

# INTRODUCTION TO RACE, GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND SOCIAL CLASS

## Concepts, History, and Theories of Difference

This introductory part of the anthology *Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Social Class: Dimensions of Inequality and Identity* introduces students to studies of social stratification, social inequality, and intersectionality. These sociological areas help us to better understand the social categories of race, social class, gender, and sexuality, and why these categories were created in the first place. These social categories are key variables or axes of difference in US society. Social stratification refers to a hierarchy of social strata or groups and the allocation of social resources to those distinct groups. Stratification systems distribute scarce and valuable resources to different social statuses in a given society. Thus, we can have racial stratification systems, gender stratification systems, and social class stratification systems, each overlapping and functioning within the same society. The inequality that results from this distribution of social rewards and valuable resources is referred to as social inequality. Some groups in society tend to receive more of what society values (for example, wealth, power, education, prestige) than other groups. As Dill and Zambrana state in Reading 10, social inequality is “institutionalized patterns of unequal control over and distribution of a society’s valued goods and resources, such as land, property, money, employment, education, health care, and housing” (p. 132). Scholars study social stratification and social inequality to better comprehend how social categories are constructed as difference and how resources are distributed in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and social class.

Intersectionality is a theoretical perspective that argues we should not study these social categories in isolation. Instead, we need to study how people experience multiple social categories at once. That is to say, instead of just looking at a working-class Latina’s social class status or racial-ethnic identity, we can ask how her social categories affect her access to social rewards in the United States. Every individual in society is multiply situated in this way; we all have identities and social statuses based on our gender, sexuality, race-ethnicity, and social class. Using an intersectional lens enables scholars to see how these social categories play out at the individual

level of identity and lived experience and also how these social categories are intermeshed at the structural or systemic levels of society. The interweaving of these social positions can create opportunities or barriers for the individual. They also can create institutional forms of discrimination. This introduction explores these concepts and contains thirteen readings divided into two subsections: “Concepts and History” and “Theories of Difference.”

## CONCEPTS AND HISTORY

The first four readings in this section, “Concepts and History”—by Weber; Desmond and Emirbayer; Crawley, Foley, and Shehan; and Wendell—define race, gender, sexuality, disability, and social class. The scholars explore how and why these categories of difference are constructed, and what purposes these concepts serve in the larger society. These scholars challenge essentialist and biological understandings of these social categories and argue instead that these categories are social constructions; they are created and defined in particular social, cultural, and political contexts. Lynn Weber’s reading, “Defining Contested Concepts” (Reading 1), provides an excellent introduction to the study of race, gender, sexuality, and social class. Weber illustrates her conceptualization of these terms and the systems of inequality that surround them using examples and personal stories. The second reading, by Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer, “What Is Racial Domination?,” delivers an overview of the field of race studies. Desmond and Emirbayer first define the concept of race and explain how it relates to the concepts of ethnicity and nationality. They then examine racism and the conditions of racial domination. Similar to arguments made in the Weber reading, Desmond and Emirbayer argue succinctly that the concept of race is tied to social inequality and power.

While Desmond and Emirbayer focus on race, racism, and racial domination, the third reading, by Sara Crawley, Lara Foley, and Constance Shehan, investigates gender, sex, and sexuality. In this reading, “Creating a World of Dichotomy: Categorizing Sex and Gendering Cultural Messages,” Crawley, Foley, and Shehan break apart and analyze the relationships between the concepts of sex and gender. They show how essentialist views of gender are problematic, and instead, how gender is real, learned, and sociohistorical. They also investigate how gender is embodied, or better said, how bodies are expected to look and behave in a gendered way. One main emphasis of their writing is the gender binary, or how US society has created the dichotomous gender categories of masculinity and femininity and reified them in gender norms, gender performances, and the social construction of sexuality. Race-ethnicity, sexuality, and social class all can affect these gendered meanings and performances.

The fourth reading in “Concepts and History,” by Susan Wendell (“The Social Construction of Disability”), argues that disability is a social construction. Wendell contends that, even though we attempt to define disability through bodily function and appearance, the meaning of both mental and physical disabilities varies according to history, law, and social context. Not too long ago, we defined left-handedness, pregnancy, and even homosexuality as physical or mental disabilities. These constructions have been challenged and changed. Perhaps that is one of the most important reasons why we need to define and examine the social constructions of these terms. If these concepts are *social* categories and not ontological, we can change

them. We have to understand these specific social constructions in order to challenge why they exist and whom they benefit in society. For instance, defining pregnancy as a disability benefits which groups of people? Defining certain races of people as problematic benefits which groups of people?

Disability, race, gender, sexuality, and social class shape individual identity, social interaction, and one's everyday life. But they are much more than just individual markers of identity. As Lynn Weber argues in "Defining Contested Concepts," race, gender, sexuality, and social class reflect patterns of social relationships: social relationships that involve power and can create social inequality. Weber argues that "race, class, gender and sexuality are social systems that are complex, pervasive, variable, persistent, severe, and power-based.... [T]hey are systems of oppression" (p. 8). Moreover, every social situation is affected by these patterns of relating in terms of race, gender, and social class. Thus, scholars like Weber, Desmond and Emirbayer, Crawley and colleagues, and Wendell see race, gender, sexuality, and social class as complex social systems that inform all social life. They are upheld by dominant ideologies that are resistant to change (for example, the myth of meritocracy, color-blind racism, patriarchy), but these social systems are not immutable; they can and have changed over time and across different regional locations and cultural milieu. These social categories can provide one with opportunities or privileges in society, or they can create barriers and oppression. One's social location or place in society is determined by one's positions on the race, social class, and gender hierarchies. (Part II of this anthology, "Identities Matter," explores the impact these social categories have on the individual level.)

The next three readings in this introduction to *Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Social Class* focus on the historical origins of social class, gender, race, and sexuality. This historical context is important because, as the scholarship illustrates, each of these concepts develops at a particular point in Western history. While social class and gender arise earlier and are used to mutually reinforce each other, the concept of race develops later and complements and strengthens social class hierarchies, while notions of sexuality are advanced most recently. Reading 5 in this section titled "The Meritocracy Myth Revisited" is by Stephen J. McNamee. This reading summarizes McNamee's 2004 book of the same name, with coauthor Robert K. Miller, Jr. This reading provides comprehensive research that challenges meritocratic statements about social mobility and social class. Their findings reveal that the US social class system is more closed than open. In particular, McNamee argues that "the dominant ideology of meritocracy overestimates the effects of merit on economic outcomes like income and wealth while underestimating the effects of non-merit factors" (p. 59). Therefore, to fully understand social class and social class inequality, we have to examine how social class is experienced differently by men, women, and genderqueer individuals as well as by people of different races, nationalities, and ages. What factors besides working hard and individual merit lead to social mobility?

Reading 6 in "Concepts and History" is by Tukufu Zuberi, who provides students with a historical lens to better understand racial domination. In "Racial Domination and the Evolution of Racial Classification," Zuberi demonstrates that the history of race is tied to social class interests and to the subjugation of people's labor by the ruling elites. Zuberi's work shows the expansion of racial domination is a key component in the development of Western economic

ascendancy and expansion. Similar to Zuberi's historical analysis of race and racial domination, Jonathan Ned Katz, in his reading, "The Invention of Heterosexuality" (Reading 7), provides a historical account of when the terms *heterosexual* and *homosexual* started being used in the United States. These social constructions developed at a particular historical time in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to serve certain social class and economic interests.

## THEORIES OF DIFFERENCE

The second section in this introduction is titled "Theories of Difference," and it refers to the various social theories that attempt to explain social differences and inequalities, including the theories of Marxism, feminism, social constructionism, critical race theory, and intersectionality. The six readings in this section enable students to recognize some of these different theoretical perspectives and how each theory explains social categories and social inequality. The first reading, by Joan Acker (Reading 8), looks at Marxist explanations of social class and capitalism. Acker expands on classic definitions of social class by incorporating the social categories of race and gender in her piece, "Is Capitalism Gendered and Racialized?"

The next two readings, by Evelyn Nakano Glenn (Reading 9) and Bonnie Thornton Dill and Ruth Enid Zambrana (Reading 10), introduce the theories of social constructionism and intersectionality. While some scholars in earlier readings already have addressed these theories in their readings, including Weber (Reading 1), Crawley and colleagues (Reading 3), and Wendell (Reading 4), Glenn illustrates how the social construction of race and the social construction of gender should be compared and integrated. Glenn argues that racial formation theories and the social construction of gender share similar processes of representation, micro-interaction, and social structure. Dill and Zambrana, in their reading "Critical Thinking About Inequality: An Emerging Lens," take this integration further by providing an introduction to intersectionality. According to Dill and Zambrana, an "intersectional analysis begins with the experiences of groups that occupy multiple social locations and finds approaches and ideas that focus on the complexity rather than the singularity of human experience" (p. 132). Intersectionality is characterized by four theoretical interventions: "(1) placing the lived experiences and struggles of people of color and other marginalized groups as a starting point for the development of theory; (2) Exploring the complexities not only of individual identities but also the group identity; (3) Unveiling the ways interconnected domains of power organize and structure inequality and oppression; and (4) Promoting social justice and social change..." (p. 134). Reading 11 by Tara J. Yosso contributes to this discussion of theory by providing an overview of critical race theory and how it challenges our understandings of cultural capital.

The final two readings in "Theories of Difference" add to earlier scholars' arguments that explain social inequality. Reading 12 by Momin Rahman in "Queer as Intersectionality: Theorizing Gay Muslim Identities," pushes our thinking on the social construction of race as discussed by Desmond and Emirbayer (Reading 2) and by Zuberi (Reading 6) and introduces queer theory to our discussion of intersectionality. Rahman argues that Muslim identities challenge Western values and discourse around race-ethnicity, and that intersectionality can be a useful framework for analyzing oppositions between Western culture and Eastern culture. The

dominant discourse of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) identity and rights is framed through a Western lens and needs to be challenged. After discussing the benefits of applying intersectionality, Rahman turns his attention to queer theory and argues that, similar to intersectionality, both theories help us to understand marginalized identities. Similarly, Subini Ancy Annamma, David Connor, and Beth Ferri do important theoretical work in their piece, “Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (*DisCrit*): Theorizing at the Intersections of Race and Dis/ability” (Reading 13). They argue that, while race and ability clearly intersect, there has been little intersection work on racism and ableism. Thus, these scholars create a new hybrid theory called *DisCrit* that brings together theories from Critical Race Studies and Disability Studies. This reading outlines the rationale for *DisCrit* and the tenets of their new theory.

## SUMMARY

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Part I of the anthology contains 13 readings, grouped into two sections that introduce students to the concepts of race, gender, sexuality, social class, and disability. All of these concepts are considered to be social categories or categories of difference because they affect social stratification systems and social inequality. The first section introduces concepts of race, sex and gender, and disability. These social categories affect people at the individual level of identity and social interaction, and they also are part of social hierarchies that distribute wealth and power in society. The readings in the first section also establish the historical origins of some of these terms and explicate the larger political and economic structures that have benefited from the concepts of race, gender, social class, and sexuality. The second section of this introduction presents social theories that attempt to explain various types of social inequality, including Marxism, feminism, social constructionism, Critical Race Theory, Queer Theory, and intersectionality.

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# 1

## DEFINING CONTESTED CONCEPTS

Lynn Weber

This first reading is by Lynn Weber, a Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies at the University of South Carolina. Weber, a well-known scholar of the American social class system and of gender studies and intersectionality, argued that race, social class, gender, and sexuality are all social systems that, while they change over time and across cultures, persist to preserve the privilege of some groups over that of others. This excerpt is taken from Weber's 2009 book, *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework*; it introduces readers to these concepts and how they are used by some societal groups to sustain their power and social control.

To analyze race, class, gender, and sexuality, it is necessary to characterize what we mean by the terms. But because their meanings are in fact contested and often obscured, defining these social systems is not a simple task. This reading offers working definitions of key terms, discusses some of the processes that operate to obscure these systems, and describes social arenas in which they are manifested differently—in political, economic, and ideological institutions.

Race, class, gender, and sexuality are social systems, patterns of social relationships among people that are:

1. <b>Complex</b>	Intricate and interconnected
2. <b>Pervasive</b>	Widespread throughout all societal domains—for example, in <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• families and communities, religion, education, the economy</li><li>• government, the law and criminal justice, the media</li></ul>
3. <b>Variable</b>	Changing, always transforming
4. <b>Persistent</b>	Prevailing over time and across places
5. <b>Severe</b>	Serious in their consequences for social life
6. <b>Power Based</b>	Hierarchical, stratified (ranked), centered in power— <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• benefiting and providing options and resources for some by</li><li>• harming and restricting options and resources for others</li></ul>

Source: Weber, Lynn. 2010. "Defining Contested Concepts." in *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework*, 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press. By permission of Oxford University Press, USA.

## RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY AS COMPLEX SOCIAL SYSTEMS

Stated otherwise, race, class, gender, and sexuality are systems of oppression. *Oppression* exists when one group has historically gained power and control over valued assets of a society (e.g., wealth, information, and political power) by exploiting the labor and lives of other groups and then by using those assets to secure its position of power into the future. In exploitative relationships, the welfare of one group of people—the exploiters, the dominant group—*depends* on the poverty and efforts of another—the exploited, the subordinate group. Exploitation is thus a *power relationship* resulting from and reinforcing the unequal distribution of productive assets in society (Wright 2008). The unequal distribution of society’s valued opportunities and resources is repeatedly reinforced in daily life, and its fundamental unfairness is masked in a pervasive belief system—an ideology, a set of stereotypes—that interprets the inequalities as a “natural” outcome of each group’s presumed superior or inferior traits.

When we first meet people, we often try to get an idea of who they are by asking questions that situate them in time and place, as well as in meaningful social categories. We ask “Where are you from?” often meaning geographic location, and “What do you do?” often meaning work or occupation. But we actually use these questions as indicators of more important social and cultural experiences and background that we associate with time, place, and work. When we meet people, we also situate them in other critical social locations—race, class, gender, and sexuality—that are powerfully embedded in all our institutions, that touch every aspect of life, and that suggest other commonalities of experience and background. *Social location* refers to an individual’s or a group’s social “place” in the race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies, as well as in other critical social hierarchies such as age, ethnicity, and nation.

Although the meaning and experience of race, class, gender, and sexuality change over time and place, they also have a persistence and resilience that lead people to believe that they will always be with us. Perhaps the central principle undergirding these hierarchies and the primary reason they persist over time is that they are intersecting systems of *power relationships*. One way of defining power is the capacity to achieve one’s aims despite resistance. Groups remain dominant in a system over time because their position enables them to continue no matter what the will or aims of others might be: They have power. Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres (2002) describe the ways these systems operate, much like a zero-sum game. Games have winners and losers, and the powerful are those who have the advantage on three fronts, the three faces of power:

- The power to design or manipulate the rules
- The power to win the game through force or competition
- The power that winners have to name the game, to tell the story about the game, its significance, and why they won—in modern slang, to spin the story

Who makes the rules that give some groups privilege? Those with power in our political, economic, and ideological systems. Who wins the game? Those whom the rules have advantaged. Who gets to put the spin on the game—who names the game and interprets its outcome? The winners.

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## Heterosexism: An Example

Heterosexism, like racism, classism, and sexism, is a system of power relations. Heterosexuals set the laws and acceptable practices governing adult intimate life (“the rules”), the advantages that go to those who follow the rules (“the winners”), and the rationale for the hierarchy that justifies the unequal treatment (“the spin”). In our culture, heterosexual marriage was long ago established as the standard and legally privileged status against which all other ways of conducting adult intimate life are measured (“the rules”). Advantages accrue to those who conform (“the winners”): the right to marry, to adopt children, to receive survivor benefits from Social Security, to file taxes as married couples, to receive health insurance from a spouse’s employer, to inherit from one’s partner, and to claim a legal family connection in medical emergencies. To be sure, significant changes have taken place in the legal status of gay people (e.g., twenty states, the District of Columbia, and many municipalities now prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation) and in public attitudes about alternative sexualities, especially among the young (Arthur Levitt Public Affairs Center 2006; Badgett et al. 2008). Still, most people who depart from the sexual standards set by those in power are denied full citizenship rights, making it difficult for them to create and to maintain families at all.

These restrictions, however, do not affect all gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people in the same way. Some middle- and upper-class White men and women, for example, have more political, economic, and social resources to construct families in spite of legal obstacles and social disapproval. Class and race privilege give White upper-middle-class, educated gay men and women the options of suing if employers discriminate; of living without spousal insurance; of establishing estates with the help of estate attorneys who can find other tax shields for their monies; of traveling to other cities, states, or countries that may allow adoption or marriage and paying the costs incurred; of living well without a partner’s Social Security.

The rationale for the unequal treatment of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people is provided in the interpretation that the powerful place on them by defining them variously as “other,” “deviant,” “sexual predators,” “sinners,” as less than fully human—not deserving of full citizenship status (“the spin”). And because they are defined as not “normal,” gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people have only recently begun to appear in popular culture texts—books, videos, films, television shows, advertisements—in ways that are less stereotypical, as was the case in such popular TV shows as *Will and Grace* or *Ugly Betty* (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation [GLAAD] 2009). The advertising industry has even coined a term, *gay vague*, for ads constructed to appeal to gay consumers—a market estimated to have had \$690 billion in buying power in 2007—without overtly challenging heterosexual dominance (HarrisInteractive 2009; Wilke and Applebaum 2001).

This third arena of power, “the spin,” is carried out in the world of ideas through the media, the knowledge experts, and the image makers. These sources provide us with explanations and interpretations intended to help us make sense of our everyday lives, including hierarchies of power and privilege, and thereby either help to create and reinforce or to challenge and transform the systems of race, class, gender, and sexuality. They can encourage us to feel comfortable with harsh treatment of some people by presenting a pervasive belief system—an ideology, a set of stereotypes—that interprets the treatment as a “natural” outcome of a group’s presumed inferior traits.

## WHY RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY?

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When we examine these four systems of social inequality—race, class, gender, and sexuality—and recognize their interrelationships as the previous example of heterosexism’s interaction with race, class, and gender suggests, you might ask which of the four is most important. And what of other forms of oppression? By focusing on these four dimensions, I do not intend to suggest that these are the only hierarchical dimensions of inequality that matter in social life. People face oppression along many other dimensions—disability, region, nation, ethnicity—and those patterns of relationships are also hierarchical and intersect with race, class, gender, and sexuality. In different times and places, and with regard to particular issues, they may carry more significance than the four dimensions examined here.

But race, class, gender, and sexuality are given priority for several reasons:

- In the United States, race, class, gender, and sexuality each have such a significant history as powerful organizers of social hierarchy that they are deeply embedded in our most important institutions: law and justice, education, religion, family, and economy.
- Subordinate groups have struggled in large-scale social movements of resistance against these oppressions in legal, educational, religious, family, economic, and other institutions for many years. As a consequence, each of these inequalities is quite visible in the public consciousness now in the United States. In recent years, for example, the persistent and rapidly growing social movements of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people for social power and self-determination have precipitated significant social change and enhanced attention from the political, religious, and other realms.
- Given the visibility and the fundamental importance of these dimensions at this time in the United States, this analysis of race, class, gender, and sexuality and its extended application to education in the United States should give you the tools—the conceptual framework and the questions to ask—to analyze other dimensions of inequality, as well.

The primary purpose of my research is to deepen our understanding of the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality and to demonstrate how to analyze those intersections in specific times and places. But the framework should encourage you to look beyond the most clearly visible dimensions of inequality in any arena, to look for more subtle expressions of power dynamics, and to seek out the structures and mechanisms that undergird oppression in all areas of society.

## PROCESSES THAT OBSCURE RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

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Race, class, gender, and sexuality shape everyone’s life every day. Yet these systems are often hard to see, to understand, even to define. In U.S. society, these constructs are typically defined by referring to social groups selected for unequal treatment and ranked according to

- **Race:** Ancestry and selected physical characteristics, such as skin color, hair texture, and eye shape<sup>1</sup>
- **Class:** Position in the economy; in the distribution of wealth, income, and poverty; in the distribution of power and authority in the workforce
- **Sex/Gender:** Biological and anatomical characteristics attributed to males and females (sex); culturally and socially structured relationships between women and men (gender)
- **Sexual Orientation:** Sex of partners in emotional-sexual relationships

Yet these definitions tend to reify the categories, to make them seem universal, seem tied to a presumably stable biology, rigid and unchanging—characteristics quite the opposite of the way the framework in this reading presents them. One of the challenges of my research is to present a more complex picture of these systems and their intersections so that we can see their persistence and significance in shaping social life and their shifting nature over time and space.

In fact, the reasons that these intersecting systems of oppression are so difficult to understand and to define are contained in the very nature of the systems themselves:

Every social situation is affected by societywide historical patterns of race, class, gender, and sexuality that are not necessarily apparent to the participants and that are experienced differently depending on the race, class, gender, and sexuality of the people involved.

Typically, the beneficiaries of long-standing patently unfair practices that routinely reinforce social injustice, such as giving special preference in college and law school admissions to the sons and daughters of wealthy alumni, do not come away viewing the practices as unfair, do not associate them with affirmative action, and may in fact view them as fair and even desirable practices (Crosby and Sockdale 2007; Karabel 2005; Sturm and Guinier 1996). To those who occupy positions of privilege, that is, who benefit from the existing social arrangements, the fact that their privilege is dependent on the unfair exclusion of or direct harm to others is obscured, unimportant, practically invisible.

Although I remember, for example, when my all-White girls' high school desegregated in the 1960s, the event meant very little to me at the time. I had never even seen the segregated African American schools whose inferior conditions had made school desegregation such an important goal in the African American community. But for my new African American schoolmates, the unfairness of racial segregation was painfully apparent, and being the first African Americans to attend my school was most certainly a critical life event for them.

Systemic patterns of inequality can also be obscure to those disadvantaged by them because they lack access to information and resources that dominant groups control. So, at the same time that I experienced my high school's integration as a nonevent because of my racial privilege, I became aware of the significant restrictions on my life imposed by my gender.

I rode to school on a bus with other students from my end of town who had gone to elementary school with me. The bus stopped at the three small Catholic girls' high schools and the

single large Catholic boys' high school. Every day on the bus, my good friend Mickey O'Hara and I, who had competed with each other academically in elementary school, compared notes about what we were learning in high school. As the days, weeks, and years went on, it became clear that Mickey was being taught much more than I. The boys in college prep courses went further in math, read more in English, had more science. They scored better on standardized tests. They had better facilities, books, and teachers. Why? In large part because each parish was required to contribute money to the boys' high school for each boy in the parish who attended the school. And for the girls? Nothing. So the girls' schools ran on tuition alone; the boys' ran on subsidies from the parishes—a fact I didn't learn until years later. My brother's education cost my parents far less and provided him much more, a discrepancy that few saw as troublesome because the school system was organized to prepare boys to provide materially for their families and to prepare girls to have children and to raise them in two-parent, heterosexual nuclear families.

These assumptions about the fundamental aims of our education—to learn to enact gender-specific roles in heterosexual marriages and in the labor market—were profound. They shaped every aspect of our lives—from proms to course content, from sports to labs. The girls' schools provided the homecoming queens and the cheerleaders; the boys' school, the athletes. The girls' schools provided the home economics and typing labs; the boys' school, the physics course.

So in my position as a girl in a gender-stratified school system, I had been aware of many of the differences in education between the boys' and the girls' schools but was unaware of the funding practices that supported them and would have been unable to do much about the practices even if I had known. Likewise, law school applicants who lack class and family privilege may never know or may be unable to change the fact that their chances for admission were reduced by the preferences given to the children of alumni. People often come away from a discriminatory practice not knowing whether or how the discrimination took place—even when they are the victims of the injustice. Even though those who suffer the unfairness are more likely to see it, we all participate in discriminatory systems *with and without* knowing that or how we have done so.

The dominant ideologies of a “color-blind,” “gender-blind,” and “sexually restrained” society obscure oppression and its history.

The dominant ideology (belief system), particularly about race and gender but also about social class and sexuality, that pervades the media and dominates public policy is that the United States is or should be a “gender-blind,” “race-blind,” “classless,” and “sexually restrained” society. These ideologies are presented as “neutral” perspectives suggesting that a “gender-blind” or “postgender” or “race-blind” or “postracial” society is the preferred outcome of any social policy that seeks to address pervasive inequalities—the goal to strive for—as well as the way that policies designed to achieve equity should operate. Although on their surface these ideologies sound much like the arguments made by antiracists in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, they are currently aimed at obscuring the privilege that accompanies Whiteness and maleness rather than at seeking to transform them from an identity of social superiority to one of social responsibility (Bonilla-Silva 2003; McDermott and Samson 2005).

We do not hear the term *class blind* used in public discourse because the dominant ideology of class differs from race and gender ideology. The classless ideology does not assert that even though classes are biologically determined, we should strive not to attend to them—as it does with race and gender. Although it recognizes great differences in income, wealth, and other valuable resources, it asserts that classes—either as biological groups or as social groups in a relation of oppression and conflict with one another—simply do not exist. Instead, economic positions in the United States are presumed to be earned in a free and open “meritocratic” society in which hard work and talent pay off—the land of the American Dream. And it is those differences in hard work and talent—not oppression—that are offered as the core causes of the obvious, extreme economic differences present in the population.

The dominant ideology of sexuality is one of restraint, with the alleged sexual practices of the heterosexual majority taken as the moral norm against which the sexual orientation and practices of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender<sup>2</sup> are seen as deviant and dangerous. The dominant ideology of sexuality is not that we should be blind to differences, that they should not matter or do not exist, but rather that they should be denied, contained, or ignored—neither discussed in public nor condoned. The military’s former policy toward homosexuals of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” implemented in 1994, captures the dominant ideology of sexual restraint well: “We won’t ask, and you shouldn’t tell, because if you tell, you will be punished.”

Think about these ideologies. Why would we use *denial* and *blindness* as bases for social policy and the assessment of moral rightness? To do so implies that we seek not to see and therefore, not to know. It suggests that ignorance is a preferred foundation for social policy—an anti-intellectual stance that has no valid place in the modern academy, where we seek knowledge, truth, and wisdom.

Yet these stances on race, class, gender, and sexuality prevail for at least two basic reasons:

- **Because members of privileged groups are not disadvantaged and, in fact, benefit from these systems, people in these groups find dismissing the claims of oppressed groups as unreal relatively easy.**
- **In our education and in mass media, we do not systematically learn about the totality of the experiences of subordinate groups.**

The experiences of oppressed groups are either excluded or distorted in our society by being presented in limited and stereotyped ways: gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people solely as people who engage in particular sexual acts or wear sex-inappropriate clothes; African Americans as slaves or protesters in the civil rights movement in the 1960s, as sports heroes and music stars, and as welfare moms and criminals; Latino/as as illegal aliens swelling the schools and welfare rolls; Native Americans as unassimilable, alcoholic reservation dwellers benefiting from gambling-driven windfalls; hard-working Asian Americans as clannishly living in Chinatowns and overcoming all obstacles to rise to educational and employment heights, especially in math and science. In short, we typically learn of these groups only as they can be seen to present “problems” or threats to the dominant group or as exceptions to the “normal” way of life.

We rarely learn of the common ground in our experiences or of the ways that the lives and struggles of oppressed groups can and have benefited the entire society. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, for example, although fought for and won primarily by African Americans, expanded protections against discrimination to women, religious minorities, and all racial groups. In a similar vein, Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres (2002) compare the experiences of women and people of color to the miner's canary. Miners used to take a canary into the mines with them to signal whether or not the air was safe to breathe. If the canary thrived, the atmosphere was safe. If the canary became sick or died, the atmosphere was toxic.

Members of oppressed groups—people of color, poor and working classes, women, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people—are like the canary: They signal when the atmosphere is not healthy. When oppressed groups experience high death rates from lack of access to medical care; high infant mortality rates; increasing high school dropout rates; declining college, graduate, and professional school attendance rates; high unemployment and poverty rates; and declining standardized test scores, something is wrong with the atmosphere—not with the canary. Trying to “fix” the canary or blaming the toxic atmosphere on the canary makes the atmosphere no less toxic to everyone in it. Learning about the atmosphere through the experience of the canary, we can develop a broader and healthier assessment of societal processes that affect us all—international relations, family life, and the workings of the economy, of education, of religion.

These systems are never perfectly patterned; some people have experiences that defy the overall patterns.

In my high school, some students in the college preparatory track never went to college; some home economics students did. But rags-to-riches stories, popular in America, are always more complex than we are often led to believe. For example, in “A Darker Shade of Crimson: Odyssey of a Harvard Chicano,” Ruben Navarette, Jr., a 24-year-old Mexican American man, tells of how he went from valedictorian of his class in a school system with a 50 percent dropout rate for Hispanics to Harvard University and then to the University of California Los Angeles graduate school in education. He describes the guilt, pain, and isolation he felt in graduate school:

White student colleagues smile at me as they tell me, implicitly, that people like my parents, like my old friends, like the new girlfriend back home whose immeasurable love is sustaining me, are incompetent and unintelligent and unmotivated and hopeless. They wink and nod at me, perhaps taking comfort that I am different from the cultural caricature that they envision when they hear the word “Chicano.”

*(Navarette 1997:278)*

So even though a pervasive pattern of oppression exists, individual exceptions also exist. And these exceptions tend to reinforce the views of dominant groups that the system is not oppressive but is indeed open and fair, because those who have benefited from the current arrangements have difficulty seeing the ways in which the exclusion of others has made their inclusion in the successful mainstream possible.

These systems are not immutable; they change over time and vary across different regional locations and different cultural milieus.

Race, class, gender, and sexuality are not fixed systems or traits of individuals. Because they are negotiated and contested every day in social relationships, they change over time and in different places. Many of the working-class White girls who were my high school classmates, for example, did not attend college immediately after high school but attended college later, in the 1970s and 1980s, after marrying and having children. Changing economic conditions no longer allowed their husbands to be the sole support of the family; changing family conditions meant that many of their marriages ended in divorce; and changing education and labor market conditions meant that there were significantly increased opportunities for women. Thus, what race, class, gender, and sexuality meant for the lives of White, heterosexual, working-class women had changed considerably from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Because of the pervasive, persistent, and severe nature of oppressive systems, people resist subordination and in their resistance can develop positive skills, talents, and abilities. These skills fortify them to survive and to challenge more effectively the very system designed to limit their opportunities to use their skills, talents, and abilities.

The fact that no parish resources were sent to the all-girls schools in my community meant, for example, that the parishes could funnel all their resources into the education of their boys—to fortify their ability to succeed and to bolster the economic base of the patriarchal nuclear family. Yet because we were segregated, I was able to play leadership roles and participate in activities that girls in coeducational schools mostly could not play. In much the same way, segregated African American schools, Native American reservation schools, and barrio schools—typically inferior in resources, per-pupil expenditures, physical facilities, and teacher preparation—have become fertile ground for the development of future leaders and activists who effectively challenge the systems themselves.

Because members of oppressed groups can withstand oppression and may even succeed while facing it, dominant group members often take that success to mean that the oppression either does not exist or is not severe. But it is not the oppression itself that creates the success that some people experience: It is the human will to resist oppression and overcome obstacles that makes this success possible. Resistance in individual and collective forms pressures the dominant system to change and transform over time. If anything, because so many people are willing to resist, former President Obama was able to connect powerfully to a wide cross-section of America. He asked people to believe that their resistance could bring about fundamental change, and his many new strategies of reaching people (employing the Internet, text messaging, organizer training, etc.) engaged a decisive segment of the United States in resistance to the status quo.

## **DOMAINS, INSTITUTIONS, AND LEVELS OF OPPRESSION**

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### **Domains and Associated Institutions**

Relationships of dominance and subordination along race, class, gender, and sexuality lines are produced, reinforced, challenged, and changed in many arenas or social domains. Although historically employed to characterize the domains of class oppression (cf. Vanneman and Weber

Cannon 1987), three broad domains—the ideological, the political, and the economic—also represent useful ways of seeing the societal context for other forms of oppression. Each domain has associated with it certain *social institutions*—patterns of social relationships that are intended to accomplish the goals of the particular domain. And relations of dominance and subordination are structured within the institutions associated with each of the three major domains of society:

- *Ideological Domain.* The media, arts, religion, and education represent institutions whose primary purpose is *ideological*—producing and distributing ideas and knowledge about society and its people, why society is organized the way it is, what people need to know in order to function in society. Control over ideological institutions enables dominant groups to shape public images and cultural beliefs about both dominant and subordinate groups. Some refer to negative group images, for example, of “welfare queens,” as *controlling images* to highlight their intended purpose of restricting the lives and options of subordinate groups, in this case poor African American women (Collins 2000; Hancock 2004).
- *Political Domain.* The government, law, civil and criminal justice, the police, and the military represent institutions whose primary purpose is *political*—creating and enforcing the laws and government structures that define citizens’ and non-citizens’ rights, responsibilities, and privileges. Through control over these institutions, dominant groups exert direct control over the behavior of others.
- *Economic Domain.* The major industries (e.g., finance, health care, manufacturing, housing, transportation, and communication) and work represent institutions whose primary emphasis is *economic*—producing and distributing society’s valued goods and services. Control over material goods and resources such as wealth, jobs, wages and benefits, health care, day care, and education makes dominant groups more competitive in the workplace and in community life.

Each of these domains and the institutions associated with them are organized to reinforce and reproduce the prevailing social hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality—by producing and disseminating ideas that justify these inequalities, by concentrating government power and social control mechanisms among dominant groups, and by unequally distributing society’s valued material and social resources to Whites, the middle and upper classes, men, heterosexuals, and U.S. citizens.

Although most institutions have a primary purpose, none of the major social institutions relates solely to a single domain of oppression—ideological, political, or economic. Just as race, class, gender, and sexuality are interconnected dimensions of oppression, so are social institutions intertwined with one another. If we think again about the realm of sports, for example, sports are

- *Ideological:* Ideas about “winners and losers,” fair play, and a “level playing field” often serve as a basis for defining how groups should be treated, punished, and rewarded.
- *Political:* Many connections between the powerful in society—especially among men—are first forged in sports teams in kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12) and



in college (Messner 1992). Sports also become overtly political arenas, as when, for example, the International Olympic Committee tied its decision to allow Beijing to host the Olympics in 2008 to demands for greater human rights in China (Human Rights Watch 2008).

- *Economic:* Over the past 40 years, as manufacturing has declined, many municipalities around the country have turned to tourism and recreation, including professional sports teams, to improve the economies of urban areas. Large colleges and universities commit millions of dollars to sports promotion to increase revenues, to satisfy alumni, and to increase donations. And some of the richest people in America are sports professionals (e.g., Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson, LeBron James) and team owners.

Education, too, although primarily an ideological institution, is deeply implicated in the economic and political domains because it certifies people for different social locations within them.

Society's expenditures on schooling are justified on economic grounds as preparing and sorting people for different positions in the capitalist economic system as owners, managers, professionals, laborers, and—for those who drop out or otherwise fail—as society's underclass. As the costs of higher education have risen dramatically in recent years, students are increasingly viewed as consumers who must be “sold” on the “product” that any given institution offers and who must be “satisfied” in order to keep their “business.” Some have even sued schools for failure to educate them. Advocates for rural and inner-city K–12 schools are challenging school funding formulas that most often rely on local property taxes and heavily advantage affluent suburban areas. For example, when its supreme court ruled that the state's constitution merely obligated it to provide students a “minimally adequate” education, a South Carolina citizens' coalition proposed a constitutional amendment to require the state to level out the gross inequities in funding across its districts in order to provide all students with a high-quality education (see [www.GoodbyeMinimallyAdequate.com](http://www.GoodbyeMinimallyAdequate.com)).

And because of the ideological and economic importance of education, the state is deeply involved in legislating the structure of education. Social movements seeking to challenge the fundamental basis of the social order often begin with and emanate from schools. Take, for example, the historical equity movements surrounding school desegregation, students with disabilities, gender equity (Title IX), and affirmative action.

### Cross-Cutting Institutions

Some institutions have no single focus and uniformly cross cut all dimensions—for example, the *family*. The family is a social institution whose purpose is to meet people's basic psychological, emotional, and physical needs. And even though emotional support, love, and nurturance take place in families, families also serve as sites where inequality is reproduced in the ideological, political, and economic realms:

- *Ideological:* Families are places where the ideas that bolster and justify the dominant power structure are reinforced daily in an intimate setting. Conservative politicians and political interest groups, for example, have used the term *family values* to refer to

the political values that serve the interests of nuclear, heterosexual, White, middle- and upper-class Christian families: values that serve to reinforce the dominant power structure.

- *Political:* Families are places where the public authority and power of middle- and upper-class White male heterosexuals is reinforced daily in a variety of ways. When a man rapes or otherwise sexually assaults the child of a neighbor, for example, the violation is typically seen as a crime and is often pursued in the criminal justice system. When, however, the same man, particularly if he is middle or upper class, rapes or otherwise sexually assaults his own daughter, the rape is more often not challenged at all, is treated as an issue for social services, or is dealt with in therapy. The public power of men (including their greater economic power) gives them power in the family, making it especially difficult for women and children to successfully challenge the abuse of that power either in the family or in the criminal justice system.
- *Economic:* Families are places where goods and services are distributed to reinforce the economic power of dominant groups. The family wage, a wage large enough to enable a man to provide for his entire family, was extended at the beginning of industrialization to White men to lure them away from family farms and into factory work but was never extended to men of color. It also served as a mechanism for exerting control over women both by denying them access to wage work and by justifying lower wages to women (Hartmann 1997). Current tax laws determining what part of income earned by individual workers will be retained by the state is set by their family status—married, heterosexual couples pay one rate, unmarried individuals pay another rate, and deductions and tax credits accrue to parents with dependent children.

## SOCIAL RELATIONS OF CONTROL

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Maintaining their position of control over subordinate groups is a primary task for dominant groups. To do so, they must structure:

- **Ideology so that exploitation is explained, justified, and rationalized and comes to be seen as a natural, normal, and acceptable part of social life**
- **The polity so that the state supports and enforces the exploitative relations**
- **The economy so that the exploitative relations continue, so that the poverty and labor of the exploited enhances the welfare of the exploiters**

### Internalized Oppression

The very fact that society continues without major disruption every day serves as a testimony not only to the power of dominant groups to effectively control the ideological, political, and material resources that subordinate groups need to shift the balance of power but also to the

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persuasive power of dominant ideologies to convince subordinate group members that the current social hierarchies are acceptable and cannot be changed (cf. Mullings 1994). Two processes of *internalized oppression* are at work:

- *Self-Negation*: Subordinate group members sometimes restrict their own lives because they believe the negative views and limits imposed on their group by the dominant ideology. When subordinate group members internalize oppression, they do not challenge the social order and may even exhibit self-destructive patterns such as drug abuse, family violence, or depression. In more subtle ways, for example, a woman who fails to put herself up for consideration for a promotion at work because she believes that she is less capable or less suited for management than her male counterparts has internalized the socially constructed, controlling images of women.
- *Negation of Others*: Subordinate group members sometimes restrict the lives of other members of oppressed groups or of their own group because they believe the negative views of and limits imposed on another subordinate group or their own group. When working-class Latinos, for example, accept negative images of Latinas as sexually promiscuous and treat them as sexual objects, the Latinos reinforce the larger structural patterns of race, class, gender, and sexuality dominance. When women managers fail to promote other women because they believe that women are less capable than men, they also reinforce structures of race, class, gender, and sexuality dominance, the same structures that have restricted their own lives.

## Resistance

But people also resist oppression. Even though each of these social institutions is organized to reproduce the current social hierarchy and is thus a structure of oppression; strong forces of resistance occur within each. The resistance occurs at both the *macro social level of community and society* and at the *micro level of the individual and the family*. Ever since the beginning of our public education system, for example, various groups have established alternative schools—religious schools, other private schools, single-sex schools, African American schools, bilingual schools, and home schools, to name a few—to resist the dominant culture’s organization of education and to produce students who have different ideas about the social order. And because education is a primary institution charged with the socialization of the young, it holds a key to the future stability of the social order. Education is thus a critical site for resistance to all forms of oppression: racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism, as well as oppression resulting from religious, ethnic, national, political, age, and disability status.

A major focus of the civil rights, women’s rights, gay and lesbian rights, and poor people’s movements has been educational system reform—for example, through school desegregation; through battles over the gender, race, and sexuality content of school texts and curricula; through struggles for access for students with disabilities; through bilingual education; and through poor (mostly rural and inner city) school districts’ challenges to school funding formulas based on property values.

Resistance also occurs at the micro level of the individual and the family, when individuals develop an alternative consciousness, insist on self-definition and self-valuation, and refuse to incorporate negative images of their groups. An alternative consciousness is often nurtured in a community of resistance, such as a racial ethnic community, a community of workers, a gay and lesbian community, a religious community, or a women's community. And increasingly today, those communities of resistance are created and sustained through the use of advanced technologies such as the Internet and cell phones, which facilitate communication across vast reaches of time and space.

When groups publicly resist oppression, individuals within them can participate in the development of a positive definition of self in the face of dominant culture oppression. When, for example, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people acknowledge their sexual orientation at work, they often face ostracism, hostility, lost opportunities for promotions, and even loss of their jobs. At the same time, however, by living their lives openly—something heterosexuals take for granted—they also contradict the denial and silence that enables dominant culture distortions about their lives to persist and to operate against them. In valuing themselves in this way, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people contribute to an environment in which others are better able to do the same. This process is one of *empowerment*, “a process aimed to consolidating, maintaining, or changing the nature and distribution of power in a particular social context” (Morgen and Bookman 1988:4). Processes of oppression and resistance and empowerment exist in dynamic relation to one another: Each is in a continuous process of changing to adapt to the shifts in the other.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss how domination and subordination along race, social class, gender, and sexuality lines become structured by institutions within the three domains: the ideological, the economic, and the political.
2. Using examples from Weber's life or your own, explain how the “intersecting systems” of race, social class, gender, and sexuality support the domination of one group over another group by obscuring or denying this power relationship and its resulting inequities.

### NOTES

1. *Ethnicity*, a concept closely related to race, is conceived as shared culture based on nationality/national origin, language, religion, and by some definitions, also race. I address ethnicity in the context of race because the Black-White divide in the United States has most powerfully shaped the terrain on which ethnic groups—people of color (Asians, Latinos, Arabs, Natives) and Whites (Irish, Italians, Jews, Poles)—have historically been viewed and treated (cf., Brodtkin 2004; Ignatiev 1995; Perlman 2005).
2. *Transgender* is a term increasingly used by people whose gender expression (e.g., masculine, feminine) is deemed inappropriate for their biological sex (e.g., male, female). As Leslie Feinberg (1996:xi) states, “Because it is our entire spirit—the essence of who we are—that doesn't conform to narrow gender stereotypes many people who in the past have been referred to as cross-dressers, transvestites, drag queens, and drag kings today define themselves as *transgender*.”