Why Some Countries Measure Race—and Others Refuse

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Abstract

In some countries, official statistics on race and ethnicity are required by law, while in others they are explicitly prohibited. Both approaches are defended as advancing social justice and protecting human rights. This article explores the history of racial classification to better understand both perspectives. It argues that the debate is not only political but also statistical: official measurement often illuminates injustice, while mismeasurement reinforces it.

To collect or not to collect

The first step of data collection is to decide whether to collect data in the first place. Not every aspect of society is suitable for measurement, and countries vary widely in what they choose to measure. Perhaps the starkest example is the decision whether to collect data on race and ethnicity.

Race and ethnicity are categories used to group individuals according to a shared identity, often based on visible traits such as skin color, cultural heritage, and national origin. In some countries, such as Brazil, South Africa, and the United States, governments are required by law to collect data on race and ethnicity. In others, such as France, Germany, and Japan, collecting such data is severely limited and, in many cases, explicitly prohibited.

Both justify their decision in the name of social justice and human rights. Those in favor of collecting official race and ethnicity data argue that such information is one of the most powerful tools for documenting inequality and discrimination. Those opposed argue that race and ethnicity are at best crude measures of lived experience and at worst categories that reinforce the very inequalities and forms of discrimination their proponents seek to eliminate.

But how does a country decide whether collecting such data advances the public good? To better understand both perspectives, let's consider the origin of race classification with a focus on its use in the United States and its absence in France.

The origin of race as a classification

The history of measuring race is inseparable from the history of racism, the belief that race is a fundamental determinant of human traits or abilities. In this sense, race is a surprisingly modern concept. Ancient civilizations were ethnocentric and xenophobic, and various forms of hierarchy existed. But none appear to have organized around race in the modern sense.

For example, historian George Fredrickson notes that while Roman slavery included people from conquered territories across Africa, Asia, and Europe, enslaved people could in principle become Roman and participate fully in Roman society. Differences of origin did not produce the kind of durable, inherited group identities that warranted an official racial classification system.

Official statistics developed gradually over the centuries of European exploration and colonization, as increasingly centralized states required standardized measurements for the administration of public affairs. Race-like classifications became shorthand for social roles.

For example, colonial administrators in the seventeenth century distinguished among indigenous peoples, predominantly European colonizers, and enslaved populations that were increasingly of African origin. One reason, as historian James Cassedy explains, was administrative. Colonial authorities sought a "safe" balance, offsetting the increased trafficking of Black slaves with a commensurate amount of White immigration.

As race-like categories became standard, social roles were increasingly interpreted as reflecting fundamental differences between races. The irony was that this view conflicted with the ascendant religious and Enlightenment principles of the period, which emphasized the equality of individuals.

Two revolutions undertaken in the name of those principles reached strikingly different conclusions. France moved, at least in principle, toward a universal citizenship that treated race and ethnicity as irrelevant and later placed strict limits on their measurement. The United States, by contrast, chose to build its constitution around slavery without naming it directly. In doing so, it created a system in which the measurement of race became increasingly necessary for the administrative functions of the state.

The rise and fall of race as a science

The term "race" first referred not to differences among human beings, but to breeds of horses and dogs and to aristocratic bloodlines.

In 1735, Carl Linnaeus placed humans within his taxonomy of plants and animals under the order Primates. Humans were then subdivided into four groups: Americans, Europeans, Asians, and Africans. As biologist Stephen Jay Gould explains, Linnaeus simply organized human beings according to four major geographical divisions, which was not much different than other racial classifications of the time.

Then in 1776, Linnaeus' student Johann Blumenbach revised these categories. Blumenbach not only asserted

five groups but also a ranking that placed White "Caucasians" at the top as the ideal from which the other races had "degenerated."

This shift from classification to ranking marked the transition to what is now called scientific racism. The field claimed to learn the laws of biological determinism through measurements ranging from the concrete, such as brain size, to the abstract, such as beauty and intelligence.

Today we know this work was irredeemably flawed, resting on statistical mistakes and, in some cases, outright fraud. Yet for a century and a half it remained enormously influential. Its power lay not only in asserting that race was a principled basis for organizing society, but in co-opting official statistics to make that claim appear objective and representative of the population as a whole.

For example, the 1840 U.S. Census tabulated Americans by both race and insanity, and the results initially appeared to show that free Black Americans in the North were insane at far higher rates than enslaved Black Americans in the South. Historian Patricia Cline Cohen has shown the results were erroneous, likely because the complexity of the census form led enumerators to misclassify senile White Americans as insane Black Americans. But the findings fit the tenets of scientific racism, so the errors were largely dismissed and the conclusions accepted as fact.

The example suggests that science, including the measurement of official statistics, is not automatically self-correcting. Indeed, the collapse of scientific racism owes perhaps less to the triumph of good science over bad than to the horror provoked by the treatment of peoples deemed inferior in the name of science, most notably the mass murder of Jewish Europeans during the Holocaust and the brutal suppression of Black protesters in the American South during the Civil Rights Movement.

It was the moral rejection of biological determinism by ordinary people that did much to clear the way for better science to prevail, rather than the scientific community alone, which in many cases benefited from the preservation of social hierarchy.

But the science did change. In 1972, Richard Lewontin produced what is perhaps the most famous application of the analysis of variance. He showed that humans possess no genes unique to any race and that most genetic variation occurs within, rather than between, racial groups. As statistician A. W. F. Edwards later pointed out, it is not correct to conclude from this work alone that racial classifications have no biological basis. Nevertheless, Lewontin's work helped launch a new body of scholarship demonstrating that the diversity of human traits and abilities cannot be adequately understood through the lens of race and that, in many contexts, race provides little if any biological insight.

Race as a protected identity

Race is no longer accepted as a principled basis for organizing society. Yet racism and discrimination persist. The debate has shifted to the role of government in addressing them. In the United States, official statistics

on race have become central to the measurement of discrimination, with mixed success.

For example, in principle, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employers from hiring, firing, or setting compensation based on race. In practice, statistician Paul Meier has argued the adversarial structure of the legal process can undermine the objectivity of official statistics as evidence: The plaintiff typically retains an expert witness to analyze employment or wage data and argue that discrimination has occurred, while the defense retains its own expert to analyze the same data using different methods and offer an alternative explanation in which discrimination has not occurred.

Courts are not the only setting in which adversarial relationships politicize ostensibly objective data. In 2005, for example, President George W. Bush removed the head of the federal agency responsible for producing official criminal justice statistics after he refused to downplay the role of race in police stops. Even in relatively apolitical environments, adversarial relationships—from competition in business to academic peer review—shape the interpretation of data. Though less extreme, these contests hearken back to the era of scientific racism, when official statistics, rather than depoliticizing public discourse, were themselves politicized.

France, by contrast, has largely prohibited the collection of official data on race. Compared with the United States, there is relatively little public discourse about race. But as sociologist Patrick Simon has pointed out, the strategy of "equality through invisibility" has not eliminated racism from French society.

It is difficult to produce a definitive measure of race and racism in France precisely because of the absence of an official statistic. Alternative measures exist, including the use of proxy variables such as names, audit studies, and small-scale surveys. Yet the growth of a political movement calling for the official measurement of race and ethnicity suggests that these tools are seen as insufficient, not necessarily because they are inaccurate, but because they do not provide the commonly accepted basis for public discourse supplied by official statistics.

The limits of measurement

Are countries that refuse to collect race and ethnicity data willfully ignorant? Or are countries that do collect them mistaking an ill-defined classification system for scientific fact?

One's perspective depends in part on values, such as the conflicting ideals of American multiculturalism and French universalism. But history suggests that the issue is not only political. It raises genuine statistical questions about whether a concept can be measured meaningfully, and whether it ought to be measured at all.

As the statistician William Kruskal argued, race and ethnicity are attempts to measure real if abstract concepts, and therefore statisticians have an important role to play in evaluating them. Yet this does not mean that everything measurable should be measured. As another statistician W. Edwards Deming warned,

"It is wrong to suppose that if you can't measure it, you can't manage it—a costly myth."

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