*https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/06/16/how-fluid-is-racial-identity/race-and-racial-identity-are-social-constructs*

**Race and Racial Identity Are Social Constructs**

*Unlike race and racial identity, the social, political and economic meanings of race, or rather belonging to particular racial groups, have not been fluid.*



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Race is not biological. It is a social construct. There is no gene or cluster of genes common to all blacks or all whites. Were race “real” in the genetic sense, racial classifications for individuals would remain constant across boundaries. Yet, a person who could be categorized as black in the United States might be considered white in Brazil or colored in South Africa.

Like race, racial identity can be fluid. How one perceives her racial identity can shift with experience and time, and not simply for those who are multiracial. These shifts in racial identity can end in categories that our society, which insists on the rigidity of race, has not even yet defined.

As I explain in my book "[According to Our Hearts](https://www.amazon.com/According-Our-Hearts-Rhinelander-Multiracial/dp/0300166826/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1434386566&sr=8-1&keywords=according+to+our+hearts)," whites in interracial black-white marriages or relationships frequently experience a shift in how they personally understand their individual racial identity. In a society where being white (regardless of one’s socioeconomic class background or other disadvantages) means living a life with white skin privileges — such as being presumed safe, competent and noncriminal — whites who begin to experience discrimination because of their intimate connection with someone of another race, or who regularly see their loved ones fall prey to racial discrimination, may begin to no longer feel white. After all, their lived reality does not align with the social meaning of their whiteness.

That all said, unlike race and racial identity, the social, political and economic meanings of race, or rather belonging to particular racial groups, have not been fluid. Racial meanings for non-European groups have remained stagnant. For no group has this reality been truer than African-Americans. What many view as the promising results of the Pew Research Center’s data on multiracial Americans, with details of a growing multiracial population and an increasing number of interracial marriages, does not foreshadow as promising a future for individuals of African descent as it does for other groups of color.

Unlike their multiracial peers of Asian and Native American ancestry who tend to view themselves as having more in common with monoracial whites than with Asians or Native Americans, respectively, multiracial adults with a black background — 69 percent of whom say most people would view them as black — [experience prejudice and interactions in ways](https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2015/06/2015-06-11_multiracial-in-america_final-updated.pdf) that are much more closely aligned with members of the black community. In fact, the consequences of the social, political and economic meanings of race are so deep that my co-author Mario Barnes and I have [argued](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=870048) that whites who find themselves discriminated against based on racial proxies such as name (for example, Lakisha or Jamal), should have actionable race discrimination claims based on such conduct. In sum, the fact that race is a social construct, defined by markers such as skin color, hair texture, eye shape, ancestry, identity performance and even name, does not mean that racial classifications are free of consequence or tangible effects.

More than 50 years ago, Congress enacted the most comprehensive antidiscrimination legislation in history, the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Half a century later in 2015, the same gaps in racial inequality remain or have grown deeper. Today, the [unemployment rate for African-Americans](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/09/06/black-unemployment-is-always-much-worse-than-white-unemployment-but-the-gap-depends-on-where-you-live/) remains more than double that for whites, public schools are [more segregated now](https://www.projectcensored.org/2-us-schools-are-more-segregated-today-than-in-the-1950s-source/) than they were in the 1950s and young black males are 21 times [more likely to be shot and killed by the police](https://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2014/10/young_black_men_21_times_more_likely_to_be_shot_dead_by_police_than_whites.html) than their white male peers. Even a white fourth-grade teacher in Texas, Karen Fitzgibbons, [openly advocated for the racial segregation](https://www.salon.com/2015/06/11/im_almost_to_the_point_of_wanting_them_all_segregated_texas_teacher_pens_breathtakingly_racist_mckinney_post/) of the 1950s and 1960s on her Facebook page.

Where will we be 50 years from now? Need I answer that question? It definitely won't be in a post-racial society.