

This paper was selected for publication in the AAA's *Anthropology News* as part of the "Rethinking Race and Human Variation" special editions of February and March 2006. The special editions were sponsored by the *Understanding Race and Human Variation* project and funded by the Ford Foundation. The *Understanding Race and Human Variation* project is a multi-year public education effort funded by the National Science Foundation and the Ford Foundation. This paper represents the views of the author and not that of the AAA or the *Understanding Race and Human Variation* project.

## **SAYING "SOCIALY CONSTRUCTED" IS NOT ENOUGH**

John Hartigan, Jr., Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Anthropology  
University of Texas - Austin  
Austin, TX 78712

### **Introduction**

The starting point for most anthropologists who critically engage general assumptions about race is that it is socially constructed. This basic stance, which grounds much of our teaching and research, is now imperiled. In the course of the last year, a variety of public, scientifically-authoritative assaults have been made on this notion. As well, the consensus among geneticists that there is no substantive basis linking genes and race is showing signs of fracturing. As a result, we quickly need to reassess our argument that race is "socially constructed." The good news is, though, that out of such a reassessment we may yet find a more effective means of examining the continuing cultural significance of race.

### **Fracturing Scientific Consensus**

A central catalyst in all of this is BiDil, a cardiovascular drug targeted for African-Americans, the first prescription drug approved by the Federal Drug Administration based on racial identity. But BiDil is only one of over 35 new forms of medical treatment or intervention predicated on the long-discredited idea that there are significant biological differences among racial groups. These medical developments follow from research that purportedly demonstrates that there are genetic markers of race and that people can be quite usefully and fairly accurately grouped according to commonplace racial categories.

Armand Leroi, a biologist at Imperial College, summarizing this research in the op-ed pages of the *New York Times* last summer, trumpeted, "the consensus about social constructs is unraveling." Indeed, sociologist Troy Duster, who has diligently formulated incisive critiques of geneticists' claims that there are scientific bases for continuing to use the concept of race, gloomily concurs, characterizing the surge of current racial research as "a remarkable fracture of the scientific consensus about race." The ramifications of this shift are huge, as

was poignantly made clear to me by a perturbed colleague, who, in referring to Leroi's assertions, asked me, "what do I tell my students now? For years I've been saying that race is socially constructed, but can I really keep telling them that?"

The question of whether or not there is a biological basis for race, or whether "race" can be objectified in scientific terms at all, will be the subject of heated scholarly debate for years to come. The respective "camps" in this dispute are well-entrenched, sophisticated and astute about the political and social import of this debate. Rather than survey the relative merits of the respective sides, here I singularly want to suggest how critical engagements with race might proceed in the wake of profound challenges to the social constructivist stance. Because, whether or not geneticists succeed in establishing that race and biology are significantly linked, it is already apparent that, in talking about racial matters from a social scientific perspective, we have to convey a good deal more than "race is socially constructed."

### **Analyzing the Cultural Dimension**

There are two basic problems with asserting "race is socially constructed." The first is that it butts up against peoples' deeply engrained sensibility that race is actually very real and palpable, something that they both experience and can "see." Obviously, this is something that we want to disrupt, but we must also recognize that the profundity of this challenge often leads to it being resisted entirely rather than taken seriously. This links to the second problem: though this basic claim invokes the "social," generally it involves a fairly meager elaboration of what and how culture matters in such perceptions. Most often, the assertions of social construction lead directly to claims that race is really just a "myth," a form of false consciousness, or that it is entirely a function of racism. When the "social" dimension of this formulation is equated completely with racism, many whites entirely shut out this important message.

So how can we proceed differently? By developing a more robust "social"—or "cultural," preferably—framework in relation to claims about race. Culture involves more than a "perspective" on race; it entails a host of dynamic processes that need to be comprehended in their own terms if we are to make sense of the broad array of ways that race matters.

This cultural dimension draws attention to the immense work of any culture—sorting out matters of belonging and difference—that informs and reproduces an array of categorical identities that include class, religious, sexual and national registers as well as race. The critical point about any cultural condition, of course, is that it is learned; it provides the templates by which subjects interpret and make sense of the world. Too often, I think, in countering claims or assertions about the relation of race and genetics, we wield "social" primarily as a means of discounting the relevance of "biology" to "culture." I

suggest instead that we, rather, assert the far greater import of “culture” to explaining how Americans, in particular, learn to make the crucial distinction between who is an “individual” and who belongs to “groups”—a morally, politically and emotionally charged contrast in American culture.

As I argue in my new book, *Odd Tribes: Toward a Cultural Analysis of White People*, an inability to grasp culture and its dynamics is central to why many whites are unable to think critically about race or to grasp its various manifestations and operations. Without some understanding that our experience of the world is culturally contoured, it is difficult to regard racism as more than just an individual failing or a vaguely perceived “institutional” byproduct. Without recognition of the interlocking aspects of cultural perceptions and categorical identities, “race” appears as just another isolated topic of concern. But by starting with basic cultural dynamics, it is easy to show how “race” both modifies and is shaped by judgments Americans make about whether or not certain people appear to be “nice,” or “friendly,” or “hard-working”—each reflecting crucial, racial categorical judgments. A cultural perspective allows us to place race simultaneously in the mix of everyday life, shaping perceptions that ostensibly do not appear racial, but without reductively asserting that “everything” is about race. Rather than worry about whether “social construction” claims are rendered tenuous or dubious by recent genetics research, we need to be more assertive about the often too obvious fact that race is a function of cultural dynamics that are learned and, hence, can be unlearned as well.

**John Hartigan Jr** an associate professor of anthropology at University of Texas, Austin, studies race and public health, currently in Chicago and San Antonio.