The Changing Meaning of Race in the Social Sciences:

Some Implications for Research and Social Policy

Ronald L. Taylor, PhD
University of Connecticut Professor of Sociology
Vice Provost for Multicultural and International Affairs

I am pleased once again to have been invited to participate in this very important gathering on health disparities.

As a member of the panel last year, I commented on the rather dubious status of the term "race" as a scientific concept, and pointed out the need to reexamine the application of the term as it is utilized in research and professional discourse in a number of fields. This morning I would like to expand upon this topic.

Although long embraced as a valid term for sorting and characterizing variations in human populations around the world, the term has been abandoned by a growing number of natural and social scientists who see it as mired in a biological, cultural, and semantic swamp. They have concluded that all attempts to classify *Homo sapiens* into races have proven a futile exercise. Perhaps the best and latest evidence is presented in *The History and Geography of Human Genes*, a 1,032-page tome published more than a decade ago (1994), which synthesizes more than 50 years of research in population genetics.

The authors of this study (Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, and Piazza) conclude that there is no legitimate biological basis for sorting individuals into groups that correspond to races as they are popularly perceived. For example, the authors' inspection of international maps of human populations and their genes disclosed that boundaries on the maps did not coincide with conventional racial categories, but shifted dramatically depending upon which gene was being examined.

More specifically, as observed by other scientists who have studied these data, "depending upon whether we classify ourselves by antimalarial genes, lactase, fingerprints, or skin color, we could place Swedes (for example) in the same race as either Xhosas (the South African "black" group to which Nelson Mandela belongs), Fulani (a Nigerian "black group"), the Ainu of Japan, or Italians" (Diamond 1994:89). The point is, human variation in genetic traits is non-concordant; variation in one trait is not highly correlated with variation in other functionally distinct traits. The discordance of human variation implies

that there are no natural units within *Homo sapiens* that permit the species to be divided into several or many evolutionary entities that can be described as races. Such assumed indicators or markers of race as skin color, hair texture, shape and size of the lips, eyes, nose and other facial features are superficial traits, functional adaptations of human populations to different environments.

Even before the results of this study were known, the American Association of Physical Anthropologists or AAPA, concluded that the usefulness of the concept race in the classification of human populations was problematic. In a statement issued in 1993, the executive council of AAPA declared that the "idea of discrete races made up chiefly of typical representatives is untenable" (Wheeler, 1995: A8). According to one survey (Begley, 1995), about 70 percent of cultural anthropologists, and more than half of physical anthropologists reject race as a biological category.

Race as a variable in health research has likewise come under increasing scrutiny in recent years as researchers discover the limitations and dangers inherent in biological explanations of group differences in health and disease.

As one group of researchers has pointed out (Williams, Lavizzo-Mourey, and Warren 1994:27), the genetic model of racial differences in health is based on three assumptions of dubious scientific validity:

- that race is a valid biological category;
- that the genes that determine race are linked to those that determine health;
- and that the health of a population is largely determined by the biological constitution of the population.

They conclude that there is little evidence to support such claims and contend that the emphasis on biological sources of "racial" variations in health obscures the social origins of disease, while reinforcing group stereotypes.

Perhaps the most serious challenge to the concept of race and racial classification comes from recent efforts to modify existing racial categories for classifying groups by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), i.e., the federal agency responsible for determining standard classifications of racial and ethnic data. Since 1977, standards classifying racial and ethnic groups have been specified in *OMB Statistical Directive 15*, which acknowledges four racial categories in the United States [white, black, Asian and Pacific Islanders] and two ethnicity categories [Hispanic and not of Hispanic origin].

Although long criticized for logical flaws in its categorization, *Directive 15* has been subjected to impassioned debate in recent years as pressure has mounted to add a "multiracial" category to the list of racial definitions specified by the Directive (Edmonston, Goldstein, and Lott, 1996). Of course, as a number of scholars have pointed out, the addition of a "multiracial" category to the list would not only undermine the concept of race as an irreducible difference between people but highlights the arbitrariness of racial classification. In light of these and other issues, serious consideration has been given to the modification, if not the elimination, of the racial and ethnic classification system mandated by the Office of Management and Budget.

The debate over race as a legitimate scientific concept highlights the need to reexamine the application of the term as it is utilized in research and professional discourse in a number of fields, including medicine, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, and social work, among others. There is little evidence, however, that recent debates have had any noticeable effect on conventional perspectives and paradigms in most of these fields as it bears on the process of defining race in research and scholarship.

Of course, the increasingly dominant perspective in the social sciences views race as socially constructed through political, legal, economic, and scientific institutions. From this perspective, the meaning of race finds its origins in social practices and a system of social relations that signify social conflict and group interests. In short, it is not individuals who create racial categories, but macro-level social processes and institutions.

Let me conclude my remarks by making a few comments about the implications of these recent developments not only for how we think about race but for research and policy.

For some of my colleagues, the perception of race as a pseudoscientific fiction, a socio-political construction, has inspired them to call for the abandonment of the term. Presumably, jettisoning the concept would undermine its use as an ideological justification for racial hierarchy and inequality in the United States and free social discourse from an anachronism that carries social effect by virtue of our tendency to acquiesce in race thinking or, as the historian Barbara Fields (1990) contends, the common practice of recreating and re-ritualizing race in our social and political life.

This is not my position. In a thoroughly racialized society such as the United States, where race is deeply fused with power, cultural patterns, and social organization, it is arguable whether dispensing with the concept will significantly alter or disrupt well established perceptions of the "other" or the attitudes and beliefs that sustain a racialized social order.

Race is a fundamental organizing principle and source of meaning in Western societies, a constitutive element of our common sense, and is no more likely to disappear than other major forms of human difference such as class, gender, or nationality (see Winant, 1994). Moreover, despite its lack of scientific merit in the biological sense, race remains salient as a major source of personal and collective identity, a central category of social recognition and self-representation. Thus critics of the concept must come to terms with the lived experiences of those within racial groups "whose life experiences are forged in the life worlds in part constituted by self-understandings that are in large measure "racial" no matter how "scientifically" inadequate--- to quote one social scientist, me (Taylor, 1998)!

Rather than jettison the concept, we simply need to approach it more critically and tentatively in our research and analyses as a concept and an analytical category.

When the term is applied to people of color, I often regard it as a surrogate or marker for a set of historical, social, and cultural experiences and conditions that influence or inform their perceptions, behaviors and attitudes on various levels of experience. The idea is to minimize the biological implications of the concept.

To be sure, the debate over the status of race and its merits as an analytical category in social science research and public discourse will continue for some time to come, fueled in part by deep concerns over racist practices the concept inform, but the more critical attention we devote to the issue the less likely such practices will continue to prevail.

Thank you for your patience!!

REFERENCES

Begley, B. (1995, Feb. 13). Three is not enough: Surprising new lessons from the controversial science of race. *Newsweek,* pp. 67-69.

Cavalli-Sforza,L., P.Menozzi and A. Piazza. (1994). *The History and Geography of Human Genes.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Diamond, J. (1994). Race without color. *Discover: The World of Science*, 15 (11), 83- 89.

Edmonston, B. Goldstein, J. and Lott, T. (Eds.). (1996). *Spotlight on Heterogeneity: The Federal Standards for Racial and Ethnic classification*. Washington, D.C.: National Academic Press.

Fields, Barbara. (1990). "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America." *New Left Review*, 181:95-118.

Taylor, Ronald. (1998) "On Race and Society." *Race and Society*, 1 (1), 1-2.

Wheeler, David. (1997). "Anthropological Association Urges Government to Stop Collecting Data Based on Race." *Chronicle of Higher Education,* September 19, A20.

Williams, D.R., Lavizzo-Mourey, R. and Warren, R. (1994, January/ February). The Concept of Race and Health Status in America. *Public Health Reports*, 109-, 26-41.

Winant, Howard. (1994). *Racial Conditions: Politics, Theory, Comparisons*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.