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The Race FAQ

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Topic:
Off Topic

This was another tumultuous week in the science wars over race.

- The *Times* (both *London* [1] and *New York* [2]) ran articles claiming that James Watson was genetically one-quarter non-white. Yet anyone with a basic knowledge of American racial history who bothered to look at the first half dozen pages of Watson's new autobiography, *Avoid Boring People* [3], which includes photos and detailed information [4] on his ancestors, would realize that this assertion by the Icelandic firm deCODE genetics is wildly unlikely [5].
- *The New Yorker* printed an essay [6] by Malcolm Gladwell on race and IQ that contained such an egregious libel [7] of Charles Murray that the magazine posted a humiliating apology and retraction [8].
- Far more importantly, a landmark paper [*Recent acceleration of human adaptive evolution* John Hawks (PDF [9])] by five scientific heavyweights on the implication of the newest genome research—that evolution sped up as the races moved away from each other—was published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*: evolution has been speeding up since the races began splitting apart.

Genetic anthropologist Henry Harpending [10] of the U. of Utah explained [11] that over the 40,000 or so years since humans left Africa:

""Human races are evolving away from each other,' Harpending says. 'Genes are evolving fast in Europe, Asia, and Africa, but almost all of these are unique to their continent of origin. We are getting less alike,

not merging into a single, mixed humanity.' ...

" 'Our study denies the widely held assumption or belief that modern humans ... appeared 40,000 years ago, have not changed since and that we are all pretty much the same. We show that humans are changing relatively rapidly on a scale of centuries to millennia, and that these changes are different in different continental groups." [12]

"The increase in human population from millions to billions in the last 10,000 years accelerated the rate of evolution because 'we were in new environments to which we needed to adapt,' Harpending adds. 'And with a larger population, more mutations occurred.'

So, it is a good time to step back and try to understand the underlying concept of race. Here's a Frequently Asked Questions [FAQ] list about how to think about race. It's a non-technical introduction to this topic that so confuses Americans.

Q. Why do you talk about race so much?

A. Most human beings talk about race a fair amount. I write about it.

Q. Why do people care about race?

A. Why do people care about who their relatives are? [13] Maybe they should care, maybe they shouldn't. I'm not here to preach morality. [14] But people *do* care, so it's important to understand the implications.

Q. What's race all about?

A. Relatedness.

Race is about who is related to whom.

Q. Do you mean a race is a family?

A. Yes, an extended family. (To be precise, a particular type of extended family [15], one that's more coherent over time than the norm, a distinction I'll explain below.)

Q. Race means family? I've never heard of such a thing!

A. It's remarkable how seldom this concept essential to understanding how the world works is mentioned in the press. Yet, in my Random House Webster's College Dictionary [16], the first definition of "**race**" is:

"1. A group of persons related by common descent or heredity." [17]

Q. If races exist, then, pray tell, precisely how many there are?

A. How many neighborhoods are there in the place where you live?

For some purposes, an extremely simple breakdown into, say, City vs. Suburbs is most useful. For other uses, an extremely detailed set of neighborhood names is helpful: e.g., "**The proposed apartment complex will aggravate the parking shortage in Northeastern West Hills.**"

Similarly, racial groups can be lumped into vast continental-scale agglomerations [18] or split as finely as you like.

For instance, should New World Indians be considered a separate race—or merely a subset of East Asians?

Every system of categorization runs into disputes between "**lumpers**" and "**splitters.**" [19] Whether lumping or splitting is more appropriate depends upon the situation.

Q. Isn't race just about skin color?

A. That's a simplistic verbal shorthand Americans use to refer to ancestry. Nobody *really* acts as if they believe race is synonymous with skin color. [20]

Q. What do you mean?

A. Consider the golfer [21] Vijay Singh, who during 2004-2005 became the only man in this decade besides Tiger Woods to be the number one ranked player [22] in the world. Singh, who was born in the Fiji Islands of Asian Indian descent, is much darker [23] in skin color than Woods.



Singh is at least as dark [24] as the average African-American. Yet, nobody in America *ever* thinks of Singh as black or African-American. There's an enormous industry [25] that celebrates the triumphs of blacks [26] in nontraditional venues such as golf. But Singh's accomplishments elicited minimal interest in the U.S.

A 2007 article [27], for example, asked where are all the black golf champions who were expected to emerge in the wake of Tiger Woods's first Masters championship in 1997. It never mentions the blackest-skinned player on tour, Singh ... because we're not actually talking about skin color when we use the word "**black,**" we're talking about sub-Saharan African ancestry [28].

Q. Aren't we all related to each other?

A. Yes, that's why we're **"the human race."** [29]

Q. If we're all related to each other, how can one person be more related to some people than to other people?

A. How can you be more related to your mother than you are to your aunt? Or to my mother?

Q. If races exist, how can somebody belong to more than one race? [30]

A. If extended families exist, how can you belong to your mother's extended family and to your father's extended family?

Q. How many races can you belong to?

A. How many extended families can you belong to?

Consider Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's children. Clearly, they are part of the Schwarzenegger clan via their father and grandfather. But they are also part of the Jadrny [31] extended family through their father's mother. [32] Yet, they also belong to the well-known liberal Catholic Shriver tribe [33] through their mother, Maria Shriver [34], daughter of Sargent Shriver [35], the 1972 Democratic Vice-Presidential candidate. *And*, they are, famously, Kennedys, because their maternal grandmother is Eunice Kennedy Shriver [36], the sister of the late President. [37]

Q. So, everybody belongs to four extended families?

A. You could keep going beyond the four grandparents. The Schwarzenegger kids, for instance, are also Fitzgeralds, because they are the great-great-grandchildren of John F. "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald [38], the mayor of Boston [39].

Q. So, your family tree just goes on out to infinity?

A. No, it eventually turns increasingly in on itself, as you can see it must from the basic arithmetic of genealogy. This tendency to turn back in on itself is the reason that racial identity exists.

Q. How does the math work?

Assume 25 years per each generation in your family tree. Go back 10 generations to the 1750s, and you have 1024 ancestors.

Go back another 250 years to the 1500s and you have 1024 times 1024 slots in your family tree; call it a million. Back to the 1250s and you have a billion openings. (Were there even a billion people alive then? [40])

And back in the 1000s, 40 generations ago, you have a trillion ancestors. Yet there definitely weren't a trillion people alive then.

Q. So, where did all my ancestors come from?

A. They did double duty, to put it mildly.

Q. So my family tree doesn't extend outward forever?

A. At some point in the past, the number of unique individuals in your family tree (as opposed to slots) would start to get fewer in number, ultimately forming a diamond-shaped rather than fan-shaped family tree. Genealogists label this "**pedigree collapse** ^[41]."

Demographer K.W. Wachtel ^[41] estimated that an Englishman born in 1947 ^[42] would have had two million unique ancestors living at the maximum point around 1200 AD, 750 years before. There'd be a billion open slots in the family tree in 1200, so each real individual would fill an average of 500 places. Pedigree collapse ^[43] would set in farther into the past than 1200.

Q. Wait a minute! Are you saying my ancestors married among themselves? So I'm inbred???

A. Yes. It's mathematically certain. There just weren't enough unique individuals alive.

Q. Ooh, yuck!

A. I suspect that the American distaste for thinking about inbreeding ^[44], even when it's so distant and genetically benign as in this English example, is one reason why our understanding of relatedness and race is so deficient.

Q. What does this have to do with race?

A. Pedigree collapse reveals how the biology of race ^[45] is rooted in the biology of family ^[15]. We can deduce from the necessary existence of pedigree collapse that while everybody is related to everybody else in some fashion, it's more genealogically significant to note that every person is much more related to *some* people than to *other* people. Even a Tiger Woods can identify himself as being of Thai ^[46], black, Chinese, white, and American Indian descent, but not of, say, Polynesian ^[47], South Asian, or Australian aborigine ^[48] origin.

Pedigree collapse is how extended families become racial groups. A race is a particular kind of extended family—one that is partly inbred. Thus it's socially identifiable for longer than a simple extended family, which, without inbreeding,

disperses itself exponentially.

Q. Can racial groups merge?

A. Over time, yes. Think of the term "**Anglo-Saxon** [49]." The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes intermarried until they lost their separate identities. (The Jutes [50] even lost their name.)

Similarly, the official ideology of Mexico is that whites and Indians have merged seamlessly into La Raza Cosmica [51], "**The Cosmic Race.**" (African Mexicans play the role of the forgotten Jutes. [52]) The reality [53] is different, but the *mestizaje* propaganda isn't wholly false.

Q. But race is just identity politics!

A. Well, there's a reason that identity politics are a big deal. [54] However you feel about all the various kinds of identity politics, you need to understand them.

People tend to organize politically around some aspects of shared identity, but not around others. For example, language and religion tend to be politically salient, but not handedness. No politician fears the Lefthanders Lobby, because left-handedness [55] is distributed too randomly throughout the population.

Sex can be politically relevant, but it frequently turns out to be less important than feminist activists hope. As Henry Kissinger [56] supposedly said, "**No one will ever win the battle of the sexes; there's too much fraternizing with the enemy.**"

Relatedness or race is typically the single most common dimension along which people align themselves politically.

Sharing relatives [18] gives people more reason to trust each other—for instance, Jared Diamond [57] notes that when two strangers meet on a lonely and lawless jungle path in New Guinea, they immediately start a far-reaching discussion of who all their relatives are, looking for overlap so they can be more confident the other person won't kill them. Similarly, organized crime families [58] typically have real extended families as their nuclei because relatives can trust each other more when outside the law.

Further, blood relatives are more likely to share other potent "**ethnic**" identity markers, such as language and religion.

Q. But, if we're all part of the human race, then why don't we always act that way?

A. Because we're not, currently, under alien attack. [59] Throughout his Presidency,

Ronald Reagan, to the alarm of his less-imaginatively insightful aides such as Colin Powell, repeatedly pointed out ^[60] that the differences between the Superpowers would seem insignificant if Earth was under assault ^[61] by hostile flying saucers. Reagan ^[62], for instance, told the UN in 1987:

"I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world." [*Address to the 42d Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, New York* ^[63]]

But little green men are not threatening us at present, so we compete against each other in the meantime.

And relatedness (i.e., race) is the most common dimension along which people cooperate in order to more effectively compete against other groups politically.

Q. Isn't race just a social construct?

A. Relatedness is the most real thing in the world: mother, father, baby ^[64].

Q. But, don't different societies have different rules about who is considered to be related to whom?

A. Yes. Indeed, every culture comes up with a way to deal with the exponential unwieldiness of family trees.

For many purposes of daily life, you have too *many* relatives. The sheer numbers of ancestors, distant cousins, and potential descendents you have expand out beyond any manageable boundaries. The amount of relatives you'll send a Christmas card to might be larger than the number you'll volunteer to cook Thanksgiving dinner for, but, still, there's got to be an end to everything.

Many cultures have devised rules to limit who counts as a relative for the purposes of, say, inheritance. English aristocratic families didn't want their land holdings divided up into unimpressive and inefficient parcels, so they followed the rule of primogeniture ^[65], passing the claim to be of noble blood down through the first-born son, with latter-borns falling out of the aristocracy within two generations. For instance, Mr. Winston Churchill ^[66] was the first-born son of *Lord* Randolph Churchill, who was the second-born son ^[67] of the Duke of Marlborough. ^[68] That seems awfully aristocratic to us plebian Americans, but by English law, he wasn't a peer because his father wasn't first-born. And thus, to Winston's political benefit, his parliamentary career was spent in the House of Commons rather than the House of Lords.

The Chinese treated sons more equitably, but almost completely ignored daughters.

In contrast to these attempts to nominally define down the putative number of relations, many Middle Eastern cultures have come up with an actual biological solution (of sorts) to reduce the number of relatives: cousin marriage [69]. In Iraq, half of all married couples [70] are first or second cousins.

Q. Why?

A. One reason is this: If you marry your daughter off to your brother's son, then your grandchildren/heirs will also be your brother's grandchildren/heirs. So, there is less cause for strife among brothers. Cousin marriage helps make family loyalties especially strong in Iraq, to the detriment of national loyalties.

Q. Do you ever want more relatives?

A. For many political struggles, the more the merrier.

Ibn Saud [71], who founded Saudi Arabia in the 1920s, consolidated his victory over other desert chieftains by marrying 22 women [72], typically the daughters of his former rivals [73]. Thus, today's vast Saudi ruling family represents the intermixing of the tribes, which has helped it survive in power for 80 years.

On the other hand, the wealthy Syrian Jews [74] of Brooklyn, with few political threats hanging over them here in America, don't need blood relations with other power centers, so the community fiercely ostracizes anyone who marries outside it.

Or, political entrepreneurs can attempt to widen or narrow their followers' working definition of who their relatives are by rhetorical means. For example, in the 1960s, black leaders encouraged African-Americans to call each other "**brother**" and "**sister**" to build solidarity.

Q. In America, wasn't there a "one-drop rule" for determining if one is a minority?

A. For blacks, yes: for American Indians, no. Herbert Hoover's VP, Charles Curtis [75], was famous for being 1/8th Kaw Indian. Being a little bit Indian added glamour to his image.

Indian nations have the right to set ancestry minimums (generally, at least 1/4th) required for legal membership in the tribe, and they often police membership with a vengeance.

Q. Isn't all this outdated?

A. Both blacks and Indians are standing by the traditional definitions, because it's in their interests.

Ever since Congress allowed Indian nations to each own one casino in the late 1980s, many tribes have been expelling racially marginal members [76] to increase the slice of the pie [77] for the more pure-blooded remainder. That's because the main benefit of belonging to a tribe—the rake-off from a single casino—is finite.

In contrast, black and Hispanic organizations have backed broad, inclusive definitions of who is black or Hispanic because the rake-off from being black or Hispanic—affirmative action quotas [78]—is indefinite in magnitude. The larger the percentage of the population, the larger the quota, and the larger the number of voters who are beneficiaries and thus supporters.

Q. So cultures change their definitions of who deserves to be a relative?

A. Not just cultures, but individuals change their definitions to fit their needs at the moment.

For example, right before the Battle of Agincourt, King Henry V needed all the loyal relatives, real or exaggerated, he could get, so Shakespeare [79] has him address the English army:

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers

For he to-day that sheds his blood with me

Shall be my brother".

On the other hand, once the bloodshed was over, King Henry probably wasn't inclined to let his old yeomen archers come over and hang around the palace whenever they liked as if they were his actual brothers.

Q. So, leaders can persuade their followers to see themselves as more or less closely related?

A. Yes, but the more they follow existing genealogical fault lines, the more likely they are to succeed.

Q. What's an ethnic group?

A. The Census Bureau draws a sharp distinction between race and ethnicity, stating that individuals of Hispanic ethnicity can be of any race. The way the federal government uses the terms can be formalized like this:

- A racial group is a partly inbred extended biological family.
- An ethnic group is one defined by shared traits that are *often* passed down within biological families—e.g., language, surname, religion, cuisine, accent, self-identification, historical or mythological heroes, musical styles, etc.—but that don't *require* genetic relatedness.

Q. Can you give an example?

A. The difference is perhaps easiest to see with adopted children. For example, if, say, an Armenian baby is adopted by Icelanders, his ethnicity would be Icelandic, at least until he became a teen and decided to rebel against his parents by searching out and espousing his Armenian heritage. But racially, he'd always have been Armenian.

Q. If races exist, doesn't that mean one race has to be the supreme Master Race [80]? And that would be awful!

A. Indeed it would, but no race is going to be best at everything [81] - any more than one region could be the supreme master region for all human purposes.

For example, a mountaintop is a stirring place [82] to put a Presidential Library. But if you want to break the land speed record in your rocket car, it's definitely inferior to the Bonneville Salt Flats [83].

Q. Okay, what does it all mean?

A. It means it's time for our intellectuals to *grow up*. The world is what it is. Making up fantasies about it, and demonizing scientists such as James Watson, just makes reality harder to deal with.

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