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Dismantling the Race Label

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Abstract

In racial identification, certain known characteristics about a person, usually visible, morphological ones, are picked out and taken to signify the presence of other characteristics which are unknown or not visible and which mark a person as similar to or different from a particular set of people. Race, used in this way, often produces negative, discriminatory behavior where group identities are placed in relation to each other in the form of a hierarchy. This paper aims to synthesize Linda Alcoff's descriptive accounts of race as an extant ontological category and of social identity as a location within a complex network of identifications with Anthony Appiah's criticism of racialism and Sally Haslanger's ameliorative definition of racialized identities to show that race, as it stands, is a reductively misrepresentative way of ascribing identity. By dismantling race as a concept in use we will better understand the actual complexity of social identity, and we will cultivate more justice in social relations.

On a descriptive account, race is a social type of group identity within which one places oneself or is placed by others. In racial identification, certain known characteristics about a person, usually visible, morphological ones having to do with skin color, hair texture, bone structure, etc., are picked out and taken to signify the presence of other characteristics which are unknown or not visible and which mark a person as similar to or different from a particular set of people. Race, used in this way, has significant effects on social behavior, and this behavior often becomes negative and breeds discrimination when group identities are placed in relation to each other in the form of a hierarchy. In this paper, I aim to synthesize Linda Alcoff's descriptive accounts of race as an extant ontological category and of social identity as a location within a complex network of identifications with Anthony Appiah's criticism of racialism and Sally Haslanger's ameliorative definition of racialized identities to show that race, as it stands, is a reductively misrepresentative way of ascribing identity. By dismantling race

as a concept in use we will better understand the actual complexity of social identity, and we will cultivate more justice in social relations.

In order to dismantle race and to see the benefits of dismantling it, we need to start from an understanding of the way race works in the given world, but before we can understand how race as a social identity works, we must understand the way social identification works in general. Particular identities gain their content through relations of difference with other identities in a social network of relations. As Alcoff puts it, identity is “a location within a social structure and marked vis-à-vis other locations which gives the identity its specificity and internal characteristics” (41). The identity is the point at which someone locates oneself in the system or is located by others. Both self-identification and other-identification work through the mechanism of difference and similarity. For instance, when I identify myself as a young, white, middle-class, American male, I am claiming to possess these characteristics which are similar to certain characteristics presumably possessed by others—i.e. youngness, whiteness, middle-class-ness, American-ness, and maleness. Additionally, these basic parts of my identity (and this is by no means an exhaustive list) only contain substance beyond the empty sounds of words because of their relations to not only each other, but also to all of the things I consider myself to *not* be. I am American because I am not Canadian or Mexican or a citizen of any other country in the world, and my identification as an American immediately places me in relation, at least on one level, to all other Americans and to the citizens of other countries through similarity or, perhaps especially, through difference. Social identities are also inherently discursive, meaning they are contingent upon the way we use words. Identities spring out of our social process of naming things, wherein we draw lines between objects and people by applying a signifier to them. American-ness would have no meaning had we not decided to name something a “country,” to divide up the world along political and geographic boundaries. “Young” would have no meaning had we never decided to count the years someone lived and to compare the number to the number of years someone else lived. Race is a type of social identity, and so it works through the mechanism of similarity and difference and is inherently discursive.

Race, as it is popularly used today, is a particular type of social identity which works on a visual level and generally has to do with bodily morphological differences. As we venture through the world we notice differences in skin color, bone structure, hair texture, height, and build between people, and we notice that some people look more similar to ourselves or different from ourselves than others. Admittedly, this is a simplified story—many of our race categories are socially inherited long before we see the people that fill them, but without the visual component, race would either not exist or have very a different meaning from the way it is used in our society. The visual differences take on special importance in race because of the way they are presumed to signify other differences. In racial identification, as Alcoff says, the visible difference

one notices is taken to be “the ‘sign’ of deeper, more fundamental difference, a difference in behavioral disposition, in moral and rational capacity, or in cultural achievement” (31). Inevitably, we place these signs in a relation of difference to ourselves. I would only take black skin to signify something which is not true of me because I do not have black skin; it would be irrational to say that white skin necessarily signifies something which I know not to be true of myself, being one who has white skin. However, deeper still than the formal differences or similarities in signified facts between racial signs, I also place myself in relation to my own race and other races through feelings of solidarity and connectedness. At one point, Alcoff describes racial identity as “a differentiation or distribution of felt connectedness to others” (43). She goes on to say, “The felt connectedness to visibly similar others may produce either flight or empathic identification or possible dispositions” (43). We respond on a deep, emotional, personal level to the differences and similarities we feel in racial identification, and it is likely that these dispositional responses contribute to racism in society, perhaps especially in cases of implicit bias where racist behavior comes out of an unconscious response to difference.

Races, though socially quite salient, develop out of our discursive process of applying names (i.e. signifiers) to sets of people and are therefore not transcendent *a priori* facts about the world. None of the significations created in race are inherent to the visible characteristics picked out: skin color, in itself, has no direct tie to moral capacity, but the traits these visible characteristics have come to signify have been attached to the visible signifiers socially. The racial sign, as an attached composite of signifier (i.e. visible characteristic) and signified (i.e. moral or rational capacity, cultural achievement, etc.) is a social construction. This conception of race as socially constructed goes against accounts which take race to be biologically real, accounts which Anthony Appiah calls “racialist” and criticizes in his essay “Illusions of Race.” As he describes it, racialism is “committed not just to the view that there are heritable characteristics, which constitute ‘a sort of racial essence,’ but also to the claim that the essential heritable characteristics account for more than the visible morphology—skin color, hair type, facial features—on the basis of which we make our informal classifications” (37). He and Alcoff both show that the science does not back up such a biologically essentialist account. As Alcoff puts it, “[T]here is a newly emerging scientific consensus that race is a myth, that the term corresponds to no significant biological category, and that no existing racial classifications correlate in useful ways to gene frequencies, clinal variations or any significant human biological difference” (31). Appiah takes this point to show that race is an illusion, as his essay title suggests. He says, “The truth is that there are no races: there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask race to do for us” (45). Appiah seems to assume that either race involves clear biological distinctions between broad sets of people or it does not exist at all, and while we would be right to agree that biological essentialism fails, to say that races then do

not exist would be to seriously underestimate the social implications that concepts of race have produced.

As Alcoff argues—against Appiah’s conclusion—that races are not biologically real does not mean that they are not socially real. She argues that races are socially constructed ontological categories which are not necessarily transcendent natural kinds but are within history and culturally various (33). To say that races, because socially constructed and dependent on culture, can therefore be dispensed with immediately would be to seriously underestimate the salience of race as a category and its impact in the world today. Alcoff summarizes the problem quite eloquently:

“[I]n the very midst of our contemporary skepticism toward race stands the compelling social reality that race, or racialised identities, have as much political, sociological and economic salience as they ever had. Race tends toward opening up or shutting down job prospects, career possibilities, available places to live, potential friends and lovers, reactions from police, credence from jurors and presumptions by one’s students. Race may not correlate with clinal variations, but it persistently correlates with statistically overwhelming significance in wage levels, unemployment levels, poverty levels and the likelihood of incarceration” (31).

Clearly, race significantly effects social behavior in a broad scope, so while we can rightfully say that race is a *socially-constructed* reality, it is a reality nonetheless—one which we must accurately account for in order to change.

Race produces important effects on social behavior, and many of the negative effects stem from race’s nature as a poor way of identifying people and providing accurate information about them. For one thing, it takes different morphological characteristics like skin color and bone structure to signify differences in “temperament, belief, and intention” as Appiah puts it (45). This is a problem, first, because the particular temperaments or beliefs race labels are presumed to signify may not actually be present in people possessing the morphological characteristics connected to the race label. This becomes especially clear in racial stereotyping. For instance, take the stereotypes that Asians are good at math or that African-Americans are lazy. The race-labels “Asian” or “African-American” are applied to people because of the visible characteristics they possess which have been attached to the labels, characteristics such as narrow eyes or black skin, respectively. However, not all people with narrow eyes are especially skilled at math, and many people with black skin are not lazy. These morphological characteristics have no direct connection to the traits they are taken to signify. In this way, race itself acts as a subtle version of stereotyping when it takes morphology to signify anything more than bare morphology, and it misrepresents the actual characteristics a person possesses by

attaching to them those characteristics presumed by their “race.” This misrepresentation of identity due to race also happens when someone self-identifies as a particular race. When I call myself Caucasian, I am placing myself in a relation of similarity to other people I would call Caucasian. If I take “Caucasian” to signify anything other than morphological traits, other things which I take to be true of myself and so attach them to my race, I could very well be misrepresenting the others to whom I am claiming similarity by using the same race label.

A second problem arises in that when race is used to mark a person’s identity, it can tend to eclipse other important aspects of her identity such as her class, age, or sex if race is applied in isolation from the others. As explained earlier, social identity expresses a location within an intricate network of intersecting identifications that relate to each other through similarity or difference. A person therefore cannot accurately identify herself by only her race, because her race only charts one line of relation with other people. This problem of accurate identification can be generally benign, but it becomes important in certain cases where we wish to get at the root of particular injustices regarding social identity by determining the identity locations where they actually occur. For instance, we might think it a worthy project to counteract hiring disparities in the corporate world by instituting affirmative action policies. Perhaps we notice a statistically disproportionate number both of Caucasians getting hired compared to African-Americans and of men getting hired compared to women, and so we institute affirmative action quotas for the hiring of women and of African-Americans. Here we have considered two relations of those not getting hired to those getting hired more often, namely race and gender. These affirmative action policies may be effective to a point, but it is possible that by looking at race and gender in isolation from each other we would have precluded the possibility of finding out if there is a significant hiring disparity between, say, Caucasian men and African-American women which differs in proportion from the disparity between Caucasians and African-Americans and the disparity between men and women. Such a case shows the ways multiple identities can overlap and compound when targeted for discriminatory practices (even if the practices only occur because of implicit bias and not overt discrimination). Considering any aspect of identity in isolation from others can eclipse other significant aspects of identity.

Race presents a special problem for determining the identities targeted for discrimination, because it already obscures possibly relevant relations of identity by subsuming several characteristics under one label. If we take race to signify multiple characteristics beyond morphology, as described above, it could be difficult to tell whether the root target of discrimination is the entire set of characteristics signified by the race label or only a single characteristic which is then projected onto the race as a whole. For example, imagine that a Caucasian gay person grows up in Uganda where he is bullied at his high school. He is a minority in the school both for being white and

for being gay. Now imagine that he moves to America and starts a business. Because of his terrible memories of being discriminated against by people with black skin, he does not hire people with black skin at his business. This case presents a couple problems, first because of the potential difficulties in determining whether the man was discriminated against in Uganda for being white or for being gay, even if the discrimination was explicitly homophobic. His whiteness could have made him stand out more as a target of discrimination than if he was only gay and not white; we cannot know because we cannot disentangle his race from his sexual orientation. They both inform his identity and are defined in relation to each other. Secondly, we can see how his discrimination against black Americans was actually rooted in his ill-feelings toward homophobic Ugandans but which were projected on those he considered to be of the same “race” as them. Here, we see how a race label could hypothetically act as a channel for discrimination where the discrimination might not have otherwise been applied. If there were no race label to connect Ugandans with black Americans, it would be clearer that the only connections between them are morphological traits, which in actuality have no connection to a person’s propensity to bully another person. Even the term “Ugandans” obscures the fact that it was only the particular people in the man’s high school who bullied him, and that they should not be taken to represent every black Ugandan person, let alone every black person.

Race has become a salient dividing factor in the world, but this does not mean that race is a necessarily permanent fixture of society. Indeed, because of the way race misrepresents a person’s actual identity by attaching to them characteristics which they do not necessarily possess and because of the way a person’s “race” can be used as a target for discrimination, we would find significant benefits in dismantling race as a concept so that society may no longer use it. Racial labels and their signified content develop out of a historical narrative and are contingent upon a particular historical framework for their meaning. As Alcoff says, in her account race figures “not as a metaphysical necessity but as a necessity within a given historical context” (43). It is plausible to say, then, that were we to adjust the social consciousness on its way into future historical epochs, we might be able to remove the necessity of race’s existence as a marker of identity. As the American Civil Rights Movement has shown, changing the social consciousness regarding race is not only easier said than done but also not impossible to accomplish.

In thinking about setting out on the project of removing “race” as a part of our social discourse, we might begin by redefining race in the way Sally Haslanger suggests in “Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?” In the paper, Haslanger puts forth an ameliorative definition of race with the intent not of mapping onto the way we use “race” now but rather with the intent of reducing injustice by changing the way we use racial identification. Haslanger agrees with Alcoff and Appiah that races are not genetically determined, and she also says that “in

different contexts racial distinctions are drawn on the basis of different characteristics,” meaning that races’ contents are historically and situationally contingent (43). She also agrees with Alcoff that a race, as a type of identity marker, “could be fruitfully understood as a position within a broad social network” (43). Bearing these things in mind, Haslanger says, “[R]ace is the social meaning of the geographically marked body, familiar markers being skin color, hair type, eye shape, physique” (44). She develops this account by defining race, or the concept of “racializing” a group, as the treatment of a person as subordinate or privileged because of “observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region” (44). Haslanger’s redefinition of race makes the idea that race is used as a way of ordering people in a hierarchy inherent to its very definition, and furthermore makes clear that this ordering is only due to certain morphological features about a person. If we made this the predominant definition of race used in society, it would become impossible to ignore race’s negative effects—that race propagates social hierarchy based on features of a person’s body. Race would only explicitly apply in cases where it now works negatively, thus alerting us to the places that need justice. As more justice is produced, the need for “race” as a signifier will pass away.

As this paper has shown, race is a socially-constructed dividing force in the social world today produces many negative effects on social behavior through its use as a signifier of identity. Furthermore, race is a poor signifier of identity, for one because it ascribes certain characteristics to a person which a person may not actually possess but which are presumptively signified by the race used to label the person due to other bodily features they are known to possess. Race also obscures the more specific root targets and causes of discrimination while also providing a channel through which discrimination can target other people. In conclusion, we should aim as a society to change our public consciousness in such a way that it no longer needs race as a signifier. We should make clear the way race misrepresents the particularities of a person’s identity and the way race’s usage propagates social hierarchies of domination and discrimination. By making these things clear through the way we use race in public discourse, we will foster a public consciousness which no longer misidentifies people under race labels, and we will cultivate more justice in social relations.

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