

The Continuing Significance of Race: Racial Genomics in a Postracial Era

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Kathleen J. Fitzgerald¹

Abstract

While most scientists of the twentieth century argued for understanding race as a social construction, this understanding has shifted considerably in the past decade. In the current era, biological notions of race have resurfaced not only in the scientific community but in the form of direct consumer use of DNA tests for genetic ancestry testing, sometimes referred to as genetic genealogy, and the emergence of pharmacogenomics, or the marketing of race-specific pharmaceuticals. In this article, I argue that the return of race as a biological concept in the form of racial genomics can best be understood through an application of Blumer's race as group position theory. Using that, I argue that during the past 20 years, four specific challenges to the racial hierarchy have emerged that have threatened white dominance: the original interpretation of the Human Genome Project results declaring humans to be 99.9 percent similar, thus, dispelling the idea that race has a genetic basis, the electoral wins of President Barack Obama and the ensuing rhetoric that America is a "postracial" society, and finally, the increase in interracial relationships and biracial/multiracial identities. The emergence of racial genomics, I argue, is a response to these specific threats to the racial hierarchy and to white dominance.

Keywords

race, genomics, group position, postraciality, white dominance

¹ Loyola University New Orleans, New Orleans, LA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Kathleen J. Fitzgerald, Loyola University New Orleans, New Orleans, LA, USA.
Email: kfitzger@loyno.edu

Personal Reflexive Statement

As a sociologist, my research has focused primarily on racial/ethnic identities, inequalities, and privilege. These interests have also informed my interest in pedagogy, specifically, how we teach the sociology of race/ethnicity, the social construction of race, and white privilege. Thus, the emergence of racial genomics, primarily in the form of genetic genealogy and the popularization of it on various PBS series hosted by Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., challenged me to think about what these developments meant for the discipline of sociology. What does it mean to teach the social construction of race in an era of racial genomics? How might genetic genealogy influence racial/ethnic identities? What does this all mean for the racial hierarchy? Can the emergence of racial genomics contribute to a dismantling of the racial hierarchy or will it reinforce the existing the hierarchy? While I am in the early stages of a qualitative research project exploring how genetic genealogy informs a person's racial/ethnic identity, this article represents some of my struggles with how we understand the reemergence of the scientific understanding of race as biologically based.

The resurgence of biological notions of race in the form of racial genomics is both unanticipated and predictable. It is unanticipated because in 2000, when the success of the Human Genome Project was initially announced, scientists declared the idea of race as genetic or biologically based to be dead. After all, the mapping of the Human Genome found that humans were 99.9 percent similar. However, within five short years, these same scientists shifted their analysis; instead of focusing on the overwhelming similarity among people, the focus shifted to the minor differences between humans, resulting in a new search for the biological meaning of race (Bliss 2012). It is also surprising because this shift occurred simultaneously as claims of a postracial society and colorblindness reigned in mainstream society. “At the very moment that race consciousness is intensifying at the molecular level, it is fading at the social level” (Roberts 2011:xi).

The resurgence of biological notions of race is predictable if this shift is understood to be an extension of racial science, which has been an integral part of racial domination. As legal scholar Dorothy Roberts argues, “the speedy resuscitation of biological concepts of race seems less surprising if we consider the intimate marriage of race and science that has lasted more than three centuries” (2011:26). Roberts argues that we need to understand “racial science” as more than eugenics and “scientific racism,” or illegitimately using science to support racist ideas. Instead, she argues that we must understand race as essential to science because “the belief that race is natural has always been validated by mainstream—not aberrational—scientific theories and methods” (2011:28). Scientists created race, as the very idea of race is rooted in the science of zoology (Krimsky 2011). Scientists historically extended great effort to find evidence supporting notions of racial inferiority and superiority and, thus, helped reproduce white racial dominance. In fact, Roberts (2011:27) argues, “Science is the most effective tool for giving claims about human difference the stamp of legitimacy.”

One of the earliest examples of science being used in the name of racial domination involved the work of scientist Samuel Morton. In the early 1800s, Morton began collecting, measuring, and categorizing human skulls from across the world in order to prove his hypothesis that the racial hierarchy could be objectively established through evidence of physical distinctiveness along racial lines, primarily brain size. Perhaps not surprisingly, he concluded that Caucasians had the largest cranial capacity, and thus the highest intellectual endowment, followed by “Mongolians” and Native Americans, while Ethiopians had the smallest cranial capacity (Jackson and Weidman 2006; Roberts 2011). Morton eventually became a leading voice among American polygenists, the idea that the human races were actually separate species.

What is the significance of the reemergence of race science in the form of racial genomics for not only the sociological understanding of race and ethnicity as social constructions, but for the discipline itself? How does this impact how sociologists teach the social construction of race as common understandings of race are reified through simplified media portrayals of racial genomics?

While there have always been difficulties getting people to understand race as a social construct rather than as something biological, in an era where racial genomics is receiving increasing attention, sociologists are faced with an even greater challenge. Getting people to understand race as a social construction, when the idea of race as biological seemed so self-evident, has always been difficult. The problem today is no different, except that the idea of race as biological is pervasive in our culture. Research finds that the idea of race as biology is again alive and well in high school biology textbooks (Morning 2008, 2011). Mainstream media reproduce the notion of race as biology in TV shows such as Gates’ *Finding Your Roots* and *African American Lives*, in which genetic ancestry testing is used to presumably identify the racial makeup of people or to identify what region of Africa one’s ancestors descended from. The media also reproduce biological understandings of race through news reports about race-specific drugs like BiDil, a drug marketed to African Americans for congestive heart failure, and through popular news stories on the search for ancestry through the use of genetic genealogy, among other things. For instance, findings that President Obama is related to African slaves in the United States—through his white mother’s ancestral line (challenging the idea that Obama had no direct links to slavery) generated national media attention (Thompson 2012). Similar media attention surrounded research findings that Michelle Obama is a descendant of both slaves and slave owners (Swarns 2012).

While some argue that social scientists are naive in their resistance to viewing race as having any biological essence at all and that we need to understand race both as a social construction and as biologically based (Bliss 2012; Shiao et al. 2012; Walsh and Yun 2011), in this article, I argue sociology can help us understand the resurgence of race as biologically based. To do so, I rely on Herbert Blumer’s classic argument on race as group position to understand the emergence of racial genomics. In other words, I argue that the return of biological notions of race is a response to the current threats to the racial hierarchy and white privilege.

The specific threats to white racial dominance that I focus on in this article are the original interpretation of the Human Genome Project that claimed there was no scientific basis for race, the electoral wins of President Barack Obama and the ensuing claim that we are a postracial society, and the increase in interracial relationships and biracial/multiracial identities. As Hochschild, Weaver, and Burch (2012) note, “The American racial order is unsettled . . . It used to be easy to identify groups’ relative positions. On a vertical dimension of more to less, Whites held the overwhelming share of desirable resources and statuses and Blacks were at the bottom of most distributions” (p. 6). In the current era, identifying groups’ relative position has become more difficult, claims to group identity have become more fluid, and white dominance is perceived by many whites as threatened. White perception of a threat to their social dominance exists despite the fact that on no empirical indicator are whites disadvantaged compared to people of color. In response, we see a return to science to remake race as biological, as science remains one of those ways racial dominance is perpetuated in a seemingly nonracial way (Bonilla-Silva 2013).

From Social Constructionism to Racial Genomics

While there is a long history of racial science supporting the understanding of race as biologically based, most extremely in the case of eugenics, the idea of race as a social construction eventually became the prevailing scientific view over the past century. At the turn of the twentieth century, social scientists, particularly anthropologists such as Franz Boas and his students, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Ashley Montagu, among others, began arguing for understanding race as a social construction. Sociologists of the Chicago School, such as Robert Ezra Park, challenged biological notions of race, albeit while simultaneously reifying problematic notions of black cultural inferiority (Steinberg 2007). By 1950, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization issued their landmark Statement on Race, which declared race to be a social myth rather than a biological reality, at least partially in response to the horrors of the Holocaust. Later, the findings of geneticist Richard Lewontin (1972) which showed that 85 percent of genetic variation exists within so-called racial groups seemed to confirm the social constructionist arguments. Despite the scientific shift toward understanding race as a social construction, the idea of race as biological, of course, still resonated to a certain degree with the general public primarily because, “race is a political system that will not be brought down with scientific evidence alone” (Roberts 2011:79).

Racial genomics, the current approaches to understanding race as biological, is the latest version of racial science and can be understood as a hidden mechanism of race, as fostering institutional practices that allow for structural racism to remain in a society that calls itself postracial. As sociologist Ann Morning emphasizes, “the historical record shows that when racial essentialism comes under attack, it survives by making its way to newer and more authoritative areas of inquiry . . . Today DNA offers the most compelling evidence” (2008:S129).

Population geneticists look to the nonrecombining DNA (DNA that stays the same over generations and does not split, such as the Y chromosome or mitochondria) to understand the history of genetic lineages and to try to understand a people's origins and migrations. Mitochondria provides all of us with a record of our maternal ancestry and the Y chromosome is passed intact from father to son, providing a record of a man's paternal ancestry. Human genome research has identified differences in allele frequencies, variant forms of a gene, which are referred to as single nucleotide polymorphisms. These minor genetic variations in human alleles correspond to the major continentally based population groups, which some scientists claim is roughly equivalent to race and to argue that race is not merely a social construct but instead has a biological basis (Abraham 2006; Leroi 2005; Risch et al. 2002; Rosenberg et al. 2002; Wade 2006).

There is by no means consensus among natural scientists, much less social scientists, on this conflation of major continentally based population groups and race and many scientists have challenged this interpretation (e.g., Duster 2011; Roberts 2011; Graves 2005). For instance, since race is a construct that has changed across time and place, to say these allele frequencies vary along population lines that correspond to race leads to the obvious question, whose understanding of race? The racial categorization of what era or of what country? Since all human beings originate on the continent of Africa, where do we draw the line associating a particular race with a particular continent or region? The racial categorization system ultimately chosen by population geneticists is hardly objective science; it is a social decision, not a biological or natural one, and is intimately related to colonialism, imperialism, and nation building.

The problem with conflating race with major continental groups is best exemplified by exploring the current state of Jewish genetic genealogy. Jewish ancestry has been the most consistently identifiable in terms of allele frequencies, for the obvious reason that people "mate with their neighbors," as Smedley (2007) says, and thus are likely to share certain alleles with their neighbors. Jews, both through choice and coercion, have experienced relatively isolated reproduction and have been more endogamous than most human groups and thus, tend to share more genetic similarities. Yet, "Jew" is not a race as we currently understand the concept of race (although, certainly in different times and places Jews have been defined as a distinct race) nor can Jews be considered to correspond with a major continental population. Additionally, even with the consistencies in allele frequencies that scientists find among Jews, Lewontin (2012) points out that none of the genetic elements found are characteristic of all or even a large majority of Jews. He argues that

the closest thing to a 'Jewish gene' is an element on the Y chromosome of males that has been passed down at least for several millennia in the male line of the Cohanim family, and whose presence in a man's genome is evidence of descent from the priestly class. The frequency of this 'CMH' (Cohanim Modal Haplotype) is around 50 percent among members of the Cohen line. It is [also] found in some other Middle Eastern groups in frequencies of around 20 percent. (Lewontin 2012)

Some social scientists have sought a middle ground on the issue: acknowledging that race is both socially constructed and biologically based (Bliss 2012; Shiao et al. 2012; Walsh and Yun 2011). Viewing the debate between social constructionists and racial essentialists as futile, sociologist Catherine Bliss (2012) has argued for understanding the scientific shift from focusing on the genetic similarity of humans to the minute genetic differences between humans through a notion of antiracist racialism. With this notion, she suggests recognizing racial categories while not embracing a racial hierarchy stating, “there is no rank to races but that there are nevertheless discrete populations worth studying” (2012:15). She is correct in an abstract sense that it is not the mere categorization of humans into discrete groups that is problematic but instead is the fact that we turn racial categories into a racial hierarchy that results in inequality. Haney-Lopez (2011) would argue, however, that one cannot separate race from the racial hierarchy because they are necessarily interrelated; races were created in order to establish white racial group dominance. In fact, he argues that one of the ways postracialism operates to obscure ongoing racism is by recognizing race while simultaneously ignoring the asymmetric group hierarchy. Race as a social, historical, and political creation was designed to allow one group to control access to resources and deny those resources to other groups; thus, the racial hierarchy cannot be separated from cultural understandings of race.

Other social scientists avoid using racial terminology, while accepting the understanding that human populations exhibit some level of genetic diversity that distinguishes human groups from one another. Walsh and Yun (2011) argue that social scientists should accept the genetic evidence of race, yet dispense with the term race, replacing it with “population” or “ethnic group,” claiming that the “essentialist versus constructivist” debate is really one of the terminology rather than empirical reality. While their acceptance of biological notions of race is problematic, their solution to use the term “ethnic group” in place of race has its own dilemmas. Particularly in light of the shift to what sociologists refer to as color-blind racism or *laissez-faire* racism, where racial inequality is viewed as a result of cultural deficiencies of minority groups (Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Bonilla-Silva 2010), simply shifting the terminology to “ethnic group” will do nothing to distance the idea from the baggage associated with race/ethnicity. It will still allow for a racial/ethnic hierarchy to exist and be perpetuated and it will still fuel notions of racial inferiority and superiority, only it will do so by linking cultural deficiencies to genetic deficiencies of populations.

Shiao et al. (2012) also proposes changing the terminology as a way to avoid the context, meaning, and consequences of using racial terminology. Rather than using the term “race,” they argue for using the notion of clinal classes to understand the clustering of alleles, similarly to the way the term “class” is used among social scientists today. Terminology taken from biology, clines refer to species that exhibit gradual genetic phenotypic differences over a geographic area. They argue that

clinal classes are a complementary measure of ancestry in terms of how both physical geography and mating restrictions have produced clusters in human genetic variation

... clinal classes assume a common evolutionary history, possess extensive genetic similarities, and coexist with clinal variations both within each class and across classes. (Shiao et al. 2012:72)

It is clear that science is still in the “race business,” and racial genomics is just the latest version of race science. Much like Morton’s use of cranial measurements to support the racial hierarchy during the 1800s, racial genomics is seemingly objective science. Racial genomics challenges notions of the social construction of race in new and problematic ways because genetics is treated as objective science, in ways social science is not, and because race is being marketed to people in new ways. For instance, genetic ancestry testing companies sell racial identity and even target particular racial/ethnic audiences with their services: Jewish people, African Americans, and Native Americans as well as people of European ancestry. “Race is continually being remade, and it is being refashioned today as genetic genealogy tests, race-targeted pharmaceuticals, and high school textbooks make clear. When the race concept has been challenged... Americans have reworked and thus preserved it, often by recalibrating its relationship to science” (Morning 2008:S130).

Racial Genomics and Blumer’s “Race as Group Position”

I argue that we can understand the resurgence of biological notions of race through revisiting Blumer’s (1958) classic argument that race is about group position. This argument was one of the first to emphasize race as structural rather than individual, which, of course is a foundational idea for most of the major sociological perspectives on race today, including Feagin’s (2009) white racial frame and Bonilla Silva’s (2010) understanding of “racism without racists” and color-blind racism.

In order to explain racial prejudice as a sense of group position, Blumer identifies four key criteria. One is that the dominant racial group feels a sense of superiority over subordinate racial groups. The second is that subordinate racial groups are perceived by the dominant racial group as intrinsically different and even alien from them. His third criterion involves dominant group claims to privilege. He expands on this by claiming, “it is the feeling on the part of the dominant group of being entitled to either exclusive or prior rights in many important areas of life” (Blumer 1958:4), a prescient point that predates the sociological interrogation of white privilege by at least four decades. The fourth key aspect of his argument is that “a fear and suspicion that the subordinate race harbors designs on the prerogatives of the dominant race,” or more to the point, that the subordinate racial group threatens the privileged status of the dominant racial group results in racial prejudice and discrimination (Blumer 1958:4). The dominant group is not necessarily concerned about subordinate racial groups per se, as they are deeply concerned about their own position in relation to subordinate groups. Finally, Blumer emphasizes that the sense of group position held by the dominant group reflects more about how things ought to be than what actually is. Ultimately, “race prejudice lies in a felt challenge to this sense of group position” (Blumer 1958:5).

Others have extended Blumer's argument to an understanding of "the role that group identity plays in the reproduction of racial inequalities" (Perry 2007:375) and that threats to group identity are threats to the ontological security of whites (Perry 2007). Still other research has relied on Blumer's notion of race as a sense of group position to document the links between white racism and threats to white privilege (Bobo 1988; Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Bobo, Kleugel, and Smith 1997; Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2010; Gallagher 1995, 2003; Jackman 1994; Wellman [1977] 1993).

Challenges to the Racial Hierarchy

If the resurgence of race as biology in the form of racial genomics is a response to threats to dominant group privilege, what are those threats? The U.S. racial hierarchy has faced unprecedented challenges in the last 20 years by a number of factors such as the original interpretation of the Human Genome Project that found human beings to be 99.9 percent similar, the electoral wins of President Barack Obama, the claim that we are a postracial society, and the increasing numbers of interracial relationships and biracial/multiracial identities. Such trends can be understood as threats to white's sense of superiority, to their dominant group position, and to white privilege.

Human Genome Project and Race

A significant threat to white dominance was the initial interpretation of the Human Genome Project results in which humans were declared to be 99.9 percent similar. Population geneticists Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, and Piazza (1994), in their foundational book *The History and Geography of Human Genes*, claimed that trying to classify people into races based upon genetics was a futile exercise. As a species, *homo sapiens* is a highly homogeneous species according to geneticists. At a press conference in 2000, President Clinton famously declared, "I believe one of the great truths to emerge from this triumphant expedition inside the human genome is that in genetic terms, all human beings, regardless of race, are more than 99.9 percent the same" (Roberts 2011). Bobo (1999) has argued that "dominant group members must make an affectively important distinction between themselves and subordinate group members" (p. 449), a job made that much more difficult by this finding. Ultimately, racial subordination requires the ability to distinguish between groups of people in some way. Thus, seeking genetic evidence of race operates to reestablish these once taken for granted distinctions between human groups.

Electoral Wins of President Obama

With the election of Barack Obama in 2008, for the first time in U.S. history, the face of political power was not white, presenting at least a symbolic challenge to whiteness. However, more is going on. As Tea Party rhetoric exposes, many whites

believe themselves to be racially disadvantaged relative to minorities by the policies of the Obama administration. Of course, this is not true. Sociologist Lawrence Bobo states, “the point is not that these perceptions are accurate. Rather, it is that many people see themselves and other groups with whom they identify as losing ground to members of a racial minority group” (1999:459). While the economic recession that began in 2008 has hit the white middle class hard, on most socioeconomic indicators, African Americans have actually lost ground during the Obama era (Smiley and West 2012).

Claims of Postraciality

The notion of a postracial society, a term that sociological research challenges but which became part of the mainstream discourse after the election of President Obama in 2008, also presents a symbolic challenge to the racial hierarchy. The term “postracial” signifies a society in which racial differences are no longer significant (Love and Tosolt 2010). If the idea that the United States is postracial is widely believed by whites to be real, it represents a threat to white privilege. Privilege and disadvantage are relational statuses; one cannot exist without the other. The rhetoric of “postracialism” implies that barriers formerly faced by racial minorities are no longer obstacles. What remains unsaid, however, is what postracialism means for the dominant group. It clearly implies a lessening of privilege; as the obstacles racial minorities faced were the very privileges whites counted on to benefit them, consciously or not.

Increases in Interracial Relationships and Biracial/Multiracial Identities

Finally, we look to the increase in interracial relationships and biracial/multiracial identities as another threat to white dominance, as encroaching on “whiteness,” thus threatening whites’ sense of dominance and white privilege. Sociologists have long looked to rates of interracial marriage in a society as a barometer of the ongoing significance of race. The data on interracial intimacies show that the United States is not a color-blind society. However, attitudes toward interracial marriages have changed enormously since World War II. In 1958, when Gallup first asked Americans whether or not they approved of marriage between blacks and whites, only 4 percent approved. By 1983, 50 percent of people surveyed still disapproved of interracial marriage. As of 2007, only 17 percent of Americans disapproved of black–white intermarriage and 77 percent of Americans approved (Romano 2003).

These changes are often viewed as racial progress, but they can also be understood as a threat to white dominance. As Jacobson (1998) points out,

the policing of sexual boundaries—the defense against hybridity—is precisely what keeps a racial group a racial group . . . from the perspective of white supremacism interracial liaisons ‘resulted in mixed race progeny who slipped back and forth across the color line and defied social control.’ Thus sexuality is one site at which all the

economic advantages, political privileges, and social benefits inhering in a cultural invention like *Caucasian* converge and reside. (1998:3)

In the United States, people tend to adhere to the norm of endogamy, meaning they tend to become intimately involved with people similar to themselves, thus, rates of interracial marriage in the United States are quite low. As of 2010, only about 7.6 percent of all marriages were interracial, and this statistic includes all possible interracial marriage combinations: Asian white, Latino black, Native American white, black–white marriages, and so on. However, interracial marriage rates have more than doubled since 1980. In 2008, a record 14.6 percent of all new marriages, defined as individuals who married within 12 months of being surveyed, were interracial. Even if rates of interracial marriage appear low, it is clear that there has been a dramatic shift in the past 40 years on the issue, paralleling changes in attitudes toward interracial marriage over the same period.

Rates of interracial marriage do vary by group, for instance, Hispanic-white marriages are the most common, while black–white marriages are the least common. Black–white marriages have increased in the last 30 years, but they have increased at a slower rate than interracial unions that do not involve a black spouse (Root 2001). White–other marriages, which refer to unions between a white and an Asian American or a Native American spouse, have more than doubled since 1980.

Interracial intimacies may be the most significant barometer of societal assimilation, but looking at the fluid racial identities claimed by biracial/multiracial people allows us to explore another challenge to white dominance. Biracial/multiracial people have always recognized the problematic nature of racial categorization since they never fit neatly into discrete, socially constructed racial categories, however, as long as the “one-drop rule” reigned, they found themselves forced to accept racial categories as at least a political reality (Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2002). Biracial/multiracial people gained a certain amount of legitimacy with the 2000 census when, for the first time, people were allowed to check more than one racial category. In 2000, approximately 2.4 percent of the population marked more than one race (Saulny 2011). According to the 2010 Census, nine million people, or about 3 percent of the population, reported more than one race.

There is nothing new about biracial/multiracial people; what is new is that so many of these people are claiming a biracial/multiracial identity rather than being constrained in their racial identity choices to being black, as the one-drop rule proscribed. People who grew up in the pre–Civil Rights era were more likely to identify as black, while those born in the post–Civil Rights era show more fluidity in their racial identity—at different points in their lives identifying as black, biracial, and sometimes even white (Harris and Khanna 2010; Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2002). Some argue that they are rejecting the color lines that have long defined our nation (Saulny 2011).

Many argue that the increasing presence of people claiming biracial/multiracial identities does not really challenge our existing racial order because it does not

challenge whiteness (Dalmage 2004; Spencer 2011). Spencer (2011), for instance, argues that we are merely adding new nonwhite categories, which in no way challenges the racial hierarchy where whites are in a position of privilege and blacks remain on the lowest rungs of the hierarchy. However, while the increasing numbers of people claiming biracial/multiracial identities may or may not disrupt the racial hierarchy, the multiracial idea does disrupt notions of race as fixed and biological, which is a powerful challenge to our racial ideology, our racial hierarchy and, ultimately, white privilege.

Discussion

Using Blumer's notion of race as a sense of group position, the previous four examples can be understood as threats to white dominance. Blumer's first point, that the dominant group feels a sense of superiority over the subordinate group, is threatened by the election of Obama, twice, to the presidency and the perception among many whites that this represents a disadvantage for whites. Ultimately, this contributes to white perceptions of subordinate racial groups "getting out of place" (Bobo 1999).

His second point, that the dominant racial group views subordinate racial groups as intrinsically alien and different from them was clearly threatened by the initial interpretation of the results of the Human Genome Project that there was no significant genetic difference between humans and that humans are, essentially, all the same. The increase in and legitimation of biracial and multiracial identities also challenges the sense dominant racial groups have of subordinate groups being intrinsically different from them because it treats race as fluid rather than discrete. Discrete racial categories allow one to more easily see someone as different or alien, whereas fluid racial categorizations make such assumptions problematic.

Blumer's third point pertained to dominant group privilege. The rhetoric of post-raciality surrounding Obama's electoral wins was that the United States was now a postracial society threatened dominant group privilege because without race, a racial hierarchy on which whites are advantaged could not exist. The increase in interracial marriages, while still accounting for a small percentage of U.S. marriages overall, can also be understood as a threat to dominant group privilege. The fastest growing rates of interracial marriage are between Latinos and whites and Asian Americans and whites, and the least common are black-white intermarriages. Bonilla-Silva (2010) argues that this is evidence of his Latin Americanization thesis, or the shift to a triracial system rather than the erosion of the U.S. racial hierarchy. Under this new racial hierarchy, whites remain at the top and blacks remain on the bottom, while an emerging category of "honorary whites" exists in the middle. The "honorary white" category consists of some Latinos and Asian Americans, such as light-skinned Latinos, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, Asian Indians, Chinese Americans and Middle Eastern Americans, and acts as a buffer between whites and blacks, helping to protect white privilege and to preserve white racial dominance. Increasing rates of interracial marriage threaten white privilege, unless

whiteness is expanded and a buffer category such as that of “honorary whites” is implemented, which could still be perceived as a threat to dominant group privilege by whites.

All four of these trends fit with the final tenet of Blumer’s argument which is that racial prejudice is the result of the dominant racial group feeling that their status is threatened by the subordinate racial group or groups. As Perry argues, “contemporary white culture and identity, though no longer wedded to blatant expressions of white racial superiority, are nonetheless still shaped by colonial discourses of self-other/universal-particular that invoke and underhandedly sustain notions of white supremacy” (2007:380). Ultimately, she continues, “identity, in itself, addresses a need for ontological security—knowing one’s ‘group position’ on the scope of being and existence” (Perry 2007:377).

In the face of such challenges to white racial dominance, racial genomics emerges as a way to keep our notions of race alive. This is particularly true in the ways race is reified in the marketing of genetic ancestry testing to individuals. There are at least 15 companies that offer consumers genetic genealogy services and many of these specifically target their clientele along racial lines. For instance, most of the companies offer Y chromosome and mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) tests which identify patterns of mutations that are thought to show European ancestry. One company claims to be able to help people find out where their ancestors came from in Africa. Many companies claim to offer genetic ancestry testing specifically for so-called Native American DNA markers (Tallbear 2008). Another company offers to test for Jewish ancestry, specifically offering the “Cohanim chromosome” test (Greely 2008).

Since 2002, almost a half-million people have pursued genetic genealogy testing (Duster 2011). Some journalists have found DNA ancestry testing to be much more common among African Americans, primarily due to the limitations placed upon them in pursuing traditional genealogical research due to the slave trade and the erasure of much of African culture in America (Duster 2011; Greely 2008; Nelson 2008). Many Jews have also embraced this technology since genetic genealogy can provide clues about a people’s origins and migrations and some genetic markers indicating migration patterns have been discovered. Many people who believe they have Native American ancestry are unable to provide adequate evidence of this to gain tribal membership (Fitzgerald 2007). Thus, however flawed the science, genetic ancestry testing holds some appeal to people who have no other way to prove their Native American ancestry (Tallbear 2008; Golbeck and Roth 2012). This has placed some pressure on Native American tribes to include these new “genetic cousins” as official tribal members, despite the fact that such people do not qualify for tribal membership through traditional methods.

While most of these prior examples do not involve the dominant racial group, whites, genetic ancestry companies are still reifying race and whiteness no matter who their target audience is. First, by claiming to find evidence of a biological basis of racial group membership (black, Native American, or Jewish in most examples), “white” is also being created, as racial categories are relational and hold no meaning

in isolation. Second, most genetic ancestry testing companies offer plenty of information on European lineage for their white consumers. While genetic ancestry testing is being aggressively marketed to racial/ethnic minorities, it is hard not to notice the Eurocentrism of the haplogroups (a DNA haplogroup is defined by differences or mutations in human mtDNA) relied on by genetic genealogy companies. For example, Sykes' (2001) book *The Seven Daughters of Eve* argues that all modern Europeans fall into one of the seven ancestral lines and share a common ancestor known as Mitochondrial Eve. Additionally, in my observations of a genetic genealogy online discussion board, I have found that while genetic genealogy results almost always indicate admixture, which refers to evidence of the breeding between two or more previously isolated populations, how people interpret their findings is another matter. They overwhelmingly focus on rather narrow conceptions of their whiteness rather than having admixture results challenge how they understand race (Fitzgerald 2013).

Certainly, there is the hope that genetic ancestry testing can challenge the racial hierarchy and the notion of discrete races. Some researchers emphasize the "potential of new genetic knowledge to transform long-standing notions of social coherence and belonging" (Brodwin 2005:139). Hackstaff (2009) argues that genetic genealogy can "transform our racial 'common-sense' by reconstituting our social histories" (p. 191). However, as it stands, these companies seem to be reifying twentieth-century racial categorizations rather than transforming our understanding of race. A significant problem with the design of genetic ancestry testing is that they begin with existing racial categories and work backward from there, which biases their findings. In other words, they begin with existing racial categories that were socially and politically constructed to assist colonial and imperialist agendas, and then apply those categories to different times and places as if they are somehow universal, an assumption that runs counter to everything we know about race.

Genetic ancestry tests compares a sample of a customer's DNA with DNA samples from Western Europe, West Africa, East Asia, and indigenous Americans—to see if they match Ancestry Information Markers from those populations. The results of these DNA searches have been interpreted as a measure of racial makeup (results claim that someone is 48 percent African, for instance). However, assessing the probability that someone comes from a particular region of the world is not the same as discovering one's racial ancestry or, by extension, their current racial makeup.

An additional problem with genetic ancestry testing is that these companies begin with an assumption of racial purity, which is problematic. As sociologist Duster (2011:105) explains, "the process relies excessively on the idea of 100-percent purity, a condition that could never have existed in human populations." Population geneticists treat races as pure (one can be "African" or "American Indian" or "European") and then explain genetic ancestry as admixture, the mixing of these otherwise pure races (Roberts 2011).

Conclusion

Why is racial genomics appealing to scientists who had once discarded biological understandings of race? While the average person may have struggled with understanding race as socially constructed and as NOT biological, most scientists throughout the twentieth century had accepted that race was a social construction. Bonilla-Silva (2010) emphasizes that color-blind racism perpetuates white privilege and white dominance without whites having any discernible hostility or resentment toward minorities. Roberts argues that racial genomics works in the same way in that scientists are able to “create a new racial science that claims to divide the human species into natural groups without the taint of racism” (2011:54).

However, this new science of race goes even farther than that. Not only do scientists working in racial genomics appear to lack hostility and resentment toward minorities, but they actually view their attention to race as a form of antiracism. Bliss (2012) argues that the paradigm shift in science from treating race as a social construction to viewing it as having at least some genetic basis was a result of several significant factors and has, ultimately, been what she calls “race positive.” One is the shift toward minority inclusion in scientific and biomedical research, such as efforts to include minority participants and women in pharmaceutical testing, for instance. This shift is also due to scientists’ reflecting on their own life experiences concerning race and many “personalize their participation in this new science of race” (Bliss 2012:6). Bliss finds that for current scientists, understanding race as biological is part of their commitment to racial justice and scientific ethics, rather than a perpetuation of the racial hierarchy.

Without doubting the sincerity of the scientists and their intentions behind reviving race as biology through racial genomics, it is still fair to question how realistic their position is. Scientists are members of the society they study, not separate from it, as those working within the sociology of knowledge remind us. When Gould [1981] 1996 offered his critique of Morton’s work in *The Mismeasure of Man* based upon his systematic replication of Morton’s study, he argued that he found,

no evidence of conscious fraud . . . Conscious fraud is probably rare in science. It is also not very interesting for it tells us little about the nature of scientific activity . . . the prevalence of *unconscious* finagling, on the other hand, suggests a general conclusion about the social context of science. For if scientists can be honestly self-deluded to Morton’s extent, then prior prejudice may be found anywhere. (pp. 86–88)

Thus, today’s scientists’ casual conflation of “major continental groups” with common understandings of “race” are just as much a product of a society with an entrenched racial hierarchy as they are anything else. It is also about more than how scientists understand clusters of alleles; it is how these are portrayed in the media and interpreted by nonscientists. We know that both conservatives who cling to a “color-blind ideology and liberals who believe in a postracial America have

embraced . . . the science validating racial difference at the genetic level” (Roberts 2011:288).

Finally, the validation of racial genomics by the public at large should give us pause, as “the public expects biology to provide the objective truth apart from social influences. Geneticists and the public should realize that the science of genetics is often closely intertwined with social attitudes and political considerations” (Provine, quoted in Smedley 2007:329). Bonilla-Silva (2013) is more forthright in his critique, and refers to racial genomics as problematic, calling on “Foundations and government agencies alike . . . [to] sponsor work to debunk so-called ‘genetic’ explanations of racial inequality. And if they continue funding this work in the name of science, we must challenge them vigorously as sponsors of racism” (p. 39).

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