The (Alleged) Biological Basis of Racialization and of the Term "Race"

Drawing from "The Scientific Sources of the Paradox" in Micheal Banton's *What we Know About Race and Ethnicity*

A Timeline of Justifications

→ **Earliest understandings of 'race'**: Two dimensions (meanings): 1. one referring to **hereditary, genealogical characteristics**, staying true to Biblical interpretations of mankind. This is the *vertical* dimension, and it can be pictured as a linear familytree. 2. The other dimension refers to the **nature** of 'race' distinctiveness. This is the *horizontal* dimension, and it is often politically motivated.

The term "race" reflected most often the *vertical* dimension until the 18th century, when the *horizontal* dimension began to carry more weight in political and social contexts.

→ **1735**: **Carl Linnaeus** publishes his classification of the animal and botanical worlds into categories of genus, species, and varietas. The word "race" eventually entered the Linnean scheme of classification, sparking for the first time ideas of 'race' as a scientific concept.

→ **19th century**: The *horizontal* dimension of race and how it related to human advancement was stressed. Europeans viewed themselves as the most advanced, both politically and economically, bringing about questions of inherent biological ability vs. circumstance. For the first time ideas about race-mixing and contrasting racial purity emerge.

→ **19th century continued**: **Charles Darwin** questioned the validity of permanent racial types, sparking debates between continuous variation and mutation-sprung discontinuous variation.

→ **1930**: Race is **defeated** as a scientific concept when R. A. Fisher's book reveals genes, not species, as a unit of Selection. Fisher creates in part the new field of population genetics.

So, what can we take away from this intricate and lengthy history?

When it comes to biological difference, differences attributed to "race" are a miniscule part of human genetic variability. These differences are biologically significant in very few ways, mainly only in circumstances such as the planning and distribution of medical services.

Language holds **immense** power in fostering a culture of division and fear, and there has never been a single definitive understanding of the word "race". The lack of a scientific basis for recognizing and identifying race contrasts heavily with popular conceptions and common usage of the word. Because of racism, 'race' carries very real political, social, and economic consequences.

Ordinary language, when used in everyday life, often acquires new meanings. This contrasts with technical language, which usually serves to seek a single definition. A word such as 'race' can carry a technical definition as well as fluid, less precise meanings in popular speech.

The ordinary language conception of the word "race" is difficult to align with our current scientific knowledge. Popular conceptions of 'race' are reinforced so strongly in everyday life that it remains embedded in social institutions and remains strenuous to change.

The bottom line: "While race has a prominent place in the ordinary language vocabulary, it has none in the vocabulary of science" (27).

Bibliography:

Banton, M. (2018). The Scientific Sources of the Paradox. In *What We Now Know About Race and Ethnicity* (pp. 11-30). NEW YORK; OXFORD: Berghahn Books. doi:10.2307/j.ctt130h8qv.5