

**Main Point:**

In this chapter, Rodriguez is addressing the overarching question of “just what race is.” Rodriguez challenges the common perception of race in America, which suggests that race is a “self-evident ‘fact’ requiring no protracted thought” that exists in the same way in any place and time; her exploration highlights that race is in fact fluid and variable over time and place and overlaps with ethnicity, depending on the context. Throughout history, various groups, both Latino and non-Latino have challenged racial constructions in America. Latino’s have done so through their unique histories, their more ‘social’ perceptions of race and by exhibiting a range of physical traits; most importantly, the increase in immigration and intermarriage are the key forces that have challenged common perceptions of race in America.

Rodriguez begins by exploring the multi-dimensional nature of race and how it is commonly understood in America. She then challenges the common conception of race in America by examining five main issues. The author concludes by examining the relationship between race and ethnicity.

**Central Issues and Concepts:**

- **The multi-dimensional nature of race**

There are many facets to race; hence, its multi-dimensional nature. Accordingly, race can be defined in several ways. Firstly, it can be defined by official bodies, which is *state-defined race*. Secondly, *popular race*, *folk race*, or race “in the common understanding” is defined in the mind of laypersons. There may be a disparity between the state and common understanding of race; however, they often influence each other. Thirdly, *ideological race* is defined by scholars in academia and popular circles, who combine the previous definitions to define race as “whatever you think it is;” or “you know one when you see one”. Some people see race as internal to a person’s identity and defined by oneself; others perceive it as external and defined by others. This is known as the external-internal axis, “imputed versus self-defined race” or “objective versus subjective” definitions of race.

- **Race in the United States**

- Most commonly in America, race is defined as “one’s biological ancestry, manifested most clearly in skin color.” (p.28) This translates into four color groups corresponding to various geographic locations: black, white, yellow and red. What makes a person white is the *absence* of colored blood, it is considered “pure,” such that the *presence* of a small amount of colored blood is considered “polluting;” white is considered the “referent group.” This is known as *hypodescent*, or the one-drop rule.

- The myth of pure races: the various racial categories have been presented as “mutually exclusive.” Despite this construction, many scholars argue that these ideas are illogical, inaccurate, not based on scientific evidence, and largely determined by the political, economic, and social context.

- The US racial classification system is reliant on color; which implies that it is a significant marker between groups and may be attached to other characteristics. However, one must note that although population groups do vary by color, it is a function of *melanin*, which in larger amounts results in a darker complexion. Accordingly, skin color is an evolved characteristic that is genetically independent of other ones. Therefore, if color is the main point of differentiation

between groups, it needs to act in accordance with other variables to determine differences between groups; however, this is not the case.

- **Exploring the idea of race**

**1. Studies of race in the past**

Race was previously perceived as being an “ascribed” characteristic that is permanent. Many scholars studying ancient societies argue that racial classification based on skin color did not exist; but rather, populations were divided based on other factors. In the end, many scholars argue that our concept of “race” today is not what it was perceived in the past. Nowadays, terms such as *European*, *whites* and *blacks* denote a particular social standing and power relationship; however, in the past, such terms were irrelevant.

**2. How other governments count their populations**

Only a few countries count their populations based on “race” or “color;” there are considerable differences from country to country regarding their perceptions of “race” and the criteria they use to count their populations. They also do not generally agree on the definition of ethnicity. This suggests that definitions of “race” are not universally recognized and understood.

**3. The literature on “mixed” race**

The literature on “mixed” race provides an interesting vantage point to understanding “race.” The extent to which “mixed” races have been acknowledged and discussed has changed over time. In the past, “mixture” was perceived as unfortunate and was demeaned; communities with “mixed” raced were called *triracial isolates*, suggesting the marginality of these groups. However, over time, triracial isolates were relabeled as *pluralists*, *runaways* and *refuseniks*. In addition, intermarriage has become much more common, even between social classes. The literature on “mixed” race has also become more positive and has grown to explore more areas.

**4. Changing U.S. census classifications**

The census’ definition of race acknowledges that it is a social construction that “lacks scientific precision.” Both the U.S. government and the census, which are responsible for counting people by race, do not have a single criterion or principle to determine one’s race; but rather, they use several markers that are not applied uniformly. This has been evident through changes in the format and terminology used in the census over time; for example, for a period of time “Mulattoes” was considered a racial category.

**5. Standard reference sources of racial definitions over time**

Demographic changes in the U.S, such as increasing numbers of Latinos, and greater “ethnic” self-identification have challenged perceptions of “race.” Accordingly, the U.S. census reviewed their position treating “race” and “ethnicity” as mutually exclusive. In addition, other standard sources such as dictionaries denote the varying definitions of race over time. These sources indicate that race is no

- **Race as race or as ethnicity?**

The confusion between race and ethnicity has been at the root of many issues in American history. Nowadays, most scholars believe that race is socially constructed, overlaps with ethnicity and is socially defined. However, other scholars argue that race does in fact have a scientific and practical value. According to these scholars, ethnicity does not “convey or imply” the context of discrimination associated with race in the US. In the end, the confusion between race and ethnicity has yet to be resolved.

**Key Quotes:**

“It is the mind of the observer that, drawing on past experience, renders pigmentation and other physical traits a repository of messages about personal beliefs, cultural habits, and social status, and makes these traits a focus of passionate sentiments transcending the merely aesthetic”(p. 32)

“...Harris, Hannaford, and Bernal agree that the idea of race as we know it today is not evident in these early works. Kinship, nationality, and cultural or religious identity had meaning then, but “skin color in itself” had “no more meaning than height or weight”” (p.32)

**Questions:**

When exploring the history of the United States, should we explore it with the perspective that it is comprised of diverse ethnic and racial groups that we assimilated into one melting pot? Or, should we tackle the issue with the perception that history is largely racialized to comprise an official *white* history with *non-white groups*, thus two melting pots? (p. 46) what are the implications of this?

To try and understand the concept of “race,” one must explore it from various vantage points, including the following that the author eliminated; what social processes are at work when an individual claims to be a member of a particular racial or ethnic group? What is the criterion that one uses when reporting a particular racial or ethnic identity? Why do individuals choose to identify themselves as a certain race although they may contain other racial ancestries, and on the flip side, why do people with little heritage from a group claim it as their racial identity?

What are the implications, if so, of equating race with ethnicity?

How can we determine the substance of race in American society? What will happen to conceptions of race, both officially and unofficially, as diversity continues to grow? How will Americans make sense of the complex situation; accordingly, what implications does this have on the concept of “race?”