

# Race : A History

## The term 'Race'

Ask viewers what 'race' means and chances are they'll equate it to physical appearance and/or where someone is born. Race on the street can mean 'Black' 'White' 'Chinese' 'African'... with a lot of focus on skin colour and physical appearance.

## 'Race' – the dictionary definition

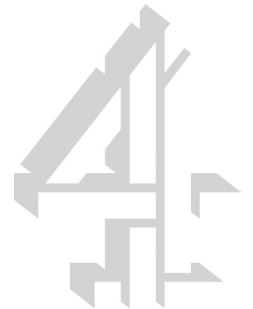
*A large group of people with common ancestry and inherited physical characteristics; a genus, species, breed, or variety of animal or plant. Oxford English Dictionary*

## The history of the word 'Race'

The term 'Race' was borrowed from plant and animal taxonomy and transferred to humans by Europeans as they first travelled the world and saw that the world was inhabited by different peoples.

Implicit in their classification and taxonomy was a notion of superiority and inferiority – Europeans were the race at the top and the other races of mankind were, in varying orders, at the bottom. The kinds of labels used were Mongloids, Amerindians, Negroids, Australoids, and Caucasoids.

This notion of a sliding scale of human races coalesced with a misinterpretation of the Darwinian notion of Survival of the Fittest to produce 20th Century Eugenics and the Nazi movement. White Europeans were the fittest while all other groups were less fit and must therefore be 'survived' i.e. eradicated.



## What modern science has to say about 'Race'

After World War Two the newly formed United Nations issued a Statement On Race which affirmed the notion that there was only one race, the human race.

Put the word 'race' in front of the word 'science' and it appears sinister. That's how strong the legacy of the racist science of the 19th and 20th century is. Eugenicians practised race science. So what about modern day scientists? What do they study?

## 'Race' is not enough

Rejecting the word 'race' doesn't mean that scientists aren't still interested in the study of human variation. Today scientists study subjects like 'human diversity', 'population diversity', and 'population genetics'; not 'racial variation', 'racial genetics'. The word 'race' is seldom seen.

Today scientists study 'populations' not 'races'. The term 'race' does not enter the lab because firstly, it is so culturally loaded that a scientist's work could be dubbed 'racist' by the media and he or she could have their grant money taken away. And secondly - and more significantly - the word 'race' is too limiting. The truth about human diversity is much more than the story of five or so 'races'... It is the story of hundreds if not thousands of 'populations', many of which overlap with each other.

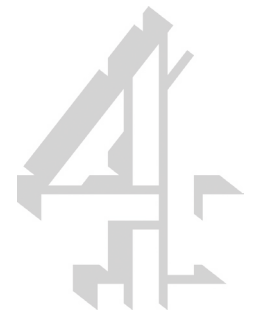
## Semantics - 'Race' verses 'Population'

Use of the word 'race' verses 'population' is not mere semantics.

Take the difference between saying Denzel Washington is from the 'black' [or 'negroid'] 'race' verses Denzel Washington is 'African American'. One, 'black', describes something superficial and non-specific; the other describes in much more scientific detail the population to which he belongs. By saying 'African American' a scientist can immediately tell Denzel Washington's ancestry traces him back to West Africa; that his ancestors came to the USA at the time of slavery and that he falls into a population that has a higher risk of diabetes, heart disease, and as a male of prostate cancer. It also tells them that he has a 1 in 3 chance of having a European ancestor in the last few centuries.

'Black' on the other hand tells the scientist that he has increased numbers of the sun-protection pigment melanin and that his ancestry is much more vague - tracing back to somewhere close to the equator. 'Negroid' would mean that he is from somewhere in Africa.

Population is also a very flexible word. The Croatian Islanders of Vis are a population; the people that are indigenous to Northern Europe are of the 'Northern European' population; the West of Ireland comprises a population as does the entire continent of Africa and equally the Kalenjin tribe of East Kenya are a population. The word conveys a myriad of commonalities, large and small.



## We see race differences so what does science say about these physical differences?

The story of population diversity is so much richer and textured than a simple story of skin colour differences or physical appearance. These physical 'traits' are minor players in the scientific body of work that focuses on 'human population diversity'. Yet it is these physical differences that of course fascinate us.

Curly hair, dark skin, pale skin, red hair, epicanthic eye fold, large noses, small stature, big muscular frames, etc etc... These are the inherited traits that endlessly fascinate people and are what in popular parlance are called 'racial'; in scientific terms they are called phenotypic i.e. resulting from the interplay of genes with environment.

Many of these physical traits evolved in populations as a response to the adaptive needs of their ancestors. The Inuit of Alaska; The Ju Huansi of the Kalahari; the Aboriginals of Australia; the Mbuti Pygmies of the Congo; the Kalenjin of East Kenya; the Aymara of Bolivia; the Northern Europeans... these populations look different to each other because of choices their ancestors made about where they were going to live. The cold, the hot, rain forest, the cloudy, different environmental pressures forced people to adapt or die. Over tens of thousands of years each group changed in appearance. The descendants of these indigenous populations are you and I and everyone alive today.

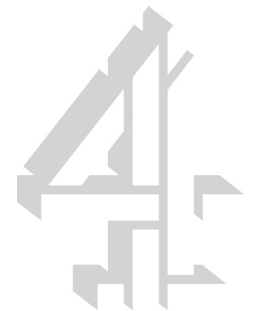
And this evidence is encoded in our DNA. Genes that encode for these traits are easy to fingerprint and see. Forensic scientists access it when they have little to go on.

But unless your ancestors have stayed in one place, have remained indigenous, chances are your outer appearance belies your geographical ancestry. Movement and mixing over the last centuries has meant that the old map of humanity's discrete groups has become blurred. So judging a book by its cover often proves incorrect. So how do scientists find out where you truly come from?

Geneticists have worked out an ingenious way of telling where you come from that has nothing to do with the way you look.

They study regions of DNA that are neutral; that don't code for anything yet tell the geographic story of human migrations, of human populations. They study 'markers' that are tiny genetic batons that are passed from parent to child down through the generations and are present in all of us. By looking at the spread of these markers they have been able to draw a map of human migrations through time.

A geneticist can often find that our physical appearance belies our biological ancestry. One person may look like they're from the 'white' 'race' but the DNA analysis can reveal much more, a plethora of populations in the past, stretching back tens of millennia.



## 'Race' differences are small but undeniable

Scientists will always emphasise that there are more differences between individuals than between groups. And above all that population differences have nothing to do with inferiority or superiority.

## Different 'race' = different medicine

Populations have different propensities for different diseases. Ashkenazi men are highly likely to develop prostate cancer, South Asian Brits are more like to get coronary heart disease than White Brits, African Americans are more likely to get Diabetes than European Americans. Africans get a strain of HIV called HIV2 while Europeans suffer from HIV1 and Europeans are at much higher risk of Dementia than other populations.

Many of these population differences in disease originate because that population is no longer living in their original ancestral homeland – where their bodies are suited to. Others population-specific diseases and propensities for disease may be due to a reduced gene pool - like Tay-Sachs in Ashkenazi Jews and increased incidence of Multiple Sclerosis on Orkney.