

excerpt from Robert Jensen, *It's Debatable: Talking Authentically about Tricky Topics* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2024), pp. 47-49.

Chapter 2: Stepping Back: Thinking

Let's go back to race and sex, the hot-button issues I'm focusing on. Here's the executive summary: Observable physical differences among people whose ancestors come from different continents are a material reality, but the concept of race is arbitrary and socially constructed. The sex binary of male/female is a material reality, but the gender binary of masculine/feminine is socially constructed. That presentation of material/social may suggest the two concepts are basically the same, but they are not. The differences matter.

On race: My ancestors come from northern Europe and Scandinavia. If I stand alongside a person whose ancestors come from Africa, the differences in such things as skin color, shape of noses, and hair texture are hard to miss. There are individual differences *within* groups of Europeans and *within* groups of Africans, and there are identifiable patterns in the differences in appearance *between* the groups. There also are patterns concerning such things as reactions to a specific drug or susceptibility to a specific disease depending on ancestors' region-of-origin. But scientists recognize that racial categories are poor proxies for genetic diversity. [Endnote 51: Committee on the Use of Race, Ethnicity, and Ancestry as Population Descriptors in Genomics Research, Using Population Descriptors in Genetics and Genomics Research: A New Framework for an Evolving Field (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine: 2023), <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/26902/using-population-descriptors-in-genetics-and-genomics-research-a-new>.]

Human communities have always recognized in-group/out-group, but modern racial groupings have not always existed. One mark of their social construction is that we could eliminate racial categories and life could go on uninterrupted. After all, there are many observable differences in human beings—some of us have larger ears than others. That's a material reality just as much as differences in skin color. But we don't create politically/economically relevant categories around the size of our ears. We don't need to create categories around any of these superficial differences to organize a society.

What makes it so hard to let go of the concept of race is our racist history. White supremacy asserts that there are racialized differences that go beyond what can be observed, primarily differences in cognitive ability, moral reasoning, or emotional maturity. Those racialized claims were socially constructed to rationalize the brutality some whites used to increase their wealth and power through the exploitation of non-white groups. Many people still believe, overtly or covertly, in that white-supremacist claim. Others don't necessarily believe it but don't want to disturb the racialized distribution of wealth and power that benefits them. But if we were ever collectively to overcome our history and renounce the disparities in wealth and power, race could disappear.

On sex: Sex is a material reality, binary and biological. Male and female are marked by the kinds of gametes we produce, sperm or egg. Not every person born has the capacity to reproduce (there are anomalies) and not every person will reproduce (people make choices). But that does not change the fact that male humans can participate in reproduction only when their small gametes come together with the large gamete of a female human.

Gender is socially constructed, an insight from feminists who challenged patriarchal claims that men's domination and exploitation of women are natural because of biology. Only female humans bear children; that's a biological reality. Suggesting that because they bear children, women are not competent to participate in politics is a patriarchal gender norm. Patriarchy—the term for systems of institutionalized male dominance—turns biological difference into social dominance, enforced by rigid, repressive, and reactionary gender norms. Gender reflects the unequal distribution of power between men and women over the past few thousand years.

A test of whether something is socially constructed is whether it could be constructed differently. Race can be. Sex can't be. We could live just fine without the concept of racial differences. The species could not survive if we didn't recognize the concept of sexual differences.

So, race is constructed all the way down, even though we mark racial groups by observable physical difference. Gender is constructed out of sex differences that are central to reproduction, and hence, central to our lives and cannot be ignored. There can be a world without races but there cannot be a world without recognizing that there are two sexes that have different roles in reproduction. Gender is socially constructed on top of sex, sometimes in egalitarian ways (through most of human history) and sometimes in hierarchical ways (in the past few thousand years of patriarchy). [Note 52: For a more detailed account, see "Sex and Gender" in *The End of Patriarchy*, 19–34.]

People's reactions to these points vary widely, even within particular political projects.

Some reactionary conservatives hold onto a notion of white supremacy rooted in biology. Other conservatives reject that claim but offer only a limited critique of the inequities produced by white-supremacist systems. Some conservatives agree that biological sex is binary but reject a critique of patriarchy and believe that a rigid binary in cultural gender systems is appropriate. Religious conservatives often assert that such rigid norms are mandated by God.

Most people on the left side of the fence accept the social construction of race and ascribe inequities to white supremacy. But when it comes to sex/gender, people on the left vary widely, largely a result of the recent success of the ideology of the transgender movement, which I examine in Chapter 5.