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SYSTEMIC RACISM: MYTHS AND REALITIES SOC 373

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Defining Systemic Racism.

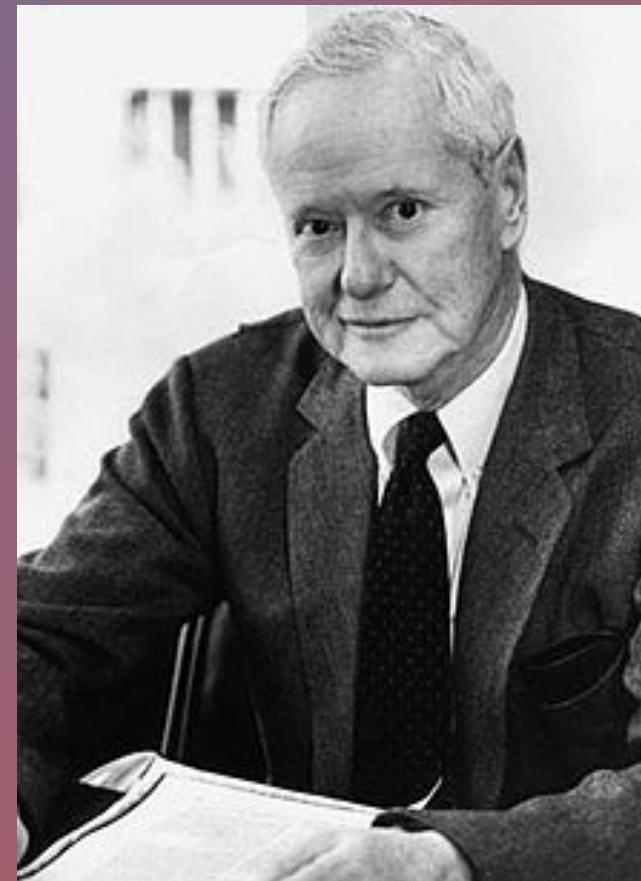
Systemic racism designates persistent racial inequalities resulting from the operation of entrenched social, economic, and political orders across time and space.

By contrast to prejudice or bigotry, which materialize in personal attitudes and beliefs, systemic racism is embedded in laws, policies, and practices that antecede individuals.

Examples include residential segregation, unfair lending practices, barriers to home ownership, processes resulting in the differential accumulation of wealth, schools' dependence on property taxes, voter suppression policies, etc.

Robert K. Merton

- + • (1949). “Discrimination
and the American
Creed”
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This celebrated paper, first published in **1948**, illustrates a way to organize knowledge and “do” science through logical reasoning and the application of rigorous methodologies.

Merton notes a difference between research with direct implications for social problems and research that is remote from these problems.

Of equal importance is his distinction between norms/values and behavior.

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But Merton was not the first to note that discrepancy. It was Harriet Martineau, a follower of Auguste Comte who first drew attention to that distinction.



Harriet Martineau: *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838)



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Merton first considers our nation's foundational creed set forth in the Declaration of Independence, the preamble of the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

He discards simplistic interpretations, noting that the American creed does NOT proclaim universal equality of innate intellectual or physical endowment.

He further notes the gap between the national creed and conduct. He observes that the gap is not just about ideals versus practices or true belief versus hypocrisy.

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Here are two
fragments of the
national creed:

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“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure + the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” o

– Preamble to the Constitution, 1787





“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness . . .”

—Declaration of Independence, 1776

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Merton is clearly thinking about the gulf between ideals such as those inscribed in our master narrative and phenomena like slavery and Jim Crow laws.

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It's not equality of individual endowments that the creed affirms but:

“the indefeasible principle of the human right to full equity: the right to equitable access to justice, freedom, and opportunity, irrespective of race or religion or ethnic origin. . . dignity of the individual irrespective of group membership. And it goes on to say that although individuals differ in innate endowment, they do so as individuals, not by virtue of their group memberships.”

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The creed is NOT a fixed and static cultural constant, unmodified in the course of time. . . It is, moreover, unevenly distributed throughout the society.

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Nor does the creed exert the same measure of control over behavior in diverse times and places. Insofar as it is a “sacred” part of American culture . . . it is largely immune to direct attack

THE CREED, THOUGH INVULNERABLE TO DIRECT ATTACK, IS NOT BINDING ON PRACTICE.

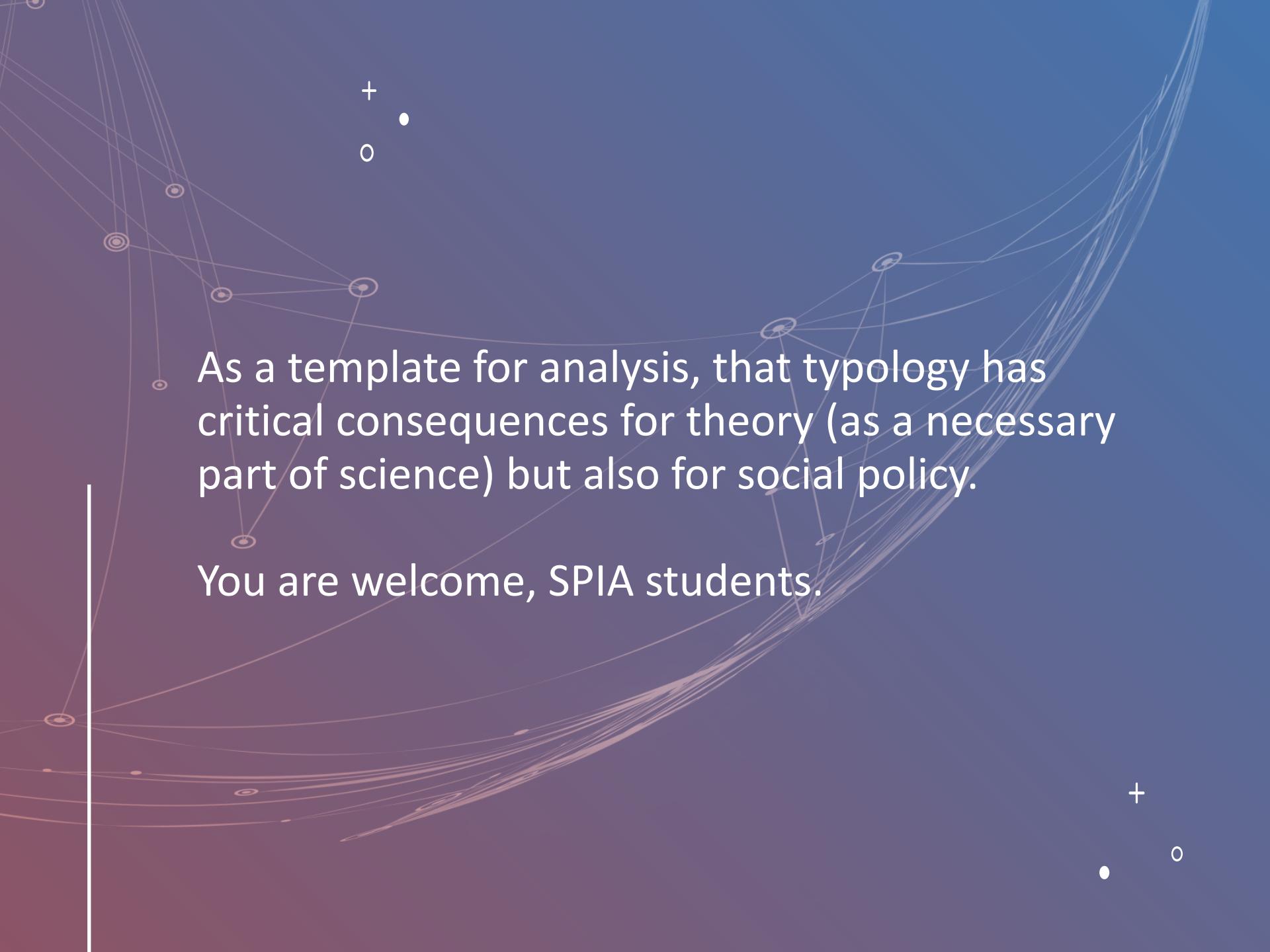
In other words, for analytical purposes, Merton is unpacking the phenomenon of discrimination into three distinct variables that may combine in various ways.

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- Once we substitute these three variables of cultural ideal, belief, and actual practice, the entire formulation of the problem changes.

We escape from the virtuous but ineffectual impasse of deplored the alleged hypocrisy of many Americans into the more difficult but potentially effectual realm of analyzing the problem actually in hand.

Conduct may or may not conform with individual's own beliefs concerning the moral claims of all people to equal opportunity.



As a template for analysis, that typology has critical consequences for theory (as a necessary part of science) but also for social policy.

You are welcome, SPIA students.

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Why?

Because the typology identifies social sectors more or less susceptible to behavioral modification through changes in the rewards/incentives system.

Type I: The Unprejudiced Non-Discriminator is (in this schema) a potent group advancing the correspondence between the national creed and actual conduct.

Type IV: The Prejudiced Illiberal represents the group most resistant to change.



On the other hand,

Types II and III: The Unprejudiced Discriminator and the Prejudiced Non-Discriminator are of greatest interest to policy because of their higher propensity towards behavioral modification in correspondence to changes in the incentives system.

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That was the intent and the effect of
Affirmative Action Programs!

(Before they were recently dismantled by the Supremes)

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With his ideas, Merton was anticipating measures to combat systemic racism in the 1940s!

And he was doing that through logical reasoning and the application of scientific approaches.

(Loud applause)

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Yet Merton also [†] lavishes criticism upon “all weather liberals.”

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Fallacy of group soliloquies. Ethnic liberals are busily engaged in talking to themselves.

Fallacy of unanimity. Continued association with like-minded individuals tends to produce the illusion that a large measure of consensus has been achieved in the community at large.

Fallacy of privatized solutions to the problem. He essays a *private* solution to a *social* problem.

Such fallacies invite social inaction.

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Liberals (as well as conservatives) often fail to recognize that privatized solutions cannot be the solution for problems that are essentially social in nature.

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Take Home Points:

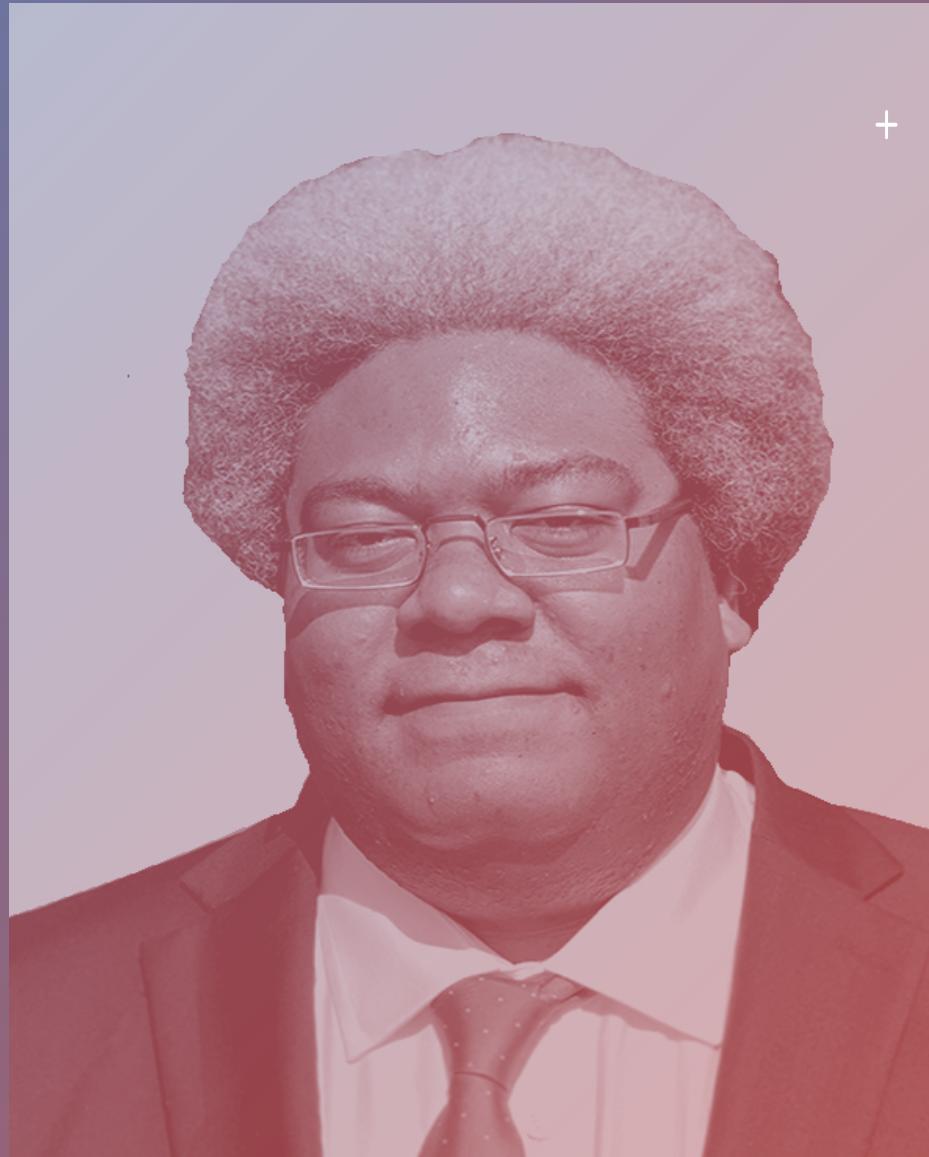
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1. A primary function of sociology is to account for the determinants and consequences of diverse forms of social behavior.
2. The “creed” does not exert the same level of control over all groups.
3. Attitudes and overt behavior vary independently.
4. **PREJUDICIAL ATTITUDES DO NOT HAVE TO RESULT IN DISCRIMINATORY BEHAVIOR.**

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Elie Mystral (2022). *Allow me to Retort: A Black guy's Guide to the Constitution.*



Mystal is the Justice correspondent for *The Nation* and, in my estimation, one of the most brilliant and piercing voices commenting on our legal system.

He notes something that should not be controversial: the crafters of the constitution owned enslaved people.

(Anyone disputing that fact?)



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As a result, Mystal argues, the U.S. Constitution would be useless, were it not for the Bill of Rights, that is without the Reconstruction Amendments.

He is thus a fierce critic of “Originalists” who argue that the Constitution should be interpreted only within the parameters of the time when it was written.

His tone is loud and filled with outrage, but Mystal like Merton, aims to salvage and honor the Constitution as an evolving document representing the best possible aspects of the American character.

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THE END

(FOR THE TIME BEING)