

Reading 8

The Social Reality of Race

Race is a category that we often use to describe and explain many of the differences between people. Yet the criteria used to categorize individuals as belonging to one race or another are different in different societies and cultures. This is what American Barbara Katz Rothman discovered when her family spent six months in the Netherlands. Fearful that her then five-year-old daughter Victoria would be “the only black kid in her class,” Rothman was told her concerns were unfounded. Yet, Rothman writes:

She was the only black kid in her class. She was the only black kid I saw anywhere in that school. If I hadn't been reassured by people I genuinely like and trust, I'd have just been angry. As it was, I was puzzled. I walked over to a wall of photographs of the school going back for years and years, group after group of class photos. No black kids. I didn't say anything, just kept watching, thinking about it. A few days later, light dawned for me: there were dark-skinned kids from India and Pakistan in all the classes. Black kids. European-style black kids.

For an American, with an American sensibility of race, Indian and African kids are not both “black.” For a Dutch person, with a different race system in his head, these were all black kids.

So what does that story prove, anyway? That the Dutch draw a different line? Maybe between the Dutch and everyone else? Not being Dutch, are all the blacks, well, black? The Indian kids in her class could see what my kid and I could see, the distinctiveness of African features over and above the similarity of skin color.

So does the story tell us that race is a socially constructed category, constructed differently in different places? Or does it tell us that the Dutch draw their lines so tightly around themselves that they don't bother to make finer discriminations—not that they don't see or experience the distinction as existing, but that they don't see why it should matter.

And is that what white Americans do when they see a black kid whose family has been in the United States since slavery days, a black kid whose family arrived two generations ago from Haiti, and a black kid who just immigrated here from Nigeria, and calls them all “African American,” seeing no meaningful differences?¹

¹ Barbara Katz Rothman, *The Book of Life: A Personal and Ethical Guide to Race, Normality, and the Implications of the Human Genome Project* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001), 51–52.

Connection Questions

1. What does Barbara Katz Rothman mean when she says that race is a socially constructed category?
2. After describing her experiences with Dutch schools, Rothman asks, "So what does that story prove, anyway?" What do you think her story "proves"? What does it reveal about the concept of race? Does this story connect with anything in your own experience?
3. People often think of race as having an unchangeable definition and that races are defined the same way over time and in all places. How does Rothman's story challenge those assumptions?