

How We are Conditioned to See Race

When social scientists need to do research, they search for research grants. Most of the large grants are federally or state-funded. As a result, when you are submitting your research proposals, you have to ask questions within the framework of things that people already want to know. Take race: Many of the questions posed by social scientists include race as a presumptive phenomenon. This is despite the fact that biological scientists will tell you that race does not exist. The reason that social scientists so often frame their inquiries within a racial framework is that politicians often use the data from their research and the research of social researchers and statisticians to organize their policies around. They use racial data to target their demographics and they use crime data filtered through racial recordkeeping to mobilize their bases. From the earliest days of the republic, politicians have been using racial data to frame debates against their opponents. So a majority of the questions asked by funding bodies include race as a given factor. When the government collects data, one of the first things they ask you to do is define yourself by your race. So it should come as no surprise that we all automatically see the diversity of the human species in terms of racial categories. It is as much a part of our national conditioning as pledges of allegiance and national anthems.

But our culture is capable of radical breaks. Just like with smoking in the 1980s. Before then, people used to smoke in movie theaters, in supermarkets, and while doing the evening news. Then, during an intense marketing campaign in the 1980's, our culture changed the narrative on smoking to the extent that the very next generation thought it was uncool to smoke. Same with race, we can make a radical break with the legacy of slavery and rid our minds of the pathological desire to categorize each other by race. But we will have to fight a media and government addicted to the collection of certain types of data that make it easier for them to manipulate us. We can break them of this habit by always being conscious of our tendency to want to categorize people or ask them what box they are in.

All racial identity categories have two perspectives: an inward-looking aspect and an outward-looking one; the subjective and the objective. We all identify ourselves a certain way but are also always being identified by others a certain way. The perspective that should matter is how we identify ourselves. But before asking someone what box they are in, ask yourself why you are asking. Is it for curiosity or do you want to draw conclusions about that person based on stereotypes? Because in the long history of people asking people what box they were in that has been a longtime method used to discriminate and criminalize, so people are sensitive to the question. And some people aren't hot on putting themselves in boxes at all, and that should be respected too.