Even before my first child was born, her race—and mine—seemed to matter. Most of the pamphlets my doctor gave me about potential birth defects made reference to groups such as “African Americans” and “Caucasians,” or they mentioned “ethnicity.” A brochure from a company called Genzyme Genetics, for example, calculated a mother’s risk of being a carrier of cystic fibrosis according to whether she was Northern European, Southern European, Ashkenazi Jewish, Hispanic, African American, or Asian American.¹ When I was twelve weeks pregnant, my doctor ordered a blood test that would indicate how likely the baby was to have certain chromosomal disorders such as Down syndrome. Before drawing my blood, a nurse asked me to state my race. Usually I describe myself as African American, but on that day, piqued by curiosity about what race had to do with my unborn child’s health, I gave the full version
of my ancestry: African, European, American Indian, and Asian. “Oh,” the nurse replied as she noted my answer on a form, “So you go in the ‘Other’ box.”

Since her birth, my four-year-old daughter has been racially classified on several occasions. Within twenty-four hours of delivery, Sofia received her first official racial designation: her birth certificate required her mother’s and her father’s race. Dutifully, I filled in “black,” but my Italian-born husband went into a huff, and, muttering that his daughter would be “iracial,” left the item blank. A week or two later, when we took Sofia to a doctor’s visit, the hospital admissions clerk insisted that they needed to know her race before she could be seen. For someone who studies race for a living, I was surprisingly unprepared for the question. “Hmmm,” I pondered. “Multiracial?” “That’s not an option,” the clerk told us. “We’ll just put ‘Race Unknown.’” Since those early days, my daughter’s race has even been required on nursery-school applications. It is probably just the beginning of what will be a lifetime of forms, checkboxes, and computer codes that all designate race. In short, a typical American experience.

My own experience offers a sampling of the varied occasions on which Americans are called upon to identify their race. In addition to medical visits, I have had to report my race when submitting school applications, renting an apartment, getting a marriage license, applying for work as a college professor, being fingerprinted for government job clearance, obtaining research funding, and filling out the household census form. Although some of these examples clearly relate to my profession as an academic, several are routine experiences that many if not most Americans share. Categorization by race comes up in our institutional transactions as well as our interpersonal relations.

As common as bureaucratic requests for racial information are, however, they rarely come with any explanation of what race is. In the absence of explicit, straightforward, or accessible definitions of race, individuals are largely left to their own devices to make sense of what they are being asked for. What is it that we think we are revealing about ourselves when we report our race? Are we saying something about our cultural practices, appearance, biological makeup, ancestry, or social
class? About our economic status, political leaning, health, or consumer habits? And why do requests for our “ethnicity” so often require that we choose a racial label such as “black” or “white”? Sociologists tend to define racial categories as being based on beliefs about physical difference, while ethnicity is thought to involve categories reflecting cultural differences (for example, in language, religious practice, customs, etc.). Yet the term ethnicity is frequently treated as a substitute for race, and not just in informal conversation.

When I was pregnant, I tried to find out what race meant from a medical perspective: what did it have to do with blood tests or my unborn daughter’s health? A couple of the corporate brochures I received explained that the results of my blood tests would be affected by my “weight, ethnic background and age,” making my ethnicity seem like a bodily measure akin to how old I was or how heavy. The nurse who drew my blood could not explain how race was relevant to predictions about my baby’s health other than to say it somehow affected how my blood work was analyzed. So although I gathered that medical professionals believe race is meaningful for health, it was hard to figure out exactly how or why. What kind of a phenomenon was race that it could be linked to blood, genes, and illness?

**SCIENCE, EDUCATION, AND RACIAL CONCEPTUALIZATION**

How Americans define what race is—and how science, education, government, and business influence those views—is at the heart of this book. Our understandings of racial difference are undoubtedly shaped by our families, friends, neighbors, and peers. But in a society where racial classification pervades bureaucratic life, our everyday experiences in settings such as schools, companies, state agencies, and medical offices also leave their mark on our notions of race. Being repeatedly asked to report our race conveys the message that it is important—one of the handful of basic facts that people or organizations need to know about us. It also casts race as a permanent and individual characteristic: something
that is embedded within us and does not change over time. Finally, the ubiquitous race question presumes a straightforward, self-evident answer: everybody knows his or her race. It does not require any complicated investigation or calculation.

The fundamental objective of this book is to explore how scientists’ concepts of race are transmitted to the public through formal education as well as other institutions. The scientific enterprise is central to American thinking about race because its claims are often the bedrock upon which academic, business, and government interpretations of the nature of race purport to rest. The medical tests marketed by companies such as Genzyme Genetics are informed by scientists’ research; so are census questionnaires and high-school textbooks. To be sure, the authority of the scientific establishment does not always go uncontested; consider for example the occasional successes of religiously inspired creationism in shaping biology education. Still, in the United States today, science is largely equated with “knowledge of nature,” especially as it is acquired through a specialized process (Conner 2005, 2). Indeed, as Yearley (2005, 1) put it, “Science is the exemplar and the measure of knowledge in the contemporary industrialized world.” So in our society, the natural and social sciences are ultimately the place where we expect to find answers about what race is.

Despite the special authority that scientists enjoy, their beliefs are by no means independent of the broader society in which they train and practice. If lay people are influenced by what “experts” say about race, the reverse is true too: scientific notions of race are informed by the broader political and social currents of their times. This was the case in the nineteenth century when scientists sought to corroborate popular wisdom concerning the intelligence of whites or the physical frailty of mulattoes, and it still holds true today. This book, then, can be understood as focusing on one section of what is in fact a loop: the flow of scientific thinking to the public, which in turn unquestionably shapes scientists’ views in the first place.

As students of “science popularization” know, scientific arguments are not usually conveyed directly to the lay public, but rather are transmitted through intermediate institutions. Organizations that have an
obviously communicative function (such as schools, newspaper publishers, or television companies) clearly play a role in the dissemination of scientific thinking to the public, and they receive the lion’s share of attention from scholars who study the diffusion of such thinking. Yet other institutions also send messages about the nature of race, either through explicit statements (for example, the Census Bureau providing a working definition of race on its website) or implicitly through their practices, such as using information about a patient’s race to help analyze her blood samples. A central premise of this book then is that it is not enough to ponder the role of academic science alone when it comes to studying the impact of scientific expertise on Americans’ understandings of human difference; we must also investigate the range of institutional intermediaries—from government agencies to biotech companies—that amplify and interpret scientists’ views, putting them into material practice and thus delivering them for public consumption.

Among the institutions that channel scientists’ notions of race, formal education provides the focus for this book. Elementary schools, secondary schools, and colleges and universities are in the business of teaching young people about the world, so it is in their classrooms that we might expect to find the most straightforward attempts to explain the concept of race. They are among the organizations most explicitly devoted to disseminating scientists’ views to the lay public, and they may well have the greatest impact of any institutions with that mission. Formal schooling is nearly universal in the United States: in 2008, 88 percent of the population aged twenty-five and over had completed high school; only about 1 percent had not finished grade school (National Center for Education Statistics 2009). Moreover, messages delivered through education generally reach their audience at an important stage: in youth, when teaching has the potential to leave profound, lifelong impressions. Finally, the classroom setting, particularly at the college level, actually brings students into direct, face-to-face contact with the scientists whose research forms the core literature that will be disseminated through varied channels. In short, school seems like a natural place to start exploring how contemporary institutions transmit scientists’ understandings of
race as it enjoys a public reach that is unparalleled in its breadth, depth, and immediacy.

This inquiry about education and the spread of scientific race thinking is organized around three main questions:

1. What concepts of race do scientists hold?
2. What concepts of race do scientists transmit to the public through formal education?
3. How do students (the lay recipients) receive or react to these messages about race?

To answer these questions, I pursued three lines of research. In-depth interviews with over forty professors of anthropology and biology at four universities in the northeastern United States supplied data on how these scientists define race. A sample of over ninety textbooks in the social and biological sciences that were published between 1952 and 2002 illustrated the messages that are broadcast from the ivory tower to the public. Finally, interviews with over fifty undergraduates at the same four campuses where I spoke with professors helped me understand what these young people made of the race-related messages they encountered in the classroom.

LOSS AND REDEMPTION: AMERICAN RACE CONCEPTS AT THE START OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The Nature of Race advances a dual argument: that biological interpretations of race remain powerful in scientific thinking and communications to the public, and that in contrast, the idea that race is socially constructed is not conveyed nearly as widely. Indeed, the message that race is a human invention has been largely “lost in transmission.”

These findings will surprise in some quarters. For one thing, they squarely contradict those social scientists who presume that the constructivist perspective on race dominates the academy. When I began my research on scientists’ concepts of race, more than one senior scholar
was skeptical that I would find any variety to study. “Everyone knows race is a social construct!” was the refrain I got used to hearing.

This book’s central argument is at even greater odds with the more widespread belief that the United States has become a “postracial” nation. In the wake of Barack Obama’s presidential campaign and election, the claim that “we are now entering a new era in America in which race has substantially lost its special significance” (Pettigrew 2009, 279)—in other words, a postracial era—has gained serious traction. But if race is fading as a dividing line in society, why is it enduring and perhaps even hardening as a biological boundary in the public imagination? And how does the biological model of race survive and indeed flourish in a nation that is increasingly multiracial? Given the diversification of our immigration stream as well as growing rates of interracial marriage over the last few decades, some scholars predict that racial mixture will bring about the demise of race (Daniel 2002) or at least a meaningful softening of color lines (J. Lee and Bean 2004). More generally, sociological research in recent years has come to emphasize the fluid and contextual nature of racial identity, whether in terms of individuals’ self-description or group classifications. As a result, sociologists have perhaps inadvertently contributed to the “postracial” idea that race is less powerful or real than it once was. Yet despite these public conversations about the disappearance of race as a barrier to advancement, and academic treatises on the situational and constructed nature of race, the long-standing belief that race is etched on the human body and has far-reaching physical, social, economic, and political consequences has given up little ground. As I will discuss in the concluding chapter, the cohabitation of these perspectives on race—that is, the faith in physical race in the midst of an ostensibly postracial era in a multiracial society—offers insight into the contemporary forms that American racial conceptualization has taken.

Another major contention of this book is that there is no consensus among experts from any scientific background about what race is; disagreement flourishes not just between specialists in different fields, but within disciplines as well. Without greater agreement on—and a more concerted effort to promote—the constructionist understanding of race, it decidedly ranks as a minority viewpoint among the public that is most
Introduction

directly exposed to scientists’ views: namely, undergraduate students. Those I interviewed were much more likely to define race in what I call “culturalist” terms—that is, to equate race with the ancestry-based cultural communities that sociologists call ethnic groups.

Why does the biological model of race hold such sway? It is not due merely to historical inertia, for the biological race concept met with considerable criticism in the twentieth century. Nor do biological accounts prevail simply because they are “true”; not only are they hotly contested by academics across the disciplinary spectrum, but history makes amply clear that in the past, various biological frameworks for race endured despite having had the empirical legs kicked out from under them. Instead, social changes—particularly demographic and political developments—have made biological views of race more appealing than they were a generation ago. Or, to put it more precisely, societal shifts have “redeemed” the biological race concept, stripping away its morally dubious connotations (for example, with eugenics) and associating it instead with benevolence and progress.

Overview of the Book

The Nature of Race is organized symmetrically. At its center are three chapters that present the findings from each of the data sets I described above: the textbooks, faculty interviews, and student interviews. The first of these is Chapter 3, which opens our inquiry into scientific communication about race by examining its presentation from the 1950s to the present in high-school biology textbooks, with comparisons to social science texts. Focusing on high-school texts targets scientific education that is more widespread than college training (as considerably more Americans graduate from high school than go on to college), and that underpins the toolkit of scientific knowledge undergraduates bring with them when they arrive at college. Chapter 4 picks up the story on university campuses, describing the definitions of race that emerged from interviews with anthropology and biology professors. Chapter 5 turns to their students, reporting on how those majoring in anthropology,
biology, and other disciplines expressed their understandings of racial
difference.

These three chapters are book-ended by two that place the transmis-
sion of race concepts through education in a broader perspective. Chap-
ter 2 considers racial conceptualization as a topic of social scientific
inquiry. It brings together disparate bodies of literature from varied
disciplines that have touched on the question of how individuals define
and think about racial difference. Chapter 6, which immediately follows
the suite of empirical chapters, looks at institutional rather than indi-
vidual conceptualizations of race. It situates formal education alongside
other key institutions that embody and convey scientific ideas of race.
And it offers an original typology by distinguishing key U.S. institu-
tions that claim in some way to discern or identify individuals’ racial
membership based on scientific knowledge: the census, the law, the
criminal-justice system, and the firms that sell DNA ancestry tests. I also
look at the medical establishment as a primary institution through which
scientific notions of racial difference are conveyed to the public.

Turning finally to the first and the last chapters of this book, the for-
ermer provides a comprehensive overview of the book’s questions and argu-
ments, while the latter summarizes and then moves beyond them.
Specifically, this final chapter poses the fundamental question of why
American race concepts take the form they do today. This important
question calls for sociological consideration of how notions of race re-
fect their times.

RACIAL CONCEPTUALIZATION
AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

What is racial conceptualization?

I use the term racial conceptualization to refer to the web of beliefs that an
individual may hold about what race is. Our concepts of race are not
limited to abstract definitions but rather incorporate a wide range of no-
tions of what a race is, what distinguishes one race from another, how
many and which races there are, how we can discern an individual’s
race, and how or why races emerge. In short, racial concepts are working models of what race is, how it operates, and why it matters.

Why do I contend that race concepts are more than simple definitions? A “definition” carries the connotation of a formal, abstract, and explicit summary statement, one that is articulated in a clear and thorough manner. Dictionaries readily provide definitions of race, such as “a group of people sharing the same culture, history, language, etc” (Jewell and Abate 2001, 1402), while a psychology textbook asserts, “Race refers to a set of hereditary physical characteristics that distinguish one major group of people from another” (McMahon and Romano 2000, 595). Formal definitions, however, cannot capture ideas that are inchoate, unexamined, or unexpressed. Nor do they easily extend to the body of ideas about human difference that might not fit neatly in a concise dictionary passage, but which are dimensions of how people understand race. A “definition” of race given in response to the question, “What is race?” (or “What is a race?”) might not explain what distinguishes one race from another, how many races there are, or where races come from. Yet whether we examine them consciously or not, our answers to these questions and others make up the complex of our understandings about what race is. These notions contribute to a multifaceted model of race that helps us navigate a social world populated by races. How to determine a person’s race; which races exist in the world; what it means to belong to a certain race—these are issues that life in a racialized society raises, and to address them we draw on our personal (yet deeply social) beliefs about the nature of race (Morning 2009). The term racial conceptualization—rather than the narrower word definition—captures this wider range of thinking.

Psychological perspectives on conceptualization

Psychological research lends support to this broad view of race conceptualization. In his pathbreaking book, Race in the Making: Cognition, Culture and the Child’s Construction of Human Kinds, Lawrence Hirschfeld (1996, 1) argues that “[r]acial thinking is not simply a catalogue of human difference; it also encompasses beliefs about the very nature of difference.” In
other words, it involves “a theory (or a theory-like constellation of beliefs) about human variation, its meaning, its scope, and its social significance” (80). The choice of the word theory—akin to the “working model” I described above—is not accidental; it ties Hirschfeld’s argument to a broader psychological literature that investigates the formation of concepts and categories in general, not just with respect to race. An influential early article in the field, “The Role of Theories in Conceptual Coherence” (Murphy and Medin 1985), posited that people’s concepts “are organized by theories” (290), that is, ideas about what kinds of things “go together” and why. These “underlying principles” (297) of categorization or correlation determine what characteristics of an object become salient to us, or what kind of relationship we presume it to have with other entities. Similarly, David Schneider (2004, 120) uses the term schemas to describe “theories we have about categories, . . . [which] function as frameworks for understanding what we see and hear.” These theories serve many functions; they “aid in the recognition, interpretation, and labeling of stimuli; affect memory for information; provide default values for missing information; and generally lead to efficient processing of schema-related material” (122).

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the term theory does not imply “a complete, organized, scientific account”; instead, it is better understood as “a mental ‘explanation’” (Murphy and Medin 1985, 290), an informal way of accounting for one’s perceptions that may be unconscious or unexamined.

These theories provide subjective explanations that structure the social environment and define the partitions the perceiver imposes upon it. They explain what a given group of people is like, what attributes the group members share, and, more importantly, why they share these attributes. (Wittenbrink, Hilton, and Gist 1998, 49)

Psychologists’ insights suggest that concepts of race are not simply stock definitions or lists of racial features but ways of making sense of the world; they embody implicit theories about human properties, social relationships, and their determinants.
Key race concepts: “essentialism” and “constructivism”

If “racial conceptualization” refers to a cognitive process of meaning-making, what are the beliefs—that is, the “race concepts”—to emerge from this process? Scholars usually identify two types: the “essentialist” view of race and the “constructivist” (or “constructionist”) perspective. In an early study of the race debate, for example, Leonard Lieberman (1968) distinguished essentialist “splitters”—academics who saw the human species as being naturally divided into races—from constructionist “lumpers,” scientists who did not believe such racial subdivisions exist in our species. This stark essentialist-constructivist dichotomy may be too restrictive to adequately describe the range of beliefs about human difference that Americans hold today; it does not easily accommodate, for example, the “culturalist” concept that equates races with groupings of people who maintain shared values, norms, and practices. Yet essentialism and constructivism remain the key poles of academic debate on racial conceptualization, and all participants must contend with them. Moreover, they are not exclusively academic concepts: essentialist and constructivist accounts also appear in media coverage and everyday discussion, often dubbed the “race is real” versus “race is not real” camps. Given the centrality of essentialism and constructivism to both scientific and lay discourse about the nature of race, it is important to take a closer look at these two schools of thought.

Essentialism

Essentialism suggests that the members of a given group share one or more defining qualities—“essence(s)”—that are inherent, innate, or otherwise fixed. Haslam, Rothschild, and Ernst (2000) associate it more specifically with beliefs that a given social category is discrete, uniform, informative (that is, knowing a person is a member of the category gives us additional information about that individual), natural, immutable, stable, inherent, exclusive, and necessary (i.e., reflecting members’ shared possession of a necessary condition or set of conditions). In the context of race, essentialism implies an inherited, immutable physical or psychological
difference between racial groups, which are believed to be “natural kinds” (Quine 1977). Essentialist beliefs need not revolve around biology; they can be rooted in ideas about the soul, psyche, etc.—that is, whatever we believe to be the essence of human beings (Nelkin and Lindee 1995). In the United States today, however, this usually translates into discourse about biological (and particularly genetic) characteristics. An example of an essentialist account comes from zoologist Ernst Mayr (2002, 90), who has defined “a geographic race or subspecies” as “an aggregate of phenotypically similar populations of a species inhabiting a geographic subdivision of the range of that species and differing taxonomically from other populations of that species.”

By all accounts, essentialism holds a prominent place in American concepts of race. Even scholars who do not personally subscribe to an essentialist viewpoint recognize that historically, notions of racial difference have been so tightly intertwined with beliefs about physical (or other essential) difference that today they can hardly be disentangled. In Hirschfeld’s (1996, 42) definition of race, for example:

Race theory is the recurrently encountered folk belief that humans can be partitioned into distinct types on the basis of their concrete, observable constitution. The notion of observable constitution captures the following features of racial thinking: racial differences are thought to be embodied, natural, and enduring, and are thought to encompass nonobvious or inner qualities (including moral and mental ones) as well as outward physical ones.

Although Hirschfeld does not support this vision of human difference, he cannot define race without including its references to biology. For this reason, scholars often speak as if there were only one view of race: “the race concept,” one that is inevitably essentialist.

**Constructivism**

Constructivism is fundamentally a theory about knowledge and how it arises. It maintains that what we know is not necessarily a reflection of what is really “out there” independent of human action, but is instead a product of social life. If essentialism posits that social categories simply
Introduction

reflect natural, stable differences between human groups, then constructivism counters that such categories are artificial or “man-made” through a process of “social construction.” In his influential book, *The Social Construction of What?*, Ian Hacking (1999) describes the central argument for the social construction of some phenomenon X as: “X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable” (6). Kukla (2000, 3) adds to this argument the claim that X is “produced by intentional human activity,” but the heart of the conflict between essentialism and constructivism lies in the determination of whether X—for example, race—is in “the nature of things” or is “a social invention” (American Sociological Association 2003, 7).

The dispute has frequently been translated as a question of whether race is “real,” with the understanding that biology represents reality and social facts denote fiction. For this reason, some critics see constructivism as denying important truths about (biological) “reality,” or as undermining valued scientific principles such as objectivity and positivism (Frank forthcoming; Gergen 1998; for examples of such accusations, see P. Gross and Levitt 1998; Sarich and Miele 2004). Yet constructivists do not see social groups as being any less real just because they are not rooted in biology. As Thomas and Thomas (1928) famously put it, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (571–72). Religious communities, for example, are “real” features of our societies that wield enormous influence in world events, but we do not generally believe their membership is dictated by biological traits. The equation of “real” with “biological” then is not only unnecessary, but it obfuscates a debate whose outlines can be traced more clearly.

A more accurate way to contrast constructivism with essentialism is to recognize that the former proposes an alternative to the latter’s explanation for what race is and how it is that races populate our social world. Where essentialists see racial categories stemming from largely fixed, inherited physical differences between human groups (and thus being enduring and universal features of our species), constructivists see the same categories as having been invented by human beings, and more specifically, as being the historical product of particular times and
places. Although different writers emphasize different historical antecedents, constructivist narratives of the emergence of the race idea tend to converge on fifteenth- through eighteenth-century European encounters with “others” as having given rise to belief in distinct, essential races. Catholic Spain’s treatment of converts of Jewish and Muslim origin, as well as European colonization and slavery in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, are among the chief historical developments that constructivist scholars view as having fostered the notion of races (Fredrickson 2002; Smedley 2007). As this time line suggests, power and inequality play major roles in constructivist explanations for the formation of social categories (Velody and Williams 1998). Omi and Winant (1994, 55), for example, define race as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.” In the constructivist view, racial classification is at its root an instrument of power, meant to establish social hierarchy and thus elevate some people—economically, socially, and politically—at the expense of others.

The importance of racial conceptualization

The constructivist association of race beliefs with societal outcomes takes us to the heart of why racial conceptualization matters. Simply put, our ideas about the nature of race influence our racial attitudes and shape social practices and policies.

What makes the contemporary debate about the nature of race such a heated one is largely the connection that its participants draw between race concepts and race attitudes, or more specifically, prejudice. For many, the essentialist view of race is part and parcel of racism. Consider for example geneticists Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, and Piazza’s (1994, 19) definition of racism as “the belief that some races are biologically superior to the others and that they have therefore an inherent right to dominate.” In this view, racism departs from the presumption of biological difference between races, and adds an inegalitarian or hierarchical interpretation of that difference. This linkage between racial concepts and attitudes is further supported by the historical observation that explicitly
oppressive projects such as eugenics and slavery were grounded in an essentialist vision of inherited, fixed, and far-reaching racial difference (Fredrickson 2002; Kevles 1995/1985; Nobles 2000). Contemporary individual-level research, moreover, has largely borne out this connection. In *The Anatomy of Racial Attitudes*, for example, Apostle et al. concluded that “how white people explain their perceptions of racial differences significantly influences what they are willing to support by way both of social policy and individual action to bring about greater racial equality in the society” (1983, 147; see also Sigelman and Welch 1991).

Yet there are also reasons to question any simple mappings of racial essentialism to racism. One is that empirical research has not always corroborated this relationship, a finding I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 2. Another is the theoretical possibility that essentialist belief in biologically distinct “natural” races need not be accompanied by racist belief in a hierarchy of races. Some proponents of the essentialist model of race believe it would be a disservice to historically oppressed minority groups to deny what they consider to be the important biological reality of racial groupings in humankind. They believe that race contains information that can help better address individuals’ health needs; see for example Satel’s (2002) article, “I Am a Racially Profiling Doctor,” or “The Importance of Race and Ethnic Background in Biomedical Research and Clinical Practice” by geneticists Burchard et al. (2003).

Both the likelihood that individuals’ racial conceptualization influences their racial attitudes and the current empirical uncertainty about just how particular race concepts are related to prejudicial attitudes are important reasons for pursuing—and improving—social scientific study of our notions of race. Perhaps an even more compelling motive, however, stems from the clearer observation that particular race concepts inform specific practices and policies.

Looking at the historical record of the United States, it is not hard to see how certain models of racial difference underpinned varied measures and activities. Slavery, Indian removal, immigration restrictions, intermarriage bans, and eugenic programs were all fueled by specific ideas of indelible racial difference. It is always harder to see how the present is shaped by our taken-for-granted beliefs. Still, there is ample evidence that our contemporary models of race affect how we do things,
both as individuals and collectively as a society. For example, the forensic practice of attempting to racially label human specimens (such as skeletal fragments or other remains from disaster or crime sites) would make no sense unless it were undergirded by the belief that one’s race is anchored in the body (Sauer 1992). In the United Kingdom, the same belief that race—as well as ethnicity—is genetically encoded has led to public authorities’ use of DNA testing to assign children to foster-care families and to verify the ethnic (and thus ostensibly national) identity of asylum applicants (Travis 2009). More broadly, research suggests that the belief that people of other races are very different from us dampens our willingness to engage with our neighbors (Putnam 2007) and to support more generous social policies (Alesina and Glaeser 2004).

The contemporary link between concepts of race and models of governance has been vividly illustrated by several controversies. In 2007, Nobel prize winner James Watson drew on his conviction that Africans are innately less intelligent than Europeans to publicly question the utility of foreign aid to African nations, reasoning that their populations were incapable of improving their circumstances (Nugent 2007). This pronouncement echoed Arthur Jensen’s widely publicized (1969) suggestion that public spending on the education of black children was futile, given the natural limits of their intelligence. And in 2005, commentator Andrew Sullivan extended the relevance of racial difference from social policies to more fundamental rights. As he saw it, “one of liberalism’s great contemporary problems” was how to reconcile the moral equality of human beings and the political equality of citizens with increasingly accurate scientific discoveries of aspects of human life that reflect our innate, biological inequality. The problem is intractable; and the more we try and solve this problem, the worse it can get. The better we get at improving the educational or social environment, or enlarging opportunity, the more tenacious and obvious our genetic differences will seem. That goes from individual to individual, but it also might apply to groups in certain categories.

Although Sullivan (2005) does not explicitly mention races (only generic “groups”), in the United States the idea of “innate, biological inequality” has traditionally been closely tied to beliefs about race. In his
Introduction

view, essentialism is a key to good governance: it is only by an honest reckoning with individual and group inequalities that we can design realistic and effective social policy—or come to a satisfactory understanding of the moral and political status of our neighbors and compatriots.

In summary, our racial concepts—that is, the way we think about what race is and how racial difference is demarcated—have the potential to shape our evaluations of others and the courses of action we take with respect to them. This means that racial conceptualization merits much more than the limited attention that I will argue is all it has received from social scientists. This book is intended then to be both a call for greater empirical investigation of how Americans think about race and a response to that appeal.

Author’s Conceptualization of Race

After describing diverse concepts of race, it seems only fair to let readers know where I stand in the debate. I consider myself a constructivist, partial to definitions of race such as the ones by Omi and Winant (1994) and Hirschfeld (1996) quoted above. Specifically, I share with constructivists the belief that racial categories are the intellectual product of a particular (albeit enduring) cultural moment and setting, and that human biological variation does not naturally and unquestionably sort itself into the “black,” “white,” “yellow,” and “red” groups that the Swedish naturalist Linnaeus outlined in the mid-eighteenth century (Hannaford 1996). Perhaps most fundamentally, I agree with Zuberi (2001) that as “a social invention” (American Sociological Association 2003), race is not an individual trait but rather a characteristic of a relationship or social setting. In other words, individuals do not carry race within them; instead, race is a label that is imposed on them (or a container into which they are put) depending on the society in which they find themselves. President Barack Obama nicely illustrates the contextual dependence of race: although he could be classified as “multiracial” or “white”—and would be in different societies or historical moments—he is usually referred to as “black” in the United States today. None of these labels is more “cor-
rect” than the other; there is no ultimate truth that resides in his body. Instead, the accuracy of each descriptor is a function of the culture in which he is classified.

These convictions about race stem from my studies in diverse disciplines, including demography, which shows that racial classification systems vary dramatically by time and place (S. M. Lee 1993; Morning 2008a); sociology and history, which reveal the arbitrariness with which the American “one-drop” rule assigns people of mixed-race heritage to a single race (F. Davis 1991; Wolfe 2001); and physical anthropology and biology, which report that human biological variation is gradual (or clinal) across geography rather than marked by sharp boundaries or disjunctions between one group of people and their neighbors.

My view of race is also undoubtedly colored by personal experience, and especially by the many instances in which I have encountered conflicts between different societies’ approaches to racial classification. As a child, I knew that at home in Harlem, my parents, their friends, our relatives, our neighbors—we were all black. But that identity never held much water with my classmates downtown at the United Nations International School. Asian, European, and especially African students were amazed that I called myself black. “You’re not black,” they would say in reaction to my light brown skin. “You’re tan!” Years later, as a student in Paris, I would get the same reaction from French friends. “You’re not black,” they would say. “You’re métisse!” And as a Foreign Service Officer posted in Tegucigalpa, I even heard my Honduran colleagues say, “You’re not mulata. You’re white!” For years I only thought of these cross-national exchanges as funny anecdotes, but over time they began to pique my curiosity. How was it that something that seemed so obvious to people—my racial identity—could differ so much depending on where in the world I found myself? If my race was as real as everybody thought it was—something written on my face—then why didn’t everybody come to the same conclusion?

When as a graduate student I was exposed to the argument that “race is a social construct,” it seemed an immensely useful tool for explaining the variability in racial classification systems that I had encountered. But one thing bothered me about the constructivist school of thought: if this
claim were really true, then why was it not more widely known? From Ashley Montagu’s 1942 book, *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, I learned that essentialist beliefs in fixed, physical racial characteristics had been challenged for at least sixty years. But why then did doctors still collect information about their patients’ race? Why did people still debate whether black athletes have a racial advantage over their competitors? How did *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray 1994), a book that argued races differed in intelligence, find such a wide audience? And why, for that matter, did my demography professors teach us to calculate life expectancies separately for whites and blacks? Was the “social construct” idea just a utopian myth, the product of sociologists’ wishful thinking?

Reading Montagu’s work half a century later opened up a historical perspective on the career of racial constructivism that prodded me to consider how ideas are disseminated over time, and—drawing on the sociology of knowledge—to think about that process in terms of stages. What if some scientists in the 1940s or even earlier had come to the conclusion that race was socially constructed, but the idea never won over a large segment of the academy? Then the lack of lay familiarity with racial constructionism could be attributed to its languishing in the “knowledge production” stage. What if instead, scientists across the disciplinary spectrum had reached a consensus that race was socially constructed, but they were not successful at getting the message out to the wider public? That would constitute a blockage in the “knowledge transmission” stage. Finally, what if scientists did make a concerted effort to circulate the idea that race is a social construct, but the public was not persuaded? Then the lack of popular constructionism could be chalked up to a failure in the “knowledge reception” stage. In short, with the historical time line that *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth* opened up, many different paths could have led to twenty-first-century Americans’ retaining essentialist beliefs about race—if indeed they did. Answering the question of whether racial constructionism had any public purchase in the contemporary United States, and trying to account for that answer, led to this book.

Although I have presented my own perspectives on race in the interest of transparency, it should be clear that the objective of this book is
not to proselytize for the constructivist point of view. Its aim instead is descriptive and analytical: to trace the ideas about human difference that are transmitted today from the academy to the public, and reflect on why these are the ideas that emerge and spread. My hope is to accurately report the many arguments that scientists and laypeople bring to the question, “What is race?,” and not to judge them.

Accordingly, I propose a working definition of race that I believe both essentialists and constructivists could find acceptable. Specifically, I submit that race is a system for classifying human beings that is grounded in the belief that they embody inherited and fixed biological characteristics that identify them as members of racial groups. Where essentialists and constructionists would differ is on whether the belief in biological racial difference is accurate. But this definition is in itself agnostic on that matter, and so I offer it as a starting point for wading into the debate on the nature of race.