

CHAPTER 7

RACE AND ETHNICITY

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After you have read this chapter, you will understand:

- That people have culturally constructed categories of race and ethnicity affecting social issues and problems regarding appearance
- The relationship of race and ethnicity—particularly as they affect issues of appearance—to gain an appreciation for the experience of those in the minority
- The impact that issues of race and ethnicity have on consumer culture

RACE

The term **race** refers to certain visible and distinctive characteristics that are determined by biology. Along with gender and age, race is one of the first things we notice about another person. Race is also a social construction, meaning that, like gender and sexuality, the concept of race is created artificially, based on physical markers, as a way of grouping people together based on what one particular culture defines as socially significant.

One of the earliest classifications of people into races was created circa 1785 by Christoph Meiners, a German philosopher who believed in polygenism, or that each race has its own unique beginnings, separate from other races. Meiners argued that there were two races: Caucasians and Mongolians (Painter, 2010). Later, Jean-Joseph Virey termed the two groups white and dark (Baum, 2006). German anthropologist Johann Freidrich Blumenback (1752–1840) proposed five races, based on skull size: Caucasian, Mongolian, Malayan, Ethiopian, and American, which became white, yellow, brown, black, and red, respectively (Painter, 2010). However, these categories were not mutually exclusive, and at one point East Asian people and high caste Hindus were considered

“white,” and poor Caucasians who worked in the field and had tanned brown skin were not “white.” Likewise, other groups of people now considered “white” were “not white” according to the U.S. government, at different times, such as Italian, Greek, Spanish, and Irish. These were likely due to immigration quotas and one could argue were an issue of social class. Today, in the United States there are six government-created categories of race (created for the census): White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Hawaiian Native or Pacific Islander, and Other.¹

The terms “black” and “white” are problematic in that not all cultures understand the terms the same way. In the United Kingdom, the term “black” is used to refer to all people who are not white. In South Africa, the government recognizes four racial categories: black, white, colored, and Indian. An African American person visiting Tanzania is likely to be considered white by the native African black people (Newman, 1995). Hence, racial categories vary among geographic regions as a way of identifying people, based on place of birth and on arbitrary physical characteristics.

In the United States, people of mixed races usually are identified by one race or the other. The United States adheres to the one-drop rule. This applies mostly to black or African American people, coming from a common antebellum law in the South that defined a person as black if he or she had a “single drop of black blood.” For example, President Barack Obama had a white mother and African father; however, he is typically referred to as the “first black president.” Anthropologists call this a “hypodescent rule,” meaning that racially mixed people are always assigned the status of the subordinate group, likely in order to keep the dominant race “pure.” Hence, a person with seven out of eight great-grandparents who are white and only one who is black is still considered black.

Racial categories often lead to judgments about beauty and attractiveness (among other characteristics). Historically, dominant groups were considered more attractive than subordinate groups. This has resulted in subordinate groups attempting to change their body aesthetics—skin tone, hair, facial features, body shape—in order to fit in with the dominant version of beauty. African hair has often been altered in texture, and one of the most popular American men's hairstyle in the early and middle 20th century was the conk. The conk was created through the use of store-bought or homemade relaxers that used lye and when applied to the head would straighten the hair but also could burn the scalp. The hair was then styled by combing it back or arranging it in a pompadour. Malcolm X, who once sported the style, advocated for natural hair in the 1960s in an effort to shed white standards of beauty and celebrate black beauty. See Figure 7.1.

Still today, many women of African descent feel the pressure to modify their hair to fit the white beauty aesthetic of straight hair. Google searches for “professional hair” and “unprofessional hair” yield images of straight and natural hair, respectively (Janin, 2016). Black hairstyles, such as afros and cornrows, have been banned in professional environments and many women fear that their jobs could be at risk if they wear their hair naturally (Sini, 2016; Wilson, 2013).

Even in the fashion and beauty industries, discrimination continues against people of color. At fashion shows, models of color are frequently left to their own devices to style their hair and makeup because professionals who understand “ethnic” hair are not hired.



Figure 7.1 The conk hairstyle, as pictured in this 1956 photograph, was created using relaxers to “straighten” the hair. The style eventually lost popularity as natural African American hairstyles took hold in the 1960s and 1970s.

And, makeup brands seem to cater to lighter skin tones and offer more options for them, while people with darker skin tones are left with fewer choices. Jaleesa Reed further explores this later in the chapter in “Cosmetic Counter Connotations: Black Millennial Women and Beauty.”

ETHNICITY

The term **ethnicity** refers to learned cultural heritage that is shared by a group of people. It typically includes a common national origin, ancestry, language, dietary habits, ideology, and style of dress. Ethnicity is different from race yet the terms are frequently, and inappropriately, used interchangeably. For example, Chinese Americans are different ethnically from Chinese people born in China, although their biological background may be identical. Furthermore, people in China may identify by one of 56 officially recognized Chinese ethnicities, including the most populous, the Han. Similarly, India has over 600 officially recognized ethnicities, and Africa, with between 1,000 and 3,000, is the most ethnically diverse continent in the world. Thus, even the concept of grouping people together by country or continent does not truly recognize different individual cultural groups.

Ethnicity plays a significant role in others' perceptions of a person's appearance. Sociologist Paul Starr (1982) found that, in the absence of distinctive skin color and other physical characteristics, ethnicity is judged by others on the basis of many imprecise attributes such as language, residence, and dress (clothing, accessories, and body markings). Dress is an important marker of identity, as **social identity theory** posits (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; also discussed in Chapter 2). According to this theory, people are first categorized into groups; an individual then identifies with one of the groups; groups then compare themselves to other groups and develop group distinctiveness, or note what makes their group different (sometimes better) than other groups. Often, this revolves around dress and adornment to show differences between ethnic groups and affiliation with an ethnic group. In “Dressing the Jibaros: Puerto Rican Peasants' Clothing through Time and Space,” José Blanco F. and Raúl J. Vázquez-López explore a certain style of dress and identity and recount how the dress of peasants in Puerto Rico became symbolic of the nation, even for those who did not identify with the cultures that moved to or colonized the island.

Veena Chattaraman also explores the issue of ethnicity and dress in “Cultural Markers in Dress: Decoding

Meanings and Motivations of College Students." She analyzes how ethnic and ethnic-inspired dress is used to celebrate one's ancestral past and culture, and to show respect to one's heritage.

ETHNIC DRESS

Ethnic dress, sometimes called "folk costume," is the dress of a particular group of people indigenous to a particular area, though one need not have lived in that area to claim ethnic affiliation. Ethnic affiliation might come in the form of color, silhouette, pattern motif, pattern size, or use of a garment. Many ethnicities have unique garments that are immediately recognizable. The Japanese have the *kosode*, with its loose fit and square sleeves. The Scots have the woolen kilt, with each plaid design unique to a particular clan (see Figure 7.2). The Tuareg of North Africa wear indigo-dyed cloaks, leaving their skin blue, giving them the epithet "the blue men." In India, the sari is ubiquitous; made of one long strip of cloth, it is wrapped around and draped over the body, but the specific wrapping, draping, color, and embroidery vary by village or ethnic affiliation.

In addition to cloth garments, jewelry also designates ethnicity. For example, the Navajo, Zuni, and Hopi Native American tribes all wear jewelry, but the style of jewelry is different from each other. Navajo jewelry is made with stones, usually turquoise, in their natural shape. The stones are set in silver that outlines the stone's natural silhouette. In contrast, Zuni jewelry is made from stones that have been precisely cut and placed into mosaics outlined in silver. The Hopi, however, rarely use stones in their jewelry. Their jewelry tends to be polished silver with



Figure 7.2 The Scottish kilt identifies not only a wearer's ethnic origin but also the particular colors and plaid design identify the clan.

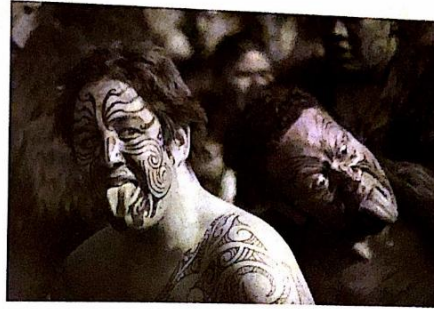


Figure 7.3 Body art, such as tattoos, can be markers of ethnic identity. The tattoos on this man's body identify him as Maori.

shapes and symbols carved into the smooth surface. Each of these differences in jewelry is immediately recognizable as being from its respective tribe.

In addition to cloth garments and accessories, altering the body is another way to display ethnic affiliation. Though tattoos in Polynesia are common, the style differs among tribes: traditional Hawaiian tattoos use straight lines and geometric motifs with no curves, traditional Samoan are geometric and linear and cover large portions of the body, traditional Tahitian tattoos are curved, and traditional Maori tattoos look like rope with curved ends (see Figure 7.3).

Although ethnic dress can remain unchanged for generations that does not mean dress never changes. New technologies, new products, and new ideas that are introduced to a culture can be adapted to become "culturally authentic." Cultural authentication is the process whereby a foreign object (e.g., clothing) is incorporated into a culture and becomes authentic to that culture. There are four steps to **cultural authentication** (Eicher & Erekosima, 1980), though Arthur (1997) argues they need not occur in this specific order: selection (adopting an object); characterization (the new culture gives meaning to the object); incorporation (identifying the object to a social group); and transformation (physically altering the object to allow for cultural distinctiveness). By this process, an item that was originally foreign can become synonymous with the culture, as in the case of European ribbon and glass beads that were incorporated into the culture of the Great Lakes Indians of North America (Pannabecker, 1996).

Ethnic dress is often used as a source of inspiration for a designer's collections. Ethnic dress was in vogue in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s when American society was taking a renewed interest in people's origins, news broadcasters were reporting on wars that were being waged in foreign countries, and new trading with countries (such as China) opened doors to new resources and aesthetics. Yves Saint Laurent presented many lines that were inspired by the everyday dress of people in Morocco, Africa, and Russia, and John Galliano took inspiration for various collections from the cultures of Egypt, Indigenous Americans, and Africans (see Figure 7.4).

Yet, at times, the commoditization of ethnic dress as fashion is met with resistance. Some people find the co-opting of sacred or important markers of ethnic identity for a season or two by the fashion industry to be disingenuous. This is called **cultural appropriation**, and it occurs when a person or group of people of one culture profits or uses the cultural creations of another culture. It is argued that it degrades ethnicity into a mere costume and/or that the objects are used inappropriately. Other questions—such as the authenticity of ethnic garments used as fashion items—pose dilemmas such as who has the right to create ethnic fashions or who has the right to profit from ethnic fashions? Christine Beaulé explores this issue of ethnic authenticity and fashion in her examination of the indigenous dress of the Andes in “The Modern Chola: Indigeneity, Gender, and Global Fashion in Bolivia.”



Figure 7.4 Galliano designed this indigenous-inspired beaded gown during his tenure at Dior, but many would consider this cultural appropriation.

Summary

This chapter focuses on the difference between race and ethnicity and how they are manifested through clothing and appearance. Race is a nebulous term whose purpose is to group people together based on very general appearance terms. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is a term that specifies a person's cultural heritage. Ethnic

groups tend to have very specific forms of dress that do not change with the fashions. But when they are used as fashion, conflict between established identity and temporary style may result.

Key Terms

Conk

Cultural appropriation

Cultural authentication
Ethnicity

Race

Social identity theory