**Race versus Ethnicity**

Race and ethnicity are two words that many people hear often. It is sometimes assumed that they mean the same thing. But there is a major difference between these two characteristics. One involves a person’s biology, while the other involves the person’s culture.

**What’s the Difference?**

Biologically speaking, all humans belong to the same species, but our species is extremely diverse. It contains numerous populations, or races, distinguished by genetic differences. The most notable of these is usually skin color. These genetic differences are actually rather minor and are often due to factors other than DNA. Environmental influences, for example, can over time result in the members of a population’s skin color changing. Such a change across the members of a race takes thousands of years or longer.

Ethnicity, on the other hand, refers to the culture of a region’s people. Language, heritage, religion, and customs are all part of a person’s ethnicity. But his or her genes are not. A person may choose not to conform to the cultural practices of those around him or her. In that case, the person cannot be considered to share his or her ethnicity. Race, on the other hand, is biological and cannot be chosen.

Race and ethnicity sometimes overlap and other times are completely distinct from each other. Americans of the Hispanic ethnicity, for instance, can be of any race: Caucasian, African, Native American, or a combination of these. What they are likely to have in common is that they speak Spanish, belong to the Roman Catholic religion, and frequently follow customs of Latin American countries.

**Two Social Constructs**

To the sociologist, both race and ethnicity are social constructs. Even though a person’s race is biological, the idea of race and the people contained in a race can change over time. Today, all Americans of European descent are regarded as Caucasian or white. In the past, groups such as Irish and Italians were not. Ethnic groups are also arbitrary in that what outsiders consider a large, comprehensive ethnicity (Indian, for example) members of that ethnicity may break down further (Dravidian, Tamil, Bengali, Punjabi, and others).

Even a term such as “African American” can be problematic. Usually used as an ethnic term to apply to Americans of African descent, it covers a large group of people. These range from the descendants of African slaves to recent African immigrants. Some believe that the use of such terms is ineffective in describing such a diverse group. Others feel that to break these groups down any further would be confusing.

**Race, Ethnicity, and Stratification**

Throughout time, societies have treated people of different races and ethnicities with inequality. Generally speaking, racial and ethnic minorities receive less access to resources such as education, wealth, and political influence. This is clear in the United States, where it has been shown that Caucasians face less discrimination in the workplace and are more likely to obtain a high school diploma or college degree than their African American counterparts.

A person’s ethnicity also affects his or her opportunities in society. In many countries, ethnic groups are viewed as existing outside the mainstream due to their different languages and customs. As a result, they are often looked at as inferior from a patriotic standpoint. And as with race, ethnicity is a line along which wealth and income are often limited. Sociologists study race and ethnicity as means of social stratification. Through this system, inequality is institutionalized.

Answer the following questions

* What are the major differences between race and ethnicity?
* How are a person’s ethnicity affect opportunities in society?