

the Social Construction of Difference & Inequality

second edition

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF
DIFFERENCE AND INEQUALITY
RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

TRACY E. ORE



THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DIFFERENCE AND INEQUALITY

Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality

Second Edition

Tracy E. Ore

Saint Cloud State University



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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DIFFERENCE AND INEQUALITY

*This book is dedicated to the memory of my brother Brian . . .
and to all others lost in the continuing crisis of AIDS.*



About the Author

Tracy E. Ore is an assistant professor of Sociology and Director of the Applied Sociology Program at Saint Cloud State University. She received her Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Michigan. Her teaching areas include race and ethnicity, social inequality, democracy and citizenship, and the ethics of sociological practice. She does research in the areas of technology and the scholarship of teaching and learning, race and ethnicity, oppression and inequality, and the development of effective teaching pedagogy. She serves as a consultant for multicultural education and curriculum to a variety of organizations and agencies and conducts workshops and trainings related to issues of inequality. She is an active member of the American Sociological Association, the Midwest Sociological Society, the Sociologists for Women in Society, and the Society for Applied Sociology.



Preface

Teaching about issues of inequality in a culture that focuses on individualism can be a very daunting task. Having been raised in such a culture, students in my classes often arrive with little knowledge of the systemic nature of inequality in society. While they may be aware of their own experiences of disadvantage (and perhaps privilege), they are generally not aware of how structural arrangements in society result in systems of difference and inequality. This book, which focuses on how race, class, gender, and sexuality are socially constructed as categories of difference and are maintained as systems of inequality, is an effort to help students move toward a more systemic understanding.

WHY ANOTHER RACE, CLASS, GENDER (AND SEXUALITY) READER?

With the plethora of readers on race, class, and gender currently on the market, one may wonder why another is needed. Indeed, some excellent anthologies are available that can be quite effective in demonstrating the impact of race, class, and gender inequality on the life chances of various individuals and groups in our society. However, very few of these texts thoroughly explain how such categories of difference are created, and even fewer demonstrate how social institutions work to maintain systems of inequality. The text here is structured in a way that examines how and why the categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality are socially constructed, maintained, and experienced.

This reader is divided into four parts. Each part begins with an introductory essay that offers a conceptual framework illustrating concepts and theories (which are highlighted by boldface type) useful for understanding the issues raised by the readings in that section. These essays are not merely introductions to the readings but rather provide material that will enable students to move beyond them. Part I provides a thorough discussion of what it means to think critically as well as an extensive overview of how and why categories of difference are socially constructed. Part II discusses in greater detail how categories of difference are transformed and maintained as systems of inequality by social institutions. Part III examines how categories of difference and systems of inequality impact the everyday experiences of individuals in our society. Finally, Part IV offers a useful look at perspectives on social change and provides examples of barriers and opportunities to transforming systems of oppression and privilege into a system of equal access to opportunity.

In each of these sections the readings and examples were selected to cover a variety of racial and ethnic groups as well as experiences of multi-racial identity. In addition, issues of sexuality are incorporated throughout each of the parts of this reader. While a few anthologies have begun to incorporate readings that address inequality on the basis of sexuality, the majority do so only on a superficial level. With the current political and social debate regarding civil rights and sexuality, it is important that texts provide sufficient material to address this area of inequality. Overall, the readings represent a myriad of individuals with various perspectives and life experiences. Such diversity will aid students' ability to understand perspectives and experiences that differ from their own. Finally, the part introductions as well as many of the readings selected demonstrate the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality and stress the importance of viewing them as interlocking systems of oppression and privilege. By moving beyond traditional additive models of examining inequality, students will be better able to see how forms of inequality are interconnected.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

As discussed in Part II, language serves as a link between all of the different forms of culture in a society. Although language enables us to communicate with and understand one another, it also incorporates cultural values. Thus, the words we use to describe ourselves and others with regard to race, class, gender, and sexuality reflect not only our own values but those of the dominant ideology and popular discourse.

In discussing the experiences of different groups, issues of language can become particularly problematic. For example, as discussed in Part I, categories of race and ethnicity are socially constructed. In addition, the externally created labels for these categories are not always accepted by those viewed as belonging to a particular group. For example, those of Latin American descent may not accept the term *Hispanic*. Similarly, those who are indigenous to North America may not accept the term *American Indian*. However, there is rarely agreement among all members of a particular racial or ethnic group regarding the terminology with which they would like to be identified.

Recognizing the problems and limitations of language, I have attempted to be consistent in the terminology I have used in each of the part introductions. For example, I use the term *Latina/o* to refer to those of Latin American descent, even though not all people in this group may identify themselves in this way. I also use the terms *black* and *African American* interchangeably, as I do *American Indian* and *Native American*. In using such terms it is not my intention to homogenize divergent experiences. Rather, it is done in an effort to allow discussion of common experiences within groups as well as across groups. The terminology used by the authors of the readings was not altered, however. It is important that readers be mindful of the limitations of my language use as well as those of the other authors within this anthology.



Changes to the Second Edition

With this second edition, I have continued to cover a variety of racial and ethnic groups and to incorporate sexuality throughout. In addition, I have maintained the focus on the intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality as interlocking systems of oppression. To keep the text current with regard to economic conditions, issues of gender and sexuality, the political and social discourse on race, as well as recent events in our country and world, I have changed 15 readings and added two others. These readings include an essay by Ibish Hussein on the political programs and policies that led to the constructing of Arabs and Arab-Americans as “other”; Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro’s article on “Race, Wealth, and Equality,” which provides an overview of the historical forces that resulted in a wealth gap between whites and blacks; an article by Michael Kimmel that illustrates the connections between homophobia and the construction of masculinity; and a portion of Scott Coltrane’s *Work on Chicano families*, particularly focusing on the role of men. As with the first edition, I selected readings that are engaging to students and that reflect a variety of experiences. I welcome any feedback that instructors and students may have on this edition.

INSTRUCTOR’S MANUAL

I have written an instructor’s manual to accompany this text that contains questions for critical thinking and discussion for each reading, short-answer and essay questions, suggestions for classroom activities, and recommendations for films/videos. These items were compiled to help instructors further student comprehension of the issues addressed in this volume.

RACE/CLASS/GENDER/SEXUALITY SUPERSITE

This companion Website provides information about the book, including an overview, summaries of key features and what’s new in the third edition, information about the authors, and Practice Test Questions.

Non-text-specific content on this site includes an annotated list of Weblinks to useful sites; a list of professional resources (e.g., professional journals); links to Websites offering Census 2000 information; a glossary;

flashcards; and a comprehensive list (annotated and listed by category) of films and videos in the areas of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality.

Visit the SuperSite by going to www.mhhe.com/raceclassgender

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The inception and completion of this project were made possible through the efforts of many people. Foremost among these, I would like to acknowledge the students at the University of Illinois and their efforts in lobbying for a class on multiculturalism and inequality that would incorporate students' doing service in the community. Without their perseverance and commitment, I would likely not have had the opportunity to teach a course that provided such a wonderful foundation for this book. As has been the case throughout my teaching career, my students are my best teachers. Thanks go to all of my students at the colleges and universities where I have taught. I continue to learn from each of them.

I also would like to acknowledge the work of a wonderful team of reviewers: Jodi Burmeister-May, St. Cloud State University; Denise M. Dalaimo, Mt. San Jacinto College; Sharon Elise, California State University at San Marcos; Kristin G. Esterberg, University of Massachusetts at Lowell; Susan A. Farrell, Kingsborough Community College; Lisa M. Frehill, New Mexico State University; Melinda Goldner, Union College; Kelley Hall, DePauw University; Melissa Herbert, Hamline University; Eleanor A. Hubbard, University of Colorado at Boulder; Melissa Latimer, West Virginia University; Betsy Lucal, Indiana University South Bend; Anne Roschelle, State University of New York at New Paltz; Steve Schacht, State University of New York at Plattsburgh; Susan Shaw, Oregon State University; and Brett Stockdill, California State Polytechnic University at Pomona. Their insights, comments, and suggestions served me greatly in clarifying the direction of this project. I value the contribution each of them made to its completion.

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Tracy E. Ore



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