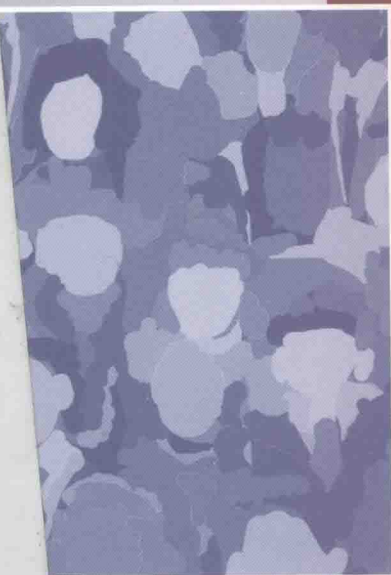


*Understanding*  
Race,  
Class,  
Gender,  
and Sexuality



*Lynn Weber*  
*Heather Dillaway*

# Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality:

## CASE STUDIES

Lynn Weber

Heather Dillaway



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## UNDERSTANDING RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY: CASE STUDIES

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# Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: Case Studies

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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 Understand-

ing *Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*," in a recent special issue of *Psychology of Women Quarterly* devoted to teaching about gender and ethnicity. Weber is the author of the new groundbreaking text *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework* (McGraw-Hill, 2001).

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.

HEATHER DILLAWAY received her master's degree in sociology from the University of Delaware in 1997. She is currently a PhD candidate at Michigan State University. Most of her written work, presentations, and publications have dealt with the connections between reproductive experiences and inequality. She is currently working on a dissertation covering women's experiences with menopause and how this reproductive experience is affected by women's social locations (race, class, gender, sexuality, family situation, etc.). Her major areas of interest include race, class, gender, and sexuality studies, sociology of the family (in particular, the sociology of motherhood/fatherhood), sociology of reproduction, and women's health. Dillaway has taught many sociology courses in the past five years, including sociology of sex and gender, introduction to women's studies, sociology of the family, and social stratification. In her teaching, Dillaway, like Weber, integrates a race, class, gender, and sexuality lens into the college curriculum.

# PREFACE

The eight case studies presented in this book are to be used to analyze race, class, gender, and sexuality dynamics in the United States today. To facilitate analysis, each case is accompanied by a set of questions addressing the five themes in the conceptual framework presented in Lynn Weber's text *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework*, which is also published by McGraw-Hill. The Introduction to these cases provides a summary of Weber's conceptual framework.

These cases have been carefully selected to represent a wide range of group experiences cross-cutting

- race, class, gender, and sexuality
- institutional arenas
- regional locations
- thematic foci.

In each case, the reader is asked to analyze both the foregrounded and the less apparent dimensions of oppression and privilege. Questions help to guide interrogations within the five themes of the framework. Questions also ask students to consider the implications for social action and social justice embedded in the stories and their analyses.

## DISTINGUISHING FEATURES

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- The cases are primary, unanalyzed narratives and first-person accounts—not mere secondary analyses about oppression.
- The limited number of cases presented allows for greater depth of analysis than is typically possible using a longer anthology.
- The cases highlight the complexities and interrelations of the dimensions of oppression and privilege.
- Questions *guide* the reader toward complex and critical analysis; they do not prescribe it for the reader.

- The stories presented involve a diverse group of people across race, class, gender, sexuality, age, disability, region, and timeframe, as well as diverse themes in criminal justice, education, family, work and economy, masculinity and femininity, identity, the American Dream, collective action, and the state.
- Each story addresses multiple intersections of inequalities and yet, taken together, the stories weave a web that even more powerfully illustrates complex interactions of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Since this book of case studies was developed in conjunction with *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework*, all of the people who contributed in multiple ways to the development of the text also contributed to the development of this book of case studies.

Elizabeth Higginbotham and Tina Hancock participated in initial brainstorming sessions for framing the text and for incorporating case studies as a way to best advance analyses of the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Lynn Weber's graduate research assistants at the University of South Carolina—Shannon Hunnicutt, Rebecca Shrum, and Kerry McLoughlin—made significant contributions to the text in numerous ways. Shannon, Rebecca, and Kerry have meticulously researched almost every topic in the books, have given valuable critiques, and have done the serious work of checking every reference, every detail. These books have been greatly improved by their involvement.

Over the last six years, students in Lynn Weber's seminars on race, class, gender, and sexuality and her seminars in women's studies at the University of Delaware and the University of South Carolina, and students in Heather Dillaway's gender, family, and social stratification courses at Michigan State University have read and given invaluable feedback on the latest iterations of the text and case studies. We thank them for seriously engaging in these projects and for the many good suggestions they made.

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. Maxine Baca Zinn has generously provided critical feedback and assistance in many ways—from recommending readings to theoretical critique to providing insights on the publication process. We are grateful to Maxine and to Bonnie and her students for their critical vision and many good suggestions. We are also indebted to the staff at the University of South Carolina Women's Studies program, Rosa Thorn and Jackie McClary, for the many ways in which they facilitated the project.



Finally, our families and friends have supported us in more ways than we can name. Chris, Russ, Annie, and Kate Bohner have engaged in numerous discussions of the issues and themes contained in these books and have always given thoughtful and honest feedback. Jean Bohner provided not only encouragement but also critical feedback and edited every line of both books. Jason Brater contributed unending support and assurance for Heather Dillaway and acted as a valuable sounding board at critical junctures during the creation of this case study book. We are deeply grateful to each of them.

Lynn Weber  
*University of South Carolina*  
Heather Dillaway  
*Michigan State University*

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# INTRODUCTION

From the time that Lynn Weber began to work on *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework*, she knew that she wanted to use real life vignettes—case studies—to convey the framework. Conducting research and teaching about race, class, gender, and sexuality for many years had taught her that analyses must be grounded in real life experience to reveal the intersecting dynamic relationships of these hierarchies of inequality. Further, as most of the anthologies on the topic demonstrate, beginning with personal experience is perhaps the best way to engage the reader in analyses of these complex intersections. So throughout that text, extensive examples and case studies are used to illustrate the themes of the conceptual framework for analyzing the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

## THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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In this book of case studies, Heather Dillaway and Lynn Weber provide you with an opportunity to conduct your own analyses of race, class, gender, and sexuality systems—to think critically about the ways that these multiple systems simultaneously operate in every social relationship, in every social institution from the economy to the family, and in every person's sense of who he or she is. To help guide your analysis, we provide questions that are organized by the themes in the conceptual framework. These themes were culled from many works published in the last 20 years that sought to analyze intersecting race, class, gender, and sexuality systems in ways that

- are complex—not superficial and simplistic—and incorporate multiple dimensions of inequality in the same analysis

- do not seek to rank the dimensions of inequality according to which one represents the greatest oppression, which group has suffered the most
- empower—further the cause of social and economic justice by providing understanding and insights that lead to challenging injustice effectively.

The five themes are described in detail in *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework* but are briefly summarized here. Some general questions are also provided to serve as guides or starting places for exploring how each theme identifies a critical dimension of race, class, gender, and sexuality systems of inequality and therefore of any analysis of them.

### **Theme 1: Historically and Geographically/ Globally Contextual**

Race, class, gender, and sexuality can be understood only in their *historical and geographic/global contexts*. So analyses focus on specific times and places and avoid the search for common meanings of race, class, gender, and sexuality that would apply in all times and places. When we examine situations, it is important to know the histories and global contexts of particular groups so that we can come to understand their current situations and their interpretations of events. Taking a broad historical and global view also enables us to see the tremendous changes that have taken place in each of these systems over time and the diversity across social geography and to recognize the potential for change in situations we face every day. When analyzing the case studies and events in your own life, ask:

- How have the relevant ideologies, the controlling images, developed over time? In this location? In other locations?
- What political processes have shaped this situation over time? In this location? In other locations?
- What historical economic conditions have affected the situation? What regional economic conditions? What global economic conditions?
- How would this situation be understood at a different historical time? In different regional and geographic locations?

### **Theme 2: Socially Constructed**

Race, class, gender, and sexuality are *social constructs* whose meanings develop out of group struggles over socially valued resources. While they may have biological or material referents, race, class, gender, and sexuality are not fixed properties of individuals nor of materially defined groups. Their meaning can and does change over time and in different social contexts. Ask:

- Are race, class, gender, and sexuality taken to determine how people should be—out of some notion of biological imperative or of inherent inferiority?
- Are race, class, gender, and sexuality seen as immutable “facts” of people’s lives or of social situations?

- Are people's economic resources, power, prestige, education, health—their total status—seen as something they earned through individual effort?
- How might the situation be viewed differently by people in different race, class, gender, and sexuality social locations?

### Theme 3: Power Relationships

Race, class, gender, and sexuality are *power relationships of dominance and subordination*, not merely gradations along a scale of resources—who has more than whom—or differences in cultural preferences or gender roles. They are based in relationships of exploitation of subordinate groups by dominant groups for a greater share of society's valued resources. These relationships change because oppressed groups struggle to gain rights, opportunities, and resources and to gain greater control over their lives from dominant groups that seek to maintain their position of control over the political, ideological, and economic social domains—over their own lives as well as over others' lives.

Try not to confuse personal power with social power. Individuals can be powerful by virtue of their insight, knowledge, personalities, and other traits. They can persuade others to act in ways they want. And this personal power can be achieved in spite of a lack of socially institutionalized power. It is the social power that accrues from occupying a position of dominance in the race, class, gender, and sexuality systems that we seek to understand here. Ask:

- What are the institutional arrangements that benefit the powerful and cost others in this situation?
- Which group(s) gain and which group(s) lose in the institutional arrangements we observe?
- Have the participants come to believe (internalized) that they lack power or have power in the situation? How have their beliefs affected their actions?

### Theme 4: Macro/Social Structural and Micro/Social Psychological Levels

These power relationships between dominant and subordinate groups are embedded in society's *macro* social institutions and in the *micro* face-to-face interactions that constitute the everyday lives of individuals. Specifying the linkages between these two levels is a key component of a race, class, gender, and sexuality analysis. When you analyze a particular social event, seeing the interpersonal and psychological manifestations of oppression is often easy. But because the broad macro-level forces that shape events are more remote and abstract, they are more difficult to see. Ask:

- Which group(s) are empowered and which group(s) are disempowered in the macro institutional arrangements we observe?
- What are the ideological, political, and economic institutional arrangements and practices that are shaping each actor's actions and views in the situation?

- Imagine changes in key macro institutional conditions, such as the onset of an economic recession or a change in laws. How would these changes alter the situation?
- How does each of the actors view the situation? Is that view different for people in different race, class, gender, and sexuality locations?
- Are oppressed group members aware of the race, class, gender, and sexuality power structures in the situation? Is there evidence that they resist controlling images in their views and their actions? Is there evidence that they have accepted the controlling images, the limits on their lives? Why?
- Are dominant group members aware of their privilege in the situation? What does it mean to them? What views do they hold of oppressed groups? If they do not take oppressed groups into account, why not?

### Theme 5: Simultaneously Expressed

Race, class, gender, and sexuality *simultaneously operate* in every social situation. At the societal level, these systems of social hierarchies are connected to each other and are embedded in all social institutions. At the individual level, we each experience our lives based on our location along *all* dimensions, so we may occupy positions of dominance and subordination at the same time. Ask yourself about all of the systems operating in every situation you examine. Although one may appear to be in the foreground, go behind the obvious and ask about the less visible dimensions:

- If we take account of only a single dimension of oppression (e.g., gender) and ignore the others, how might we interpret the situation differently?
- What are the dimensions that are foregrounded, that are fairly obvious, in this situation?
- What are the dimensions that are not as apparent? Why?
- How does the power of the individuals involved shape our perspective on what dimensions are important?

### Implications for Social Action and Social Justice

Finally, when conducting race, class, gender, and sexuality analyses, it is important to be explicit about what you hope to gain through such analyses. Ask yourself about the implications for social justice of the perspective you have, the questions you ask, and the answers you obtain:

- Do your analyses provide insights that in a political context would likely serve to reinforce existing power relations?
- Do your analyses illuminate processes of resistance or avenues for self-definition or self-valuation that could transform the race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies?
- How might people in different social locations react to and employ your analyses? To what ends?

## QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

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Accompanying each of the eight case studies presented here is a set of specific questions associated with each of the five themes in the framework as well as questions about the implications of the case for social action and social justice. These questions are not intended to be comprehensive and to touch on every possible avenue one could pursue in attempting to understand each thematic aspect of race, class, gender, and sexuality systems. Furthermore, they are not organized in a linear progression. Instead, they are intended as questions to spur critical thought about the multiple dimensions of each of these systems as well as of their intersecting dynamics. Because each of us brings to an analysis the knowledge and perspectives that have been shaped by our own social location in race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies, our analyses will likely take many directions as different people are better situated to see the dynamics of inequality in different aspects of stories or situations. Thus, bringing multiple angles of vision to bear on any case will certainly enrich and likely change any analysis.

Although the questions are organized by conceptual theme, you will also find that there is considerable overlap in the themes that need to be addressed to answer any specific question and that some of the questions might thus fit into several of the themes. Just as race, class, gender, and sexuality as systems intersect, so do the conceptual themes that undergird these systems connect and overlap. For example, the fact that the meanings of race, class, gender, and sexuality are historically, geographically, and globally contextual in many ways implies that they are socially constructed and thus can and do change over time and place. Likewise, that they are power relationships merely specifies that the relationships are of dominance and subordination, yet these relationships take place at both the macro/social structural and micro/social psychological levels. And the simultaneous expression of race, class, gender, and sexuality inequalities is manifest as we explore all of the other themes. So use the questions to spur your thinking to generate complex, dynamic, and useful analyses of the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality in specific social situations and in specific lives.

## ABOUT THE CASES

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The eight case studies presented here were selected for several reasons. First, we wanted to present a range of different experiences across multiple social locations and yet to do so in only a few cases. Consequently, considerable race, class, gender, and sexuality diversity is represented in these cases. But they are by no means comprehensive or exhaustive. The stories involve

- native born and immigrant populations
- multiple racial groups including people of African, Asian, European, Mexican, and Native descent



- poor, working-class, and middle-class people
- gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and heterosexuals
- men and women.

They also include

- rural, suburban, and urban dwellers
- a wide age range
- regional variation (Northeast, South, Southwest, and Midwest)
- international variation.

Major political, economic, and ideological institutions are highlighted across the eight studies

- federal and state government agencies and organizations
- the economy and workforce
- marriage and the family
- education
- law and criminal justice.

Likewise, the studies problematize dominant ideologies such as the American Dream, heterosexuality, masculinity and femininity, and Whiteness.

## RESOURCES

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To facilitate your analyses of race, class, gender, and sexuality systems, we provide a few references at the end of each case. And this introduction is followed by a set of general references that might be useful in each of the cases. You may also wish to refer to Lynn Weber's (2001) *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework*, New York: McGraw-Hill, which provides not only a fuller discussion of the framework but also a detailed time line of indicators of oppression and resistance in modern U.S. history. Finally, this introduction is also followed by a list of current anthologies on race, class, gender, and sexuality that can be resources as well as opportunities for conducting further analyses.

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