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# ‘Race’ is an invented concept, but an impactful one, researchers say

*Ideas of race, racism have evolved throughout history*



Nicholas Breyfogle

Many Americans define themselves by race. However, those who base their identity on skin color and other physical traits may be surprised to learn that race is a social rather than biological construct, researchers say.

In “Ideas of Race and Racism in History,” a virtual panel discussion held Oct. 12 by The Ohio State University [College of Arts and Sciences < https://artsandsciences.osu.edu/>](https://artsandsciences.osu.edu/)

, professors who have studied the issue said racism is rooted in the false notion that there are separate races.

“This idea of race, it just simply isn’t real. It is not real in a biological sense,” said Hasan Jeffries, an associate professor in the Department of History. “But at the same time ... it is socially meaningful – biologically meaningless, but socially meaningful – because it has structured global society for the last 500, 600 years.”

The discussion also featured Alice Conklin, Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor in the Department of History; Robin Judd, an associate professor in the Department of History; and Deondre Smiles, an associate professor of geography at the University of Victoria, Canada. Nicholas Breyfogle, an associate professor in the Department of History and director of [the Harvey](#)

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The concept of race emerged in the mid-17th century as a means for justifying the enslavement of Africans in colonial America, Conklin said, and scientists eventually devised theories to uphold the system of forced labor.

“The idea of race as something biologically real came into existence first as a folk idea and then as a scientific one,” she said. “This idea was arguably the greatest error modern Western science ever made.”

The error was based on three false premises, Conklin said.

“One, that biologically distinct races existed in nature; two, that some races were more intelligent than others,” she said, “and three, that these races could be classified and ranked from superior to inferior according to the typical brain, shape, weight or size for each so-called ‘race.’”

The catastrophic effects of racism are evident in the genocide of Jews in Nazi Germany during World War II, Judd said.

“Even before the Nazis are coming into power and then consolidating power, there’s first an understanding of ‘racial purity,’” she said. “There’s a belief that there’s something that can allow for a ‘pure race’ and something that can allow for an ‘impure race,’ and that there is a hierarchy of races and there’s a superiority of one particular race.”

Categorizing people by phenotype runs contrary to the worldview of many Native Americans and other indigenous peoples, said Smiles, who claims African, European and Ojibwe Native American heritage.

“Sometimes people will refer to indigenous peoples as a race. And if you ask many indigenous peoples, they’ll oftentimes say, ‘Well, we’re not a race, we’re a nation,’” he said. “I can speak for my own people, where the Ojibwe, we have a long history of viewing our tribal identity, as viewing it in political and kinship frameworks rather than racial or biological constructs.”

When people refer to “race,” they’re most likely using the term as a stand-in for cultural heritage and ancestry, Jeffries said.

“We cannot pretend as though race itself isn’t a meaningful, impactful construct in the lives of all people,” he said, “and certainly all Americans.”