse to highly typological, differentiated racial groupings, evolving in relative isolation from one another over extended periods of time—no “fuzzy sets” here, in practice. If brain size, intelligence, and athletic ability vary among modern human races according to the cultural and environmental backgrounds within which these races evolved, and if the difference in these factors is as great as the authors claim, then presumably those races are supposed to have evolved in very different environments and in considerable isolation from one another. As we have seen in Chapter 2, however, claims that these differences exist are not well supported by the data.

Thus, the segue from populational definition to typological treatment is necessary for the authors’ broader argument. On the one hand, research has demonstrated that human biological variability is clinal and multivariate, with a substantial lack of concordance between a variety of biological characteristics. On the other hand, traditional concepts of race hierarchy in the United States require that races be relatively well differentiated from one another, so that they can be talked about, compared, and used as a foundation for political action essentially as monolithic, homogeneous things. In *Race: The Reality of Human Differences*, the authors’ political agenda becomes evident at the end of the book, when they discuss the policy implications of their understandings of race—taking the American situation as representative of the whole world as they do so (Sarich and Miele 2004:233–262). They claim that three possible approaches to public policy concerning race exist: a future meritocracy, where people are judged as individuals—and individuals and groups “find their place” in social and economic hierarchies; a future of race quotas and “levelling down,” as governments try to boost the fortunes of inferior groups; and a future of resegregation. Unsurprisingly, given their thesis, the authors prefer the first of these visions of the future.

Central to all of these scenarios is the *assumption* that race is fundamental to all aspects

of human interaction, with the characteristics of different groups permanent for the long term. If, however, it turns out that many of the differences between racial groups listed by Sarich and Miele are rooted in historical circumstance and modern environments—as many examples from this book suggest that they are—and *not* in inevitable biology, then a different set of imperatives suggest themselves. A claim that all is biology—Sarich and Miele’s ultimate thesis—is an excellent crutch for people who would prefer not to occupy themselves with the plight of people who are poor, powerless, and disadvantaged. If we admit the likelihood that people often find themselves in such circumstances because of transitory conditions in the modern world, then it becomes incumbent upon us to change those conditions for the better.

## CONCLUSION

“Race” is, as I noted at the beginning of this essay, a word, and it is a word that admits of a wide variety of meanings. The history of the United States of America has meant that some of these meanings of “race” are laden with an immense significance. This perhaps masks the fact that American definitions and American relations of race are not necessarily universal—although the power of the United States today means that social and cultural debates about race around the world are increasingly debated using American meanings. The continuing American preoccupation with and debate about race and race relations is in some ways a testament to the ideals of the Republic, implying at least a theoretical commitment to the equality of all its citizens. Americans may disagree vigorously on whether such equality has been substantially attained—as a noncitizen, my outsider’s perspective is that it has not—but there is broad agreement that the question itself is important. This has not been the case in all of the countries where important issues of race relations exist.

One central element in these debates involves decisions about when “race” is a useful

and appropriate concept to be used in particular kinds of analysis, and when it is not. To what degree can differences in educational attainment between different groups in the United States be ascribed to racial discrimination? Are there significant differences in the way elections are handled in predominantly black and predominantly white districts across the country, and is this due to these variations in population? Is race or socioeconomic status a better proxy for student needs in affirmative action programs? Active argument surrounds all of these issues, and hinges on the meaning, scope, and utility of social concepts of race, and on the relations of those concepts to other ways of characterizing American society.

The same situation holds in anthropology: we can (and must) investigate the various dimensions of race, describing and critiquing the concept as we do so. This involves, among other things, examining whether biological race concepts are appropriate models for investigating variability among human beings. This has been one preoccupation of physical and biological anthropology for more than a century now, and it appears that the answer to this question is “No.” The typological race models that had held sway in anthropology through most of the existence of the discipline are not good descriptions of how human biological variability works. The implications of populational models, on the other hand, are so far removed from popular understandings of the term “race”—with hundreds of thousands or perhaps millions of “micro-races” dotted around the globe—that use of the term in such cases does nothing more than risk needless confusion. Science is not an exercise in nostalgia: when a term progresses from being burnished by long use to being made obsolete by increasing knowledge, it needs to be discarded. The concept of biological race in anthropology is at that point.

This does not mean that anthropologists will stop studying human biological variability, either in individual or populational terms. Such research will obviously continue, benefiting especially from the extraordinary advances in genetic research that have taken place over the

last two decades and that seem to accelerate in pace every day. There is, however, no reason for such research to be hobbled by terminology that sows confusion rather than illuminate the real world. It is unlikely that people, in America and elsewhere, will stop using physical characteristics as representations for social difference.

Such preoccupations are very deeply ingrained within human societies around the world, and they would not be easily given up. It remains, however, for both anthropologists and people in society in general to be continually conscious of the origins of such practices, and of the nature of human biological and cultural variability.

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The concept of race has historically signified the division of humanity into a small number of groups based upon five criteria: (1) Races reflect some type of biological foundation, be it Aristotelian essences or modern genes; (2) This biological foundation generates discrete racial groupings, such that all and only all members of one race share a set of biological characteristics that are not. This entry focuses primarily on contemporary scholarship regarding the conceptual Contemporary Philosophical Debates. 3. Race versus Ethnicity. 4. Race in Moral Despite the strong monogenist arguments provided by Kant and Blumenbach, polygenesis remained a viable intellectual strain within race theory, particularly in the "American School of Anthropology," embodied by Louis Academia - The Concept of Race in Anthropology. Britannica Websites. Articles from Britannica Encyclopedias for elementary and high school students. Many people think of race as reflective of any visible physical (phenotypic) variations among human groups, regardless of the cultural context and even in the absence of fixed racial categories. The term race has also been applied to linguistic groups (the "Arab race" or the "Latin race"), to religious groups (the "Jewish race"), and even to political, national, or ethnic groups with few or no physical traits that distinguish them from their neighbours (the "Irish race," the "French race," the "Spanish race," the "Slavic race," the "Chinese race", etc. with Kant's concept of race<sup>1</sup> which is often used as a pretext for labelling Kant as a "racist" thinker whose use of prejudices of its time does not only influence his anthropology but also, quite possibly, his critical philosophy as a whole. While these are several subtle nuances in the ongoing debates which have meanwhile transgressed the limits of an internal philosophical controversy, affecting the reception of Kant's ideas in contemporary social studies, the arguments of those who take an active part in these debates can be roughly divided into two groups or interpretative strategies.<sup>2</sup> The

Race for these anthropologists This chapter will summarize some of the implications of a number of fundamental conclusions of anthropological research on biological populations into which all humans can be sorted. This concept was a central part of studies which people have been identified with different parts of humanity from their beginning almost two centuries ago. In Europe and North America, these divisions have often used language to denote the existence of the other. Before I dive into the concept of race, I just want to thank Kambiz for this opportunity to broaden not only my perspectives but everyone else's as well. I am very excited to discuss subjects that interest me and make people think critically about culture and society. I am looking forward to this personal challenge to hold my own writing with an anthropological community. A race is a grouping of humans based on shared physical or social qualities into categories generally viewed as distinct by society. The term was first used to refer to speakers of a common language and then to denote national affiliations. By the 17th century the term began to refer to physical (phenotypic) traits. Modern science regards race as a social construct, an identity which is assigned based on rules made by society. While partially based on physical similarities within groups, race does not fit with Kant's concept of race<sup>1</sup> which is often used as a pretext for labelling Kant as a "racist" thinker whose use of prejudices of his time does not only influence his anthropology but also, quite possibly, his critical philosophy as a whole. While there are several subtle nuances in the ongoing debates which have meanwhile transgressed the limits of an internal philosophical controversy, affecting the reception of Kant's ideas in contemporary social studies, the arguments of those who take an active part in these debates can be roughly divided into two groups or interpretative strategies.<sup>2</sup> The