

Second Edition

The Meaning of Difference

American Constructions of
Race,
Sex and Gender,
Social Class, and
Sexual Orientation

Karen E. Rosenblum

Toni-Michelle C. Travis

THE MEANING OF DIFFERENCE

**American Constructions of Race,
Sex and Gender,
Social Class,
and Sexual Orientation**

A Text/Reader

SECOND EDITION

Karen E. Rosenblum

George Mason University

Toni-Michelle C. Travis

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Boston Burr Ridge, IL Dubuque, IA Madison, WI New York San Francisco St. Louis
Bangkok Bogotá Caracas Lisbon London Madrid
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McGraw-Hill Higher Education

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The Meaning of Difference

American Constructions of Race, Sex and Gender, Social Class, and Sexual Orientation

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

4 5 6 7 8 9 0 FGR/FGR 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

ISBN 0-07-229602-X

Editorial director: *Phillip A. Butcher*

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Supplement coordinator: *Marc Mattson*

Compositor: *GAC Indianapolis*

Typeface: *10.5/12 Times Roman*

Printer: *Quebecor Printing Book Group/Fairfield*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The meaning of difference : American constructions of race, sex and gender, social class, and sexual orientation / [editors] Karen E.

Rosenblum, Toni-Michelle Travis. -- 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-07-229602-X (pbk.)

1. United States--Social conditions--1980- 2. Pluralism (Social sciences)--United States. I. Rosenblum, Karen Elaine. II. Travis, Toni-Michelle, 1947-

HN59.2.M44 2000

306'.0973--dc21

99-34828

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PREFACE

For us, this book is not simply a reader. Rather, it is an attempt to move forward in understanding how race, sex, sexual orientation, social class, and other significant social categories are formulated in American culture. We hope that after reading this volume, students will see the world differently and faculty will feel better able to expand the scope and structure of their courses.

Our aim in *The Meaning of Difference* is to offer a conceptual framework by which to understand the social construction of difference. That perspective is provided in the three framework essays that structure the book. The first essay describes how categories of difference are *created*, the second considers the *experience* of difference, and the third examines the *meanings* assigned to difference by law, politics, and public policy; the economy; science; popular culture; and language. Each framework essay is followed by a set of readings that illustrate and extend the concepts developed in the essay. The readings were specifically selected because of their applicability to multiple groups. For example, Deborah Tannen's discussion of women as a "marked category" can be used to consider how people of color and the poor are also "marked." Similarly, M. Annette Jaimes's article on the "blood quantum" required to classify one as Native American can be applied to a discussion of the criteria people use to classify one another as gay or straight. Throughout, our premise is that similar processes operate when we "see" differences of color, gender, class, and sexual orientation, and that these processes likely also apply to other statuses, such as disability. We hope that this encompassing, conceptual approach makes this book more than "just another reader."

Several other features distinguish the material presented here. Rather than focusing on one or two types of difference, we have tried to provide scope and equal representation. The chapter on Supreme Court decisions offers an accessible and historically contextualized discussion of the origins of

public policy. The text has also been designed with an eye toward the pedagogic difficulties that accompany this material: When the topic is simultaneously race, sex and gender, social class, and homophobia, no one group can be easily cast as victim or victimizer.

This second edition offers 26 new readings as well as more readings overall. Topically, this means we have extended coverage to mixed-race people, Native Americans, and those who are disabled. While the focus of the book remains on race, sex, social class, and sexual orientation, we believe the extension of the conceptual framework to disability breaks new ground in understanding how difference is constructed. A list of key concepts at the beginning of each framework essay makes the material more accessible. The chapter on Supreme Court decisions discusses a recent case on affirmative action in higher education admissions, *Hopwood v. Texas*. Jamey Piland, a colleague at Trinity College in Washington, D.C., has used the book in several interdisciplinary courses, and from that experience has produced an insightful *Instructor's Manual* that focuses especially on how to teach this material.

Many colleagues and friends have helped us clarify the ideas we present here. David W. Haines provided a thoughtful critique of the framework essays and continues to be a source of conceptual and technical guidance. Theodore W. Travis provided insight on Supreme Court decisions, their relationship to social values, and their impact on American society. The second edition benefited enormously from the comments of colleagues who have used the volume: Victoria Rader, Rose Pascarell, and Jamey Piland—master teachers all.

We owe special thanks to our students at George Mason University and Simmons College for sharing their experiences, to Simmons faculty members for their review and critique, and to Bernadette O'Leary for her general assistance and commitment to keeping us on track. We are particularly grateful to Beth Omansky Gordon for convincing us to expand our framework to include disability. Thanks also go to John Ameer of Simmons College for his compilation of video and film titles, which is included in the *Instructor's Manual*. Many thanks to Nancy Murphy for keeping the administrative side of Karen's life in order during the completion of this edition. Katherine Blake at McGraw-Hill provided considerable and much-appreciated support. For the second edition, we again convey our appreciation to Joan Lester and the Equity Institute in Emeryville, California, for their understanding of the progress that can be made through a holistic analysis.

McGraw-Hill proved itself as committed to a thorough review process for the second edition as it did for the first, again putting together a panel of accomplished scholars with broad expertise: Judith Baker, Ithaca College; James Fenelon, John Carroll University; Anne Onyekwuluje, Western Kentucky University; Shaunna Scott, University of Kentucky; Sarah Soule, University of Arizona; Mindy Stomblor, Texas Tech University; and Pamela Ann Quiroz, University of Massachusetts–Amherst. All offered detailed, insightful, and invaluable critiques, and we are much in their debt.

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CONSTRUCTING CATEGORIES OF DIFFERENCE

FRAMEWORK ESSAY I: KEY CONCEPTS

aggregate To combine or lump together (verb); something composed of different elements (noun). (See pages 11–14.)

constructionism The perspective that reality cannot be separated from the way a culture makes sense of it—that meaning is “constructed” through social, political, legal, scientific, and other practices. From this perspective, differences among people are created through social processes. (See pages 2–5.)

dichotomize To divide into two parts and to see those parts as mutually exclusive. (See page 14.)

differential undercount In the census, undercounting more of one group than of another. (See pages 9–10.)

disaggregate To separate something into its constituent elements. (See pages 11–14.)

essential identity An identity that is treated as core to a person. Essential identities can be attributed to people even when they are inconsistent with actual behavior. (See page 20.)

essentialism The perspective that reality exists independently of our perception of it, that we perceive the meaning of the world rather than construct that meaning. From this perspective, there are real and important (essential) differences among categories of people. (See pages 2–5.)

ethnic group, ethnicity An ethnic group is composed of people with a shared national origin or ancestry and shared cultural characteristics, such as language. For example, Polish Americans, Italian Americans, Chinese Americans, and Haitian Americans are ethnic

groups. “African American” can be considered a racial category, but also an ethnicity (given the shared history of slavery). (See page 16.)

gender Masculinity and femininity; the acting out of the behaviors thought to be appropriate for a particular sex. (See page 21.)

master status A status that has a profound effect on one’s life, that dominates or overwhelms the other statuses one occupies. In contemporary American society, race, sex, sexual orientation, social class, and ability/disability function as master statuses, but other statuses—such as religion—do not. For example, race strongly affects occupational status, income, health, and longevity. Religion may have a similar impact in other cultures. (See page 2.)

Other A usage designed to refer to those considered profoundly unlike oneself. (See pages 23–25.)

panethnic An ethnic classification that spans national-origin identities. (See page 12.)

race The conception that people can be classified into coherent groups based on skin color, hair texture, shape of head, eyes, nose, and lips. (See pages 16–18.)

sex The categories of male and female. (See page 21.)

status A position in society. Individuals occupy multiple statuses simultaneously, such as occupational, kinship, and educational statuses. (See page 2.)

stigma An attribute for which someone is considered bad, unworthy, or deeply discredited. (See pages 25–26.)

FRAMEWORK ESSAY

This book deals with the social construction of difference as it operates in American conceptions of race, sex and gender, social class, and sexual orientation. These categories, so often taken for granted, will be systematically questioned throughout the text.

Race, sex, class, and sexual orientation may be described as *master statuses*. In everyday speech, the term *status* conveys prestige. In most social science literature and in this text, however, a status is understood as a position or slot in a social structure. For example, office manager is an occupational status, college graduate is an educational status, and cousin is a kinship status. At any point in time, each of us occupies multiple statuses; that is, one may be an office manager, a college graduate, and a cousin simultaneously. Among these statuses, master statuses are those that “in most or all social situations will overpower or dominate all other statuses. . . . Master status influences every other aspect of life, including personal identity” (Marshall, 1994:315).

In this text we will examine the similarities in the master statuses of race, sex, social class, and sexual orientation. The circumstances of African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans differ in many ways, just as the experiences of racial minorities differ from those of sexual orientation minorities. Nonetheless, similar processes are at work when we “see” differences of color, gender, class, and sexual orientation. The impact of these statuses on people’s lives also have important commonalities. Indeed, we will suggest that many of the same processes occur in the operation of other master statuses, such as disability.

In preparing this volume, we noticed that talk about racism, sexism, homophobia,¹ and class status seemed to be everywhere—film, music, news reports, talk shows, sermons, and scholarly publications—and that the topics carried considerable intensity. These are controversial subjects; thus, readers may have strong reactions to this volume. Two perspectives—essentialism and constructionism—are core to the book and should help you understand your own reaction to the material.

The Essentialist and Constructionist Orientations

The difference between the *constructionist* and *essentialist* orientations is illustrated in the tale of the three umpires, first apparently told by social psychologist Hadley Cantril:

Hadley Cantril relates the story of three baseball umpires discussing their profession. The first umpire said, “Some are balls and some are strikes, and I call them as they are.” The second replied, “Some’s balls and some’s strikes, and I call ’em as I sees ’em.” The third thought about it and said, “Some’s balls and some’s strikes, but they ain’t nothing ’till I calls ’em.” (Henshel and Silverman, 1975:26)

¹The term *homophobia* was coined in 1973 by psychologist George Weinberg to describe an irrational fear of, or anger toward, homosexuals. While the psychological application has been abandoned, the word remains in common use to describe a strong opposition to or rejection of same-sex relationships. The term leaves much to be desired, but the alternative that has emerged, *heterosexism*, is not yet in conventional usage. *Heterosexism* has been defined as the presumption that all people are heterosexual and that heterosexuality is the only acceptable form of sexual expression.

The first umpire in the story takes an essentialist position. In arguing that “I call them as they are,” he indicates his assumption that balls and strikes are entities that exist in the world independently of his perception of them. For this umpire, “balls” and “strikes” are easily identified, mutually exclusive categories, and he is a neutral observer of them. This umpire “regards knowledge as objective and independent of mind, and himself as the impartial reporter of things ‘as they are’” (Pfuhl, 1986:5). For this essentialist umpire, balls and strikes exist in the world; he simply observes their presence.

Thus, the essentialist orientation presumes that the items in a category all share some “essential” quality, their “ball-ness” or “strike-ness.” For essentialists, the categories of race, sex, sexual orientation, and social class identify significant, empirically verifiable differences among people. From the essentialist perspective, racial categories exist apart from any social processes; they are objective categories of real difference among people.

The second umpire is somewhat removed from pure essentialism. His statement, “I call ‘em as I sees ‘em,” conveys the belief that while an independent, objective reality exists, it is subject to interpretation. For him the world contains balls and strikes, but individuals may have different perceptions about which is which.

The third umpire, who says “they ain’t nothing ‘till I calls ‘em,” is a constructionist. He operates from the belief that “conceptions such as ‘strikes’ and ‘balls’ have no meaning except that given them by the observer” (Pfuhl, 1986:5). For this constructionist umpire, reality cannot be separated from the way a culture makes sense of it; strikes and balls do not exist until they are constructed through social processes. From this perspective, difference is created rather than intrinsic to a phenomenon. Social processes, such as those in political, legal, economic, scientific, and religious institutions, create differences, determine that some differences are more important than others, and assign particular meanings to those differences. From this perspective, the way a society defines difference among its members tells us more about that society than the people so classified. This book operates from the constructionist perspective, since it examines how we have arrived at our race, sex, sexual orientation, and social class categories.

Few of us have grown up as constructionists. More likely, we are essentialists who believe that master statuses such as race or sex encompass clear-cut, unchanging, and in some way meaningful differences. Still, not everyone is an essentialist. Those from mixed racial or religious backgrounds are familiar with the ways in which identity is not clear-cut. They grow up understanding how definitions of self vary with the context; how others try to define one as belonging in a particular category; and how in many ways, one’s very presence calls prevailing classification systems into question. For example, being asked “What are you?” is a common experience among mixed-race people. Such experiences make evident the social constructedness of racial identity.

Most of us are unlikely to be exclusively essentialist or constructionist. As authors we have taken the constructionist perspective, but we still relied on essentialist terms we ourselves find problematic. The irony of questioning the idea of race but still talking about “blacks,” “whites,” and “Asians,” or of rejecting a dualistic

approach to sexual identity while still using the terms “gay” and “straight,” has not escaped us. Indeed, throughout our discussion we have used the currently favored essentialist phrase “sexual orientation” over the more constructionist “sexual preference.”²

Further, there is a serious risk that a text such as this falsely identifies people on the basis of either their sex, race, sexual orientation, or social class, despite the fact that master statuses are not parts of a person broken off from one another like the segments of a Tootsie Roll (Spelman, 1988). All of us are always simultaneously all of our master statuses, and it is that complex package that exists in the world. While Section I of the readings may make it seem as if these were separable statuses, they are not. Indeed, even the concept of master status suggests that there can be only one dominating status, though we would reject that position.

Both constructionism and essentialism can be found in the social sciences. We present constructionism as a useful approach to contemporary master status formulations, but essentialism has nonetheless been a critical element in the development of modern science. It has been the basis of probability theory and statistics (Hilts, 1973), and it forms the bedrock for most social scientific research.

Both perspectives also are evident in social movements, and those movements sometimes shift from one perspective to the other over time. Some feminists have held the essentialist belief that women and men are inherently different, as have most of those opposed to feminism. The constructionist view that sexual identity is chosen dominated the gay rights movement of the 1970s (Faderman, 1991), but today most members of that movement take the essentialist approach that sexual identity is something one is born with, whereas those opposed to gay relationships take the constructionist view that it is chosen. In this case, the use of language often signals which perspective is being used. For example, sexual *preference* conveys active, human decision making with the possibility of change (constructionism), while sexual *orientation* implies something fixed and inherent to a person (essentialism). Opinion polls show an increasing percentage of Americans believe homosexuality is something one is born with. In 1977, 13 percent indicated they believed that to be the case; in 1998, 31 percent agreed with that statement (Berke, 1998).

In telling the life story of a friend, journalist Darryl Rist explained the shift to a more essentialist approach on the part of gay rights activists as a response to heightened prejudice against same-sex relationships:

[Chris Yates's parents were] . . . Pentecostal ministers who had tortured his adolescence with Christian cures for sexual perversity. Shock and aversion therapies under born-again doctors and gruesome exorcisms of sexual demons by spirit-filled preachers had culminated in a plan to have him castrated by a Mexican surgeon who touted the procedure as a way to make the boy, if not straight, at least sexless. Only then had the terrified son rebelled.

Then, in the summer of 1991, the journal *Science* reported anatomical differences between the brains of homosexual and heterosexual men. . . . The euphoric media—those

²The phrase “sexual identity” may now be replacing “sexual orientation.” It could be used in either an essentialist or a constructionist way.

great purveyors of cultural myths—drove the story wildly. Every major paper in the country headlined the discovery smack on the front page. . . . Like many others, I suspect, Chris Yates's family saw in this newly reported sexual science a way out of its wrenching impasse. After years of virtual silence between them and their son, Chris's parents drove several hundred miles to visit him and ask for reconciliation. Whatever faded guilt they might have felt for the family's faulty genes was nothing next to the reassurance that neither by a perverse upbringing nor by his own iniquity was Chris or the family culpable for his urges and actions. "We could never have condoned this if you could do something to change it. But when we finally understood that you were *born* that way, we knew we'd been wrong. We had to ask your forgiveness." (Rist, 1992:425–26)

It is understandable that those under attack would find essentialist orientations appealing, just as the expansiveness of constructionist approaches would be appealing in more tolerant eras. Still, both perspectives can be used to justify discrimination, since people can be persecuted for the choices they make as well as for the "genes" they were born with.

Why have we spent so much time describing the essentialist and constructionist perspectives? Discussions about race, sex, sexual orientation, and social class generate such great intensity partly because they involve the clash of essentialist and constructionist assumptions. Essentialists are likely to view categories of people as "essentially" different in some important way; constructionists are likely to see these differences as socially created and arbitrary. An essentialist asks what causes people to be different; a constructionist asks about the origin and consequence of the categorization system itself. While arguments about the nature and cause of racism, sexism, homophobia, and poverty are disputes about power and justice, from the perspective of essentialism and constructionism they are also disputes about what differences in color, sexuality, and social class *mean*.

The constructionist approach has one clear advantage, however. It is from that perspective that one understands that all the talk about race, sex, sexual orientation, and social class has a profound significance. Such talk is not simply *about* difference and similarity; it is itself the *creation* of difference and similarity. In the sections that follow, we will examine how categories of people are named, dichotomized, and stigmatized—all toward the construction of difference.

Naming

Difference is constructed first by naming categories of people. Therefore, constructionists pay special attention to the names people use to refer to themselves and others—the points at which new names are asserted, the negotiations that surround the use of particular names, and those occasions when people are grouped together or separated out.

Asserting a Name Both individuals and categories of people face similar issues in the assertion of a name. A change of name involves, to some extent, the claim of a new identity. For example, one of our colleagues wanted to be called by her first name rather than by its abbreviated version because the diminutive had come to seem childish to her. It took a few rounds of reminding people that this was her new

name, and with most that was adequate. One colleague, however, argued that he could not adapt to the new name; she would just have to tolerate his continued use of the nickname. This was a small but public battle about who had the power to name whom. Did she have the power to enforce her own naming, or did he have the power to name her despite her wishes? Eventually, she won.

A more disturbing example was a young woman who wanted to keep her “maiden” name after she married. Her fiancé agreed with her decision, recognizing that he would be reluctant to give up his name were the tables turned. When his mother heard of this possibility, however, she was outraged. In her mind, a rejection of her family’s name was a rejection of her family. She urged her son to reconsider getting married. (We do not know how this story ended.)

Thus, asserting a name can create social conflict. On both a personal and societal level, naming can involve the claim of a particular identity and the rejection of others’ power to impose a name. For example, is one Native American, American Indian, or Sioux; African American or black; girl or woman; Asian American or Japanese American; gay or homosexual; Chicano, Mexican American, Mexican, Latino, Hispanic, Spanish American, or Hispaño?

Geographically, *Hispanic* is preferred in the Southeast and much of Texas. New Yorkers use both *Hispanic* and *Latino*. Chicago, where no nationality has attained a majority, prefers *Latino*. In California, the word *Hispanic* has been barred from the *Los Angeles Times*, in keeping with the strong feelings of people in the community. Some people in New Mexico prefer *Hispaño*. Politically, *Hispanic* belongs to the right and some of the center, while *Latino* belongs to the left and the center. Historically, the choice went from *Spanish* or *Spanish-speaking* to *Latin American*, *Latino*, and *Hispanic*. (Shorris, 1992:xvi–xvii)

Deciding what name to use for a category of people is no easy task. It is unlikely that all members of the category use the same name; the name members use for one another may not be acceptable for outsiders to use; nor is it always advisable to ask what name a person prefers. We once saw an old friend become visibly angry when asked whether he preferred the term *black* or *African American*. “Either one is fine with me,” he replied, “I know what I am.” To him, the question meant that he was being seen as a member of a category, not as an individual.

Because naming may involve a redefinition of self, an assertion of power, and a rejection of others’ ability to impose an identity, social change movements often lay claim to a new name, and opponents to the movement may signal their opposition by continuing to use the old name. For example, *black* emerged in opposition to *Negro* as the Black Power movement sought to distinguish itself from the more moderate Martin Luther King wing of the civil rights movement. The term *Negro* had itself been put forward by influential leaders W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington as a rejection of the term “colored” that had dominated the mid- to late 19th century. “[D]espite its association with racial epithets, ‘Negro’ was defined to stand for a new way of thinking about Blacks” (Smith, 1992:497–98). Similarly, in 1988 Ramona H. Edelin, president of the National Urban Coalition, proposed that *African American* be substituted for *black*, and now both terms are in use (Smith,