



## What's the Use of Race?

April 25-26, 2008, MIT Faculty Club

Despite long-standing critiques of the concept of race from biologists, anthropologists, and social scientists, race continues to thrive as a category of analysis among scholars, pundits, and the conventional wisdom. State and federal institutions routinely collect data about race and ethnicity. The National Institutes of Health requests that researchers include racially and ethnically diverse populations in their studies. Journals in fields as diverse as genetics, public health, and sociology report data on race and ethnicity and use these variables as significant factors in their analyses. This pursuit of race has produced overwhelming documentation of racial disparities, from birth rates to education, income, crime, punishment, disease, medical treatment, and life expectancy. While many scholars believe that research must consider race if it is to understand fully human biology and experience, critics argue that race is a hollow and misleading concept that leads to invidious distinctions. While advocates of social justice argue that racial disparities must be documented before they can be alleviated, our vast knowledge of disparities has not yet led to decisive social or political action against them.



**Massachusetts Institute  
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What should be done? Should the concept of race be invoked to further the goals of science or social justice? Do racial and ethnic distinctions produce natural categories for scholarly or political analysis? Do the benefits of including diverse populations in research outweigh the potential harm caused by reifying racial and ethnic distinctions? Will efforts to improve the precision of these categories with subtler distinctions based on ancestry or genetic markers increase the utility of the resulting data? What role do funding agencies (whether governmental or philanthropic) and journal editors have as gatekeepers for the appropriate use of racial and ethnic categories? What hopes and conflicts are embedded in analyses of race as a scientific, medical or social category? This conference invites papers from any discipline -- medicine, history, anthropology, epidemiology, STS, genetics, sociology, law, ethics, and others -- that consider these debates about the uses of race. We hope to describe and explore the competing interests that have made studies of race simultaneously feared and desired.

Abstracts (300 words) should be submitted by October 15th to:

David S. Jones, M.D., Ph.D.  
[dsjones@mit.edu](mailto:dsjones@mit.edu)