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Joan Ferrante | Prince Brown, Jr.

The Social Construction of Race and Ethnicity in the United States

**Joan Ferrante
Prince Brown, Jr.**

Northern Kentucky University



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PREFACE

The Social Construction of Race and Ethnicity in the United States is a five-part book that challenges conventional views of race and ethnicity by describing and critiquing the foundation of those views: the U.S. system of racial and ethnic classification. Readings in this textbook call attention to (1) the personal and systematic consequences of classifying people, (2) the U.S. government's obsession with "nonwhite peoples" reflected in its ongoing attempts to create racial categories and construct rules governing classification, (3) the scientific research disputing the logic of classifying people into race and ethnic categories; (4) the reasons classification persists in the face of overwhelming evidence disputing that logic, and (5) a new paradigm for thinking about "race/ethnicity" and "race-ethnic" relations.

The Social Construction of Race and Ethnicity in the United States is not just a book of readings. Each of the five parts leads off with an in-depth essay or overview that grounds the set of readings in sociological theory. Readings were selected for their potential to stimulate critical thinking and self-examination. In addition, each reading begins with one or more study questions to help readers clarify/identify key concepts and issues.

The idea for this book grew out of our frustration with the misleading way in which the idea of "race" is treated in most textbooks that address this concept. The authors, for example, accurately point out that race is not a meaningful biological concept but then proceed to define race in a way that highlights biological traits and to show photographs suggesting that race is a definitive, clear-cut attribute.

This book also developed out of a shared commitment to improve the quality of our teaching and to gain a fuller understanding of the impact the idea of race has on a society that is consumed by it. The logic, organization, articles, and ideas evolved in conversation with each other and from students responses to class material. As one example of how student input helped to shape this book, we asked students to respond in writing to the idea that "race" is a myth and is based on the false assumption that people can be divided into distinct racial categories. While there are always a few students not surprised by this idea, the majority cannot see how this is possible—as these sample comments show:

- *I don't understand how this is possible but I am open-minded about it.*
- *If there is no such thing as race, why can I look around at the people in the class and know their race?*
- *If race is a myth, why is race such a big deal in this country?*

Such responses motivated us to ask and answer several difficult questions that are central to this book: (1) How is it that racial categories are treated as mutually exclusive when we can identify many cases in which people have complex biological histories? (2) If classification schemes in fact are based on a false assumption, why do they seem so clear-cut? (3) Why have government officials spent so much physical and mental energy devising rules for classifying people according to race? (4) “Why do we so easily recognize races when walking down the street if race is a myth?” (Haney López 1994:19). (5) If race is a myth, should we dismantle classification schemes?

In writing and selecting the readings, we struggled with how to refer to “race.” Should we always put the word *race* in quotation marks? Should we always qualify references to a person’s race with the words *people classified as* black, white, and so on? In the end, we concluded that the idea of race is real if only because its consequences are real. However, we believe that people must shift their understanding of the meaning of race away from a term referring to clear biological divisions of humanity, to a term referring to “a way in which one group designates itself as ‘insider’ and other groups as ‘outsiders’ to reinforce or enforce its wishes and/or ideas in social, economic, and political realms” (Rorhl 1996:96). *The Social Construction of Race and Ethnicity in the United States* was created with the goal of helping readers make this conceptual transition.

Acknowledgments

The ideas in this book are not new. For example, *Race: A Study in Modern Superstition* by Jacques Barzun was published in 1937 and reissued in 1965. In the preface to the 1965 edition, Barzun states “This book is coming back into print because the idea of race it treats of, although repeatedly killed, is nevertheless undying” (pp. ix).

Recall also that W. E. B. Du Bois was preoccupied with the “strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century.” His preoccupation was no doubt affected by the fact that his father, born in Haiti, was of French and African descent and his mother, born in the United States, was of Dutch and African descent. In *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, Du Bois (1899) wrote about popular ideas of race and compared them to reality. Du Bois documented that blacks and whites married and paired off despite laws prohibiting marriage and that they did have children (who, by definition cannot fit into one racial category).

We mention Du Bois and Barzun as a way of acknowledging those who came before but whose ideas were not received in the same way as those who write about race as a social construction today. The dates on which many of the readings included in *The Social Construction of Race and Eth-*

nicity in the United States were originally published also point to the many contributors and the long process behind the development of new paradigms.

To our knowledge, this is the first reader written and compiled with the exclusive goal of explaining race as a social construction. For this opportunity, we thank Alan McClare, who signed the book in November 1995. On signing, the book was in rough draft form. Margaret Loftus, former Associate Editor at Addison Wesley Longman, saw the project through to its completion almost 18 months later. We thank Margaret for the encouragement she offered, her insights about how to improve the book, and her excellent ability to synthesize in writing and in conversation the many reviews she secured for this project. In this regard, we are grateful to:

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Special thanks goes to Annalee Taylor Ferrante, for handling the correspondence connected with securing permissions for the readings we reprinted. She also checked all references and quotes for accuracy, and maintained the files. We know of no person who could do this detailed work with the same level of care and accuracy as Annalee.

We dedicate this book to Robert K. Wallace and to Elizabeth, Eric, and Christopher Brown and thank them for their tireless support. We also dedicate this book to the thousands of people who jeopardized their lives, education, and careers in the on-going struggle to alleviate the impact of racial classification in the United States.

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INTRODUCTION

Every ten years since 1790 (the year of the first census), the United States government has attempted to count the number of people living under its jurisdiction and classify them according to race. On the surface, this seems like a relatively simple task: Obviously we think determining race can be done by simple observation, and we assume that everyone knows his or her race. The Census Bureau data in Table 1 suggests that everyone in the United States belongs to one of five broad racial categories: (1) White; (2) Black; (3) American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut; (4) Asian or Pacific Islander; or (5) Other race. Note there is no mixed-race category nor is there a “don’t know” category.

Recently we asked students in a Race and Gender class and in an Introduction to Sociology course if they knew of someone who might find it difficult to answer the race question used by the U.S. Bureau of the Census—that is, did they know of someone who could check more than one of the racial categories provided? (See Table 2.) If so, we asked them to please take a few minutes and write about that person. Of the 70 students in the Race and Gender class, 19 (27 percent) responded in the affirmative. Of the 80 students in the Introduction to Sociology course, 70 (88 percent) knew of someone. Here are some examples.

- *I am of mixed ancestry but because I have to choose one category I usually fill in the white category. I am Japanese-American, and I know many other Japanese-Americans. Many of us never know what circle to fill in. Just the other day I took my brother to the doctor's office, and he asked me which one he should circle, and I told him white. Then he asked me which do I usually fill in and circle, because he was confused too. I told him I usually circle white.*
- *Carolyn, a tall white lady in her 30s, lives with her black husband in a small, predominantly white county. They have one daughter who is five years old and looks a great deal like her father. She is beautiful*

Table 1 1990 Population in the United States by Race

RACE (UNIVERSE: PERSONS)

White	199,827,064
Black	29,930,524
American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut	2,015,143
Asian or Pacific Islander	7,226,986
Other race	9,710,156

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1996).

Instructions for Question 4

All persons, regardless of citizenship status, should answer this question.

- One of my friends has a dark complexion and long hair (male). Recently he was pulled over by a police officer and cited for speeding. The

- officer marked his race as Native American/Eskimo on the citation. Actually, my friend considers himself white with some Indian ancestry.*
- *I am Filipino, but my birth certificate says I am white. Also I was born in Virginia. My parents are both Filipino, however. Not too many people can figure out, without asking, that I am Filipino; they assume I am Asian.*
 - *A friend of mine's mother is Vietnamese and her dad is white. She looks Vietnamese, and most people see her as just that. People who don't know have asked if she can speak English. She just looks at them, almost annoyed at the question because she speaks it plain as day. She was born in the U.S. and has lived here all her life.*
 - *Kristen was born to a Native-American mother and an African-American father in 1974. Kristin's grandmother forced her daughter, who was only 16 years old, to give Kristen up for adoption. A white couple eventually adopted her. Kristen makes it a point to inform herself about Native American peoples. She belongs to the local chapter of the NAACP and is the black affairs editor of a college campus newspaper.*
 - *I decided to write about myself. I came to the United States from Brazil two years ago. The most intriguing thing about the United States is its ideas about race. It is appalling how Americans insist on placing me in a racial category. When someone in this class asked me "what race do I declare myself in situations in which I must list my race?" and I said "black," one of my "white" friends said in complete disbelief, "You are not black!" While a "black" friend said: "I am very glad, I consider you a sister."*

Apparently these student-generated examples are not unusual.¹ According to the results of the 1990 *Census of Population and Housing Content Reinterview Survey* (1993), approximately one in 20 people reported a race on the Content Reinterview Survey that was different from the race they reported on the 1990 Census form (see Table 3).

These survey results, along with student-generated examples, raise an important question: How is it that racial categories are treated as mutually exclusive when we can identify many cases in which people have complex biological histories? Maybe race is not a biological factor, or an inherited trait like eye color or hair color. Perhaps *race* refers to that which is produced through racial classification (Webster 1993). In other words, the fact that everyone seems to fit into a single racial category is the result of the system of racial classification used in the United States. It is not the objective placement of individual human beings in "natural" biological categories.

Perhaps the best example of how the U.S. system of racial classification determines race is the criteria used to specify classification of mixed-race persons. As late as 1980, any person of mixed parentage was "classified according to the race of the nonwhite parent, and mixtures of nonwhite races

Table 3 Race Reported on U.S. Bureau of the Census Form versus Race Reported on Reinterview Form

Reinterview Classification	Census Classification						
	Total Reported	1	2	3	4	5	6
Total Reported	24,539	20,919	2375	118	454	81	592
Item Responses							
1. White	21,034	20,564	30	43	12	36	349
2. Black or Negro	2406	59	2306	2	2	3	34
3. Indian/Eskimo/Aleut	116	37	5	69	0	0	54
4. Asian or Pacific Islander	449	24	0	0	410	410	9
5. Other API	80	6	7	0	21	21	32
6. Other Race	454	229	27	4	9	9	163

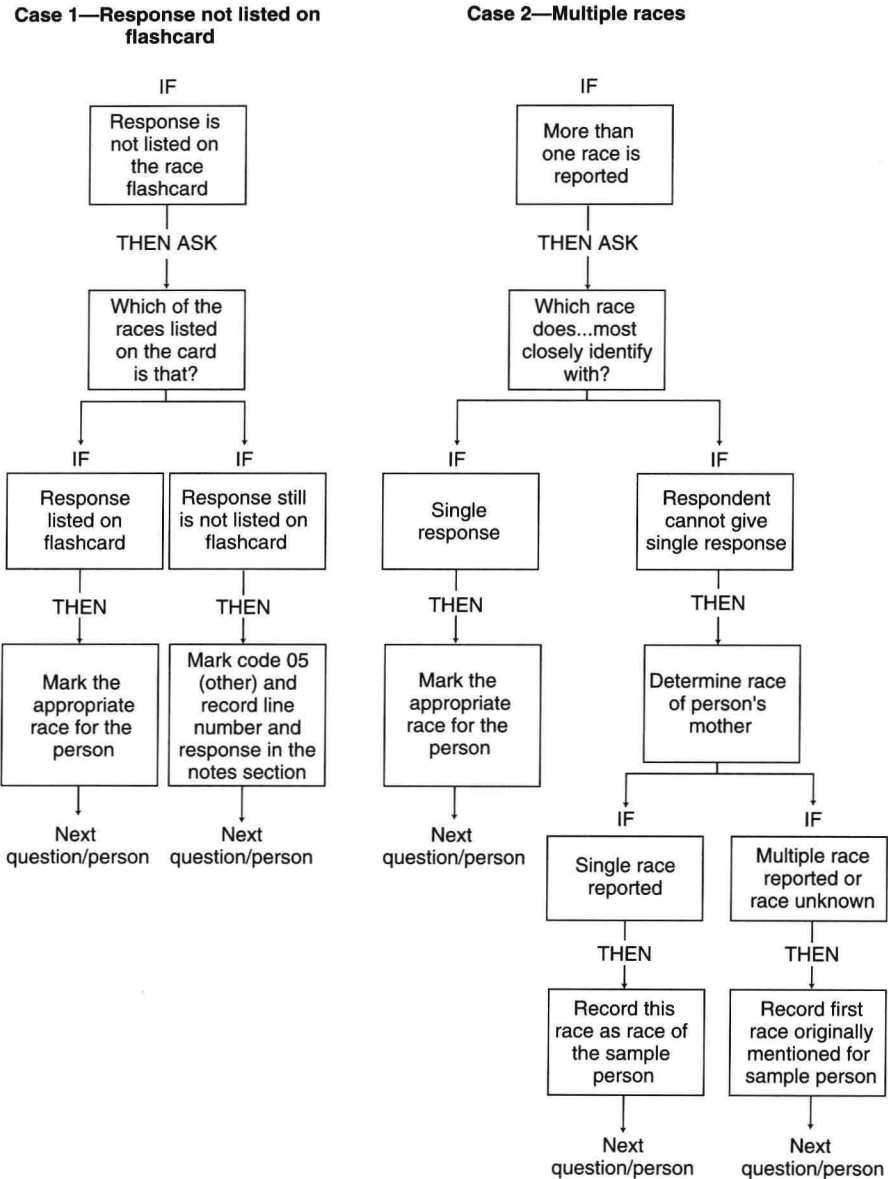
24,539 people who answered the race question on the 1990 U.S. Bureau of the Census form were asked to name their race on the 1990 Census of Population and Housing Content Reinterview Survey. Of these 24,539 people, 20,919 said their race was "White" on the 1990 census form, while only 20,564 reported their race as "White" on the Reinterview form. This difference means that 355 people who said they were "White" on the census identified themselves as another race on the reinterview survey. Of those 355, 59 said they were "Black," 37 said they were "Indian/Eskimo/Aleut," 24 said they were "Asian or Pacific Islander," six said they were "Other Asian Pacific Islander," and 229 identified themselves as "Other Race."

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1993: 21).

are classified according to the race of the father, with the special exceptions noted above" (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993:21). An example of a special exception applies to persons of mixed Negro and Indian descent. In such cases no matter what the father's race, the person is classified as Negro "unless the Indian ancestry very definitely predominates or unless the individual is regarded as an Indian in the community" (p. 21).

As another example, consider the diagram taken from the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1994) interviewing manual (see Fig. 1). The diagram is a flowchart of decisions interviewers must make about *problem cases*, respondents who say they are more than one race or who name a race not listed as a response. Notice how the flowchart directs interviewers to classify the so-called problem respondent as belonging to one race.

The flaws of the racial classification scheme used in the United States are especially evident when we come across people who do not fit into a single racial category, who are forced into a single category, or who must choose between categories. Such cases tell us that race is not an easily de-

Figure 1 Diagram of Procedures for Recording Problem Race Cases

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1994:C3-17).

finable characteristic immediately evident on the basis of physical clues, but is a category defined and maintained by people through a complex array of formal and informal social mechanisms.

The official system of racial classification used in the United States is not unlike a classification scheme devised by a third-grade class in Riceville, Iowa. In 1970, teacher Jane Elliot conducted a classic experiment in which she divided her students into two groups according to a physical attribute—eye color—and rewarded them accordingly. She did this to show her class how easy it is for people (1) to assign social worth, (2) to explain behavior in terms of a physical characteristic such as eye color, and (3) to build a reward system around this seemingly insignificant attribute. The following excerpt from the transcript of the program “A Class Divided” (*Frontline* 1985) shows how Elliot established the ground rules for the classroom experiment.

ELLIOT: It might be interesting to judge people today by the color of their eyes . . . would you like to try this?

CHILDREN: Yeah!

ELLIOT: Sounds like fun doesn't it? Since I'm the teacher and I have blue eyes, I think maybe the blue-eyed people should be on top the first day. . . . I mean the blue-eyed people are the better people in this room. . . . Oh yes they are the—blue-eyed people are smarter than brown-eyed people. . . .

BRIAN: My dad isn't that stupid.

ELLIOT: Is your dad brown-eyed?

BRIAN: Yeah.

ELLIOT: One day you came to school and you told us that he kicked you.

BRIAN: He did.

ELLIOT: Do you think a blue-eyed father would kick his son? My dad's blue-eyed, he's never kicked me. Ray's dad is blue-eyed, he's never kicked him. Rex's dad is blue-eyed, he's never kicked him. This is a fact. Blue-eyed people are better than brown-eyed people. Are you brown-eyed or blue-eyed?

BRIAN: Blue.

ELLIOT: Why are you shaking your head?

BRIAN: I don't know.

ELLIOT: Are you sure that you're right? Why? What makes you sure that you're right?

BRIAN: I don't know.

ELLIOT: The blue-eyed people get five extra minutes of recess, while the brown-eyed people have to stay in. . . . The brown-eyed people do not get to use the drinking fountain. You'll have to use the paper cups. You brown-eyed people are not to play with the blue-eyed people on

the playground, because you are not as good as blue-eyed people. The brown-eyed people in this room today are going to wear collars. So that we can tell from a distance what color your eyes are. [Now], on page 127—one hundred twenty-seven. Is everyone ready? Everyone but Laurie. Ready, Laurie?

CHILD: She's a brown-eye.

ELLIOT: She's a brown-eye. You'll begin to notice today that we spend a great deal of time waiting for brown-eyed people (*Frontline* transcript 1985:3–5).

As soon as Elliot set the rules, the blue-eyed children accepted and enforced them eagerly. During recess, the children took to calling each other by their eye colors. Some brown-eyed children got into fights with blue-eyed children who called them “brown-eye.” The teacher observed that these “marvelous, cooperative, wonderful, thoughtful children” turn into nasty, vicious, discriminating little third-graders in a space of fifteen minutes” (p. 7).

On the first reading, you might dismiss this demonstration as interesting but as something that could never happen in real life. Eye color as a means of classifying and ranking people—how absurd! In addition to the obvious fact that eye color is an attribute over which people have no control, even the most simple-minded person could readily identify the flaw in this scheme: eye colors fall into more than two categories. Thus a two-category classification scheme could not accommodate people with green, hazel, gray, or mixed-color eyes (one blue eye and one brown eye). We might even laugh at the fact that the teacher and the children agreed to use collars as a way to clearly distinguish the brown-eyed people from the blue-eyed people. All of us can see that dividing people in this manner makes no sense.

Such a strategy is similar to racial classification in the United States in that people are classified according to criteria over which they have no control, either formally by the government or other institutions, or informally as part of everyday interaction. Ernest Evans Kilker (1993) points out that state definitions of who is black have ranged from Georgia's “any known ancestry” to Ohio's “preponderance of blood.” Other methods of determining race include “‘exhibiting’ a child of questionable race to a jury (e.g., Nebraska, California, North Carolina, Kentucky); showing photographs or even crayon portraits (notice the kinky hair) of family members of the individual in question; general reputation; and ‘classification by association’—assigning ‘color’ based on the color of those the individual has normally associated with” (p. 252).

As in the third-grade experiment, a major shortcoming of the U.S. system of racial classification is that not all people fit neatly into the categories the U.S. government designates as important. Even so, as we will