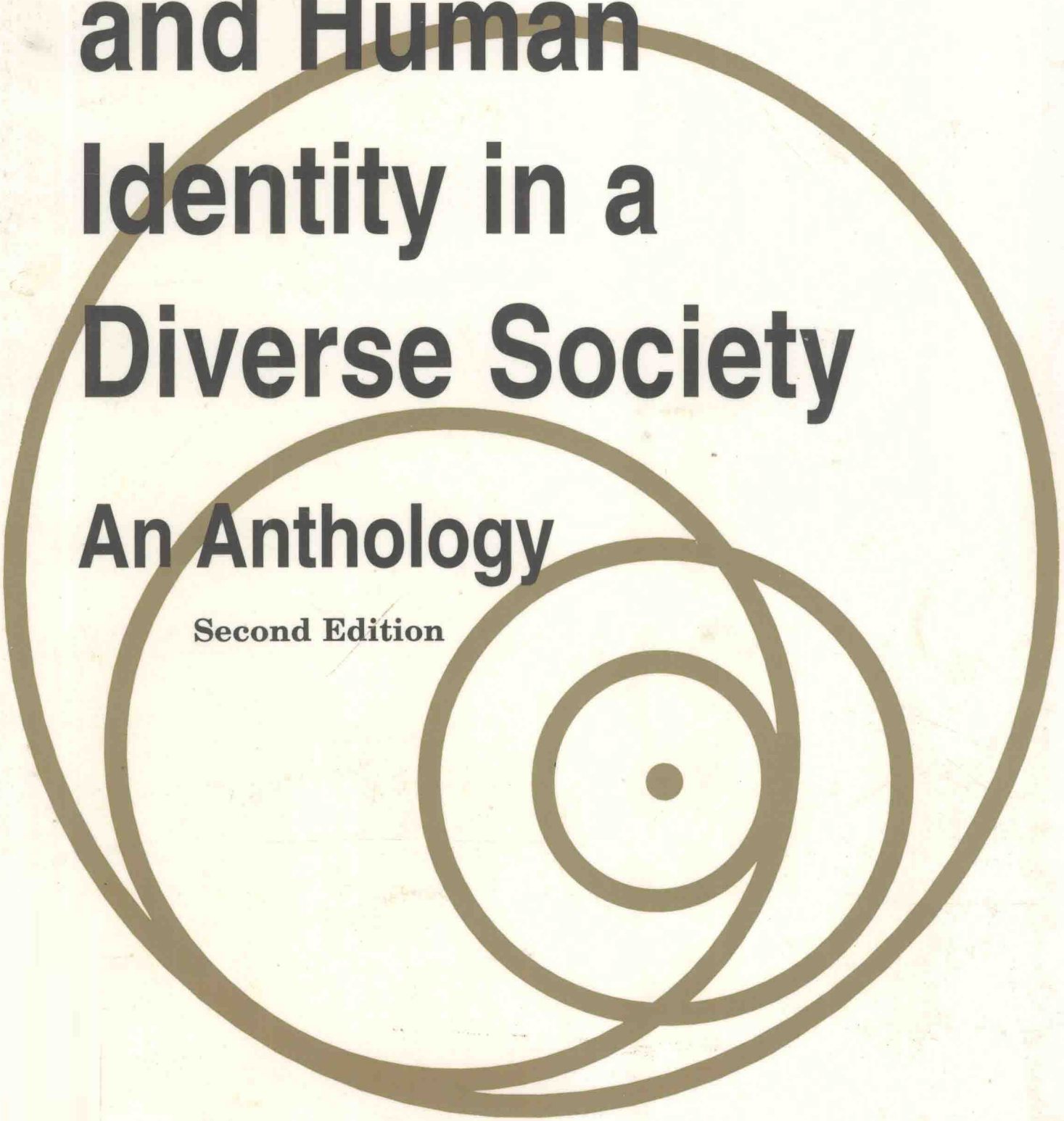
Race, Gender, and Human Identity in a Diverse Society

An Anthology

Second Edition



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Foreword by Litchfield O'Brien Thompson

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Foreword

The Origins and Purpose of the Race, Gender and Human Identity Course

Litchfield O'Brien Thompson

Since 1987, "Race, Gender and Human Identity" has been one of the core courses of the General Education Curriculum at West Virginia State College. It was conceived and designed to fit the requirements of a newly revised curriculum. One of its goals was to foster an appreciation for the interconnectedness of knowledge. This emphasis necessitated focus on interdisciplinary learning. Herein lay the attraction for a course which utilized instructors from multiple disciplines as a team.

The new course was placed under the "human diversity" component of the new curriculum. Members of the initial subcommittee assigned to develop the course were cognizant of the origin and legacy of the college. The Institution was created in 1891 to provide education for "Negroes" in West Virginia. Choosing race relations as one of the categories for investigation thus seemed entirely appropriate. Of particular relevance was the historic desegregation Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka,* 1954. WVSC, under the leadership of President William Wallace, responded with dispatch and gained the plaudits of the national media for the success of "integration in reverse." This was the impulse behind the college's unofficial motto: "A Living Laboratory of Human Relations."

Another category fitting the mold of human diversity, gender relations, became an obvious choice among members of the sub-committee. From the 1960s on, due mainly to efforts of the women's movement, the issue of discrimination based on gender was elevated to national priority. The course offered the opportunity to explore the origins of gender inequality and how gender stratification was maintained and resisted.

Race and gender are certainly important though and not exclusive sources of identity. Issues related to personal identity are often the topic of popular discussion. It should be understood that the complex social structure in the U.S. today produces social actors with multiple identities. The foundation for these social identities is linked to ethnic, religious, national, and class affiliation. Historically, such identities are known to generate in-group solidarity and out-group hostility. Analyzing the conflict and accommodation which stem from these areas of antagonism helps us to grasp the nature of the political and economic challenges which confront the nation. To assist in this endeavor, concepts such as ethnicity, class, ethnocentrism, prejudice, discrimination, sexism and racism were considered central to the vocabulary for the course.

With the analytic categories in place, attention turned to theories and models which could provide coherence to the course. The guiding principle was that these should be broad enough and elastic enough to explain how distinct categories overlapped. The theories and models which fitted this focus were: the theory of patriarchy, the interest theory of discrimination, the theory of internal colonialism, the theory of institutional discrimination, the theory of functional differentiation of gender, and models of assimilation and pluralism.

Each of these theories and models suggests strategies for reducing the incidence of discrimination based on invidious distinctions such as race and gender. Exploring the viability and applicability of strategies was considered a fitting conclusion to the course.

The final task in the preparation for the course was to select articles that would mesh with the general perspective and would draw from imaginative literature, autobiography, articles from history, art, the social sciences and biology.

With the parameters in order, a pilot course was taught by an interdisciplinary team made up of instructors from the English, Psychology

and Sociology departments. It proved a fascinating and challenging experience. The team met weekly to coordinate areas of responsibility; to assure that the "common learning experience," a pillar of the General Education Curriculum, was not ignored; to adjust to lecturing in a large auditorium before students and peers; and to learn how to deal with the many emotive issues raised.

A decade has passed, and "Race, Gender and Human Identity" remains a fixture of the General Education Curriculum. The philosophy of the course remains unaltered. An emphasis on heterosexism which was limited in the early years has been integrated into the course. The number of faculty who have taught the course has grown. Though adhering to the expectations of the common learning experience, teams take on a character of their own. The contribution of students in influencing changes that have been introduced cannot be underestimated.

It should be apparent from this introduction that "Race, Gender and Human Identity" was a collaborative effort from the beginning. Arline Thorn was especially vital in her role as leader of the program. Sandra H. Marshburn, Tayoba T. Ngenge, Rebecca S. Francis, and O'Brien Thompson, who teamed up for the pilot course, are to be commended for their pioneering contribution. Gerry E. Beller expressed a keen interest in the course upon joining the faculty during its teething years and shaped its development. Rather than risk opprobrium for leaving out others who have taught the course and added to its character, let us list departments from which instructors have been drawn: Art, Biology, Communications, Criminal Justice, English, Political Science, Psychology, Social Work, and Sociology.

Introduction

Introduction to the Second Edition

Chuck Smith

A number of changes, and I hope improvements, have been made in this second edition of *Race, Gender, and Human Identity in a Diverse Society: An Anthology*. Both editions have been a cooperative effort by the faculty of West Virginia State College who take on the additional responsibility to teach this interdisciplinary course. Professor Carol Taylor-Johnson who, in addition to writing several selections and serving as an editor, composed the book's title. O'Brien Thompson, a member of the team who designed the course, expressed the vision of all of the professors in the book's foreword. The second edition, contains 40 readings, down from 59 in the first edition. Six of these were written for this book by members of our faculty. The book contains readings from natural science, social science, theology, literature, and the popular press. This edition has more fiction than the first edition. It also includes contextual introductions and discussion questions for each reading. I appreciate the work of Carol Campbell, Carolyn Sturgeon, Carol Taylor-Johnson, Martin Japtok, Barbara Ladner, and Charles Ledbetter who developed that material.

This reader will be used for Spring Semester 1999 through Summer Semester 2000. The editors have chosen materials which are particularly useful for the West Virginia State College student to understand the personal importance and social dynamics played by race and gender in the 1990s. It is our intention that the students will enjoy and benefit from reading this material.

Contents

Readings About Sexual Identity

Readings About Human Identity

1
Introduction
Defining Oneself: The Significance of Identity

Chuck Smith

"Who am I?" Some introspective people ask themselves this question frequently and thoughtfully. Others of us seldom, if ever, consciously consider it. Yet, almost every person maintains a firmly held sense of a unique self. The term for that sense is *identity*. This concept, identity, is a set of distinguishing characteristics and personality traits that define an individual. The articles and stories collected in this reader, and especially those in this first section, center on how and why people assign identities to themselves and to others. These readings also provide an understanding that how one identifies oneself and others contributes to individual and social behavior.

How do you see yourself? Which of your attributes do you consider to most fully or most accurately reveal who you truly are? Listing those traits can provide insight into one's self-identity. Such an insight may disclose those characteristics that are important to you in defining your self. To illustrate this point, define your identity by developing a description of who you are. Do this by listing ten of the most significant characteristics or traits that reveal who you are. Begin each listing with the descriptive phrase, "I am . . ." or "I am a . . ." For example, your listing should be in this form: "I am good looking" or "I am an environmentalist" or "I am a basketball player." List these descriptions roughly in the order of their significance in defining your identity. Make your list before you continue reading.

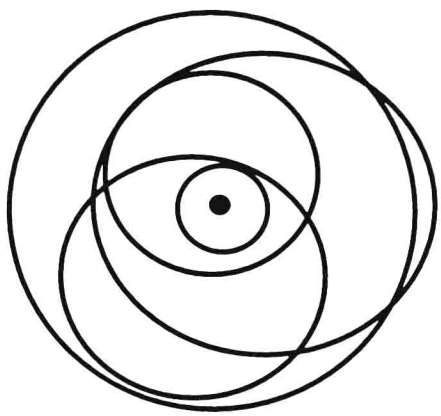
Examine your completed list. You can probably separate the descriptions in your list into several broad categories. You may have listed some physical characteristics, some traits of temperament, and other attributes based on membership in groups. It should become apparent that your identity is a complex, multifaceted concept. What does the list communicate about your self-image? What listed items pertain to the values you espouse? Is their position in the list an indicator of their importance in your life? Does the list provide any understanding of your perception of your role and place in society? Do feelings and emotions play an important role in how you see yourself? After reflecting on the answers to these questions, do you think you will make changes if you make a second list? How would your list vary at different times and in different circumstances? There are two benefits in doing this exercise. It provides you with an approximate sense of your self-image. It can also help you realize that as a unique person you have valuable contributions to make to your community. I will return to this subject at the conclusion of this essay.

One acquires an identity in several ways. Moreover, many components comprise a person's identity. Some of them are biologically determined by genetics and by the balance of chemicals in the body. Many others are the result of external influences such as experiences, habits, and socialization into various groups. Furthermore, others may see various components to be paramount and essential in defining a person, although that person does not see those attributes as particularly important in defining him or herself. Developing an identity is a complex, and, for the most part, unconscious process. Our bodies provide many of the elements that constitute identity. Physical size, strength, and appearance are all derivatives of our genetics. We have only limited control over these aspects of ourselves. Exercise, cosmetics, diet, and clothing, however, can alter them somewhat. Temperament is in part an outgrowth of chemical compositions in our brains. The balances of various chemicals affect our feelings and emotions. Our temperament is also the result of environmental influences. People learn to adopt different moods, dispositions, and demeanors in response to other people's reactions to their behavior. Habitually projecting various demeanors causes them to become traits of one's personality.

It is the aim of college courses, such as Race, Gender and Human Identity, to examine the social dimensions and dynamics of identity. For the reasons that Dr. O'Brien Thompson explained in his introduction to this book, this

course focuses especially, but not exclusively, on racial and sexual identities. In our time and national culture, concerns revolving around these identities significantly influence social, economic, religious, and political issues. The components of identity that most influence these important areas of life are those related to membership in a group. We are social animals. An important part of what constitutes being human is membership in groups. At the most basic level we form families. These groups are more than merely biological relationships operating on instinctual behaviors. Human families build on emotional bonds that nurture and sustain their members.

People are usually members of a number of groups. A schematic representation of this relationship depicts the individual as a dot. Concentric and overlapping circles drawn around the dot signify the groups which encompass their various other members. Some people may be members of every group of which the "dot" person is a member, while others may be members of only some or none of them. In the first essay in this book, "Formation of In-Groups," Allport argues that group membership plays an important role in defining one's identity. He maintains that people derive identity, in great part, from membership in those groups with which one consciously and intentionally associates. A person's membership in groups, he contends, defines his or her social position.



A good part of personal identity is the product of group membership. There is a good chance that some components of identity that you listed above were memberships in groups ("I am a Christian") or associated you with groups ("I am a basketball player"). In fact, you may not be aware of how firmly your association with a group defines your identity. An idea that confronts or attacks your group's ideas or values may make you defensive. In a course such as Race, Gender, and Human Identity, it is important to recognize that natural reaction. An objective and nonjudgmental statement about a certain group may cause members of that group to become defensive or argumentative. Stereotypes are generalizations based on accurate or misperceived characteristics of a group. Stereotypes attributed to your ethnic, religious, racial, or sexual group can cause you to feel uncomfortable. Several essays in this section of the reader discuss the ways people identify with groups and the effects that has on personal identity. Also, consider practical matters. We will be discussing ethnic, sexual, religious, and racial groups in class. Be aware that a remark you make about a group may be unsettling or even offensive to members of that group. This may be true even when you absolutely have no intention of being confrontational and do not intend a slur. By the same token, if the remark of another upsets you, do not automatically assume that that person intended to provoke you. Discussions will be most productive when everyone involved shows sensitivity to the feeling of others. This does not mean that discussions cannot be lively and open. An objective of this course, after all, is to raise the level of awareness and appreciation for the values and traditions of various social groups.

Dominant groups sometimes define other groups as being in some way inferior. The most obvious and universally experienced example of this is the claim of male superiority to the female. Such claims can govern social and legal relationships. To the extent that claims of inferiority are accepted by members of the subordinate group, they can have a devastating consequence on the subjugated people's self-image. Heker captures an example of this in her short story "The Stolen Party." In its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregated education violated the Constitution. That ruling was based, in part, on the damage segregated schools inflicted on the self-identity of black children. The Court cited studies that demonstrated that segregation caused some Negro children to be ashamed of their skin color and to wish they were white. Members of subjugated groups frequently resist their characterization as inferior. Apes's essay "An Indian's Looking Glass for the White Man," provides a masterful examination of the rejection of the characterization of inferiority.

Introduction—Defining Oneself: The Significance of Identity

This course examines aspects of human identity. Its goal is to increase the understanding of the social behaviors that result from tensions among various groups in our community and nation. Several semesters ago, a student in Race, Gender and Human Identity wrote in a journal entry: "I should not be required to take this course. I am not a bigot, there is not one bone of prejudice in my body. I don't discriminate against other people." This attitude misses the point of the course. It is not included in the college's general education curriculum because the faculty assumes that students are narrow-minded bigots. This is the equivalent to supposing that American Government and General Psychology courses are in the core curriculum because the faculty suspects students of being traitors and psychopaths. In fact, the assumption of the faculty is that most students respect other people. This course provides an opportunity to learn about the values of others, to understand some of the underlying causes of social unrest, and to develop tools and ideas to build a more tolerant society.

2
Formation of In-Groups

Gordon W. Allport

This article examines the basic roles of groups in society and the influence group membership has on individual identity. This piece was first published in 1954, which is reflected in some of its vocabulary and examples. The models and principles it establishes, however, remain very useful. Its discussion of the relationship between in-groups and prejudice is especially significant.

1. The concept which Allport calls in-groups embraces much more than a high school clique or exclusive organization. What is an in-group? What role does it play in the formation of one's identity?
2. What is prejudice? The group-norm theory is very useful in explaining why prejudice exists. The theory posits that groups develop ways of living, characteristic codes and conventions, beliefs, standards, and enemies. What purpose do these values serve for a group?
3. The group-norm theory also asserts that both obvious and subtle demands keep individuals loyal to these values. Given what we have said about in-groups, why is this so? What does this suggest about ending prejudice by attempting to change social attitudes individual by individual?

The proverb *familiarity breeds contempt* contains considerably less than a half-truth. While we sometimes do become bored with our daily routine of living and with some of our customary companions, yet the very values that sustain our lives depend for their force upon their familiarity. What is more, what is familiar tends to *become a value.* We come to like the style of cooking, the customs, the people, we have grown up with.

Psychologically, the crux of the matter is that the familiar provides the indispensable basis of our existence. Since existence is good, its accompanying groundwork seems good and desirable. A child's parents, neighborhood, region, nation are given to him—so too his religion, race, and social traditions. To him all these affiliations are taken for granted. Since he is part of them, and they are part of him, they are *good.*

As early as the age of five, a child is capable of understanding that he is a member of various groups. He is capable, for example, of a sense of ethnic identification. Until he is nine or ten he will not be able to understand just what his membership signifies—how, for example, Jews differ from gentiles, or Quakers from Methodists, but he does not wait for this understanding before he develops fierce in-group loyalties.

Some psychologists say that the child is "rewarded" by virtue of his memberships, and that this reward creates the loyalty. That is to say, his family feeds and cares for him, he obtains pleasure from the gifts and attentions received from neighbors and compatriots. Hence he learns to love them. His loyalties are acquired on the basis of such rewards. We may doubt that this explanation is sufficient. A colored child is seldom or never rewarded for being a Negro—usually just the opposite, and yet he normally grows up with a loyalty to his racial group. Thoughts of Indiana arouse a glow in the breast of a native Hoosier[1]—not necessarily because he passed a happy childhood there, but simply because he *came* from there. It is still, in part, the ground of his existence.

Rewards may, of course, help the process. A child who has plenty of fun at a family reunion may be more attached thereafter to his own clan because of the experience. But normally he would be attached to his clan anyway, simply because it is an inescapable part of his life.

Happiness (i.e., "reward") is not then the only reason for our loyalties. Few of our group memberships seem to be sustained by the pleasures they provide—an exception perhaps being our recreational memberships. And it takes a major unhappiness, a prolonged and bitter experience, to drive us away from loyalties once formed. And sometimes no

amount of punishment can make us repudiate our loyalty.

This principle of the *ground* in human learning is important. We do not need to postulate a "gregarious instinct" to explain why people like to be with people: they have simply found people lock-stitched into the very fabric of their existence. Since they affirm their own existence as good, they will affirm social living as good. Nor do we need to postulate a "consciousness of kind" to explain why people adhere to their own families, clans, ethnic groups. The self could not be itself without them.

Scarcely anyone ever wants to be anybody else. However handicapped or unhappy he feels himself, he would not change places with other more fortunate mortals. He grumbles over his misfortunes and wants his lot improved; but it is *his* lot and *his* personality that he wants bettered. This attachment to one's own being is basic to human life. I may say that I envy *you.* But I do not want to *be* you; I only want to have for myself some of your attributes or possessions. And along with this beloved self go all of the person's basic memberships. Since he cannot alter his family stock, its traditions, his nationality, or his native language, he does well to accept them. Their accent dwells in the heart as well as on the tongue.

Oddly enough, it is not necessary for the individual to have direct acquaintance with all his in-groups. To be sure, he usually knows the members of his immediate family. (An orphan, however, may be passionately attached to parents he has never seen.) Some groups, such as clubs, schools, neighborhoods, are known through personal contacts. But others depend largely on symbols or hearsay. No one can have direct acquaintance with his race as a whole, nor with all his lodge brothers or co-religionists. The young child may sit enthralled while he hears of the exploits of the great-grandfather whose role as a sea-captain, a frontiers-man, or nobleman sets a tradition with which the child identifies himself. The words he hears provide him with just as authentic a ground for his life as do his daily experiences. By symbols one learns family traditions, patriotism, and racial pride. Thus in-groups that are only verbally defined may be nonetheless firmly knit.

What Is an In-Group?

In a static society it would be fairly easy to predict just what loyalties the individual will form—to what region, to what phratry,[2] or to what social class. In such a static society kinship, status, even place of residence, may be rigidly prescribed.

> In ancient China at one time residential arrangements actually coincided with social distance. Where one lived indicated all of one's memberships. The inner circle of a region was the Tribute Holding where government officials only were permitted to reside. A second circle contained the nobility. Beyond this an outer but defended area, known as the Peaceful Tenures, contained literary workers and other citizens of repute. Farther out lay the Prohibited territory divided between foreigners and transported convicts. Finally came the Unstrained territory, where only barbarians and ostracized felons were allowed to dwell.[3]

In a more mobile, technological society such as ours no such rigidity exists.

There is one law—universal in all human societies—that assists us in making an important prediction. *In every society on earth the child is regarded as a member of his parents' group.* He belongs to the same race, stock, family tradition, religion, caste, and occupational status. To be sure, in our society, he may when he grows older escape certain of these memberships, but not all. The child is ordinarily expected to acquire his parents' loyalties and prejudices; and if the parent because of his group-membership is an object of prejudice, the child too is automatically victimized.

Although this rule holds in our society, it is less infallible than in more "familistic" regions of the world. While the American child normally acquires a strong sense of family membership and a certain loyalty to his parents' country of origin, race, and religion, he has considerable latitude respecting his attachments. Each individual pattern will be somewhat different. An American child is free to accept some of his parents' memberships and to reject others.

It is difficult to define an in-group precisely. Perhaps the best that can be done is to say that

members of an in-group all use the term *we* with the same essential significance. Members of a family do so, likewise schoolmates, members of a lodge, labor union, club, city, state, nation. In a vaguer way members of international bodies may do the same. Some we-organizations are transitory (e.g., an evening party), some are permanent (e.g., a family or clan).

Sam, a middle-aged man of only average sociability, listed his own in-group membership as follows:

his paternal relatives
his maternal relatives
family of orientation (in which he grew up)
family of procreation (his wife and children)
his boyhood circle (now a dim memory)
his grammar school (in memory only)
his high school (in memory only)
his college as a whole (sometimes revisited)
his college class (reinforced by reunions)
his present church membership (shifted when he was 20)
his profession (strongly organized and firmly knit)
his firm (but especially the department in which he works)
a "bunch" (group of four couples who take a good deal of recreation together)
surviving members of a World War I company of infantry (growing dim)
state where he was born (a fairly trivial membership)
town where he now lives (a lively civic spirit)
New England (a regional loyalty)
United States (an average amount of patriotism)
United Nations (in principle firmly believed in but psychologically loose because he is not clear concerning the "we" in this case)
Scotch-Irish stock (a vague feeling of kinship with others who have this lineage)
Republican party (he registers Republican in the primaries but has little additional sense of belonging)

Sam's list is probably not complete—but from it we can reconstruct fairly well the membership ground on which he lives.

In his list Sam referred to a boyhood circle. He recalls that at one time this in-group was of desperate importance to him. When he moved to a new neighborhood at the age of ten he had no one of his own age to pal with, and he much desired companionship. The other boys were curious and suspicious. Would they admit him? Was Sam's style compatible with the gang's style? There was the usual ordeal by fistfight, set in motion at some slight pretext. This ritual—as is customary in boys' gangs—is designed to provide a swift and acceptable test of the stranger's manners and morale. Will he keep within the limits set by the gang, and show just enough boldness, toughness, and self-control to suit the other boys? Sam was fortunate in this ordeal, and was forthwith admitted to the coveted in-group. Probably he was lucky that he had no additional handicaps in terms of his racial, religious, or status memberships. Otherwise the probation would have been longer and the tests more exacting; and perhaps the gang would have excluded him forever.

Thus some in-group memberships have to be fought for. But many are conferred automatically by birth and by family tradition. In terms of modern social science the former memberships reflect *achieved* status; the later, *ascribed* status.

Sex as an In-Group

Sam did not mention his membership (ascribed status) in the male sex. Probably at one time it was consciously important to him—and may still be so.

The in-group of sex makes an interesting case study. A child of two normally makes no distinction in his companionships: a little girl or a little boy is all the same to him. Even in the first grade the awareness of sex-groups is relatively slight. Asked whom they would choose to play with, first-grade children on the average choose opposite-sexed children at least a quarter of the time. By the time the fourth grade is reached these cross-sexed choices virtually disappear: only 2 percent of the children want to play with someone of the opposite sex. When the eighth grade is reached friendships between boys and girls begin to reemerge, but even then only eight percent extend their choices across the sex boundary.[4]

For some people—misogynists[5] among them—the sex-grouping remains important throughout their lives. Women are viewed as a wholly different species from men, usually an inferior species. Such primary and secondary sex differences as exist are greatly exaggerated and are inflated into imaginary distinctions that