

# Differences between race and ethnicity



DATA at the commission shows that in many instances, members of the public are unable to differentiate between race and ethnicity. In most cases, complaints are lodged using the two characteristics otherwise known as status grounds, either incorrectly or interchangeably.

For this reason, even though it is factually incorrect, the Equal Opportunity Commission groups race and ethnicity under the same header when collating data.

This column attempts to clarify the two status grounds so that the commission can better assist citizens.

Please note that race and ethnicity are two of seven status grounds covered by the Equal Opportunity Act. These are: race, ethnicity, sex, marital status, origin including geographic origin, disability and religion.

Race, according to the field of anthropology is biological in nature. It consists of physical characteristics from one's genetic ancestry. Example skin, hair, and eye colour, bone and jaw structure and the tendency towards certain diseases, among other things.

However, ethnicity is both social and cultural. It is based on identity with a group sharing similar traits, such as common language, heritage, culture, geographic region, foods and diets, and faith. Ethnicity derives from tradition and customs.

To understand the difference, think about the race and ethnicity of Caribbean people. A person's race may be black but

ethnically, they identify as Trinbagonian.

People may have different social experiences based on their race, regardless of their ethnicity. These people may experience racism and be treated differently based on the belief that a particular race possesses distinct characteristics or qualities, that distinguishes them as inferior or superior to another.

A person of a particular race, under normal circumstances, cannot change their race to avoid this social experience, but a person can adopt or deny ethnic affiliations.

Example, one can consider leaving a religious doctrine (e.g Hinduism) for another (e.g Presbyterian) or an individual moving from one geographic middle-income area and moving to a geographic upper-income area.

Why is it difficult to untangle the meaning of race and ethnicity?

Historically, the word "race" originally functioned much like the word "ethnicity."

Race referred to groups of people connected by a common descent or origin. A person's race, referred to their culture, ancestry, and sometimes language and

religion. Race and ethnicity were sometimes used not to describe a person's physical features or ancestral origin, but to oppress a person who was perceived to be different.

People who identify as a particular race or ethnicity experience obstacles, sometimes systemic, that limit their opportunities. Where someone is treated less favourably due their race or ethnicity, this constitutes discrimination.

Race and ethnicity are protected status grounds or characteristics under Section 4 of the Equal Opportunity Act, Chapter 22:03.

A specific example of a complaint that the Commission received under the status ground race included:

I. When an employee (the complainant) claimed he had not been promoted by an employer on account of his race.

A specific example of complaint that the commission received under the status ground ethnicity included:

II. When a student at a school (the complainant) claimed she was removed from classes because of her natural hairstyle.

The commission hopes this article would better inform the citizens and prospective complainants of the differences between race and ethnicity as it pertains to discrimination.

Members of the public can lodge a complaint using any of the options listed on the Commission's website: [www.equalopportunity.gov.tt](http://www.equalopportunity.gov.tt).