

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

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

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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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Tracy E. Ore



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Constructing Differences

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, the Census Bureau attempts to conduct a complete accounting of all residents every 10 years. The data gathered by the Bureau is very important, because it serves to determine the distribution of federal dollars to support housing assistance, highway construction, employment services, schools, hospital services, programs for the elderly, and other funding targets. In the year 2000, persons filling out census forms were given a unique opportunity. For the first time ever, those with mixed racial heritage were permitted to select more than one racial category. As a result of new governmental policy, the category “multiracial” is now a reality in the United States.

Does this mean that people who are multiracial have never before existed in this country? Of course not. Even a superficial exploration of U.S. history will show that multiracial people have been present throughout. The recent news of DNA tests confirming that Thomas Jefferson was the father of at least one child by his slave Sally Hemings is but one example of how the history of slavery in the United States has contributed to the existence of people of multiracial descent. However, until recently government policies in the United States have not allowed for the recognition of a multiracial identity. Rather, they have enforced policies such as the rule of **hypo-descent**—one drop of black blood makes you black—to maintain distinct racial categories.

The preceding example clearly illustrates how the categories that we use to describe ourselves and those around us are the product of social rather than biological factors. Biologically, people who are multiracial certainly exist throughout the United States. Indeed, it is unlikely that anyone is “racially pure.” Nevertheless, it is the social recognition, definition, and grouping of these factors that make them culturally significant in our daily interactions. Our reliance on such distinct categories is made clear when we ask someone whose race is not immediately discernible to us, “What are you?”

These culturally defined classifications are also significant in that they are structured as categories that are fundamentally *different* from one another. Thus, we expect people to be black or white, never in between. It is important to point out, however, that difference isn’t necessarily a negative quality. On the contrary, the existence of categories of difference adds a great deal of richness to our lives. The presence of different cultural traditions, types of food, forms of music, and styles of dance serves to make society more interesting. It is not the differences that are the causes of inequality in our culture. Rather, it is the meanings and values applied to these differences that makes them harmful. For example, it is not that people of color are defined as different from whites in the United States but that whites are viewed as superior and

as the cultural standard against which all others are judged that transforms categories of race *differences* into a system of racial *inequality*.

The readings in this text explore how categories of difference with regard to race/ethnicity, social class, sex/gender, and sexuality are constructed and then *transformed* into systems of inequality. We will investigate *what* creates these categories and *how* they are constructed, and consider some explanations about *why* these categories are created. It is important that we understand how the processes that construct these categories simultaneously create structures of **social stratification**—a system by which society ranks categories of people in a hierarchy—and how social stratification results in systems of inequality. The readings in this text will aid us in understanding the effects that categories of difference have on *all* members of our society and how this inequality can be addressed. By examining closely the processes that construct categories of difference, we will better understand how they impact our lives. Furthermore, by recognizing how systems of inequality are socially created, we can gain a greater understanding of how to transform such systems into ones of equality.

CRITICAL THINKING

A fundamental component in examining constructions of difference and systems of inequality is **critical thinking** about the social constructs on which systems of inequality rely. This requires us to examine how the social structure has affected our values, attitudes, and behaviors. The object of this text is not to negate your present belief system and provide you with a new one, but rather to provide the tools that will allow you to think critically about the attitudes and opinions you have been given. By thinking critically, we are better able to develop a belief system that we can claim as our own.

Many of us are unsure of what is meant by critical thinking. According to various scholars, critical thinking can involve logical reasoning, reflective judgment, exploring assumptions, creating and testing meanings, identifying contradictions in arguments, and determining the validity of empirical findings and generalized conclusions. For the purposes of this text, to think critically is to ask questions about what is assumed to be real, valued, and significant in our culture. Stephen Brookfield (1987) offers a useful framework for asking these questions. He sees critical thinking as having four primary elements.

First, we must *identify and challenge assumptions*. We should try to identify the assumptions that are at the foundation of the concepts, values, beliefs, and behaviors that we deem important in our society. Once we have identified these assumptions, we need to explore their accuracy and legitimacy, considering whether or not what we take for granted does indeed reflect the realities we experience. For example, a common assumption in the United States is that women are inherently more nurturing than men and that men

are inherently more aggressive than women. When thinking critically, ask whether such assumptions reflect reality or if they shape what we observe in the behaviors of women and men. In other words, do we observe women indeed being more nurturing, or do we make note of only their nurturing behavior? In addition, we need to ask whether our expectations of women and men shape the ways in which they act. For example, do men behave in a more aggressive manner because that is what is expected of them? Through identifying and challenging assumptions, we become more aware of how uncritically examined assumptions shape our perceptions and our understanding of our environments.

Second, thinking critically involves *awareness of our place and time in our culture*. When asking questions about aspects of our culture, we need to be aware of our own **standpoint**—the position from which we are asking these questions. In other words, we need to be aware of our location at a particular intersection of culture and history; how that is influenced by our race/ethnicity, social class, sex/gender, sexuality, ability, age, and other factors; and how these in turn influence the questions we ask and the answers we accept. For example, a millionaire examining the strengths and weaknesses of the U.S. economic system would likely see different problems and solutions to these problems than would a working-class individual. Their respective class standpoints (as well as their race/ethnicity, sex/gender, sexuality, etc.) affect the ways in which they examine the world.

One's standpoint also influences what one sees as "normal" or "ordinary" behavior. This relates to the concept of **enculturation**—immersion in our own culture to the point where we assume that our way of life is "natural" or "normal." Because we are so enculturated into our own societal standards and practices, we often assume that they are the only options and, as a result, we are unaware of alternatives. Furthermore, we often view those who have other cultural standards or practices as behaving in a strange or unnatural manner. For example, people raised in a culture with strict religious teachings based on the idea of a supreme being may be so enculturated that they view those with different notions of religion (or none at all) as strange or odd. As a consequence of the depth of our enculturation we also often possess some level of **ethnocentrism**—the practice of judging another culture using the standards of one's own. Such judging is based on the assumption that one's own group is more important than or superior to other groups (Sumner, 1959). Thus we may judge those who possess different religious beliefs than ourselves not only as strange but as *wrong*. For example, many non-Muslim Americans, fueled by media stereotypes, view the practices of those that follow Islam as inappropriate, if not "un-American."

It is important to point out, however, that ethnocentrism is not in and of itself problematic. Every social system to some degree promotes its ideas and standards. Ethnocentrism becomes a problem when such ideas are used as a basis for treating people in an unequal manner. An alternative to ethnocentrism is **cultural relativism**—judging a culture by its own cultural rules and