Racism

Racism is most commonly used to describe the belief that members of one’s own race are superior physically, mentally, culturally, and morally to members of other races. Racist beliefs provide the foundation for extending special rights, privileges, and opportunities to the race that is believed to be superior, and to withholding rights, privileges, and opportunities from the races believed to be inferior. No scientific evidence supports racist claims, although racism exists in all countries and cultures. The definition of racism has evolved to describe prejudice against a group of people based on the belief that human groups are unequal genetically, and that members of some racial groups are thus inferior. Sociologists distinguish between individual racism, a term describing attitudes and beliefs of individuals, and institutional racism, which denotes governmental and organizational policies that restrict minority groups or demean them by the application of stereotypes. While such policies are being corrected to eliminate institutional racism, individual racism nonetheless persists.

Scientists have acknowledged individual differences among ethnic and racial groups, citing the importance of environment in shaping performance and measurable ability. When test results appear to indicate differences in ability and performance that follow racial lines, the effect of environment must be considered in interpreting the results. In addition, tests and other instruments for evaluating ability may be biased to favor knowledge and experiences of one racial or ethnic group over others. Thus, test scores must be analyzed with great caution with regard to patterns of performance and their relationship to race.

By studying genetic patterns in humans, scientists have demonstrated that genetic differences between races are not very significant. As humans migrate from continent to continent and ethnic groups intermingle,
racial categories will have less meaning, but prejudice is not likely to disappear.

See also Ethnocentrism; Eugenics

Further Reading

Otto Rank
1884-1939
Austrian psychoanalyst and collaborator of Sigmund Freud, who developed theories of will and birth trauma.

Otto Rank was Sigmund Freud’s closest collaborator for 20 years. Later, he strongly influenced the development of psychotherapy in the United States. He was the first psychoanalyst to examine mother-child relationships, including separation anxiety. He also was one of the first to practice a briefer form of psychotherapy, called “active therapy.” His work, in contrast to orthodox Freudian psychology, emphasized free will, relationships, and creativity. Many of Rank’s ideas, including the importance of the ego, consciousness, and the present, have become mainstays of psychoanalytic theory.

Born in Vienna, Austria, in 1884, Otto Rosenfeld changed his name to Otto Rank as an adolescent. It was one of his first acts of “self-creation.” The second son of Simon Rosenfeld, a jeweler, and Karoline Fleischner, the family could only afford a higher education for one son. Rank attended trade school, despite recurring bouts of rheumatic fever, and became a locksmith, while his brother studied law. In 1904, Rank suffered a suicidal depression, after which he experienced a spiritual rebirth.

Hired by Freud
Rank was extremely well-read in literature and philosophy. After discovering the works of Freud, he wrote an essay that applied Freud’s theory of dreams to the creativity of artists. On reading the essay, Freud was so impressed that in 1906 he hired Rank as the secretary of the newly founded Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. Soon, Rank was a member of the “Committee of Seven,” Freud’s inner circle. Although only 22, Rank was considered to be the resident expert on mythology, literature, and philosophy. With financial support from Freud, Rank earned his Ph.D. from the University of Vienna in 1912, with the first ever dissertation on psychoanalysis. Entitled The Lohengrin Legend, it was published in 1911. Rank was the first psychoanalyst without a medical degree.

Rank lived with Freud and together they trained psychoanalysts from all over the world. However as Freud’s favorite, he engendered the anger and jealousy of other Freud disciples. Rank edited Freud’s The Interpretation of Dreams, co-edited their psychoanalytic journals, and became director of their publishing house. In 1918 in Poland, while serving in the Austrian army, Rank married Beata “Tola” Mincer, who also joined Freud’s circle and became a psychoanalyst. Their only child, a daughter, was born in 1919.

Breaks with Freud
In The Trauma of Birth, published in German in 1924 and in English in 1929, Rank extended Freud’s ideas to mother-child relationships. He viewed the child’s separation from the mother at birth and weaning as the basis of neurosis and argued that the male sex drive was a desire to return to the womb. Rank’s therapy involved re-experiencing the trauma of birth. On a trip to the United States in 1924, Rank lectured on his own ideas as well as Freud’s. Although Freud originally praised Rank’s new work, soon he was attacking him, and they broke off their relationship in 1926. Rank moved his family to Paris and began spending a great deal of time in the United States, lecturing and treating patients. His new “active therapy” stressed a more equal relationship between the patient and therapist, with a focus on terminating the analysis, as opposed to the open-ended and intensive psychoanalysis of Freud. The Freudians labeled Rank as mentally ill, and he was expelled from the American Psychoanalytic Association. To remain in the Association, those who had undergone analysis with Rank were forced to undergo analysis again with a Freudian practitioner.

Rank was a prolific writer. His works included a 700-page survey, The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend, first published in 1912. Between 1926 and 1931, he wrote important works on developmental psychology, education, and therapeutic methods. The English translation of an expanded version of his early essay on art, Art and Artist, appeared in 1932. In sharp contrast to Freudian principles, Will Therapy (1936) stressed consciousness, choice, responsibility, and action. Rank argued that neurotics were failed artists who could regain their will through analysis, in a process of self-creation or rebirth.