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DIVERSITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Questions and Concepts

This chapter introduces several concepts crucial to the study of dominant-minority relations in the United States. The selections emphasize prejudice and racism but also call attention to the widely misunderstood concept of race.

The concept of race is addressed in several places. First, the Narrative Portrait by Lawrence Hill presents the efforts of a person of mixed black-white heritage to grapple with issues of identity and status in a world where people have traditionally been regarded as *either* black or white. His thoughts are consistent with the view, widely held among social scientists, that race is a *social construction*: a way of thinking about ourselves and others that is socially determined and a reflection of our experiences in a highly race-conscious society. Race is important because we are trained to think it's important, not because of some essential quality inherent in the concept.

Second, the reading by Rosenblum and Travis explores the processes by which we construct social categories like race, sex, class, and ethnicity. The authors argue that so-called racial and gender differences lie more in the cultural and social perceptions we acquire during socialization than in the nature of the phenomena themselves. In other words, group boundaries are created by a social process, not by some "natural" quality of the groups themselves, and we come to regard these boundaries as important because of our socialization, not because of anything inherent in the group.

Finally, the biological and social realities of race are explored in the Current Debate. Why do African American (and African) athletes dominate in so many sports? Jon Entine's answer to this question assumes that race is a meaningful biological reality and that the dominance of African American athletes is, in some sense, "natural." Kenan Malik, on the other hand, questions not only Entine's logic and assumptions but the reality of the concept of race itself.

The concepts of prejudice and racism are addressed from a number of perspectives. The Narrative Portrait by Mark Mathabane recounts an incident from his childhood in South Africa during the days of apartheid. In this memoir, we see how prejudice (and the perception that race is a biological reality) is carefully taught in a highly racist society and how prejudicial thinking can be reinforced even by people who believe that they are trying to combat it. The reading by Yetman distinguishes among prejudice, discrimination, and racism—concepts that are at the core of the sociological analysis of dominant-minority relations. Researchers Van

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Ausdale and Feagin explore how these concepts are used by young children in their interactions with each other. Again, we see the results of race-conscious thinking and careful training in prejudice.

Please visit the accompanying website to *Race, Ethnicity, and Gender*, second edition for the *Public Sociology Assignments* at <http://www.pineforge.com/das2>.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER IN THIS CHAPTER

1. Is race *merely* a social construction? Is the biology of race completely irrelevant? How about gender? Is it also merely a social construction? How do gender and race differ (if at all) in this regard?

2. What are prejudice, racism, and discrimination? How are these concepts linked to each other? How do they differ? Make sure you can explain and

describe each concept and cite examples from your own experience.

3. How are prejudice and racism taught? What roles do parents and significant others such as teachers, siblings, and friends play? Do we merely acquire the prejudiced views from our social environment or are we more active in the process? How?

NARRATIVE PORTRAIT

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACIAL IDENTITY

Traditionally, in the United States, race has been seen as a set of fixed, unchanging, unambiguous categories. Perhaps the most powerful example of this perception was the “one-drop rule” that has been used to determine racial identity, especially in the South. The rule was simple: any trace of black ancestry—a single drop of African-American blood in your veins—meant that you were black.

In contrast to this rigid perception, the increasing numbers of cross-group marriages and “mixed race” individuals reminds us that race is subjective and negotiable, not fixed and permanent. That is, racial identity is a definition of self that is constructed during socialization and negotiated and developed in interaction with parents, siblings, peers, and others in the community. Race is not permanent or fixed, and social conceptions can change independent of the biological realities. New racial categories can emerge as the social conception of race changes. For example, professional golfer Tiger Woods has (tongue in cheek) made up his own racial category—Cablasan—to acknowledge his Caucasian, Black, and Asian ancestry.

Although the newer, less rigid view of group membership might be growing in strength, the tradition of categorical thinking still has an enormous impact on the way people of mixed racial heritage are regarded by others and how they think about themselves and their place in the larger society. Some of these conflicts are illustrated in this selection from writer Lawrence Hill, the son of a black father and a white mother. His parents were involved in the U.S. civil rights struggle in the 1950s and 1960s but opted to move to the more tolerant racial climate of Canada to raise their children. Mr. Hill was raised in a suburb of Toronto and rarely encountered other children of color. In the passage below, he remembers some of the issues related to his multiracial status and the problem of finding a place for himself even in the mild Canadian racial atmosphere. He also reflects on the more certain racial identity of his parents, the difference between black and white racial identities, and provides something of an outsider’s view on U.S. race relations.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There is a T-shirt that reads: "No Child Is Born a Racist." Based on the analysis presented in this reading, do you think that this statement is true? Is prejudice an inborn personality trait, a case of children mimicking adults, or is it the result of a complex combination of social factors? If the latter is true, what are the social causal factors for children?

2. On the one hand, we see these children enacting boundaries that seem cruel. On the other hand, we see them breaking barriers that most adults never get past. How can both be happening at the

same time? What does this tell us about prejudice and discrimination?

3. Why do you think adults attribute blame to someone else when their child has made a racial slur? Would the adults engage in this type of behavior if the child had been reprimanded for any other type of misbehavior? What kind of "unlearning" approach would be most effective for children? Is "We don't say that word" enough? What do you think needs to happen to enable children to unlearn negative stereotypes at this early age?

CONSTRUCTING CATEGORIES OF DIFFERENCE

Karen Rosenblum and Toni-Michelle Travis

Race, sex, and class may be described as "master statuses." In common usage "status" means prestige, but in most social science literature status is understood as a position within a social structure, for example, a kinship or occupational status. Any individual simultaneously occupies a number of statuses, but their master status "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 argue that there are important similarities in how the master statuses like race and sex operate. . . . This is not to say that these master statuses operate identically, or that people in these categories have had interchangeable experiences. The past and present circumstances of African American, Latino, and Asian American men and women are distinctive on innumerable counts; they cannot easily be compared to the experience of white women. . . . The impact of race and sex . . . unfolds quite differently in the upper, middle, working, and poor classes. Nonetheless, there

are also important similarities in the way these master statuses are currently constructed and in their impact on individual lives. . . .

THE ESSENTIALIST AND
CONSTRUCTIONIST ORIENTATIONS

The difference between the constructionist and essentialist orientations is illustrated in the tale of the three umpires:

Social psychologist 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).

The first umpire 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 independent of his perception of them. For this umpire, "balls" and "strikes" are distinct, easily identified, mutually exclusive categories, and he is a neutral and relatively powerless observer of them. In all, he "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, . . . and social class identify significant, empirically verifiable similarities among and differences between people. From the essentialist perspective, for example, racial categories exist apart from any social or cultural processes; they are objective categories of essential difference between people.

Though somewhat removed from pure essentialism, the second umpire still affirms that there is an independent, objective reality, though it is one which is subject to *interpretation*. For him, balls and strikes exist in the world, but individuals might have different perceptions of which is which.

The third umpire, who argues "they ain't nothing till I call 'em," is unabashedly constructionist. He argues that "conceptions such as 'strikes' and 'balls' have no meaning except that given them by the observer" (Pfuhl, 1986:5); balls and strikes do not exist until an umpire names them as such. While the essentialist presumes an external world with distinct categories existing independent of observation, the constructionist argues that reality cannot be separated from the way that a culture makes sense of it. From the constructionist perspective *social* processes determine that one set of differences is more important than another, just as social processes shape our understanding of

what those differences *mean*. The constructionist assumes that "essential" similarities are conferred and created rather than intrinsic to the phenomenon, that the way that a society identifies its members tells us more about the society than about the individuals so classified. Thus, the constructionist perspective treats classifications such as race as socially constructed through political, legal, economic, scientific, and religious institutions. Although individuals do not on their own create such classifications, macro-level social processes and institutions do. . . .

Few of us have grown up as constructionists. More likely, we were raised as essentialists who believe that master statuses such as race or sex encompass clear-cut, immutable, and in some way meaningful differences. From an essentialist perspective, one simply *is* what one *is*: someone with African ancestry is black, and a person with male genitalia is male even if he does not feel like a male. It is fairly unsettling to have these bedrock classifications questioned which is what the constructionist perspective does.

However, not all of us have grown up as essentialists. Those from mixed racial or religious backgrounds are likely to be 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.

Still, few of us are likely to take either an essentialist or constructionist perspective exclusively. . . . Our own perspective as authors has been constructionist. Nonetheless, we have sometimes had to rely on essentialist terms we ourselves find problematic. The irony of simultaneously questioning the idea of race,

but still talking about “blacks,” “whites,” and “Asians” . . . has not escaped us. . . .

Further, . . . master statuses are not parts of a person that can simply be broken off from one another like the segments of a Tootsie Roll (Spelman, 1988). Each of us is always simultaneously all of our master statuses, and it is that complex package that exists in the world. . . . Indeed, even the concept of master status suggests that there can be only one dominating status, though we would reject that position. . . .

Discussions about racism and sexism generate the intensity they do partly because they involve the clash of essentialist and constructionist assumptions. . . .

NAMING AND AGGREGATING

Classification schemes are by definition systems for *naming* categories of people; thus constructionists pay special attention to the names people use to refer to themselves and others—particularly the points at which new names are asserted, the negotiations that surround the use of particular names, and those occasions when categories of people are grouped together or separated out.

Asserting a Name

The issues surrounding the assertion of a name are similar whether we are talking about individuals or categories of people. A change of name involves, to some extent, the claim of a new identity. For example, one of our colleagues decided that she wanted to be called by her full 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 telling example was provided by a young woman who wanted to keep her “maiden” name after she

married. Her fiancé agreed with her decision, recognizing how reluctant he would be to give up his name were the tables turned. When her prospective mother-in-law 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 and his fiancé to reconsider getting married. (We do not know how this story ended.)

Thus, the assertion of a name can yield some degree of social conflict. On both the personal and a societal level, naming can involve the claim of a particular identity and the rejection of others’ power to impose a name. All of this applies to individual preferences. For example, is one Chicano, Mexican American, Mexican, Latino, Hispanic, Spanish-American, or *Hispaño*; Native American, American Indian, or Sioux; African American or black; girl or woman; Asian American or Japanese American; gay or homosexual? This list does not begin to cover the full range of possibilities; or include geographic and historical variations.

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).

Thus, determining the appropriate name by which to refer to a category of people is no easy task. It is unlikely that all members of the category prefer the same name; the name members use for one another may not be acceptable when used by those outside the group; 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, such a question indicated that he was being seen as a member of a category rather than as an individual.

As we have said, on both the individual and collective level naming may involve a redefinition of self, an assertion of power, and a rejection of others' ability to impose an identity. For this reason, social movements often claim a new name, just as those who continue to use the old name may do so as a way to indicate opposition to the movement. For example, in the current American setting, we may be in the midst of a change from "black" to "African American." "Black" emerged in opposition to "Negro" as the Black Power movement of the Black Panthers, Black Muslims, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) came to distinguish itself from the more mainstream Martin Luther King wing of the civil rights movement (Smith, 1992).

The term "Negro" had itself been born of a rejection of the term "colored" that dominated the mid- to late-nineteenth century. The term "African" had preceded "colored," and was used as late as the 1820s. Led by influential leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, "'Negro' was seen as a 'stronger' term [than 'colored'] . . . despite its association with racial epithets. 'Negro' was defined to stand for a new way of thinking about Blacks" (Smith, 1992:497-8).

On the same grounds, president of the National Urban Coalition Ramona H. Edelin, proposed in 1988 using "African American" instead of "black." The campaign to adopt the term, led by Coalition spokesman Jessie Jackson, met with immediate success among black leaders and now both terms are in use (Smith, 1992).

Ironically, the phrase "people of color" is emerging now as a reference encompassing all non-white Americans. White students unfamiliar with the historical background of "colored" will sometimes use that term interchangeably with "people of color." Unaware of the historical distinction, they are surprised by the anger with which they are met.

Each of these changes—from "Negro" to "black" to "African American"—was first promoted by activists as a way to demonstrate their commitment to change and militance. . . . [Similarly], the women's movement has asserted "woman" as a replacement for "girl." The significance of these two terms is revealed in the account of a student who described a running feud with her roommate. The student preferred the word "woman" rather than "girl," arguing that the application of the word "girl" to females past adolescence was insulting. Her roommate, who was also female, just as strongly preferred the term "girl" and just as regularly applied it to the females she knew. Finally, they tried to "agree to disagree," but each of them had such strong feelings on the matter it was clear they could not be roommates much longer.

How could these two words destroy their relationship? It appears that English speakers use the terms "girl" and "woman" to refer to quite different qualities. "Woman" (like "man") is understood to convey adulthood, power, and sexuality; "girl" (like "boy") connotes youth, powerlessness, and irresponsibility (Richardson, 1988). Thus, the two roommates were asserting quite different places for themselves in the world. One claimed adulthood; the other saw herself as not having achieved that. This is the explanation offered by many females: It is not so much that they like being "girls," as that they value youth and/or do not yet feel justified in calling themselves "women." Yet this is precisely the identity the women's movement has put forward: "We cannot be girls any more, we must be women."

The Negotiation and Control of Names

While individuals and social movements may assert a name for themselves, government agencies also control access to such categorizations. Still, these agencies are not impervious to social movements and social change. The recent history of U.S. Census Bureau classifications offers an example of the negotiation of a categorization system.

Census classifications and census data are significant for a variety of reasons. The census determines the apportionment of seats (among states) in the U.S. House of Representatives, and it affects the distribution of federal monies to states, counties, and cities for "everything from feeding the poor to running mass transit systems" (Espiritu, 1992:116). Since the census is conducted only once every ten years, its results shape policy for a decade.

Most important to our discussion, events in the 1960s and 1970s elevated the importance of census data:

... The proliferation of federal grants programs and the cities' increasing dependence upon them tended to heighten the political salience of census statistics. Such formulas often incorporated population size, as measured or estimated by the Census Bureau, as a major factor. By 1978 there were more than one hundred such programs, covering a wide range of concerns, from preschool education (Headstart) to urban mass transportation. . . . [T]he single most commonly used data source was the decennial census (Choldin, 1994:27-8).

The census offered an important source of information by which the courts, Congress, and local entities could gauge the extent of discrimination. "Groups had to prove that they had been discriminated against in order to qualify for federal help under the Voting Rights Act. . . . To receive help in the form of an affirmative action plan from the newly established Equal

Employment Opportunity Commission, each minority had to demonstrate its disproportionate absence from certain categories of employment" (Choldin, 1986: 406). As legislation raised the stakes involved in census data, disputes regarding its structure escalated. In response, the Census Bureau—for the first time ever—established minority committees to advise the government on the content and implementation of the 1980 census (Choldin, 1986).

On the Hispanic Advisory Committee, representatives argued strongly that the census "differentially undercounted" the Hispanic population, i.e., that the census missed more Hispanics than it did those in other categories. Undercounting primarily affects those who are low-income, non-English speaking, and live in inner cities—those who are poor often lack stable residences and are thus difficult to reach; those who cannot read English cannot answer the questions (only in 1990 did the census provide for Spanish-language surveys); those who are illegal immigrants may be unwilling to respond to the questionnaire. (The Constitution requires a count of all the people in the United States, not just those who are legal residents.)

While the Census Bureau might use birth and death records to determine the undercount of blacks, representatives on the Hispanic Advisory Committee pointed out that the Latino undercount could not be determined by this method since birth and death records did not record Hispanic ancestry. As a way to correct for an undercount, the advisory committee argued for the introduction of a Spanish/ Hispanic origin *self-identification* question in the 1980 census. Thus, negotiation produced a new census category. . . .

Thus, while many treat census classifications as if they were fixed categorizations grounded in scientifically valid distinctions, that is not the case as even the Census Bureau admits: "The concept of race as used by the Census Bureau reflects self-identification, it does not denote any clear-cut scientific definition of biological

stock . . . the categories of the race item include both racial and national origin or sociocultural groups" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). Indeed, the federal guidelines that regulate research and policy-making in health, education, employment, civil rights compliance, school desegregation, and voting rights are similarly clear that the classifications "should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature" (Overbey, 1994).

Still, when we consider "official counts" of the population, we risk believing that what is counted must be real. While the Census Bureau and other federal agencies operate from explicit constructionist premises, the data they produce may be used toward an essentialist worldview in which racial categories are presumed to reflect real and abiding differences between people. Indeed, the Census Bureau [made a change to the 2000 Census that allowed people to check more than one race box for the first time].

The Spanish/Hispanic origin question provides an example of the negotiation of a categorization. By contrast, assignment to the category "Native American" was not initially open to negotiation by those it affected: Native Americans were not allowed to define who was included within that classification, only the federal government could do that.

Historically, federal definitions relied on the idea of "blood quantum," which was a measure of how much of one's ancestry could be traced to Native Americans. This standard was established in the 1887 General Allotment Act, which redistributed collectively held reservation land as individually deeded parcels. In order to qualify for a land parcel, Native Americans had to document that they possessed one-half or more Native American ancestry. . . . Despite an ongoing debate about abandoning blood quantum, the standard persists for access to federal and some state services (one-quarter ancestry is now the usual requirement). Though individual

tribes now define their own criteria for tribal membership, many still rely on the blood quantum standard.

AGGREGATING AND DISAGGREGATING

The naming or labeling processes we have described serve both to aggregate and disaggregate categories of people. On the one hand, the federal identification of categories of disadvantaged Americans collapsed various national-origin groups into four headings—Hispanics, Native Americans, Blacks, and Asian or Pacific Islanders (Lowry, 1982). Thus, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, and Cuban Americans all became "Hispanic" in some way. On the other hand, the groups which comprised these aggregates had historically regarded one another as different and thus the aggregate category was likely to "disaggregate" or decompose back into its constituent national-origin elements.

While one might think that "Hispanic" or "Asian American" are terms used for self-identification, that does not appear to be often the case. In the U.S. "Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans have little interaction with each other, most do not recognize that they have much in common culturally, and they do not profess strong affection for each other" (de la Garza, et al., 1992:14). Thus, it is not surprising that a survey of the Latino population concludes that "respondents do not primarily identify as members of an Hispanic or Latino community. . . . [Rather, they] overwhelmingly prefer to identify by national origin . . ." (de la Garza, et al., 1992:13). While members of these groups share common positions on many domestic policy issues, they do not appear to share a commitment to Spanish language maintenance, common cultural traditions, or religiosity (de la Garza, et al., 1992). In short, the category "Latino/Hispanic" exists primarily, but not exclusively, from the perspective of non-Latinos.

The same can be said about the aggregate census category "Asian or Pacific Islander," which encompasses about fifty different nationalities. While the classification "Hispanic" offers at least a commonality in Spanish as a shared language in the country of origin, "Asian American" encompasses groups with unique languages, cultures, and religions; different racial groupings; and several centuries of congenial and/or hostile contact with members of other groups with whom they now share the category "Asian American." In all, the category "Asian American" aggregates on the basis of geography rather than any cultural, racial, linguistic, or religious commonalities. "Asian Americans are those who come from a region of the world that *the rest of the world* has defined as Asia" (Hu-Dehart, 1994).

Aggregate classifications like "Latino," "Hispanic," or "Asian American" were not simply the result of federal classifications, however. These terms were first proposed by student activists following the lead of the Black Power and Civil Rights movements, and they continue to be used, although by a small proportion of people. As Yen Le Espiritu describes . . . , college students coined the pan-ethnic identifier Asian American in response to "the similarity of [their] experiences and treatment." As we saw earlier, when participants in social change movements forge new social identities and alliances, they also assert new names for themselves. In all, people use both aggregating pan-ethnic terms like "Asian American" and disaggregating national origin identifiers like Japanese American—each is used at particular moments, for particular reasons.

For two categories, however, Native and African Americans, the submerging of differences into an aggregate classification was the direct result of conquest and enslavement.

The "Indian," like the European, is an idea. The notion of "Indians" was invented to distinguish the indigenous peoples of the New World

from Europeans. The "Indian" is the person on shore, outside of the boat. . . . There [were] hundreds of cultures, languages, ways of living in Native America. The place was a model of diversity at the time of Columbus's arrival. Yet Europeans did not see this diversity. They created the concept of the "Indian" to give what they did see some kind of unification, to make it a single entity they could deal with, because they could not cope with the reality of 400 different cultures (Mohawk, 1992:440).

Conquest made "Indians" out of a heterogeneity of tribes and nations distinctive on linguistic, religious, and economic grounds. It was not only that Europeans had the unifying concept of "Indian" in mind—after all, they were sufficiently cognizant of tribal differences to generate an extensive body of tribally specific treaties. It was also that conquest itself—encompassing as it did the usurpation of land, the forging and violation of treaties, and the implementation of policies that forced relocation and concentration—structured the life of Native Americans along common lines. While contemporary Native Americans still identify themselves by tribal ancestry, just as those called Asian American and Latino identify themselves by national origin, their shared experience of conquest also forged the common identity reflected in the aggregate name, Native American.

Similarly, the capture, purchase, forced and often fatal relocation of Africans, and their experience of being moved from place to place when they were sold as property, created the category now called African American. This experience forged a single people from those who had been culturally diverse; it produced an "oppositional racial consciousness," i.e., a unity-in-opposition (Omi and Winant, 1994). "Just as the conquest created the 'native' where once there had been Pequot, Iroquois, or Tutelo, so too it created the 'black' where once there had been Asante or Ovimbundu, Yoruba or Bakongo" (Omi and Winant, 1994:66). . . .

the Court reiterated a year later in terms of Asian Indians (Espiritu, 1992; Takaki, 1993). In this way, needed labor could be recruited to the country, while minimizing the risk that immigrants would become permanent residents and an economic threat (Steinberg, 1989). Not until 1952 were all immigrants eligible for naturalization, though the children of immigrants born on U.S. soil were always considered U.S. citizens.

Thus, while three racial categories—"white," "Negro," and "Indian"—were identified throughout the nineteenth century (Omi and Winant, 1994), all were located within the white/non-white dichotomy. In 1854, the California Supreme Court in *People v. Hall* held that blacks, mulattos, Native Americans, and Chinese were "not white" and therefore could not testify for or against a white man in court (Takaki, 1993:205–6). (Hall, a white man, had been convicted of killing a Chinese man on the testimony of one white and three Chinese witnesses; the Supreme Court overturned the conviction.) By contrast, Mexican residents of the Southwest territories ceded to the United States in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo "were defined as a white population and accorded the political-legal status of 'free white persons'" (Omi and Winant, 1994). As historian David Roediger argues, even European immigrants were initially treated as non-white, or at least not-yet-white. In turn, they lobbied for their own inclusion in American society on the basis of the white/non-white distinction.

[Immigrants struggled to] equate whiteness with Americanism in order to turn arguments over immigration from the question of who was foreign to the question of who was white. . . . Immigrants could not win on the question of who was foreign. . . . But if the issue somehow became defending "white man's jobs" or "white man's government" . . . [they] could gain space by deflecting debate from nativity, a hopeless issue, to race, an ambiguous one. . . . After the Civil War, the new-coming Irish would help lead

the movement to bar the relatively established Chinese from California, with their agitation for a "white man's government," serving to make race, and not nativity, the center of the debate and to prove the Irish white (Roediger, 1994:189–90).

Thus, historically "American" has meant white, as many Asian Americans are casually reminded when they are complimented for speaking such good English—a compliment which presumes that someone who is Asian could not be a native-born American. . . . Novelist Toni Morrison would describe this as a story about "how American means white":

Deep within the word "American" is its association with race. To identify someone as South African is to say very little; we need the adjective "white" or "black" or "colored" to make our meaning clear. In this country it is quite the reverse. American means white and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with . . . hyphen after hyphen after hyphen (Morrison, 1992:47).

Because American means white, those who are not white are presumed to be recent arrivals and are regularly told to go "back where they came from." In short, in America we appear to operate within the dichotomized racial categories of American/non-American—these are racial categories, because they effectively mean white/non-white.

But what exactly *is* race? First, we need to distinguish race from ethnicity. Social scientists define ethnic groups as categories of people who are distinctive on the basis of national origin, language, and cultural practices. As Robert Blauner explains, . . . "members of an ethnic group hold a set of common memories that make them feel that their customs, culture, and outlook are distinctive." Thus, racial categories encompass diverse ethnic groups; e.g., in America the racial category "white" encompasses ethnic groups such as Irish, Italian, and

Every perspective on the social world emerges from a particular vantage point, a particular social location. Ignoring who the “us” is in the boat risks treating that place as if it were anywhere and nowhere, as if it were just the view “anyone” would take. Historically, the people in the boat were European, contemporarily they are white Americans. As Ruth Frankenberg frames it . . . , in America “whites are the nondefined definers of other people,” “the unmarked marker of others’ differentness.” Failing to identify the “us” in the boat, means that “white culture [becomes] the unspoken norm,” a category that is powerful enough to define others while itself remaining invisible. Indeed, as Frankenberg argues, those with the most power in a society are best positioned to have their own identities left unnamed, thus masking their power.

The term androcentrism describes the world as seen from a male-centered perspective. By analogy, one may also describe a Eurocentric perspective. To some extent, regardless of their sex [or] race, all Americans operate from an andro- [and] Euro- perspective since these are the guiding assumptions of the culture. Recognizing these as historically and culturally located perspectives makes it possible to evaluate their adequacy.

DICHOTOMIZATION

As we have seen, many factors promote the construction of aggregate categories of people. Often aggregation yields dichotomization, that is, the sense that there are two and only two categories, that everyone fits easily in one or the other, and that the categories stand in opposition to one another. . . . In contemporary American culture we [often separate the world into] “us” and “them”—as if people could be sorted into two mutually exclusive, opposed groupings.

Dichotomizing Race

Perhaps the clearest example of dichotomization is provided by the “one-drop rule. . . .” The one-drop rule describes the set of social practices whereby someone with any traceable African heritage is judged to be “black” by both American blacks and whites. . . . In American society this rule is applied only to blacks—no other category of people is defined by only “one drop.” This is not simply an informal social practice; it was a principle reaffirmed in 1986 by the Supreme Court in *Jane Doe v. the State of Louisiana*. . . .

The one-drop rule explains why some American racial classifications are so confounding to many immigrant and even native-born Americans. . . . In contemporary American culture, assignment to the status of black is not based on appearance or even the preponderance of racial heritage. Rather, social custom and law hold that a person with as little as 1/32 African ancestry is black. The American one-drop rule precisely denied the possibility of being mixed; instead, it defined a child born to black and white parents as black.

While the black/white dichotomy may well be the most abiding and rigidly enforced racial distinction in American society, different regions and historical periods have also produced their own splits: In the southwest the divide has been between Anglos and Latinos; in parts of the west coast it is between Asian Americans and whites. Still, each of these distinctions is embedded in the country’s historic dichotomy of “whites” and “non-whites.” That distinction was stressed early in the nation’s history: “Congress’s first attempt to define American citizenship, the Naturalization Law of 1790, declared that only free ‘white’ immigrants could qualify” for citizenship (Omi and Winant, 1994:81). That position was reaffirmed in 1922, when the Supreme Court held that a Japanese immigrant could not become a naturalized U.S. citizen because he was not white, a position

Polish Americans. Unfortunately, many fail to recognize ethnic distinctions among people of color. For example, not all American blacks are African American, some are Haitian, Jamaican, or Nigerian; African American is an ethnic group identification that does not encompass all American blacks.

Returning to the concept of race, the term most likely first appeared in the Romance languages of Europe in the Middle Ages where it was used to refer to breeding stock (Smedley, 1993). A "race" of horses, for example, would describe common ancestry and a distinctive appearance or behavior. "Race" appears to have been first applied to humans by the Spanish in the sixteenth century in reference to the New World populations they discovered. It was later adopted by the English, again in reference to people of the New World, and generally came to mean "people," "nation," or "variety." By the late eighteenth century, "when scholars became more actively engaged in investigations, classifications, and definitions of human populations, the term 'race' was elevated as the one major symbol and mode of human group differentiation employed extensively for non-European groups and even those in Europe who varied in some way from the subjective norm" (Smedley, 1993:39).

Though elevated to the level of science, the concept of race continued to reflect its origins in animal husbandry. Farmers and herders had used the concept to describe stock bred for particular qualities; scholars used it to suggest that human behaviors could also be inherited. "Unlike other terms for classifying people . . . the term 'race' places emphasis on innateness, on the inbred nature of whatever is being judged" (Smedley, 1993:39). Like animal breeders, scholars also presumed that appearance revealed something about potential behavior, that among humans race signified something more than just difference of color. Just as the selective breeding of animals entailed the ranking of stock by some criteria, scholarly use of

the concept of race involved the ranking of human "races" along a variety of dimensions. Thus, differences in skin color, hair texture, and the shape of head, eyes, nose, lips, and body were developed into an elaborate system for classifying humans into discrete categories. These categories were then ranked as to their merit and potential for "civilization." Although the conquered peoples of the world were the objects of this classification system, they did not participate in its invention.

The idea of race emerged among all the European colonial powers (although their conceptions of it varied), but only the British in North America (and South Africa) constructed a system of rigid, exclusive racial categories and a social order *based on race*, a "racialized social structure" (Omi and Winant, 1994).

[S]kin color variations in many regions of the world and in many societies have been imbued with some degree of social value or significance, but color prejudice or preferences do not of themselves amount to a fully evolved racial world view. There are many societies, past and contemporary, in which the range of skin color variation is quite large, but all such societies have not imposed on themselves worldviews with the specific ideological components of race that we experience in North America or South Africa (Smedley, 1993:25).

This racialized social structure—which in America produced a race-based system of slavery and later a race-based distribution of political, legal, and social rights—was an historical first. "Expansion, conquest; exploitation, and enslavement have characterized much of human history over the past five thousand years or so, but none of these events before the modern era resulted in the development of ideologies or social systems based on race" (Smedley, 1993:15). While differences of color had long been noted, social structures had never before been built on those differences.

Thus, it is not surprising that scientists have assumed that race difference involves more than simply skin color or hair texture and have sought the biological distinctiveness of racial categories—but with little success. In the early twentieth century, anthropologists looked to physical features such as height, stature, and head shape to distinguish the races, only to learn that these are affected by environment and nutrition. Later, the search turned to genetic traits carried in the blood, only to find that those cannot be correlated with conventional racial classifications. Even efforts to reach a consensus about how many races there are or what specific features distinguish them from one another are problematic.

If our eyes could perceive more than the superficial, we might find race in chromosome 11: there lies the gene for hemoglobin. If you divide humankind by which of two forms of the gene each person has, than equatorial Africans, Italians and Greeks fall into the “sickle-cell race”; Swedes and South Africa’s Xhosa (Nelson Mandela’s ethnic group) are in the healthy hemoglobin race. Or do you prefer to group people by whether they have epicanthic eye folds, which produce the “Asian” eye? Then the !Kung San (Bushmen) belong with the Japanese and Chinese. . . . [D]epending on which traits you pick, you can form very surprising races. . . . How about blood types, the familiar A, B, and O groups? Then Germans and New Guineans, populations that have the same percentages of each type, are in one race; Estonians and Japanese comprise a separate one for the same reason. . . . The dark skin of Somalis and Ghanaians, for instance, indicates that they evolved under the same selective force (a sunny climate). But that’s all it shows. It does *not* show that they are any more closely related in the sense of sharing more genes than either is to Greeks. Calling Somalis and Ghanaians “black” therefore sheds no further light on their evolutionary history and implies—wrongly—that

they are more closely related to each other than either is to someone of a different “race.” . . . If you pick at random any two “blacks” walking along the street, and analyze their 23 pairs of chromosomes, you will probably find that their genes have less in common than do the genes of one of them with that of a random “white” person [because the genetic variation within one race is greater than the average difference between races] (Begley, 1995:67, 68).

In all, the primary significance of race is as a *social* concept: We “see” it, we expect it to tell us something significant about a person, we organize social policy, law, and the distribution of wealth, power and prestige around it. From the essentialist position, race is assumed to exist independent of our perception of it; it is assumed to significantly distinguish people from one another. From the constructionist perspective, race exists because we have created it as a meaningful category of difference between people.

Dichotomizing Sex

First, the terms “sex” and “gender” require clarification. “Sex” refers to females and males, i.e., to chromosomal, hormonal, anatomical, and physiological differences. By contrast, “gender” describes the socially constructed roles associated with sex. Gender is learned; it is the historically specific acting out of “masculinity” and “femininity.” . . .

While the approach may be unsettling, sex can be understood as a socially created dichotomy much like race. As developmental geneticist Anne Fausto-Sterling and anthropologist Walter Williams make clear, Western culture has an abiding commitment to the belief that there are two and only two sexes and that all individuals can be clearly identified as one or the other (Kessler and McKenna, 1978). [But] sex refers to a complex set of attributes—anatomical, chromosomal, hormonal,

physiological—that may sometimes be inconsistent with one another or with an individual's sense of their own identity. This is illustrated in the recent case of a Spanish athlete who is anatomically female, but in a pre-game genetic test was classified as male. On the basis of that test, she was excluded from the 1985 World University Games. She was then reclassified as female in 1991, when the governing body for track-and-field contests abandoned genetic testing and returned to physical inspection. As the gynecologist for the sports federation noted, "about 1 in 20,000 people has genes that conflict with his or her apparent gender" (Lemonick, 1992).

Nonetheless, just as with race, . . . membership is assigned to one or the other of the sex categories irrespective of inconsistent or ambiguous evidence. Indeed, the conviction that there ought to be consistency between the physical and psychological dimensions of sex propels some people into sex change surgery in an effort to produce a body consistent with their self-identity. Others will pursue psychotherapy seeking an identity consistent with their body. In either case, it makes more sense to us to use surgery and therapy to create consistency than to accept inconsistency: a man who feels like a woman must become a woman rather than just being a man who feels like a woman.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain the difference between the "essentialist" and "constructionist" perspectives. Try to develop an example of the difference that parallels the baseball umpire metaphor presented in the reading. Cite examples of each approach to gender and race from your own experiences.
2. Why do group names and definitions matter? What exactly is at stake when the census is conducted? Explain some of the recent changes that have occurred in naming groups. Why did these changes occur? Who initiated the change? Why?
3. How does labeling "... serve to both aggregate and disaggregate categories of people"? How and why does aggregation lead to dichotomization? How and why has the concept of race changed over time? How are sex and race similar as social constructions? How are they different?

CURRENT DEBATES

RACE AND SPORTS

How real is race? Is it a matter of biology and genes and evolution or purely a social fiction arising from specific historical circumstances, such as American slavery? Does knowing people's race tell us anything important about them? Does it give any useful information about their character, their medical profiles, their trustworthiness, their willingness to work hard, or their intelligence? Does race play a role in shaping a person's character or his or her potential for success in school or on the job?

This debate about the significance of race and the broader question of "nature versus nurture" has been going on in one form or another for a very long time. One version of the debate has centered on the relationship between intelligence and race. One side of the debate argues that biological or genetic differences make some races more capable than other races. Today, the huge majority of scientists reject this argument and maintain that there is no meaningful connection between race and mental aptitude.¹

1. For the latest round of arguments in this debate, see Herrnstein, R., & Murray, C. (1994). *The bell curve*. New York: Free Press; and Jacoby, R., & Glauber, N. (1995). *The bell curve debate*. New York: Random House.