



# *The* Meaning of Difference

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

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# THE MEANING OF DIFFERENCE

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

**A Text/Reader**  
**THIRD EDITION**

**Karen E. Rosenblum**

George Mason University

**Toni-Michelle C. Travis**

George Mason University



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## THE MEANING OF DIFFERENCE

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

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# PREFACE

In teaching in our respective fields, we regularly face classrooms filled with students who are questioning their identity in American society. With a population over one-third students of color, George Mason University has experienced in microcosm the traditional and the new American divide. As we shared our classroom experiences, we began to consider the similarities in the operation of race, sex and gender, social class, sexual orientation, and—later—disability. Our conversations led us to conclude that there was an overarching conceptual structure that could be applied to this material, and applied in a way that would provide students with a positive, rather than divisive, classroom experience. Thus, the genesis of the first edition of *The Meaning of Difference* in 1996.

*The Meaning of Difference* (or *MOD*) is, first and foremost, an effort to understand how *difference* is constructed in contemporary American culture: How do categories of people come to be seen as “different”? How does being “different” affect people’s lived experience? What meaning does difference have for social interaction, social institutions, or cultures? What difference does difference make?

*MOD* focuses on the most significant categories of difference on the American landscape—race, sex and gender, sexual orientation, social class, and disability—and asks: What is *shared* across these categories? What can be learned from their commonalities? That the *Meaning of Difference* is now in its third edition makes us hopeful that such an approach is useful in understanding American conceptions and constructions of difference.

## **ORGANIZATION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

*MOD* is divided into three sections. Each section opens with a Framework Essay that provides the conceptual architecture by which to understand the readings. The readings have been carefully selected to illustrate the Essay's concepts and structure. Thus, the Essays are not merely introductions to the readings; they are the "text" portion of this *text/reader*.

The first Framework 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, public policy, the economy, science, popular culture, and language. The readings that illustrate and extend each essay were specifically selected because of their applicability to multiple categories of people. For example, M. Annette Jaimes's article on the "blood quantum" required to classify a person as Native American can be applied to a discussion about the criteria people use to classify one another as gay or straight. Similarly, Eric Liu's discussion of finding himself "Asian American" parallels many people's "discovery" of their membership in race, sexual orientation, or disability groups.

## **DISTINGUISHING FEATURES**

Several features make *The Meaning of Difference* distinctive:

- First, it offers a conceptual framework by which to understand the commonalities among categories of difference. We believe this encompassing approach makes *MOD* unique.
- Second, *MOD* provides an accessible and historically grounded discussion of the Supreme Court decisions critical to the creation of these categories of differences.
- Third, *MOD* has been designed with an eye toward the pedagogic difficulties that often accompany this subject matter. Our experience has been that when the topic is *simultaneously* race, sex and gender, social class, and sexual orientation, no one group can be easily cast as victim or victimizer.

## **CHANGES IN THE THIRD EDITION**

The third edition includes 25 *new* readings and nine *more* readings than the previous edition. Specific changes and additions include the following:

- More readings focusing on whiteness as an identity.
- More readings examining the intersections of race, social class, sex and gender, and sexual orientation.

- Coverage of the 2000 Census in its process and results.
- An entirely new section on social class.
- Increased attention to the topic of disability, including discussion of a recent Supreme Court case on disability rights, *PGA Tour, Inc., v. Casey Martin*.
- An Index to provide easier access to the topics.

The third edition also includes several new readings that we think will become classics. “At the Slaughterhouse,” by Charlie LeDuff, was part of the 2001 *New York Times* Pulitzer-Prize-winning series, “How Race Is Lived in America.” LeDuff paints an unforgettable image of race and ethnic conflict at a North Carolina slaughterhouse. In “All Souls’ Night,” Michael Patrick MacDonald provides a personal account of the lives of poor and working-class whites in South Boston—“the best place on earth to live.” Michael Zweig’s, “Why Is Class Important?” and Sherry B. Ortner’s, “Preliminary Notes on Class and Culture,” draw our attention to social class as a hidden aspect of American social relations.

Several readings from the previous editions have been retained here because of their wide popularity among students and faculty. Certainly, John Larew’s, “Why Are Doves of Unqualified, Unprepared Kids Getting into our Top Colleges,” has been a revelation for students trying to understand affirmative action policies. Robert Moore’s, “Racism in the English Language,” paints a vivid, and still relevant, picture of the values embedded in the language of color. Finally, in the two articles by Anne Fausto-Sterling—one from the previous edition of *MOD*—we can observe changing notions about people who are intersexed.

## **SUPPLEMENTS**

### **Instructor’s Manual/Test Bank**

Jamey Piland, a colleague at Trinity College in Washington, DC, has used *MOD* in several interdisciplinary courses and, from that experience, has produced a thoughtful Instructor’s Manual that focuses especially on how to teach this material. Melissa Milne, a graduate student at George Mason, developed the discussion questions for our new readings.

New for the third edition is a Test Bank combined with the Instructor’s Manual. The Test Bank, developed by Susan Weldon of Eastern Michigan University, includes multiple-choice and true-false questions for the Framework Essays and each of the readings.

### **Companion Website**

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

Other content on this site include 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 film and video guide.

**Visit the companion website by going to**

**[www.mhhe.com/raceclassgender](http://www.mhhe.com/raceclassgender)**

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Many colleagues and friends have helped us clarify the ideas we present here. David W. Haines has been unfailingly available to help Karen think through conceptual and technical dilemmas. She could not imagine a colleague more supportive or wise. Theodore W. Travis provided insight on Supreme Court decisions, their relationship to social values, and their impact on American society. The third edition also benefited 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 and Simmons College for sharing their experiences, and to Melissa Milne for her research assistance and commitment to keeping us on track. We are particularly grateful to Beth Omansky Gordon for convincing us to broaden our scope to include disability. Thanks go to John Ameer of Clark University for his compilation of video and film titles included on the companion website. Thanks also go to Nancy Murphy for again keeping the administrative side of Karen's life in order during the completion of this revision.

We continue to be grateful to Joan Lester and the Equity Institute in Emeryville, California, for their understanding of the progress that can be made through a holistic analysis.

Proving itself as committed to a thorough review of the third edition as it had for previous editions, McGraw-Hill put together a panel of accomplished scholars with broad expertise. All offered detailed, insightful, and invaluable critiques, and we are much in their debt:

Kelly Dagan, Illinois College

Jennifer Eichstedt, Humboldt State University

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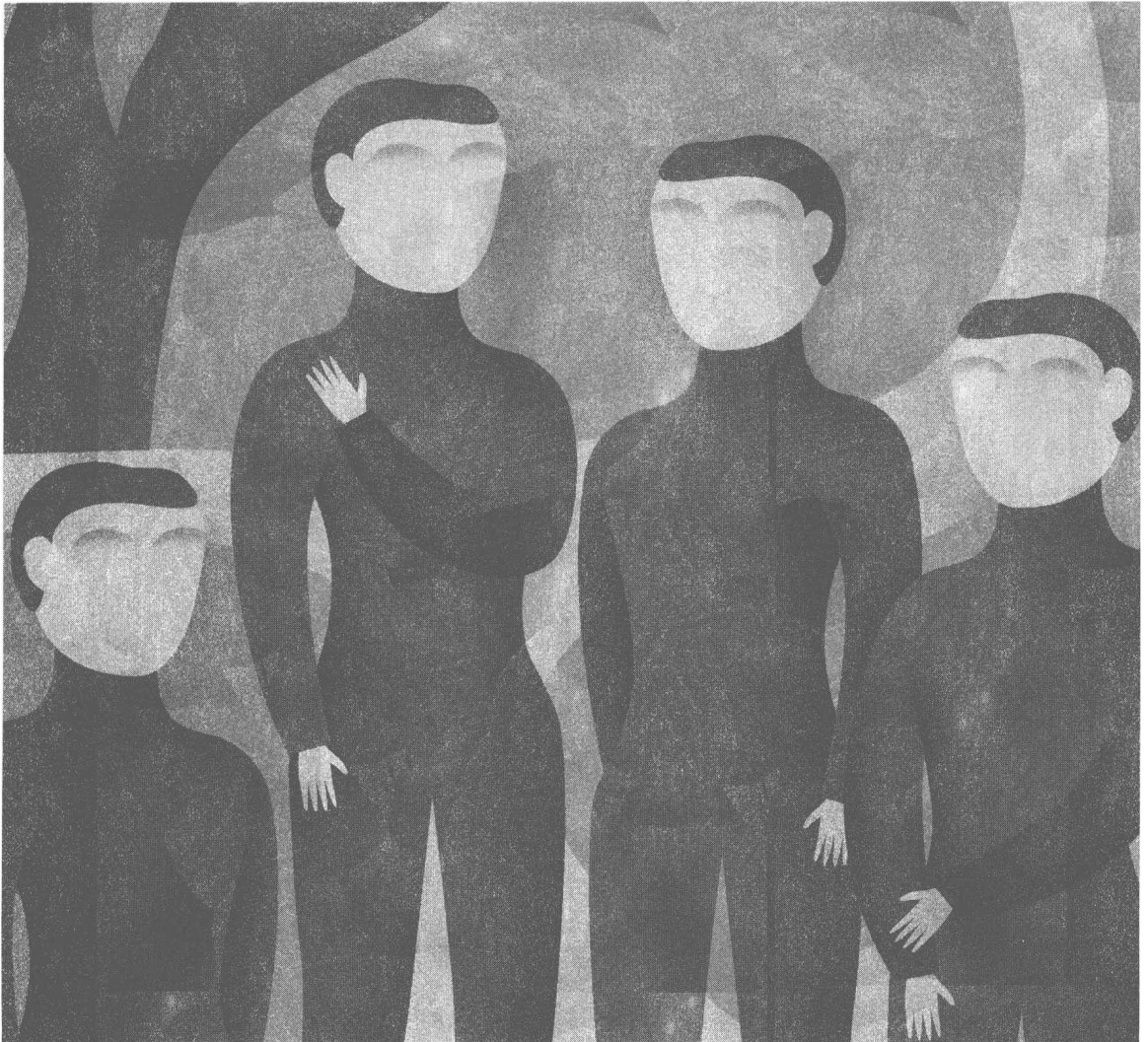
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# CONSTRUCTING CATEGORIES OF DIFFERENCE



## FRAMEWORK ESSAY

*The Meaning of Difference (MOD)* addresses 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 this 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).

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. There are also commonalities in the consequences of these statuses for people’s lives. Indeed, we 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,<sup>1</sup> 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 these issues. Two perspectives—essentialism and constructionism—are core to this 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

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<sup>1</sup>The 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* is the presumption that all people are heterosexual and that heterosexuality is the only acceptable form of sexual expression.

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)

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, and he is merely 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 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. *MOD* 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 entail 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, the experience Jordan Lite describes in Reading 23 of 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 take the constructionist perspective, but we have still relied on essentialist