

Cultural understanding of the concept of race

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The mutual relation between culture and nature will be examined in the present article on the basis of a specific example. The discussion about highly general concepts, which undoubtedly include the concepts of nature and culture, makes more sense, when it is referred to a more detailed problem. It is the status of the notion of race. My thesis in the article is as follows: today the notion of race is better suited to a description of cultural phenomena than to a description of biological phenomena. Thus, the notion should be part of the vocabulary of social sciences and culture sciences rather than the vocabulary of natural sciences.

My argument will consist of three main parts. First, I will try, drawing on arguments of modern physical anthropology as well as philosophy and science, to show why the notion of race is becoming problematic and redundant in the natural sciences discourse. Then I will present various ways of defining race in social sciences and in the humanities, together with their related premises and consequences. Finally, I will examine the methods of studying this problem empirically.

However, I will start by explaining why this topic is cognitively important and interesting to me. The reason behind my decision to tackle it is linked to my personal experiences from a visit to the United States on a scholarship. The problem of race is the subject matter of numerous studies at American universities. In Poland, apart from a few publications, it virtually does not exist¹. As a result, our knowledge of what race is and what it signifies is limited. That is why I have asked the question about the way knowledge of human races is shaped in Polish society. In other words, I am interested in how the category of race is constructed and what

¹ In fact, the only Polish monograph devoted to the issue of race from the perspective of the humanities is a book by Radosław Tyrała, *O jeden takson za dużo. Rasa jako kategoria społecznie problematyczna*, Warsaw 2005.

its social and cultural function is. The aim of the present article is to show the theoretical assumptions of my research.

Does a culture scholar have the right and competence to deal with this topic and encroach on the territory of natural sciences? For the category of race has been traditionally part of the biological vocabulary. In a popular textbook of cultural anthropology, Ewa Nowicka argues that although the concept of race has done a lot of harm in the history of humanity, today “exploring the biological variety of human beings is not socially dangerous”². This is primarily because of the fact that for social studies biological diversity does not matter, for it does not overlap with cultural diversity³. In addition, in Nowicka’s view, modern anthropology is based on cultural relativism and pluralism. This corresponds to the opinion expressed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, according to whom “it does not behove an anthropologist to try and define what is and is not a race”⁴. The arguments would be correct, if we concluded that the notion of race refers exclusively to the biological diversity of the human species. However, this is not the case, which I will try to demonstrate further on in the article.

An important practical argument for tackling this issue is the increasing multiculturalism of Polish society. The reflection on ethnic diversity has appeared in the past and is also present today. The problem is that the notion of *ethnos* in the perspective I suggest is not identical with the notion of race. Therefore, I propose a look at the social relations from a different perspective. However, often we may have the impression that the word “race” is a taboo, that the topic is seen as controversial and politically incorrect. It is increasingly passed over in silence. But in this way we cease to understand what race is and what its importance is or, more broadly, what the significance of biological differences within the human species is. This state of affairs makes it possible for all kinds of demagogues to use this concept to spread their racist views. There is an interesting paradox here between the “theory” and “practice” of modern racism, a paradox noted by James Blaut. On the one hand, very few people would openly call themselves racists. Very few people, too, share Arthur de Gobineau’s views. On the other hand, Blaut believes that there are many manifestations of racism. The scholar explains this paradox by referring to the theory of cultural racism, which looks for its justification not in biology but in allegedly impassable cultural differences⁵. This change in the approach to racism also encourages us to look at the phenomenon of race from the perspective of the humanities.

² E. Nowicka, *Świat człowieka — świat kultury*, Warsaw 2005, p. 220.

³ See *ibidem*, p. 223.

⁴ C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Innate and the Acquired*, [in:] *idem*, *The View from Afar*, The University of Chicago Press 1983, p. 3

⁵ See J. Blaut, “The Theory of Cultural Racism”, Polish translation by M. Turowski, *Lewa Noga* 2003, no. 15.

The concept of race in physical anthropology

The first thing to be done is to qualify the very concept of race. It refers to zoological systematics. The word itself comes from French and was used initially in the description of animal husbandry. It was introduced into the language of science in the mid-18th century by Georges-Louis Leclerc, Count de Buffon, to replace Linnaeus' "variety". The term race denotes a taxonomical unit below the species. However, attempts to classify the human species are older. Over the centuries there have been four main ways of approaching classification: geographical, typological, population-based and cline-based.

In order to acquire a better understanding of race classifications, it is worth taking a closer look at the basics of the methodology of natural sciences. Taxonomy is a subdiscipline of biology dealing with the theoretical foundations of biological systematics⁶. Initially, in the 18th and 19th century, it was more metaphysical. For example, for Carl Linnaeus the objective of classification was to "discover God's plan in the marvels of his creation"⁷. An important assumption was the conviction that there was a hierarchy of beings: from the least to the most perfect. It was manifested also in racial classifications from that period. Representatives of various races were not equal; they occupied different positions in the great chain of being. Today, systematics has got rid of such associations with theology and is understood in the following manner: "Systematics is about getting to know and describing the diversity of living organisms, looking for the nature and causes of both differences and similarities, showing the relations between them and developing a classification explaining these relations"⁸.

The geographical criterion for classifying the human species has existed since Antiquity. It emerged in modern European science in 1684, thanks to works by the French doctor François Bernier. Drawing on the criterion of the place of living, he distinguished Europeans, Negroes, Asians and Laplanders. A similar approach was used by Immanuel Kant, who proposed a division into four human varieties, depending on climate – red (cold climate), yellow (dry and hot climate), white (wet climate) and black (wet and warm climate).

In typological concepts race was defined by means of a set of morphological features like skin colour, body build, skull shape, etc. Skin colour in particular was treated as an important sign of racial identity of a human being. It is still commonly regarded as an official distinctive feature. The classification proposed in 1758 by Linnaeus had the following races: Caucasian (*Homo europaeus*), yellow

⁶ See A. Malinowski, J. Strzałko, *Antropologia*, Warszawa-Poznań 1985, p. 331.

⁷ C. Linnaeus, quoted after: L. Matile, P. Tassy, D. Goujet, *Introduction à la systématique zoologique (Concepts, Principes, Méthodes)*, Polish translation by P. Trojak, Warsaw 1993, p. 15.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 17.

(*Homo asiaticus*), red (*Homo americanus*) and black (*Homo africanus*). Johann Friedrich Blumenbach added the Malayan (brown) race that was to be a link between the white and the black race. Each of these races was characterised not only by different external features, but also by different ways of social life and character traits. For instance, according to Linneus, the Caucasian race was characterised by nobility, inventiveness and lawfulness. Representatives of the yellow race were supposed to be strict, greedy but also submissive. *Homo americanus* was joyful and stubborn, faithful to tradition, while blacks were lazy, shameless and capricious. These theories, which did not even try to avoid value judgements, later provided fuel for the so-called scientific racism. The most popular and at the same time the least cognitively sophisticated classification comes from 1812 and was proposed by Georges Cuvier. In this case the only criterion is skin colour, used by this scholar to distinguish just three races: white, yellow and black. This classification has proved to be the most enduring and can still be encountered today in school biology textbooks⁹.

The emergence of population-based and cline-based concepts was linked to some changes within systematics itself. Initially, its interest focused on phenotype or set of features (both morphological and environmental) of a specific organism. Modern systematics focuses on genotype, i.e. set of genes of a given individual. These changes, referred to as “new systematics”, were inspired by Julian Sorell Huxley, whose 1940 book *The New Systematics* laid the foundations for a new paradigm¹⁰. The change was possible thanks to developments in the theory of evolution and genetics. George Simpson, an American palaeontologist, who took up Huxley’s concepts in his research, based his studies on the following principles:

- Population is the basic unit in systematics.
- Variation is the basic element of the essence and definition of population.
- Populations are dynamic systems which evolve.
- Species can be defined only in terms of dynamics, evolution, genetics, intra-population and inter-population links, and not in terms of fixed morphological structures¹¹.

Of particular importance is the following change: systematics focuses not on individuals and their morphological traits anymore but on populations. Ashley Montagu has proposed the following definition: “A race is a more or less isolated population of one species, inhabiting common territory, which differs from other populations of the same species in the incidence of one or more genes”¹². Such an understanding of race makes it impossible to distinguish several “pure” and immutable racial types. In 1950 Carleton S. Coon, Stanley M. Garna and Joseph B. Birdsell proposed a classification with nine main races and thirty-three “local”

⁹ I will return to this problem in the final part of the article.

¹⁰ See L. Matile, P. Tassy, D. Goujet, op. cit., pp. 28–30.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 29.

¹² A. Montagu, quoted after: R. Tyrała, op. cit., pp. 23–24.

racess. The main races were: European, African, Asian, Australian, Melanesian, Indian, American, Polynesian and Micronesian.

The concepts of cline variation emerged in the second half of the 20th century and are a continuation of the population-based understanding of race. We can regard as their precursors the aforementioned Ashley Montagu and Frank C. Livingstone. The latter said in the early 1960s: “there are no races – only clines”¹³. The term “cline”, which originated in geographic sciences, denotes a line along which the intensity of a feature changes. Cline thus indicates the direction of a change, e.g. an increase or decrease in the incidence of a gene. Studies carried out on large populations make it possible to create relevant maps showing the distribution of specific genes. Such an approach rejects the existence of races as closed groups that can be abstracted. In addition, this term does not refer to populations, but describes the incidence of a given trait. Consequently, a population can be described by means of several clines with regard to features seen as significant¹⁴. Thus the concept of races refers to a gradation of some features and not a population of some individuals.

The problem of the existence of races

Developments in modern genetics prompt some to conclude – as was the case with Livingstone – that races do not exist. This, in turn, leads to the question of the ontic status of the notion of race and, ultimately, to the ontic status of scientific concepts. When scholars ask whether races exist, they treat cognitive realism, sometimes ontological realism, as obvious, as a condition for understanding the essence of natural sciences. In such an approach, scientific concepts are believed to faithfully reflect the structures of the world. What is problematic, however, is whether such terms as “atom” or “race” refer to beings that really exist. This is of fundamental significance to the ontic status of scientific concepts. Given the fact that ontology is not an empirical science, this problem cannot be solved by referring to the results of specific studies, which makes it insoluble. However, the problem can be bypassed by referring to pragmatic reasons. First, we can point to the uselessness of this dispute to research practice. Second, it seems that it is very difficult or even impossible to demonstrate scientifically that something does not exist. We would need to demonstrate consistently that it is logically impossible for a given phenomenon to exist. For these reasons it seems more practical to assume that scientific concepts such as “race” or “atom” do not refer to really existing phenomena, but function only as some categories within specific scientific theo-

¹³ F. Livingstone, quoted after: J. Strzałko, *Czy i komu potrzebne jest pojęcie rasy?*, Bydgoszcz 2008, p. 15.

¹⁴ See R. Tyrała, op. cit., p. 27.

ries. Given such conclusions, it makes no sense to ask whether races exist. On the other hand, it is worth asking whether this is a useful concept, whether it can be used in empirical research, whether it fits in well with other concepts and scientific theories or whether it makes it possible to achieve practical results (for instance in medicine). In this paradigm we could say that “in natural sciences ‘to exist’ means more or less to be a component (building block, element, substance) of a model”¹⁵. To use the language of late Ludwig Wittgenstein, we could formulate this idea in the following manner: existence means making sense in a given linguistic game. That is why I believe that the question about the existence of races is unfortunate and does not make it possible to understand the problem analysed here. It would need to be expressed differently, for example by asking whether the concept of race can be applied in modern research, whether there is room for it in the modern vision of the human being.

Jan Strzałko, a leading Polish physical anthropologist, ends his brief study as follows: “It would be good if the term ‘race’ disappeared at least from the anthropologists’ vocabulary once and for all and if those who use it were aware of the fact that they are using what is only a risky metaphor”¹⁶. Modern biology seems to reject the concept of race. However, it is worth bearing in mind that this view is not shared by all scholars. Three-quarters of Polish anthropologists have replied in the affirmative to the question about the existence of human races. Among American scholars 69% of respondents said that there were no races¹⁷. The issue is still being discussed, with some using the term “subspecies” or “variety” in order to avoid the controversial word. Still, many scholars reject both the concept of race altogether and its equivalents, giving clear reasons for their attitude. These include, first of all, the fact that modern systematics has changed its paradigm and is based primarily on the genotype and not the phenotype. External appearance, by means of which the various races used to be defined, is not significant. Highlighting these features is an arbitrary and methodologically wrong move. Secondly, in the light of modern systematics research there are no isolated and closed populations. A change in the incidence of a trait is gradual and not sudden. Thirdly, inter- and intra-population differences are significant. The former refer to average differences in the incidence of a given feature between various populations; the latter denote differences within a given population. Richard Lewontin, one of the creators of population genetics, said already in the early 1970s that the genetic variation of the human species was in 85% an intra-population variation¹⁸. Of the

¹⁵ W. Sady, “Co to znaczy, że coś istnieje?”, *Studia Filozoficzne* 1982, no. 11–12, p. 17.

¹⁶ J. Strzałko, op. cit., p. 22.

¹⁷ See K. Kaszycka, J. Strzałko, “‘Race’ — still an issue for physical anthropology? Results of Polish studies seen in the light of the U.S. findings, *American Anthropologist* 2003, no. 105. The survey in Poland covered a group of one-hundred respondents and was conducted in 2001, while the American survey was conducted in 1999.

¹⁸ See J. Strzałko, op. cit., pp. 16–17.

remaining gene pool, only about 6% display “inter-racial” variation. For Lewontin such a low percentage is not sufficient to distinguish any races – the concept is simply cognitively useless. In other words, for modern geneticists differences between various “races” are far less significant than differences between representatives of one “race”. This view is shared to this day. It was also confirmed in the human genome project. In a statement published in 2003, the authors of the project say that

DNA studies do not indicate that separate classifiable subspecies (races) exist within modern humans. While different genes for physical traits such as skin and hair colour can be identified between individuals, no consistent patterns of genes across the human genome exist to distinguish one race from another¹⁹.

Despite the fact that genetic research on the molecular level shows that humans are a species that is exceptionally uniform genetically, this does not mean that there are no biological differences between people. Differences are there, but given their complex nature, they cannot be described by the concept of race. The concept cannot be operationalised, it does not have an unequivocally empirical meaning. For these reasons the concept of race should disappear from the vocabulary of natural sciences.

Race as a cultural category

The starting point for my further reflections is a belief that the concept of race is characterised by some degree of social reality, independent of the scientific discourse. Race is commonly believed to be a functional category used both to classify ethnic diversity and for the purpose of self-identification. In many societies, racial identity is one of the most important elements, which is why the topic can be discussed by social sciences and the humanities. The basic distinction is the understanding of race either as a cognitive category or a social group²⁰. Understanding race as a cognitive category means that the concept makes it possible to classify various groups of people in accordance with their race. Of secondary importance is the fact that such a classification does not have a biological justification. It is relatively rational and based on phenotypic traits, e.g. skin colour. As Piotr Małczyński's studies have demonstrated, the concept of race is used by young people as a relevant category enabling them to classify people²¹. Coherence and consistency are not, obviously, a characteristic feature of such classifica-

¹⁹ http://www.ornl.gov/sci/techresources/Human_Genome/elsi/minorities.shtml (access: 2 December 2011).

²⁰ See Ł. Ostrowski, *Mowa o rasizmie*, Warsaw 2009, pp. 79–82.

²¹ See P. Małczyński, *Recepcja idei “rasy” w świadomości potocznej*, Wrocław 2010, not published.

tions; what is important is that they make it possible to describe social reality in a manner that is clear to members of a given community. On the other hand, when race is seen as a social group, it is treated as a distinctive social entity, the foundation of which is racial identity and bonds between members of a group. In this case classification is not only a way to see the world, but primarily a way to see one's own subjectivity. An example here is the United States of America, in which race is not only a category used in censuses, but a way to define various ethnic groups: e.g. Afro-Americans, Latinos, Indigenous peoples or Whites. Afro-Americans, for example, define their own racial identity through shared culture and art, history (slavery and fight for equality) or social experiences.

Of course these two approaches to the concept of race are not mutually exclusive, they often even complement each other. The distinction is analytical, but it points to, in my opinion, two important issues in the cultural understanding of the concept of race: 1) way in which people see themselves and 2) others. A definition that tries to combine these two elements has been proposed by Marco Martiniello: "Race is understood as a social group that sees itself and is seen as different from the point of view of phenotypic traits"²². This definition seems to be a good starting point for further analysis. It points to important elements in the cultural understanding of race: self-perception, perception of others and interpretation of phenotypic traits – primarily skin colour – as features of race.

In his work *Więź społeczna i dziedzictwo krwi* (*Social Bond and the Heritage of Blood*), Stanisław Ossowski carried out a detailed analysis of the functioning of racial myths in society, an analysis that despite the passage of time – the book was first published in 1939 – still remains relevant. They seem important for the analysis of the cultural understanding of race. Ossowski was convinced that racial myths at the time had been replaced by naive and indefensible genealogical myths²³, with a specific ancestor with a name being replaced by a "multitude of nameless ancestors". The Polish scholar understood race in the following manner: "In popular concepts race is actually an ethnic concept; it is usually regarded as a unit higher than the nation; race is commonly believed to consist of nations, just like a nation consists of regional groups"²⁴. Thus, the concept of race does not belong to science but to mythology, the aim of which is to "legitimise the belief in the superiority of one social group over other groups, the belief in an exceptional mission and exceptional rights"²⁵. Ossowski does not give a precise answer to the question about what race is. He is more interested in how social images of human races emerge and what functions they serve – they constitute the identity of a given group, referring to an alleged blood heritage. An important characteristic

²² M. Martiniello, quoted after: W. Żelazny, *Etniczność. Ład — konflikt — sprawiedliwość*, Poznań 2006, p. 140.

²³ See S. Ossowski, *Więź społeczna i dziedzictwo krwi*, Warszawa 1966, p. 118.

²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 118–119.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 123.

of these myths is the fact that they sanction depreciation of other groups. What is also interesting are Ossowski's reflections on the causal power of myths:

That the belief in common blood ties as a source of bonds within society is based on illusions and myths does not diminish its social role. False convictions, however, may have just as many effects as views that reflect reality. These effects are not limited just to psychological phenomena and social relations. By directly influencing our mental attitudes, myths and illusions may modify our behaviour and thus transform the biological state of affairs in various social groups²⁶.

Using contemporary language of the humanities, we could say, after Ossowski, that racial myths, despite their falsehood, do have performative power that makes it possible to effectively influence society. From this perspective it is not important whether a given view is true or false – it is simply regarded by society as binding. The history of discrimination against various racial and ethnic groups is full of examples illustrating this mechanism. This means that the concept of race, despite a lack of justification in biology, is socially real.

When specifying the status of race as a social and not biological phenomenon, we can refer to constructivism. In its perspective “races” do not exist in nature outside social experience, which is always mediated in culture. “Race” is thus not a fact but an artefact, a manifestation of the functioning of culture. The constructivist approach – contrary to essentialism – makes it possible to show a given phenomenon as not obvious, unnatural and arbitrary. The deconstruction of “race” may also involve demonstrating that a given classification is not necessary but just accidental, and that it has been formed in response to some social expectations. The case of “sex/gender” is similar, as not only is it a biological fact, but it is also entangled in various social contexts. On the one hand, race is “only” a construct and on the other “no less” than a construct. It is worth returning here to the classics of social constructivism — Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. They describe the process of the emergence and functioning of social constructs²⁷, the starting point of which is externalisation of subjective meanings. Next, these meanings become objectivised, i.e. become institutions of the social environment, independent of their creators. On the other hand, a feature of institutions is that they appear as “natural” and conceal their conventionality. The next stage is internalising the construct, i.e. learning meanings in the process of socialisation, thanks to which these meanings again become subjective and are recognised as one's own. This model of the emergence and functioning of social reality, briefly described here, enables us to understand the phenomenon of race as a social construct.

However, it is worth emphasising that there is not one understanding of race – it depends on society within which it functions. For example, in American society “race” refers to completely different ideas than in Polish society and Polish

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ See P.L. Berger, T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Polish translation by J. Niznik, Warsaw 1983, pp. 85–201.

scientific discourse. In the case of the United States, it is strongly linked to the history of slavery and subsequent fight against racial segregation. In Europe, in turn, it immediately brings to mind the theories of racial purity, eugenics and 19th century totalitarianism. That is why a uniform definition of the concept does not seem possible. Therefore, I would like to present several selected controversies surrounding the evolution of the concept of race in American sociology and anthropology. This problem is particularly important to Afro-American or *black studies*. Discussions about race in the United States are summed up in the book *Racial Formation in the United States*. Its authors, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, follow the changes in the thinking about race in American scientific discourse from the 1920s, when the issue began to be perceived not as a biological but social phenomenon. According to the authors cited here, we can distinguish three main paradigms: ethnic, national and class paradigm²⁸.

The ethnic paradigm, chronologically first, developed thanks to the American sociologist Robert E. Park. Under this approach, race is a social category, one of many, which determines ethnic origin. The remaining categories are: religion, language and customs²⁹. This means that race is not something autonomous, but it functions in correlation with ethnic origin. The concept played an important role in explaining the multi-ethnic nature of the United States, where the various ethnic groups were to be assimilated. The process is often described by the *melting pot* metaphor. According to this approach, the various cultures making up American society were supposed to melt in it as if in a pot, losing their individual characteristics. Incidentally, this approach coincides with a vision of globalisation according to which it is to lead to a homogeneity of cultures. Omi and Winant criticise such thinking, showing that assimilation does not mean in this case a melting of various cultures, but their adaptation to the dominant culture. They also point out that the ethnic paradigm completely ignores the historical experiences of the various races, which – according to the scholars – cannot be compared. The experience of slavery of the black inhabitants of America is different from the fate of America's indigenous peoples and different from the history of white descendants of the colonisers. Omi and Winant argue that these experiences, which are the basis of racial identity, cannot be reduced only to the issue of ethnic origin.

Another paradigm in question is the economic approach. Drawing on the Marxist theory of social classes, it treats race as a consequence of the economic stratification of society³⁰. The various races are defined with regard to relations to the means of production, access to work and economic goods. Referring to this paradigm and the notion of class struggle, scholars have tried to explain the disparity in employment and wages between the black and white population of the

²⁸ See M. Omi, H. Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, New York 1986, pp. 9–23.

²⁹ See *ibidem*, p. 17.

³⁰ See *ibidem*, pp. 25–37.

United States. Despite undoubted successes the class approach has a fundamental defect characteristic of all such reductionisms. All cultural phenomena, or in other words the superstructure, are explained here by means of economic phenomena – by the material base. There is no room here for any specificity of social and cultural phenomena. Like in the case of the ethnic paradigm, there is no taking into account of the specific cultural experiences of the various races, there are no questions about cultural determinants.

The third approach examined here is explaining the problem of races with reference to the category of nation³¹. This way of thinking emerged as a result of the fiasco of integration of various ethnic and racial groups into one American nation. It was the basis of both the racial segregation policy and black nationalism or the idea of pan-Africanism. The advocates of the latter called for a return of all representatives of the black race to their homeland – Africa. Under the national paradigm, various races make up separate nations with their own history, culture and institutions. This approach is also characterised by a degree of reductionism and by the various race-nations being treated by uniform structures. What is ignored here is the merging of races and different cultural experiences of various ethnic groups. The culture of Afro-Americans is different from the culture of Africans, especially given the fact that the latter do not constitute a homogeneous group. As Omi and Winant note, what is worrying are the political consequences of this approach, assuming an inevitable antagonism between the various races.

Having discussed these main paradigms, Omi and Winant proposed their own concept: of racial formation theory. They treat race as a social identity, which is obviously shaped by economic, political and social processes, but cannot be reduced to them³². Thus, it is relatively autonomous. According to these scholars, only such an approach can sufficiently explain the specificity of American history and contemporary politics.

Of course, the example of racial formation theory has a limited application. As I have already noted, there is no single cultural understanding of the concept of race. The concept proposed by Omi and Winant grew from American scholarship and American experiences. We should, therefore, consider whether it can be referred to the social-cultural life in Poland. It is all the more difficult given the fact that race has hardly ever been used as a key to interpreting Polish culture.

Studying races

The cultural understanding of race presented here is to be used to create a theoretical basis for research into this issue in Polish society and culture. This can be

³¹ See *ibidem*, pp. 38–51.

³² See *ibidem*, p. 66.

formulated in the following manner: how is “race” constructed in Polish society? I am interested in what people know about “races”, what concepts they refer to, how this knowledge is created, where it comes from and what expectations it contains with regard to representatives of the various groups of people. Drawing on the distinction between race as a social group and race as a cognitive category, we can formulate at least two complementary research problems. The first concerns whether there are races understood as social groups in Poland. Are there racial bonds and identities in Polish society that would find their justification in racial myths? The second problem is associated with whether the concept of race as a cognitive category is to be found in Poland and how it functions there. What is people’s knowledge – both declarative (manifested in their words) and procedural (manifested in their behaviour) – of human races? To these problems we may add a third question concerning the dynamics between these two phenomena, i.e. question about whether the construct of race is being internalised, that is whether new racial myths are being created, whether these myths are being transformed and, if so, how and because of what determinants. The problem also includes the mechanisms of the emergence and transformation of the race construct as a cognitive category: here we can ask about the sources of this knowledge as well as factors that influence it.

Answers to these questions may be provided by empirical research. It should be unobtrusive – research into social behaviour which does not affect this behaviour³³. This approach makes it possible to gain access to the so-called naturally occurring data that already exist in the social world³⁴. This type of research includes content analysis, analysis of existing statistical data or historical-comparative analysis. My analysis of the content of biology textbooks for secondary and upper secondary schools has demonstrated that often they present mid-19th century concepts of race as binding. This picture can be verified by a more comprehensive and systematic analysis of educational content of the geography, history, Polish language or social studies curricula. The aim of such research is to describe the knowledge of human races presented in general education. As Małczyński’s studies have demonstrated, this knowledge is quite chaotic, internally contradictory and based on out-of-date information³⁵. What may become an important area of unobtrusive studies are some phenomena in popular culture. Particularly interesting and promising seem to be studies of pictorial jokes published spontaneously by users of popular internet websites. Their advantage is that they are published in the virtual space voluntarily and thus are cognitively valuable manifestations of cultural ideas and needs of Internet users. In addition, they are quite interesting

³³ See E. Babbie, “Unobtrusive Research”, [in:] idem, *The Practice of Social Research*, Wadsworth Publishing 2012, p. 330.

³⁴ See D. Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, SAGE Publications Ltd 2001, pp. 286–287.

³⁵ See P. Małczyński, op. cit., p. 65. This chaos can be seen in, for instance, the fact that pupils treat groups like Arabs, Turks or Eskimos as races.

manifestations of unofficial culture not linked to any existing institutions. Another possibility is conducting reactive studies focused on extracting data, for instance by means of surveys or interviews dealing with knowledge of racial classification. The aim would be to recognise racial identities in Polish society and the ideas related to them. However, reactive studies, which interfere with the social reality, carry a greater ethical risk. As a side-effect, they may strengthen or even provoke some convictions concerning racial classification, convictions that did not previously exist in the social reality.

My intention has been to explain the cultural understanding of the concept of race. Racial classification functioned for years as one based on “solid” scientific foundations. Today, also thanks to science itself, it has ceased to be useful in a description of biological differences between human beings. However, the concept of race itself as well as the classification accompanying it have freed themselves from the biological discourse and continue to function in society in the form of racial myths. In other words, the concept of race has become autonomous and as a quasi-objective construct affects the social reality. In the title of his short work, Strzalko asks: *Is the concept of race necessary and who needs it?* but does not provide a satisfying answer. We are still not certain whether anyone needs the concept of race, whether the world might not be a better place, if we removed it from our vocabularies. It is easy to repeat that racial myths are false, especially when they serve specific social functions. I believe that recognising these functions is an important challenge for the humanities.

