

---

# Scholarly Debates and Their Societal Backdrops

Ann Morning

*Grounds for Difference* is truly a jewel of a book. Through a series of essays, it casts light on major facets of the domains of ethnicity and nationalism. Nowhere is this more evident than in the chapter entitled “The Return of Biology,” which will be the focus of this essay.

“The Return of Biology” has a great deal to offer multiple and overlapping audiences. Readers who want to explore how claims linking race to biology have been produced or taken up in sociology in the last decade will be hard-pressed to find a comparable text covering so much ground in such concise fashion. Similarly, the chapter is a terrific teaching resource because it provides a brief yet comprehensive overview of key domains where notions of race and biology are being hashed out today: biomedicine, forensics, genealogy, and the politics of belonging. In my view, however, the chapter’s greatest contribution is its ending manifesto: the list of recommendations that Brubaker makes for “a constructivist response” to what he perceives as the return or rise of objectivist notions of race as biology. Every student of sociology should become familiar with it.

Having said that, there are aspects of both his description of scholarly debate about race and his recommendations for a response to which I would like to add.

## Biology in the Sociological Imagination

Brubaker’s account of academic thinking on race and biology in the last few decades includes three key elements:

- A long-standing division of jurisdiction—between biologists’ study of “populations” and social scientists’ investigation of “race”—that is now coming undone;
- This division holding only as long as biologists “acquiesced” to it; and
- A long-standing—though also softening—“antibiologism” among sociologists.

Each of these claims, I argue, warrants a more nuanced portrayal—one that would bring into sharper focus the field of power in which the disciplines maneuver.

Early on in his depiction of the scholarly landscape, Brubaker (2015) describes a “tacit and largely uncontested division of jurisdiction” (ibid.: 51) between biologists’ “objectivist study of populations” and social scientists’ “subjectivist study of race” (ibid.: 52), with the latter claiming an “exclusive jurisdiction over the phenomenon of race” (ibid.: 50). However, this account overlooks the considerable extent to which social scientists have consistently been attuned to geneticists’ claims about race, and indeed eager to enlist them in their own arguments. As Brubaker puts it, sociologists have appealed “to the authority of biology to validate their subjectivist and constructivist understandings of race” (ibid.: 50). This attention is explained by the

uneven playing field between currently prestigious biology and less prestigious sociology and anthropology, which must be kept squarely in focus whenever we think about scholarly debates over the nature of race. Given this asymmetry—including in popular ideas of who “real” scientists are—I doubt that social scientists have ever really believed themselves that they had “exclusive jurisdiction” over racial claims making.

The reality and centrality of this uneven disciplinary playing field is also apparent in the second element of Brubaker’s panorama, namely the idea that the ostensible sociological jurisdiction over race came about (at least in part) because biologists “acquiesced” to it. As Brubaker sees it, in the past biologists refrained from “publicly challenging social scientists’ claims that race was biologically meaningless” (ibid.: 51). This idea of biologists’ “acquiescing”—of “letting” sociologists and anthropologists have a vocal role in debates about race—suggests that the former had a determining power that they merely chose not to exercise. Which may be true—or may not be, if post–World War II race biology was too crippled by international outrage over the Holocaust to be a viable, credible interlocutor. The point here is simply that again, depictions of scholarly debate over race are freighted with assumptions or perceptions regarding the disciplinary balance of power that need to be explicitly examined.

The claim that biologists submitted to sociological race jurisdiction should also be questioned for another reason, namely the motives that Brubaker ascribes to them. He sees two possibilities. One is that biological scientists were just not interested in “folk” notions like race. This may well be true, but if so, it would have to be understood as a superficial attempt at scientific boundary marking *à la* Gieryn given—as Brubaker points out—their willingness to use folk racial categories (or near equivalents) without qualms.

The other motive Brubaker suggests for biologists’ avoiding public commentary on race is their political or ethical sensibilities. This may also be accurate at least in part, but it is problematic in that it echoes—even if only inadvertently—an accusation that proponents of a biological race concept have repeatedly made. In what Reanne Frank (2012) has called “forbidden knowledge discourse,” anyone who denies the biological foundations of race is perceived as only doing so out of a misplaced and antiscientific political correctness.

The suggestion that the only two reasons for which biologists once shied away from pronouncements on race are (1) allergy to “folk” ideas and (2) political correctness gives dangerously short shrift to a very real third factor: that some biological scientists have seen race as a matter of social science rather than biology precisely because their own data and observations suggest as much to them. There has been no shortage of geneticists who have actively concluded that race was not a useful category in biology, and that has to be understood as an integral element of why the social sciences have had a strong voice in scholarly discussion of race. In other words, it is not just because biologists have avoided weighing in for “unscientific” reasons.

Thinking about the variety of views that geneticists have about race—apparent to me in my own interviews (Morning 2011) and in those conducted by Catherine Bliss

(2012)—reminds us not to oversimplify the contrast between the social and biological sciences, rendering them as monolithic in their views and locked into opposition with each other. In fact, we would also do well to realize that sociologists' constructivism is neither as total nor as deeply rooted as we might believe, allowing for plenty of fairly objectivist (or at least undertheorized) use of race in social scientific analysis. Even a short visit to the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association or the Population Association of America would illustrate this. Consequently, the "biology versus sociological science" comparison may not only obscure important variations in both disciplinary camps but also ignore some similarities between them.

The question of just what it is that sociologists think about race is at the heart of the third and last dimension of Brubaker's description of the academic landscape that I have highlighted. In his view, "A reflexive antibiologism became central to the disciplinary identity of sociologists. . . . Most sociologists have been uninterested in the interface between the social and the biological, and many have been hostile to any attempt to show the bearing of biology on social life" (Brubaker 2015: 2).

My immediate reaction to this comment is: Just how interested in the interface between the social and the biological have biologists been? How open have they been to attempts to show the bearing of social life on biological processes and—importantly—on the production of biological knowledge? Or to put it differently: Have geneticists cited sociologist Troy Duster as much as social scientists have cited geneticist Richard Lewontin? Again the uneven playing field in the academy rears its ugly head. As the reference to Troy Duster suggests, I think that social scientists have paid much more attention to what biologists say about race than vice versa, but the latter have not been castigated for it. Accordingly, it seems reasonable and fruitful to put any charge of sociological antibiologism in perspective by comparing it to biological antisociologism.

Such comparison does not invalidate Brubaker's claim about sociologists, however, and I think he is probably right about sociological skepticism toward biological explanations as well as about its current weakening. In fact, the tide may be turning even more quickly than he suggests. He points to the arguments that some prominent sociologists have made in recent years against antibiologism; I would go even farther to suggest that important institutions like journals, large-scale surveys, and funders now welcome sociological research drawing on genetic data or analyses, as Catherine Bliss's research on sociogenomics suggests. Once again, the current prestige of—and explanatory power ascribed to—biological science will be crucial for understanding the evolution of race as an object of scholarly inquiry.

## A Biosocial Constructivist Manifesto

"The Return of Biology" is not only a descriptive (and analytical) account, but it also has an important normative component in the form of recommendations for the

outlines that a “constructivist response” might take. This normative agenda is a response to Brubaker’s (2015: 53) perception that “[t]he new objectivism and naturalism present a challenge to subjectivist and constructivist accounts of race and ethnicity.” While I applaud the series of thoughtful recommendations that follow, I see the nature of the challenge somewhat differently.

As I have argued elsewhere (Morning 2011), I do not see objectivist accounts of race presenting us—especially sociologists of scientific knowledge—with any more of a challenge than have Boyle’s chemical experiments or Linnaeus’ taxonomic nomenclature (Schiebinger 1993; Shapin 1994). In other words, we sociologists have the tools to investigate and analyze knowledge claims without having to accept them as true. The fact that these claims purport to be objective—maybe even divinely ordained—matters of fact has not prevented us from showing how social life has deeply influenced their production, whether through political movements, gender hierarchies, norms regarding trust, or other forces. What objectivist claims about race do hamper, though, is the broader diffusion of sociological understandings about knowledge claims. In other words, constructivism faces an uphill battle in the popular mind—and for that matter in the ivory tower—in part because in the boundary-marking move that Thomas Gieryn (1999) described so eloquently, its objectivist opponents are quick to claim the mantle of “real” science.

Not only do we seem to perceive the challenge of objectivism differently, Brubaker and I may also have different senses of what is at stake in a sociological response to biological essentialism. He is worried—as are others—that “denying . . . the relevance of biology to the social sciences” would be a “self-marginalizing” move (Brubaker 2015: 81). He captures this concern nicely when he writes: “In the past decade or so, a number of prominent sociologists . . . have argued that a principled antipathy to the biological is both intellectually narrow-minded and professionally self-defeating, threatening to make sociology irrelevant in an intellectual and social context in which the biological sciences are increasingly powerful and prestigious” (ibid.: 2). Concern over the status of the sociological discipline should be taken seriously. But our intellectual agenda should not be driven by political winds. In other words, the prestige of biological science is not a valid reason for aligning ourselves with it.

Similarly, rather than presume the blanket relevance of biology to social outcomes, we must rigorously ask when, how, and to what extent biological processes are meaningful for social life. Here I am not concerned only about our colleagues, many of whom like Brubaker are thinking in sophisticated ways about what he describes so nicely as the ways that “the circuits of social construction and social causation . . . pass through the body” (ibid.: 84); the broader public conversation cannot be overlooked. We must be extremely careful and extremely rigorous when dealing with claims about the import of biology because we are operating against a broader societal backdrop in which, as our late colleague Dorothy Nelkin along with Susan Lindee described, far-reaching powers are routinely ascribed to genes (Nelkin and Lindee 1995). We cannot let ourselves forget that we are still in an era where a

*New York Times* science reporter can publish a book with a major press that asserts that nations inhabited by Europeans and their descendants are among the wealthiest in the world because whites have special genes for creativity and democracy (see Wade 2014).<sup>1</sup> In such a world, arguments about the biology of race are all-too-quickly lapped up in the public sphere, and for this reason we social scientists must be especially vigilant about the soundness of the claims we put forward.

In the United States, whose academy has a disproportionate impact on scholarship worldwide, we are primed to think of biology as destiny. This is in no small part because as a society we have been organized to make race destiny, and socialized to view biology as the underpinning of that natural order. That legacy is why race is already part of our discipline's nascent conversations about biological processes and social outcomes. In short, knowing that we are operating in a society that is quick to perceive race as a matter of biology, and social outcomes as a matter of physical characteristics, the arena of sociogenomics is one that we want to enter with a minimum of assumptions, and subject those to great scrutiny. We would not want to import from biological science a lack of attention to the complexity of social life, and especially a lack of attention to the processes of the "social construction of reality" (Berger and Luckmann 1966) that reify our categories—indeed, all of what passes for "knowledge"—into apparently objective matters of fact.

Happily, the first plank in Brubaker's recommendations for a constructivist response to racial objectivism is a call to reaffirm the "foundational insight" of constructivism, namely that "[r]ace and ethnicity do not exist prior to or independently of people's beliefs and practices" (Brubaker 2015: 81). At the same time, however, he makes clear throughout the chapter that we cannot be effective proponents of this insight simply by repeating the mantra that "race is socially constructed." As Brubaker shows, the solution is *not* to stop repeating this claim, but to turn it into something more deeply understood than a mantra. Right now it is too often a superficial and poorly grasped claim, both in the public and even among social scientists. Instead, we have to double down and thoroughly comprehend why we say race is socially constructed. Gaining a deeper appreciation of racial constructivism requires reckoning with biology, and it is something that all social scientists should be trained to do. Fortunately, Rogers Brubaker has provided us with an extremely useful and incisive tool for doing just that.

1. It is not too much of a stretch to say that Wade believes Europeans alone have the genes for "modernity," a concept that Brubaker takes up elsewhere in *Grounds for Difference*. "Modernity" is indeed a racialized notion because—as its partial roots in "modernization" development theory suggest—it is effectively a self-congratulatory way of invoking and valorizing the contemporary West and its ideologies, cultural forms, and social structures. Especially because the arbiters of modernity are largely Western (or Western-trained) theorists. Modernity theory also seems to embody a self-serving and sanitized account for the spread of Western mores and practices, one that discounts racism. Its language of "diffusion" and "convergence" suggests a kind of agent-less process where the good, "modern" package is simply taken up voluntarily worldwide (see Brubaker 2015: 52), rather than being delivered and imposed through European imperialism and its aftermath. Although Brubaker readily acknowledges the risk of a "narrow, complacently Eurocentric account of modernity" (ibid.: 153), this raises the question, "Is there any other kind?"

## References

- Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Bliss, Catherine (2012) *Race Decoded: The Genomic Fight for Social Justice*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Brubaker, Rogers (2015) *Grounds for Difference*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Frank, Reanne (2012) "Forbidden or forsaken? The (mis)use of a forbidden knowledge argument in research on race, DNA and disease," in Keith Wailoo, Alondra Nelson, and Catherine Lee (eds.) *Genetics and the Unsettled Past: The Collision between DNA, Race, and History*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press: 315–24.
- Gieryn, Thomas F. (1999) *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Morning, Ann (2011) *The Nature of Race: How Scientists Think and Teach about Human Difference*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- (2014) "Does genomics challenge the social construction of race?" *Sociological Theory* (32): 189–207.
- Nelkin, Dorothy, and M. Susan Lindee (1995) *The DNA Mystique: The Gene as Cultural Icon*. New York: Freeman.
- Schiebinger, Londa (1993) *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Shapin, Steven (1994) *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wade, Nicholas (2014) *A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race and Human History*. New York: Penguin.