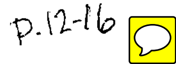
Source: Pollock, M. ed. 2008, Everyday Anti-Racism



3

Getting Rid of the Word "Caucasian"

Carol C. Mukhopadhyay

Racial labels and categories, like all terms and concepts, are human-made classifying devices that we learn, internalize, and then use to interpret the everyday world in which we live. But conventional American racial categories are rooted in colonialism, slavery, and an elaborate ideology developed to justify a system of racial inequality. Given racial categories' sociohistorical rather than biological roots, the notion that "races" describe human biological variation has been officially rejected by the American Anthropological Association. (See the Association's statement, in Resource list.) As we critique outmoded systems of racial classification, we must also question the labels we use for "races."

The Civil Rights Movement dismantled the most explicit forms of racism, including many biological-sounding racial labels. Terms like "Negroid," the "Red Man," and the "Yellow Race" were replaced — often by group members themselves — with words like "Black" or "African American," "Native American," and "Asian," which indicate that these groups are political, not biological, realities. Today, terms like "Oriental" would immediately mark the user as seriously out of touch with current understandings. Yet there is one strildng exception in our modem racial vocabulary: the term "Caucasian." Despite being a remnant of a discredited theory of racial classification, the term has persisted into the twenty-first century, within as well as outside of the educational community.

It is high time we got rid of the word Caucasian. Some might protest that it is "only a label." But language is one of the most systematic, subtle, and significant vehicles for transmitting racial ideology. Terms that describe imagined groups, such as Caucasian, encapsulate those beliefs. Every time we use them and uncritically expose students to them, we are reinforcing rather than dismantling the old racialized worldview. Using the word Caucasian invokes scientific racism, the false idea that races are naturally occurring, biologically ranked subdivisions of the human species and that Caucasians are the superior race. Beyond this, the label Caucasian can even convey messages about which groups have culture and are entitled to recognition as Americans.

The term Caucasian originated in the eighteenth century as part of the developing European science of racial classification.' After visiting the region of the Caucasus Mountains, between the Caspian and Black seas, German anatomist Johann Blumenbach declared its inhabitants the most beautiful in the world, the ideal type of humans created in "God's image," and deemed this area the likely site where humans originated. (Humans actually originated in Africa.) He decided that all light-sldnned peoples from this region, along with Europeans, belonged to the same race, which he labeled Caucasian.

Blumenbach named four other races that he considered physically and morally "degenerate" forms of "God's original creation." He classified Africans (excepting lighter-skinned North Africans) as "Ethiopians" or "black." He split non-Caucasian Asians into two separate races: the "Mongolian"or "yellow" race of China and Japan, and the "Malayan" or "brown" race, including Aboriginal Australians and Pacific Islanders. Native Americans were the "red" race.

Blumenbach's system of racial classification was adopted in the United States. American scientists tried to prove that Caucasians had larger brains and were smarter than people of other races.' Racial science dovetailed with nineteenth-century evolutionary theories, which ranked races from more "primitive" "savages" to more "advanced" or "civilized," with Caucasians on top. Racial hierarchies were used to justify slavery and other forms of racial discrimination.

The U.S. legal system drew on Blumenbach's definitions to decide who was eligible to become a naturalized citizen, a privilege the 1790 Naturalization Act restricted to "whites." This schema created dilemmas. Blumenbach's Caucasians included such groups as Armenians, Persians (Iranians),North Indians, Arabs, and some North Africans. In 1923, however, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the naturalization petition of an immigrant from North India, saying he was Caucasian but not white and citing, among other things, his skin color.

The constant tweaking of categories like "Caucasian" to include or exclude newcomers provides evidence of these categories' social rather than biological basis. By the 1920s, eugenicists (who were concerned with the improvement of the species through the reproduction of the "superior" race) had divided Caucasians into four ranked sub-races: Nordic, Alpine, Mediterranean, and Jew (Semitic),and designated Nordics intellectually and morally superior. These subdivisions were used to justify discriminatory immigration laws that preserved the ethnic dominance of northern and western Europeans. Not until after World War II, when theories of "Aryan" racial superiority were thoroughly discredited by their association with the Nazis, did these distinctions begin to dissolve and European Americans become fully homogenized into the category "white." The status of groups like Armenians, Iranians, and South Asians remained ambiguous, demonstrating that "white," like "Caucasian," was a category that could easily be bent to exclude those deemed unworthy

The North American system of racial classification continues to shift in response to historical, economic, and political events. Yet the basic conceptual framework imagining biologically distinct racial categories remains surprisingly stable. The word Caucasian is still used in many forms of data collection, medical circles, and popular discourse. Most other labels have changed. New terms more accurately reflect geographic locations or ancestral origins, broadly defined. In contrast, the more biological-sounding word Caucasian stubbornly persists. I suggest that each time we, as educators, use or subject our students uncritically to the term Caucasian, we are subtly re-inscribing key elements of the racist world view.

Caucasian has more explicitly biological connotations than other contemporary racial terms. To most of us, the Caucasus does not signify a geographical area. Virtually none of our students and probably very few of us could locate the Caucasus on a map or specify what countries or regional groups it includes today (answer: Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, parts of north Iran, and central southern Russia). So what does it mean to designate someone Caucasian? It does not, at least in the twenty-first century United States, suggest anything cultural — that is, a shared set of behaviors and beliefs. U.S. Caucasians do not speak Caucasian. Since it does not connote location or language, it implies something more "natural" than cultural — a profoundly dangerous assumption.

Of course, categories such as Asian, African, and Native American are human-made classifications, too. These labels also falsely imply that clear dividing lines exist between geographically defined "races." For example, the category Asian is internally diverse and has shifting boundaries. It includes Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese people, but what about the peoples of the Indian subcontinent, the Indonesian archipelago, or the Pacific islands? Still, students can identify specific languages and countries in Asia or Africa. Unlike Caucasian, labels like African, Asian, and Native American, while oversimplified, connote culture-bearing historical and political entities.

Anthropologists have long struggled to convince the public that races are not discrete, bounded, biologically based categories but artificial inventions, arbitrary divisions in a continuum of human diversity. Using the label Caucasian masks the equally arbitrary and invented character of this racial category. It renders invisible the diverse ethnic, linguistic, religious, and political groups that make up Europe, which constituted the significant identities of most European Americans until the past half century. The term Caucasian implies that people of European descent form a coherent, stable, homogeneous, biological entity, reinforcing obsolete biological notions of "race."

Using the word Caucasian also tends to imply that whites (the two terms are often used interchangeably) differ from other major racial groupings in the United States in being just plain Americans whose immigrant origins remain unmarked. Yet European Americans originally arrived as immigrants

and refugees and were often unwanted by those who had preceded them Today, they are no more authentically American than any other group. Compared to Native Americans, all European Americans are recent immigrants Most African Americans' ancestors were brought to these shores before the ancestors of most European Americans arrived. Yet the term Caucasian, because it now lacks any geographic connotation, masks this group's foreign ancestry while other labels, such as Asian American or African American, highlight those groups' foreign roots.

The word Caucasian also reinforces the tendency to equate "American" with people of European descent because, as a one-word designation, Caucasian reinforces the "hyphenated" status of other American groups Linguistically, adding a modifier to a generic term — for example, adding Asian or African to American — generally signifies that the modified form is less "normal." The more fundamental, typical, "normal" form is left unmarked. (For example, we add the gender modifier "male" to mark the unusual, abnormal category of "male" nurses. "Nurse" refers to the typical, taken-for-granted. "normal" nurse, who is female.) Most standard U.S. racial labels today other than Caucasian add a specific modifier to American. These modifiers, unless used for all racial-ethnic groups, subtly marginalize the "marked" groups, implying they are not fully American. Some groups remain framed eternally as immigrants, regardless of how many generations they have been in the United States.

Finally, for those designated Caucasian, the term subtly erases their ethnicity, their own ancestry, cultural traditions, and experiences. Ironically, we are starting to talk as if ethnicity and culture are attributes of only some groups, especially marginalized groups. My university has an umbrella organization for the diverse cultural groups on campus, but it does not include any European American ethnocultural groups. But of course, what is Caucasian culture? The category is empty.

Being more specific about origins allows European American students the opportunity to explore their ethnic identities and ancestries. Linking histories or cultural practices to specific cultural or linguistic regions by calling them English, German. Italian, Polish, and so forth. situates them as one among many cultural traditions brought to the United States by immigrants.

European American is a more precise substitute for Caucasian than white — at least as long as we feel the need to classify U.S. residents into a few large groupings If we wish to describe lived experiences of privilege and the distribution of opportunities based upon ancestry, both "European American" and "white" can be useful The label European American (or "Euro") may sound bulky or strange at first, but so did African American!

We can also challenge the notion of "pure races" by substituting a more accurate term, "multiracial," for "of mixed race." The terminology of mixture draws upon the old notion of distinct races In fact, the history of our species is one of constant interaction and mating between populations; that is why

humans have remained one species. Moreover, in the process of "mixing," one element gets "diluted." The term "multiracial" connotes the possibility of multiple cultural traditions, multiple identities, and a richer, rather than diluted, cultural legacy.

What can we do beyond using language that reinforces the ideas we want to convey? We can encourage our students to think about everyday, popular language, its roots, and the subtle meanings it conveys. We can invite them to alter their own everyday talk.

RESOURCES

Carol C. Mukhopadhyay, Rosemary Henze, and Yolanda T. Moses. 2007. *How Real Is Race? A Sourcebook on Race, Culture, and Biology*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. A sourcebook of conceptual background material, activities, and lesson plans for teachers regarding race categories.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Principle:** How can we use racial labels like "white," "black," or "Asian" without suggesting biological differences that do not really exist? On the other hand, what would be lost if we deleted all racial terms from our language?
2. **Strategy:** Mukhopadhyay suggests replacing the word "Caucasian" not with "white" but with "European American." What do you think of this substitution? Does it mask the social experience of living as "white" in the United States?
3. **Try tomorrow:** What might you say the next time a student or colleague refers to someone as "Caucasian"? Role-play the interaction.

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Part II

Get Ready to Talk about a Racialized Society

So race categories are not real, biologically. But socially, they are. We live lives as racial group members. And schools are particular places where race still matters.

The essays in this part share a core principle of everyday antiracism: teachers need to discuss the relevance of race in school with students, parents, and each *other*.

What strategies can educators use to get started in discussing the relevance of race in school?

1. Start developing the will, skill, and capacity to engage in courageous conversations about race.

   Glenn Singleton and Cyndie Hays suggest that educators agree to a few key commitments, such as "speak your truth" and "stay engaged," before talking with colleagues or students about race issues.

2. Start talking precisely about moving students to opportunity.

   Mica Pollock suggests that educators strive to talk more specifically about which of their actions actually provide the opportunities students need.

3. Start thinking critically about what it means to "care" for students.

   Sonia Nieto suggests that educators discuss which actions are most "caring" for students of color in particular in a racially unequal society.