Purpose of the Study: To explore the historical construction of the category of race and how its definition is inconsistent and shifts across time and place.

Rationale and Significance: Our ability to overcome health disparities may be partially dependent upon de-essentializing race and re-examining it in the context of class and gender in our studies and intellectual discussions. Many researchers tend to handle race as a stable identifier based on particular biologic characteristics or by self-identification, but historians note how the category of race is not fixed, greater than biology, and reflective of the social, political, and cultural factors that shape the way society at large groups people at particular times and places. From antebellum southern commentators who used the physical characteristics of slaves to justify slavery, to modern scientists searching for genetic markers of disease without considering the interaction of social and political contextual factors that shape the process of diagnosis, researchers have used race in ways that are socially constructed and rooted in dominant cultural understandings that reinforce institutional racism.

Methods and Sources: Narrative data is synthesized from published nursing research studies from 1970-2004 and contrasted with the broader secondary historical literature specifically exploring the categorization of race. A theoretical discussion of methodological dimensions of the categorization of race is drawn from selected historical episodes, US Census categories, and federal reports.

Findings and Conclusions: Over time, science has been used as an economic, social, and political construct to both justify and question social power structures. We see this most obviously in the eugenics movement, the response to epidemics and disasters, and in research on violence and firearms, and teen pregnancy. Race and racism remain powerful co-founding social factors both in how power structures are maintained and how racial identities bestow a strong sense of history and reflect particular social relationships.

The social construction of race is demonstrated in the 350 studies randomly chosen from every other issue of Nursing Research from 1970-2004. Most do not describe how race is measured or defined, or how subjects are categorized into racial groups. Most subjects were assigned to racial categories by self-report or by observation, although observation became less common after the mid-1990s. Although white or Caucasian are race-based categories, most researchers did not seem to constitute this group as a race in the analysis. “Black” included disparate groups seemingly based on skin color. Most of the studies used race as a descriptor in the demographics but not in the analysis or discussion of results. The unevenness of the categorization of race in these studies indicates that if we attribute differences shaped by unstable categories, we essentialize and obscure larger hidden factors of racism. Race as a descriptor of the population without reference to the processes of racism, class, or gender issues operating within the particular community being discussed becomes “decontextualized individualism,” or a label with enormous historic but not much scientific meaning.

*N318 Work Group includes the 13 members of the Benjamin Franklin Scholars course, Race, Class, Gender and the History of American Health Care, Fall, 2008: Elizabeth Converse, Madeleine Grant, Andrea Harris, Anna Harris, Flora Jiang, Alina Kim, Jennifer Kwok, Erin Li, Eileen Mckeown, Brian Mertens, Elizabeth Mongol-Gunter, Jordan Rosenblum, Hannah Skop, Emma Sodbinow, and Andrew Weinhold.