

1.6.20: Race and Ethnicity

Learning Objectives

- Compare and contrast race and ethnicity
- Discuss how cultural differences among races may influence communication



The concept of race has changed across cultures and eras ranging from being based on ancestral and familial ties to theorists assigning categories of race based on geographic region, ethnicity, skin color, and a wide range of other factors. These assumptions were reflected in their labels; for example, people would be categorized based on region (e.g., Chinese or German) or skin tone (e.g., black or white).

Ethnicity is a term that describes shared culture—the practices, values, and beliefs—of a group. Common cultural elements may include a shared language, religion, and traditions. Like race, ethnicity is a complex concept, and its meaning has changed over time. And as with race, individuals may be identified or self-identify with ethnicities in complex, even contradictory, ways. For example, members of ethnic groups such as Irish, Italian-American, and Russian are generally included in the “white” racial category. Conversely, the English ethnic group includes citizens from a multiplicity of racial backgrounds: including black, white, Asian, and a variety of racial combinations. These examples illustrate the complexity and overlap of these identifying terms. Ethnicity, like race, continues to be an identification method that individuals and institutions use today—whether through the census, affirmative action initiatives, nondiscrimination laws, or simply in daily interactions.

Read and view more

While race and ethnicity are both based on the idea of a common ancestry, there are several differences between the two concepts. Sociologist Dalton Conley, one of the experts contributing to PBS’s *RACE: The Power of Illusion* project, explains the differences between race and ethnicity: “First of all, race is primarily unitary. You can only have one race, while you can claim multiple ethnic affiliations. You can identify ethnically as Irish and Polish, but you have to be essentially either black or white. The fundamental difference is that race is socially imposed and hierarchical. There is an inequality built into the system. Furthermore, you have no control over your race; it’s how you’re perceived by others.”^[1]

Fellow contributor and author John Cheng draws the distinctions further, noting that ethnicity represents a choice to be a member of a group; for example, one can adopt the language, customs and culture of that ethnic group. Race is not a choice: “you either are or are not a member of [a given] race.” Echoing Conley’s point about the socialization of race, Cheng emphasizes that “race becomes institutionalized in a way that has profound social consequences on the members of different groups.”^[2]

Explore aspects of race with PBS’s [RACE: The Power of an Illusion](#) programming or watch the Khan Academy video [“Demographic Structure of Society: Race and Ethnicity.”](#)

Language, Communication, and Diverse Social Groups



Whether we realize it or not, we use language as a way to classify people into social categories, just as it is common to use physical variations like race to distinguish people. We all have an idea in our heads of what a “standard” version of a language sounds like based on how and where we grow up and our early social influences. It is easy to pick up on very small characteristics in spoken language that can differentiate it from what is considered standard.

Imagine a group of five people talking after a staff meeting. As you walk by, you overhear a snippet of their conversation. You notice all are speaking the same language together, for example English, and you are able to hear several different varieties of English at once. This means you are hearing different types of intonation, pronunciation, or regional accents. Someone’s voice and language can provide information about their geographical locality, socio-economic status, and ethnicity or racial groups.

To add to the complexity of this topic, people often ascribe certain language characteristics to racial groups. Since many individuals have dual or mixed heritage, they can belong to many different language groups or varieties. For perspective on this point, watch “tri-tongued orator” Jamila Lyiscott’s spoken-word essay “Broken English,” presented at TEDSalon New York as “[3 Ways to Speak English](#).”

Unfortunately, people’s perceived racial differences can create a type of language barrier. This can then influence how individuals communicate in the workplace. Sometimes at work people may adopt a particularly “professional” way of speaking, be it jargon or a certain level of vocabulary or elaborate coded language. This can be off-putting and sound fake to other individuals who use different ways of speaking and may find some types of “professional language” difficult to understand.

Some individuals may take the opposite approach. Especially in marketing, we see individuals using “street” language or new slang (or even memes) in an attempt to connect with their target audience. This approach almost always fails, as it is nearly impossible to correctly mimic this type of dialect. It can also alienate those targeted by these tactics by making them feel like their identities are being flattened and commodified.

Depending on racial or ethnic background, people from different groups may approach public communication in a work setting differently:

- Beliefs about what is considered polite
- Beliefs about what emotions are appropriate to be expressed in a public setting
- Beliefs about how to interact with someone if there is a large age difference
- Beliefs about how to make a request or to offer assistance in a direct or indirect manner
- Beliefs about what is considered humorous or in poor taste
- Beliefs about the appropriateness to talk about someone who is not there or to speak for someone else who is not present
- Beliefs about eye gaze or physical touch from non-family members (such as giving a hug to a co-worker if they look upset)

✓ Examples

Consider the following scenarios of employees working at a grocery store and write your thoughts on each.

Bakery

Two associates in the bakery department have been working together for about a month. They have just started their shift after having two days off. One associate Mary, seems to have no issue sharing with her coworkers every detail about her weekend with her children. Mary asks about her coworker Jane’s weekend. Jane gives a short and nondescript answer. Is Jane being rude for not disclosing much information, or is Mary sharing too many personal details to someone she barely knows?

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Break Room

In the break room, several men and women are sitting around tables eating lunch. Next to the tables there is a young man, Tomas, who is sitting on a couch and looking at his phone. At the table, the conversation turns towards the monthly celebration of any employees who have birthdays that month. The young man on the couch pipes up saying “my birthday is actually today.” Employees around the table express the regular “happy birthday” and congratulatory phrases. One person gets up and gives Tomas a hug. Tomas is taken aback and tries to pull away from the embrace. Is Tomas being rude for not accepting the celebratory nature of the hug, or is the coworker unaware of how people might feel about physical touch from non-family members or close acquaintances?

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The three-part PBS series *Do You Speak American* provides additional perspective on the expression of the English language in America, discussing differing varieties of English ranging from A-Prefixing to Spanglish. Spanglish is an expression of both Anglo and Hispanic culture, with its fluid shifts between English and Spanish language often compared to jazz.

For more on immigration and the evolution of language, including how Spanglish compares to other languages such as Black English and Yiddish, tune in to the Ilan Stavan’s “[Spanglish: The Making of a New American Language](#)” on the Drescher Center for Humanities YouTube channel.

? Key Takeaways

Generalizations about people’s appearance and cultural identity help us understand where they are coming from, but it’s critical to focus on understanding the individual as a person. As one of the testimonials on [Nike’s Equality page](#) puts it: “I am not a color. I am not a race. I am an individual. I am me.” While we may not be able to visualize or connect one-on-one with each person we communicate with, we can choose language that allows people to see themselves in the picture.

Being aware of (and respecting) differences in communication isn’t the only facet of communication to consider when talking about race and ethnicity. It’s also important for individuals to consider the words, both in casual conversation and in addressing others. While most individuals know not to use racial slurs, there are some unintentional slurs that people often don’t realize they’re using. For example, the word *jipped* (as in “I got jipped by that car salesman”), has its roots in a racial slur.^[3] Above all else, listen to individuals who belong to minority groups, and if they say a word is racist or a slur, don’t use that word.

1. Conley, Dalton, John Cheng, David Freund, and Sumi Cho. “[Ask the Experts: What Our Experts Say](#),” *RACE—The Power of Illusion*, 2003. Web. 26 June 2018.
2. Ibid.
3. Challa, Janaki. “Why Being ‘Gypped’ Hurts The Roma More Than It Hurts You.” NPR. December 30, 2013. Accessed July 17, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/12/30/242429836/why-being-gypped-hurts-the-roma-more-than-it-hurts-you>.

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