We are, by and large, comfortable with people determining their own gender identity but not with people determining their own racial or ethnic identity. Why?

Our sex is determined by our chromosomes. XX = female and XY = male. Similar biological determinism operates across much of the animal kingdom and possibly in some plants. But that’s not the whole story. Chromosomes sometimes go wrong and people are born with more than two sex chromosomes. Or babies are born with ambiguous sexual organs. Genes interact with their environment. Society has created gender roles and gender expectations that match the sex dichotomy. Baby girls are dressed in pink, baby boys in blue. However, there are people who, for many reasons, cannot conform to gender expectations, and as a society we have accepted that people have a right to determine their own gender and that we should support them in doing so. We recognize that forcing people to conform to a particular gender role can cause them great harm, so we don’t do it.

There is no genetic basis for race. The best evidence for this is that people breed no matter what their genetic heritage is. But we act as if race is a thing. We assign people to a particular race depending on their skin colour and other superficial features. Think about dogs. We breed dogs to have features that we desire: small size, aggression, nocturnalism, docility, wool-like coats, a herding instinct, foul breath, flatulence, and so on. But they are all basically dogs, and you had better keep your greyhound away from my toy poodle when she’s in heat. Distinctions between breeds are arbitrary, but they suit us. It is the same with racial distinctions: they are arbitrary, but we persist in them and this suggests there may be some benefit, to some people, in doing so.

Whenever we classify we define a barrier separating the included from the excluded. This is done with Us and Them and the way we draw distinctions that define Us advantageously but which are to the disadvantage of Them. Rich, poor; White, black; Homeowner, renter; Fulltime employee, gig worker; Master, servant; Resident, immigrant; Race 1, race 2; Male, female; Trump supporters, the rest. The fact that the distinctions between Us and Them are arbitrary and socially or culturally determined does not make them invisible or ineffective, nor does it make it any easier to transition between inside and outside.

This backgrounder is deliberately inconclusive because I don’t want to spoil the discussion. Race and ethnicity have little scientific basis but we act as if they are real. Is this simply tribalism or is there something valuable to be gained by maintaining them?

Alan Belk
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