SOC 205 Lecture 14
Definitions and Meanings of Race

What is race?

- Polednak argues that race is often used to define groups, but it is unclear what the concept actually means.
- How would you define race?

Does race have biological underpinnings?

- Much of the more recent research on the subject refutes this.
- Polednak reports that about 90% of the total genetic variability was found within 4 “races” or “ethnic” groups. The groups are:
  - Caucasians
  - African Americans
  - American Indians (Cheyenne from Clinton, Oklahoma)
  - Asians (Chinese residents of Taiwan)

Biological underpinnings of race (continued)

- Polednak further argues that dividing people into “races” is an “arbitrary exercise of convenience for simplifying a complex situation due to a long evolutionary history of population movements across geographic barriers.”
- What is the problem with defining race in biological terms?
  - May contribute to prejudice
  - May overemphasize the importance of black-white biological or genetic differences in explaining disease patterns

Biological markers of race

- Admixture (?)
  - Gene flow between racial groups, often measured using skin color and frequencies of certain blood groups and serum proteins.
  - These methods are problematic for measuring admixture.
  - Nevertheless, Polednak argues that measuring admixture could be potentially useful for uncovering genetic factors in explaining racial differences in disease.

If race is not biological, then what is it?

- LaVeist notes,
  Race is a social variable. It denotes a common socio-political history. Within the context of health outcomes, race is fundamentally a measure of exposure to health risks.
- Polednak argues that thinking about race in social terms, rather than biological ones, is important for understanding racial differences in both disease and other factors.
Social definitions of race

- “One drop rule” (?)
  - Any amount of African ancestry defines one as “black.”
  - Since 1989, the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) has defined infants as black if either one of their parents is black. Polednak refers to this as a vestige of the one drop rule.

Evidence for race as a social category

- Williams presents 2 pieces of evidence in arguing for race being seen as a social indicator rather than a biological one
  - The concept of race was developed long before modern scientific theories of genetics.
  - Racial categories do not represent biological distinctiveness

Social Definitions (continued)

- According to LaVeist, the major way that race is defined socially is through physiognomy. (?)
  - Defined as the “art of judging human character from facial features.”
  - LaVeist further notes that the most commonly used indicator of race is skin color along with hair texture and other physical features.
  - It should be obvious that thinking about race in this way leads one to problems of measurement error.

Race and Measurement Error

- Williams reports death rates for infants and adults by race and ethnic group.
- He notes several measurement error problems that may affect these rates:
  - Observer bias
  - Reliability
  - Multiracial status
  - Definition of racial groups
  - Census undercount

Race and measurement error (continued)

- Observer bias
  - Numerous studies have examined the relationship between observer-defined race and self-reported race.
  - Many of these studies find that observers tend to undercount non-white racial groups, including American Indians, Asian and Pacific Islander Americans (APIA’s), and Hispanics.
Observer bias
(continued)

• What problem does this lead to in generating mortality data?
  • Mortality data are based primarily on death certificates
  • Most of the data reported on death certificates are provided by the officials who
    complete the forms with no discussion about race with the next of kin of the
    deceased.
  • If this is true, how would it affect the counts of deaths shown in the table?
    • Deaths for American Indians, APIA’s, and Hispanics are likely to be
      underreported.

Reliability

• The second problem with measuring race is change in racial identity.
• The most convincing evidence of the importance of this phenomenon comes from the
  fact that the American Indian population grew by 6 times between 1960 and 1990.
  • The explosion of growth in this group cannot be explained by biological growth or
    by migration.
  • Rather, self-identifying as American Indian seems to be conditions by the larger
    social environment.

Reliability
(continued)

• What are some of the reasons that might contribute to the higher levels of self-reported
  race as American Indian?
  • May depend on the form of the race question
  • Economic incentives for American Indians (?)
  • Reduced discrimination against American Indians
  • Increased willingness to self-identify as American Indian
  • Increased use of self-enumenration in the census

Multiracial Status

• How do you define the race of a child who has parents of different races?
• The NCHS uses an algorithm to decide this:
  • If the father was white, the child is given the race of the mother
  • If the father was non-white, the child is given the race of the father
  • If one parent is Hawaiian, the child was Hawaiian
• Issues about definitions of mixed-raced individuals are continually debated; chances
  are that these debates will not subside given increasing rates of racial intermarriage
Definition of racial groups
• Different governmental agencies use different measures when assessing individual race.
• For example, the CDC uses one question to measure race, whereas other health surveys use two measures, one for race and the other for Hispanic origin.
• Why are these issues important?
  • The estimated size of racial groups will depend upon the wording of the question used to measure race.

Census Undercount
• When certain racial groups are underestimated in the census, what does it do to the death rates attributed to that racial group?
  • It inflates them in direct proportion to the undercount
• Census enumeration vs. sampling: what is the issue?

Other issues in racial measurement error?
• Small group sizes
• Language barriers

Ethnic Groups vs. Race
• Within each racial group, there are a number of different ethnic categories. Would it be more effective to focus on ethnic groups rather than racial ones?
• Even though ethnic groups within races can vary to a great degree, using ethnic groups as social marker may mask the importance of skin color in defining status.

Discussion Question
• With all of these problems, should we continue to study race factors in health?