

College of DuPage

DigitalCommons@COD

Student Scholarship

English

5-14-2020

Critically Assessing the Invalidity of Race Realism and Finding Solutions to Educate Society on Racial Theory

Ryan Lawless
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.cod.edu/englishpub_student_pubs



Part of the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lawless, Ryan, "Critically Assessing the Invalidity of Race Realism and Finding Solutions to Educate Society on Racial Theory" (2020). *Student Scholarship*. 3.

https://dc.cod.edu/englishpub_student_pubs/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Scholarship by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact orenick@cod.edu.

**Critically Assessing the Invalidity of Race Realism and Finding Solutions to Educate
Society on Racial Theory**

Ryan Lawless

College of DuPage

ENGLI 1102-HON

Professor Trina Sotira

May 14, 2020

Abstract

With race being a hard concept to grasp, many competing theories have arisen to explain what race is and how to categorise someone by race. The dominant explanation for race in early history has been characterised by race realism. Colloquially, race realism is the theory that scientific evidence proves race to be objectively definable by trends in geography, appearance, and most prominently, genetics. Previous research from Stanford geneticist Noah Rosenberg (2005) that looked to support this topic has relied on small sample sizes and data that had otherwise been misinterpreted. When Sarah Tishkoff (2009) of the University of Pennsylvania conducted the same experiments more thoroughly and with larger sample sizes, evidence contradictory to earlier experiments arose and invalidated the findings supposedly supporting race realism. Considering this, we used data from an extensive public survey to assess society's underlying beliefs and attitudes towards race while looking to confirm that race realism had been invalidated at a social level. In alignment with the newer findings, the data we collected suggests that people of younger generations have been less and less exposed to the ideas of race realism, and all have come to the conclusion on their own that it is arbitrary to objectively define someone by race. The study showed that while these generations still socially group themselves into races as a result of ancestral and geographic history, there is no genetic property that ties them to their personal sense of identity. Thus, the study concludes by providing ways to further educate the population and avoid the pitfalls of race realism, as certain social groups in the media still back the obsolete ideas of race realism to this day.

Introduction

Race is all but impossible to objectively define. Despite this, society still uses the abstract and subjective idea of race to belittle, control, and discriminate against others in society. The theory of race realism focuses on the existence of races through biological and behavioural differences as a result of varying genetic properties, and those backing it use it to divide humanity into groups based on such criteria. Race realism continues to gain traction every day, and it is important to recognise its prominence and invalidity in society to understand what can and should be done to promote proper education around racial theory.

Literature Review

Societal Prevalence

While individuals are bound to hold prejudices, the spread of these prejudices can be traced back to the belief that scientific evidence has made racism more acceptable, which has only led to detrimental effects. Nicole Hemmer, a historian and research scholar with the Obama Presidency Oral History Project, addresses the basic ideas of how race realism has survived throughout history to seemingly become popular again in her article. In one of her news articles, Hemmer goes further into detail about *The Bell Curve*, highlighting authors Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's claims that low IQ people, which tended to be of colour, are more likely to be exposed to poverty, crime, and other poor social situations. ("Scientific Racism", 2017) As these ideas gained traction due to different scientific studies, alt-right and conservative media began tolerating them in order to expand their constituency, ultimately contributing to the Trump campaign and his inauguration into office. A professor at Bradley University, Ed Burmila is an active follower and historian of leftist politics with a Ph.D. in Political Science. An article

written by Burmila (“Scientific Racism Isn’t Back”, 2018) goes into detail about how the subtle and sparse spread of texts often cited by conservatives has conglomerated in different corners of social media. As a result, government officials have been influenced to show their true colours, realising how large of a backing there is for blatant racism. Burmila (2018) cites Donald Trump as an example when he described immigrants as being from “shithole countries”, expressing his disappointment that the immigrants are not coming from countries “like Norway”.

The effects of these theories have caused an immense divide among people of different “races” and have created never-ending turbulence at both a societal and personal level that is seen in the present. As COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc on society, Asian-Americans have been at the source of verbal and physical assaults due to stereotyping and a complete misunderstanding of the pandemic’s origin. According to Austa Somvichian-Clausen’s article explaining the harm being done by associating China as the sole cause of this virus, President Trump has continued to refer to the coronavirus as the “Chinese virus” despite the World Health Organization advising against this and explaining that naming viruses could aid in the creation of negative connotations for Asian Americans (Clausen, 2019). As reports of the virus continue to expand beyond China’s borders, many citizens have approached this situation with hostility as they felt China was at the epicentre of the catastrophe at-hand and that their country and race was the cause of the virus spreading. This misinterpretation of data has caused Asians in America and abroad to fear for their lives while being spit on, threatened, and attacked by those of a different “race” despite everyone involved being from the same country. The structural racism found in America has always been influential to its society, but as ideas and scientific hypotheses reach further corners of different communities both liberal and conservative, the revival of race realism becomes harder to stop.

Studies Surrounding Race Realism

Although race realism in the modern era has given an opportunity for racism, bigotry, and discrimination to be justified, it is important to understand the arguments and statistics being cited by self-proclaimed race realists to assess their validity. Noah Rosenberg is a professor and geneticist at Stanford University, spending most of his time researching human genetics and its changes over time. Being one of the first to present substantial alternative findings for genetic variation among races, many race realists have flocked to this study as a citation for their argument. In the study, Rosenberg evaluated the genetic similarity between individuals and then placing those individuals into clusters. Within the evaluation, Rosenberg assessed that about a 1.53% genetic variation exists between continents. Rosenberg's study also found a variation of only roughly 5% between different continents, suggesting that genetic "races" may not exist, yet those in support of race realism have left this figure out of their own evidence. The validity of the study cannot be confirmed, though, as only 52 unique population samples were used in the findings. Nevertheless, Rosenberg concludes through his research that as geographic distance increases, the genetic distance increases in a linear manner (Rosenberg et al., 2005, pp. 456). This study is a part of many others that help provide a reason behind why race realism is believed to have scientific backing, thus further giving rise to segregation of races and people in society.

A study like Rosenberg's, however, quickly provides an alternate conclusion. Sarah Tishkoff is a professor of genetics and biology at the University of Pennsylvania and has dedicated much of her time to researching human evolutionary genetics, specifically focusing on genetic diversity amongst populations in Africa. With a population sample of more than double Rosenberg's, and using the same tools as him, Tishkoff's experiment shows "evidence for shared

ancestry among geographically diverse... populations” (Tishkoff et al., 2009, pp. 1036). She further presents that any variation of within-population genetic diversity in Africa is due to modern humans existing in Africa longer than in any other geographic region and have maintained relatively large population sizes (Tishkoff et al., 2009, pp. 1037), which accounts for why Rosenberg’s studies found an increase in within-population diversity in Africa in comparison to other geographical regions. The research further supports the idea that regardless of geographical population, modern human genomes can be traced back to a single common ancestry in Africa. These findings help Tishkoff and her colleagues conclude that at its root, “race” is a term meant to confine a broad variety of genetics and there is no absolute empirical evidence to suggest that humans can be accurately categorised into races.

Methods & Analysis

Parameters of the Study

To better understand the findings and experiments surrounding race realism, I conducted an anonymous survey that assessed people’s underlying beliefs and attitudes towards race. The survey helped to confirm whether race realism had been invalidated by society or adopted it by it, and if there were solutions to combat the possible pitfalls of the theory of race realism. In the survey, participants were asked to give demographics about them, such as their level of education, and which race they most closely aligned with and why. Afterwards, participants were asked a series of questions to evaluate their core beliefs on race, including if there were race-specific qualities, if race was a social construct or not, if there are possible deficits from procreating with a different race, and if they felt there was any correlation between the spread of COVID-19 and the genetics of Chinese descendants. Further, the survey asked how familiar

participants were with the theory of race realism, if any of the lines of reasoning for race realism is valid, and what, if anything, should society do to promote awareness of race realism and other racial theories to provide proper education on the topic.

Although a small sample size was returned and the results should be interpreted with caution, the participants all seemed to agree with each other as only three (~14%) participants out of 21 believe that certain races possess biologically superior/inferior qualities, and only two (~9.5%) backed any evidence for race realism. No participants, however, felt that the characteristics and genetics of people of Chinese or other Asian descent are directly connected to the spread of COVID-19, telling me that despite the pressure from the White House to label this virus as the “Chinese virus” and there being an exponential increase in aggressions and microaggressions towards those of Asian descent, these people acting aggressively are still a minority. One result to note is that all 21 participants were of high school or college level, yet none of their educations have directly exposed them to the ideas and history of race realism or racial theory at all: approximately 57% of these participants learned of race realism solely through personal research and self-education. From this, it is worrisome to think how many young minds in school are being exposed at an early age to parts of uncensored social media without the topic of race realism being presented in another light. If I were to conduct further research into people’s beliefs towards race and race realism with a more extensive survey, I would look to include questions regarding social media’s influence on their attitudes.

What to do About Race Realism

Despite good efforts, society continues to resort to grouping people by race, ultimately developing prejudice and separation, and social media groups will look to capitalise on this

situation. According to the participants of the survey, however, there are ways we can combat this problem. When viewing the results of the survey, virtually all the individuals agreed that the first step should be to add race realism into curricula throughout a child's education via social science classes. In this, students should be presented evidence against race realism and the idea of definitive races. Teaching the scientific downfall and negative impacts on society that race realism has will help counteract the influence of biased social media groups. Instead, instructors should encourage a more progressive and independent mindset among their students. Beyond the social sciences, biology, anthropology, sociology, and various other fields of science would assist in promoting race as a social construct. Linguistic adaptation would also be of assistance as it is not rare to see or hear individuals or groups considered to be of different "races" being given varying descriptors as a result of their appearance or stereotypes surrounding them.

Other suggestions from participants included removing social programs that look to favour racial backgrounds over others as this only develops a greater divide between people of supposedly different races, and race realists will feed off this. These suggestions included the removal of affirmative action programs as well as strict regulation on phenomena such as redlining, where companies, primarily real estate companies, unethically and unlawfully limit their services and reject loans for creditworthy borrowers purely based on their race or where they live. With the regulation of these practices, some participants conclude that it will help present all parts of society as equal, regardless of appearance or ethnicity, and the stigma, stereotypes, and misconceptions surrounding the existence and qualities of different races will minimise. Although the research I conducted presents a small sample size containing only high school and undergraduate students, these people are the most impacted by education, or a

lack thereof, regarding race realism. Although receiving input and feedback from older generations would provide great insight on how attitudes regarding race have changed, my study has indicated that there is still work that needs to be done both in and outside of academia in order to progress and educate society and fully discard the ideas of race realism.

Discussion

Through a synthesis of professional studies, analysis of race realism's effects on society, and field research of my own, I was able to determine that, while dangerous, race realism does not hold the same amount of validity as it once did. As science and technology continues to progress, more and more studies can be done to discredit the outdated studies of Rosenberg and his colleagues. However, this technological advancement comes at a price. With endless media outlets and spheres of the internet to express people's ideas and learn information from a possibly biased source, groups with controversial ideas are bound to manifest. It is in these places that, little by little, young generations are being exposed to the outdated and bigoted ideas that race realists present, and in our current situation with an ongoing pandemic, this is showing rather greatly. Although my study suggests that many educated students refrain from such behaviour, it is common currently to overhear anti-Asian remarks or see active aggression towards those of Asian descent simply due to China's association with the COVID-19 outbreak.

While there is still discussion for the best way to combat these issues, research indicates that not enough is being done to educate the bulk of society on racial theory. With a lack of proof that race can be definitively showcased, as demonstrated by Tishkoff's research, the leading theory as of right now is the idea that race is merely a social construct, and while

it may not be arbitrary to identify or describe oneself by their skin colour or where they grew up, it is arbitrary to associate those things with who they are and how they act; it surely cannot be used to group one with other individuals who are unique in their own right. It is in this distinction that many tend to blur the lines between what is acceptable and what is not regarding ideas around race. Thus, it is important for society to collaboratively establish a stronger system of education like what was described to me by my survey participants. As society learns more and more about race realism and race theory in a proper academic setting, as opposed to via social media, people will get a better understanding of the harsh treatment and biases towards other races that develop with race realism and how it is crucial to progress past this outdated theory and accept others as individuals, not as subjects of a definitive race characterised by faulty criteria.

Conclusion

When taking into context the effects behind the support of race realism, it is worrisome to know that this group and their beliefs are reaching new ears through various forms of media. Racist rhetoric has become more common due to the conviction that many followers of race realism hold, allowing them to think of more subtle ways to keep their ideas visible re-establish racial superiority. On the surface, race realism does not seem far-fetched of a theory; there have been tests completed to shed light onto the topic and some of it may be in favour of the theory's claims. However, after a more thorough interpretation of the case studies cited, no substantial evidence for the justification of race realism has been presented. By using race realism as an explanation of biological differences among people, the door is opened for racism to divide society as a whole and give rise to hostility and discord. In an era where citizens regardless of colour need to support each other, the focus should instead be on progressing humanity.

References

- Burmila, E. (2018, April 6). *Scientific Racism Isn't 'Back'-It Never Went Away*. The Nation. Retrieved from www.thenation.com/article/archive/scientific-racism-isnt-back-it-never-went-away/
- Hemmer, N. (2017, March 28) *'Scientific Racism' Is on the Rise on the Right. But It's Been Lurking There for Years*. Vox. Retrieved from www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/3/28/15078400/Scientific-racism-murray-alt-right-black-muslim-culture-trump
- Rosenberg, N., Mahajan, S., Ramachandran, S., Zhao, C., Pritchard, J.K., Feldman, M.W. (2005). Clines, Clusters, and the Effect of Study Design on the Inference of Human Population Structure. *PLOS Genetics*, *1*(6), 455-457. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgen.0010070>
- Somvichian-Clausen, A. (2020, March 20). *Trump's Use of the Term 'Chinese Virus' for Coronavirus Hurts Asian Americans, Says Expert*. TheHill. Retrieved from www.thehill.com/changing-america/respect/diversity-inclusion/489464-trumps-use-of-the-term-chinese-virus-for
- Tishkoff, S., Reed, F., Friedlander, F., Ehret, C., Ranciaro, A., Froment, A, ... Hirbo, J. (2009). The Genetic Structure and History of Africans and African Americans. *Science*, *324*(5930), 1035-1044. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1172257>