

*Understanding*  
Race,  
Class,  
Gender,  
and Sexuality



*A Conceptual Framework*

*Lynn Weber*

# *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*

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## *A Conceptual Framework*

*Lynn Weber*

*University of South Carolina*



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## UNDERSTANDING RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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## About the Author

Lynn Weber has been the Director of Women's Studies and a Professor of Sociology at the University of South Carolina since 1996. She arrived at South Carolina after serving two years as Distinguished Professor in Race, Class, and Gender at the University of Delaware and having spent the previous 13 years co-founding and later directing the Center for Research on Women at the University of Memphis.

Founded in 1982 by Weber, Bonnie Thornton Dill, and Elizabeth Higginbotham, the Center for Research on Women was the first in the nation to focus on women of color and on the intersections of race, class, and gender. Over the years, Weber—in conjunction with many scholars associated with the Center—provided pioneering scholarship on race, class, and gender and served as a leader in innovative teaching and curriculum change focused on race, class, and gender. Many of today's leading race, class, and gender scholars have been deeply involved with the work of the Center, serving on the faculty, on the advisory board, as visiting scholars, and as curriculum workshop leaders and participants. These scholars include Patricia Hill Collins, Maxine Baca Zinn, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Judith Rollins, Esther Chow, Elaine Bell Kaplan, Cheryl Gilkes, Kenneth Goings, Sharon Harley, Leith Mullings, Sandra Morgen, Kathy Ward, Denise Segura, Ruth Zambrana, Mary Romero, Bernice Barnett, Sheryl Ruzek, and many others. For the pioneering research of the center, Weber, Dill, and Higginbotham received the Jessie Bernard Award of the American Sociological Association in 1993, and for innovative pedagogical work, they received the ASA's Distinguished Contributions to Teaching Award in the same year—a dual honor never bestowed before or since.

Co-author of *The American Perception of Class*, Weber has published on the intersections of race, class, and gender—especially in the process of upward social mobility, in mental health, and in the lives of professional-managerial women. In addition, she has published articles on teaching race, class, and gender, including the lead article, “A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality,” in a recent special issue of *Psychology of Women Quarterly* devoted to teaching about gender and ethnicity.

Weber has consulted with many higher education institutions of all types on ways to integrate race, class, and gender into the curriculum. Her special focus has been on classroom dynamics and ways to convey difficult and potentially volatile material so that learning is enhanced.

# Preface

By the time I reached the University of Delaware for my sabbatical in the fall of 1994, I was burned out. I had been administering the Center for Research on Women at the University of Memphis for the previous 12 years, a rewarding but continuous struggle.<sup>1</sup> I had been writing and running grants for which the timetables were always too short, the money too little, and the deadlines too soon.

Because I always felt unprepared, it had been a while since I had walked into a classroom feeling excited. I fell behind in reading the latest works in the growing field of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and I felt that I hadn't revised my pedagogy enough. Despite receiving consistently good teaching evaluations from my students and being the recipient of an ASA teaching award, I had begun to think of myself as a bad teacher.

But, as the Distinguished Visiting Professor in Race, Class, and Gender at the University of Delaware, I was teaching only one course, a graduate seminar in race, class, and gender. I had few other responsibilities. I read, rested, exercised, thought, and taught. I loved teaching again. I went to class feeling prepared, a luxury in today's academy, and I began to see that I hadn't been a bad teacher after all—just an exhausted one. As I became energized in my teaching, I started to address a problem that had bothered me for some time—namely, the lack of a conceptual framework for evaluating the scholarship on, and for teaching about, the nature of race, class, gender, and sexuality as systems of oppression.

Those of us who had been teaching about the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality had relied on anthologies<sup>2</sup> or course packets of articles and books to demonstrate how these systems of social inequality operate simultaneously and are inextricably intertwined, and thus must be examined together. Yet, while the anthologies very clearly illustrate how truly interconnected these systems are—especially in our individual lives—they fail to provide us with a frame-

<sup>1</sup>For a history of the Center for Research on Women, see Weber, Higginbotham, and Dill (1998).

<sup>2</sup>For a list of some of these anthologies, see Weber and Dillaway (2001), *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: Case Studies*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

work for conducting such analyses ourselves or for assessing the studies we read for their effectiveness and quality in revealing the intersecting dynamics and fundamental character of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Even as I began this project, I had doubts that it should be done. The study of race, class, gender, and sexuality arose primarily from women of color, from working-class and lesbian scholars who critiqued feminist scholarship for its unstated and unproblematized White, middle-class, Eurocentric, and heterosexual bent. In their critiques, these scholars contended that, to be inclusive, feminist scholarship should be historically and geographically/globally situated—in time and place—and clear about the social locations or standpoints of the groups studied and the scholars themselves. Furthermore, the critiques implied that claiming to have uncovered universal or at least pervasive truths about women and gender from analyses that were based only on dominant-culture women's lives was as problematic as the universal claims of male-centered scholarship that White feminists had so vehemently and correctly contradicted.<sup>3</sup> So, I had to ask myself if it would be possible to construct a conceptual framework for understanding race, class, gender, and sexuality that would not be abstract and ahistorical and a replication of the very model it would be designed to replace.

As it turned out, I didn't have to ponder these possibilities for too long, for I was thrust into this book project by a request that made the need for such a framework even more clear to me. I was asked to be one of six scholars of race, class, gender, and sexuality to write a response to an article entitled "Doing Difference," by Candace West and Sarah Fenstermaker (1995), which *Gender & Society* was planning to publish in a forthcoming issue of the journal (see Collins et al. 1995). Earlier, West and Don Zimmerman (1987) had written an influential piece entitled "Doing Gender" that made a case for the social construction of gender but was subsequently criticized for omission of race and class. "Doing Difference" was written in response to the criticism. At the time, I thought writing my response to "Doing Difference" would give me a chance to clarify the common themes I had started to identify in the scholarship on race, class, gender, and sexuality. I even hoped that West and Fenstermaker would give us the framework that I was looking for.

However, as I read that piece, I became angry. Surprised at my own reaction, I began frantically writing about all the problems I had with the article. Most significantly, I felt their argument—that gender, race, and class are, foremost, patterns of behavior created in small-group, face-to-face interactions—minimized the ways that the macro-institutional, political, economic, and ideological power arrangements shape every interaction among individuals in our society. To fail to make the connection between these face-to-face interactions and the historically embedded political, economic, and ideological structures shaping the nation was to miss the point.

I wrote and wrote and quickly realized that my response had gone way beyond the couple of pages I would be allotted. More importantly, I came to see that

<sup>3</sup>For an example of these debates in which I participated, see Baca Zinn et al. (1986).



my reaction was so intense because West's and Fenstermaker's argument had run counter to several of the characteristic themes and common assumptions that ran through the scholarship on race, class, gender, and sexuality. At that point, I realized that I wanted and needed to write a book.

The book that I have written is in many ways a collaborative effort, which includes the feedback and understandings about curriculum transformation that I gained from faculty from across the nation in workshops beginning in the early 1980s at the Center for Research on Women. It reflects the perspective I developed from years of working with Bonnie Thornton Dill and Elizabeth Higginbotham. More directly, in the early stages of work on the book, I benefited from brainstorming sessions and the critical pedagogical, empirical, and theoretical insights of two good colleagues—Higginbotham and Tina Hancock. They were especially helpful in thinking about the use of case studies in the book. Over the next few years, as I continued to work on the conceptual framework, I was invited to publish it as the lead article in a special issue of *Psychology of Women Quarterly* devoted to teaching about gender and ethnicity. The feedback I received from Janet Hyde, Margaret Madden, and the anonymous reviewers greatly improved the manuscript.

But this book was primarily developed in the classroom. From 1994, when I began this project, until the spring of 2000, I incorporated the framework and the latest iteration of the text into my classes. My students, graduate and undergraduate, at the University of Delaware and the University of South Carolina, gave me honest and valuable feedback. They were my best critics. They took my seminar on race, class, gender, and sexuality, my seminar in women's studies, and my sociology of gender courses. They came from a wide array of disciplinary backgrounds. They pushed me to strive for greater clarity and to make my analysis better—to make it consistent with the ideals I claimed to be working towards and to make it useful for the purposes of social justice. Because there were no similar books to serve as models, I tried a number of different formats. My students helped me decide what worked and what didn't, and they always encouraged me to pursue the project even when I wasn't sure I would ever finish it or if it would ever be published. As they read it now in its final form, I'm sure they will see that I couldn't make it go all of the places or address all of the issues they had recommended. These are the limits of my vision. But I hope they recognize that the final product is so much a reflection of their prodding, insights, and input. I cannot name all of the students here, but I deeply appreciate their help.

Throughout the process of writing this book, I was aided by a group of incredibly hardworking and insightful graduate student research assistants. The historical time line in Chapter 2 was a major research project, begun by Enashea Kohler and finished (a task that included rechecking every reference) by Rebecca Shrum and Kerry McLoughlin. Shannon Hunnicutt worked for the last three years researching almost every topic covered. Shannon's, Rebecca's, and Kerry's persistent, steady, and meticulous work kept me on track, and their insights often helped me to reshape an argument. Heather Dillaway's co-authorship of the case studies book that accompanies this text reflects the collaboration involved in that project, but I also benefited greatly from her feedback on the text itself. I am also indebted to Rosa

Thorn, program coordinator, and Jackie McClary, administrative assistant, of the Women's Studies Program at the University of South Carolina. They have supported my work and the project in numerous ways, not the least of which was making sure I had the time and resources to get the job done.

Several colleagues read the manuscript and gave detailed and enormously helpful critiques—Judith Barker, Kathleen Blee, Craig Kridel, Mary Margaret Fonow, Joan Spade, Susan Spivey, Kathy Ward, and Bruce Williams. Bonnie Thornton Dill not only read the manuscript, but also used a draft in her women's studies seminar on power and conflict at the University of Maryland. I thank both Bonnie and her students for their critical vision and many good suggestions for improving the manuscript. My editors at McGraw-Hill, Sally Constable and Kathy Blake, and the project manager, Laura Griffin, were a pleasure to work with. Even when we ran into snags, they were always professional, supportive, and maintained a much appreciated sense of humor. I am also grateful to my friends Chris, Russ, Annie, and Kate Bohner, who have engaged in numerous discussions of the issues and themes contained in the book and who have always given me thoughtful and honest feedback.

Finally, in writing this book, I often had to confront my own doubts. How can any one person claim to write clearly and succinctly about such a massive and complex topic and to do it well? Even with all the encouragement I received from students, colleagues, and friends, this project would not have been completed without the unflagging confidence and support of Jean Astolfi Bohner, to whom I dedicate this book. She consistently encouraged me when I just didn't think I could possibly finish. She talked to me about every issue in the book, and she used her amazing editing skills to fine-tune the manuscript. Most importantly, she lives her life as a model for relating across differences, and in so doing helps me to see new ways of achieving justice.

Lynn Weber  
*University of South Carolina*

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