Reflections on the “What” and “Why” of Race as a Construct

A review of

The Philosophy of Race
by Albert Atkin

Reviewed by
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What is race? Is it real? If so, what should we do with it or about it? And in what ways do race and racism impact our everyday lives? If you have contemplated these big questions, you would appreciate Atkin’s careful reflection in his book The Philosophy of Race on the role of philosophy in teasing out possible answers. The book is organized around the questions above, comprising five chapters, and offers a section of suggested further reading. One might wonder why the philosophy of race should concern psychologists. However, the philosophy undergirding the constructs we measure and operationalize is of great importance. Too often, as researchers, we do not locate ourselves and our research variables within a larger context. In this straightforward book, Atkin supports us along that journey.
The examination of race requires entertaining the nooks and crannies of lay and academic conceptualizations of race. Atkin treats the question of the reality of race with care and provides ample examples and evidence to illustrate various claims. He does a solid job of allowing room, where it is reasonable, for varied perspectives. At times the exploration of scientific and social conceptualizations of race feels tedious, but the precision is worthwhile in making the text feel balanced and accessible regardless of one’s personal beliefs.

Atkin addresses the previously mentioned questions from a philosophical perspective. Through the systematic application of philosophical methodology, race is established as a social construct with individual, cultural, and institutional dynamics. One poignant analogy provided is that of nations. Atkin reminds the reader that although we would not argue against the reality of nations, we also would be hard-pressed to argue that nations are naturally occurring. The Earth was not formed with the boundaries that have established nations; treaties, legislation, sanctions, and so forth make nations real. Yet the contradictions do not minimize our adherence to, engagement with, or belief in nations.

In addition to the question of race, Atkin explores the topic of racism. Models for defining racism (i.e., belief/ideological, behavioral, affective) are explored in addition to subsequent negative impacts. Racial profiling, a particularly salient policy question, is tackled with insightful examination of pros and cons. Although I would have welcomed the application of Atkin’s thoughtful work to additional social issues, the exercise is well executed.

Links to Psychology

Race is widely accepted as a social construct that operates on individual, cultural, and institutional levels (Jones, 1997; Plaut, 2010). However, a recent increase in colorblind racial attitudes (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000) has left ample room for people to conclude that race should not and does not matter. With the election and reelection of a president of color, the sentiment of some is that we are postracial and have arrived at a time when we are beyond race. However, research suggests that the construct is enduring and remains active in affecting the lives of individuals (Brondolo, Libretti, Rivera, & Walsemann, 2012; Carter, 2007).

Atkin leans on the psychological constructs of stereotype threat and implicit bias as he considers the questions of race and racism. Both are important in exploring how race and racism maintain a hold and in the difficult task of measuring the dynamics. Psychologists have concerned themselves with how to capture the effects of race and racism and have made major strides with documenting the ways in which the risk of confirming commonly held stereotypes about a group that an individual identifies with can hinder performance (Steele, 2010; Steele & Aronson, 1995).
In recent years, the presence of implicit rather than explicit bias has captured increased attention. Intersecting Atkin’s focus on racial profiling and psychological research, findings on split-second decisions made by law enforcement agents indicate that implicit assumptions lead to increased error in assuming that African American men are carrying a weapon (Payne, 2006). Atkin’s section on racial profiling as policy serves as an example of an area where philosophy can contribute to the conversation.

Atkin highlights the subsequent importance of racial identity (Cross & Vandiver, 2001; Helms, 1992; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998) as the social construction of race is accepted. The way in which individuals think of themselves with regard to their racial group has been examined for over 40 years and is an area where psychology can continue to inform the discussion of race and racism. In addition to beliefs about self and group, racial identity has been found to affect the relation between how individuals experience racism and mental health (Banks & Kohn-Wood, 2007).

The deleterious impacts of racism have been and continue to be examined (Brondolo et al., 2012; Carter, 2007). From psychological to physiological symptoms, the role of racism in health has been underestimated. Interestingly, less-blatant forms of racism (i.e., microaggressions, daily hassles) have been found to be particularly pernicious rather than innocuous, as commonly conceptualized (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Sue et al., 2007).

Atkin’s inclusion of \textit{race} beyond the construct of \textit{race} helps the reader acknowledge the connections between the two concepts rather than stay safely in the place of pontificating solely about race. More broadly, the text urges psychologists to reflect on the philosophical underpinnings of their constructs differently than previous texts that have made focused critiques of the field regarding race (Guthrie, 2004; Tucker, 2007).

\section*{Strengths and Weaknesses}

Atkin includes frequent examples that illustrate the intricate details of multiple trains of thought and distinctions between concepts. In addition, he makes an attempt to offer international perspectives, citing historical and current events in the United States, Brazil, Britain, and Australia. For example, the comparisons and contrasts drawn across the history of slavery in the United States and Brazil, between the indigenous populations in the United States and Australia, or regarding racial categorization across the globe offer a richness of connection as well as clear distinctions.

Unfortunately, the exploration of multiple avenues to reject the premise of \textit{race} makes sections of the book feel tedious at times. However, this criticism should be understood in the context of the psychological operationalization of terms, which focuses mainly on the chosen definition with little, if any, expansion on alternative or competing options. In addition, it appears appropriate to philosophy to acknowledge and explain as many
perspectives as possible to lend validation that the conclusion reached has been done with full knowledge of the scope of the issue.

**Prospective Audience**

*The Philosophy of Race* would be of interest to psychology graduate students who desire a philosophical grounding in their study of race. It would also be useful to any psychologist who is beginning to think about race, especially how it influences research (e.g., topic/question selection, participant recruitment, how race is treated in statistical analyses).

As a stand-alone read, it should not be considered an exhaustive resource about race in the field of psychology. Any readers who are new to thinking about the concept of race in general and race as a social construct in particular will need to make use of the references mentioned throughout the book, the helpful chapter-by-chapter guide at the end of the book, and additional psychological research conducted on the topic.

**References**


Helms, J. (1992). *A race is a nice thing to have*. Topeka, KS: Content Communications.


