

ASA Trails Lesson
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The Social Construction of Race

Objectives: Students will be able to...

- Explain what it means that race is a social construction
- Cite examples of the social construction of race
- Connect the sociological imagination to the social construction of race
- Understand Omi and Winant's idea of *Racial Formation*

Primary Sociology Standards this lesson addresses:

4.1.3

Secondary Sociology Standards:

1.2.2, 1.2.3

This lesson helps students conceptualize the idea that race is a social construction, especially in the way that Omi and Winant describe in their seminal work, *Racial Formation* (1986); *Racial classification in each country is based on the country's social, cultural and political history.*

Background:

When I teach race, I begin with a lesson on what race is not, especially biology. Once students understand that race is not a discreet biological category, I use this lesson to explain that it is a social construction. Students have had lessons about what the social construction of reality is and its connection to W.I. Thomas's theorem that if people believe something is real, it has real consequences. And so, this lesson helps to establish that race may not be scientifically real, but it is real in the minds of the members of society. After this lesson, I lead students through lessons that demonstrate that the construction of race has very real consequences.

Preparation:

Make copies (or use a digital form) of this supplementary document.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JGLo0PT335w9MH45nvZ7SAzEd8cMI-SmafD3yCCZRs0/edit?usp=sharing>

Part 1 of the lesson: The social construction of race around the world

Teacher should instruct students to note what their race would be in various countries based on the countries' censuses from 2001. These census categories come from the American Anthropology Association's website www.Understandingrace.org (2017).

Discussion:

Ask students how many of them marked two or more different races around the world. All of them should raise their hand because, for example, in Bulgaria the choices are different than all the other countries (Bulgarian, Turkish, Gypsy). Teachers can solicit who had the most different races as well.

Teachers may want to probe students about how it felt to be categorized as “other”. Discussion can tease out the feelings on belonging within a society and how that may shape those individuals living there.

Then ask students why each country has those specific categories. Answers should reflect Omi and Winant’s idea in *Racial Formation*; that the country has a unique political and social history and the racial categories represent that (as opposed to biological and scientific categories). The most obvious is British racial categories which illustrate Britain’s history of imperialism.

Teacher should explain that this activity illustrates that race changes based on *where* a person is. This is one aspect of C. Wright Mills’s Sociological Imagination.

Part 2 of the lesson: The social construction of race in the U.S.A.

Teacher should instruct students to identify what their race is using several of the official U.S. census forms. Teachers should note that until 1960, race was determined by the census worker. So, that person would come to a house and ask questions about the occupants but rather than asking the occupants about their race, the worker would look at the people and make a determination of their race. So, it is important to note that people did not self-identify their own race until 1970. So all of these answers should be based on what a census worker would *think* the student’s race is.

Discussion:

Similar to part 1, ask students how many of them would have been a different race if they were living during the decades above. Note that even white students would have a different category in 1790 than in the other decades.

Ask students if they can identify what the social and political dynamics were that led to particular racial categories being used by the census in each decade. One example that teachers can highlight is why there was no Chinese in 1870, but then Chinese was added in 1880. This is because there was an economic depression and many Chinese who came to California to build railroads and work in mining and lumber were now being blamed for taking jobs from whites. That led to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Now the census was needed to identify who was Chinese in order to exclude them from citizenship. Additionally, teachers should note that many of the students who identify as white today, would not have been identified as white during earlier periods of U.S. history including Irish, Italian, Armenian, and Jewish immigrants.

Explain to students that this is an example that *when* someone lives shapes how society constructs their race.

For more info see:

Lisa Wade's October 2, 2015 post on the Society Pages, *The US census and the social construction of race*
<https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2015/10/02/the-census-and-the-social-construction-of-race/>

Pew Research Center's February 6, 2020 post, *What Census Calls Us*
<https://www.pewresearch.org/interactives/what-census-calls-us/>