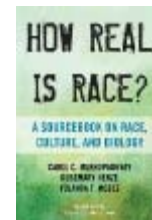


How Real Is Race?: A Sourcebook on Race, Culture, and Biology

reviewed by Erica Misako Boas — August 02, 2015

Title: How Real Is Race?: A Sourcebook on Race, Culture, and Biology
Author(s): Carol C. Mukhopadhyay, Rosemary Henze, & Yolanda T. Moses
Publisher: Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham
ISBN: 0759122733, **Pages:** 362, **Year:** 2013
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Mukhopadhyay, Henze, and Moses' *How Real is Race? A Sourcebook on Race, Culture, and Biology* is a refreshing read on the significance of understanding race not as biology, but as a sociocultural construct that operates as power. The word "refreshing" is apropos because it achieves what has been challenging for many of us educators: the writers painstakingly explain and show how race has been and continues to be constructed through culture. And they do it in clear language—a true feat considering the complexity of the topic and the fact that this is the first book to take up the project of a "biocultural approach" to explaining the racial construct. With respect to the biocultural approach, the authors argue, "Race is very much culturally and socially real, and has had and continues to have real consequences, both social and biological" (p. xvi). While offering a perspective on race that connects biology and cultural anthropology, they debunk in great detail the enduring myth of race as biological by presenting key research studies in an accessible manner.

How Real is Race is divided into three distinct parts: (a) "The Fallacy of Race as Biology"; (b) "Culture Creates Race"; and (c) "Race and Hot-Button Issues in Educational Settings." Each of these sections is comprised of chapters with titles that clearly align with the material presented. All of the chapters conclude with a summary of the key conceptual points, and a set of clearly outlined assigned activities suitable for lower and upper division undergraduates. Some of the chapters include conclusions and reflective questions, and the book ends with a resource section, which gives a comprehensive list of activities, as well as major website resources. These contributions alone are invaluable to teaching race in the classroom. Best assigned to students beginning on their paths of social and cultural analysis, the text offers abundant opportunities for thought, reflection, and learning.

Part One of the book explains in great detail how race is not biology, and how scientists have done much to solidify this belief, while more recently supplying scientific evidence that humans are, in fact, more biologically similar across races than they are within races. Mukhopadhyay, who wrote this first part, is clear on the point that "Biology has played a role in the cultural invention that we call 'race,' . . . but most of what we believe or have been taught about race as biology, as valid subdivisions of the human species, and an important part of human biological variation is a myth" (p. 2). This, she later asserts, has been scientifically proven to be invalid "because there are no objective, reliable, meaningful criteria scientists can use to construct or identify racial groupings" (p. 5). Such language is useful to those who are new to anthropological and sociological studies of race.

That race is a social construct, and not biological has—for many undergraduates—become part of their lexicon. However, articulating how race has been, and is constructed, continues to be evasive for students and educators alike. Part One of the book may be assigned as required reading for an undergraduate course to accompany some of the literature that smacks of biological explanations for racial difference, such as Herrnstein and Murray's (1994) *The Bell Curve*, which the authors refer to in Part Three.

To read this section of the book with companion pieces, then, would allow for a supported interrogation of popular discourse. It would equip undergraduates with knowledge of the ideology that Mukhopadhyay, Henze, and Moses have written this book against; there could arise a fear that the essential details of the first four chapters on the relationship between biology and race would be lost on its audience.

The premise of Part Two contends not only that "race is culturally real" (p. 126), but that it is also an organizing principle of power. This section offers, once again, a vital explanation of a subject that is commonly glossed over, when it comes to discussions of race. One educating on race might say to a class, "Race is a cultural (or social) construct. Culture is complex, and is a learned symbolic system that incorporates language, artifacts, ritual, etc." Part Two also written by Mukhopadhyay does the work of systematically deconstructing these complex meanings of culture, and putting it into plain language. While the first chapter in Part Two could have integrated race into its language to provide continuity to the general topic of the book, it provided a thorough beginning that contextualized the remainder of the discussion on race, culture, and power. Race—not as a neutral fact of biology—but as a systematic fact of inequality is given deep attention here.

Mukhopadhyay begins the final chapter of the section, entitled "If Race Doesn't Exist, What Are We Seeing?" with a response, eloquently stated, "There is a biological component to the cultural invention we call race. Cultural processes, not nature, are

responsible for continuing visibility and social significance of race in the United States" (p. 177). That culture shapes biological factors to take the form of race is the thread that is woven through the book, and it is a useful point to which they return just before launching into their next section.

Part Three focuses on potentially volatile issues that emerge around race in schools. It covers ground from articulating the meanings of the terms racist and racism to racial-cultural explanations of the achievement gap and on to the socio-institutional dimensions of race in schools: clubs, assemblies, racial labels, and even interracial dating. Gender and sexuality are given a few pages of attention, describing the ways that race intersects with these categories for young people. While the focus is a brief one, educators will appreciate the intention to take seriously the social concerns of young people. It is a reminder that more needs to be written on the ways, in which intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality take effect in the lives of youth and—importantly—how to approach these realities. Taken together, these chapters offer educators both a method for understanding the educational institutions in which they work, while also providing frameworks for approaching with their students the myriad forms that race takes on in schools.

Authors Mukhopadhyay, Henze, and Moses provide educators with a clear, accessible, and essential resource for thinking about and instructing on race at the undergraduate and secondary school levels. No other book offers what *How Real is Race* does: a "user-friendly" handbook for educators; a detailed and thorough examination of the relationships among race, culture, and biology, and an important contribution to the literature on race theory. Purposed as a "sourcebook," it is wise to consider it a practical text to guide instruction on the sociocultural construction of race, wherein race is theorized as a cultural creation that has emerged from biological explanations, but is not statically cultural or inherently biological.

Reference

Herrnstein, R., & Murray, C. (1994). *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. New York: Free Press.

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