

# Lecture 7 Notes: Race and Ethnicity

## 1 Using Intersectionality

### Definition 1: Intersectionality

The relationship between socio-demographic factors (e.g., class, gender, race, ethnicity) which intersect to shape an individual's unique structural opportunities and constraints. It emphasizes how various axes of identity mutually influence experiences, attitudes, and worldviews.

- Intersectionality helps us understand that someone's social location (race, class, gender, etc.) influences how they view and are viewed by others.
- By adopting an intersectional lens, we recognize that *no single* aspect of identity can fully explain social outcomes—multiple dimensions interact simultaneously.

## 2 Race for Biologists vs. Sociologists

### 2.1 Biological Perspective

#### Definition 2: Biological Race

Differences in physical characteristics (such as skin color, hair texture, or facial features) that result from long periods of genetic divergence and interbreeding among human populations.

- Historically, biologists considered race “essential,” attributing phenotypical traits to genetic heredity.
- Modern genetics shows:
  - **High within-group variation:** Genetic diversity within a so-called racial group often exceeds differences between groups.
  - **No behavioral basis:** No empirical link connects genetic markers of race to intelligence, work ethic, or other behavioral traits.

## 2.2 Sociological Perspective

### Definition 3: Social Race

A social construct that categorizes people based on perceived physical differences (e.g., skin color), but whose significance arises from historical, political, and economic processes rather than innate biology.

- Common errors in everyday thinking about race:
  - *Reification*: Treating race as a fixed, biological essence.
  - *Essentialism*: Assuming that certain traits are innate to a racial group.
- Sociologists study how racial categories are:
  - **Created** (e.g., colonialism, legal codes),
  - **Maintained** (e.g., segregation, discriminatory policies),
  - **Transformed** (e.g., civil rights movements),
  - **Destroyed** (e.g., multiracial recognition).
- Race influences social structure (e.g., access to resources, prestige, power) and personal identity (how individuals see themselves).

## 3 Defining Race and Ethnicity

### Definition 4: Race

A concept signifying and symbolizing social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies. Although race invokes physical features (e.g., skin colour), the choice of which features to emphasize is determined by social and historical processes.

### Definition 5: Ethnicity

A shared cultural heritage, often including language, national origin, religion, and traditions, which distinguishes a group within a larger society.

- **Race** emphasizes *perceived physical* traits.
- **Ethnicity** emphasizes *cultural* traits (e.g., customs, language, ancestry).
- Both race and ethnicity are *social constructs* with real consequences.

## 4 Race, Class, and Status

### Definition 6: Social Class

The hierarchical distinctions between individuals or groups in society, often based on wealth, occupation, and education.

### Definition 7: Social Status

The relative prestige or social honor an individual holds in society, which may or may not align with class position.

- Race functions as a marker of both:
  - **Class:** Income, education, occupation often correlate with race.
  - **Status:** Public perceptions of prestige and respect are influenced by race.
- Examples of how race overlaps with class and status:
  - *Language* (accent, dialect) can signal both class and “race.”
  - *Dress and taste* become signifiers of race-class status (e.g., certain fashion styles associated with racialized groups).

### Example 1: Race as Social Marker

In many societies, having lighter skin is associated with higher socio-economic status. This does not reflect any biological advantage, but rather a historical process of privilege passed down through generations.

## 5 Racial Formation

### Definition 8: Racial Formation

A sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed. This includes the social, political, and economic forces that determine the content and importance of racial categories, and the consequences for individuals and groups.

- **Creation:** Colonial powers assigned racial labels to justify slavery and land appropriation.
- **Inhabitation:** Individuals and communities adopt or resist imposed identities.
- **Transformation:** Civil rights movements, immigration shifts, and cultural changes alter how race is defined.

- **Destruction:** Blurring of racial boundaries (e.g., recognition of multiracial identities).

### Example 2: Colonial Racialization

During the Atlantic slave trade:

- Enslaved people were classified as “Black” regardless of diverse origins.
- “White” identities were reinforced to justify the exploitation of darker-skinned people.
- Over time, skin color became the primary marker of racial difference, overshadowing original religious or ethnic distinctions.

### Example 3: Social Whitening

In certain Latin American countries, individuals of mixed Indigenous and African ancestry might pass as “mestizo” or “mulatto” to access social privileges reserved for lighter-skinned groups. This process reflects a hierarchy based on skin tone rather than any objective measure.

## 6 Discrimination and Prejudice

### Definition 9: Stereotype

An over-simplified generalization about a group of people, often based on false or incomplete information.

### Definition 10: Prejudice

Negative beliefs, thoughts, or feelings held about a target group, typically resistant to change even when confronted with new information.

### Definition 11: Discrimination

Biased actions (intentional or unintentional) toward individuals based on their membership in a particular group (e.g., race, ethnicity).

### Definition 12: Racism

Discriminatory actions or institutional practices that disadvantage individuals because of their race.

### Definition 13: Ethnocentrism

The belief that one's own ethnic group or culture is superior to others, often leading to discrimination or prejudice against out-groups.

- **Stereotype:** Rigid, oversimplified images of a group (e.g., “All X are Y”).
- **Prejudice:** Negative attitude (e.g., feeling) toward a group (e.g., “I dislike group Z”).
- **Discrimination:** Behavior resulting from prejudice (e.g., refusing to hire based on race).

### Example 4: Microaggressions

A manager constantly mispronounces a colleague's non-Western name, saying it carelessly in front of others. Though seemingly minor, this act reinforces the message that the colleague's identity is “other” and not valued.

## 7 White Supremacy and Neoliberal Ideology

### Definition 14: White Supremacy

A historical and systemic ideology asserting that white people are inherently superior to people of other races, justifying dominance and unequal treatment.

- White supremacy is not solely individual prejudice but a *structural* phenomenon embedded in laws, policies, and institutions.
- **Examples of structural white supremacy:**
  - Jim Crow laws enforcing racial segregation.
  - Redlining practices in housing, restricting home ownership for BIPOC communities.
- **Neoliberal Ideology:** Promotes individual responsibility and free markets, often blaming BIPOC for poverty rather than acknowledging systemic barriers.
- Through neoliberal rhetoric, structural inequalities are framed as personal failings (e.g., “If they just worked harder, they wouldn't be poor”).

### Example 5: Neoliberal Blame

During an economic downturn, media narratives focus on “welfare fraud” among marginalized racial groups, ignoring corporate bailouts and structural job losses that affect all classes.

## 8 Systemic and Institutional Racism

### Definition 15: Systemic Racism

Overlapping structures of discrimination embedded within and across organizations and institutions, which collectively reinforce unequal race-based distinctions and outcomes, irrespective of individual actors' intentions.

### Definition 16: Institutional Racism

Racial distinctions embedded in the policies, practices, and procedures of societal institutions (e.g., legal, educational, economic) that systematically disadvantage certain racial groups.

- **Systemic vs. Institutional:**

- *Institutional racism* refers to specific policies and practices within a single institution (e.g., a school's discipline policies that disproportionately suspend Black students).
- *Systemic racism* refers to the broader, interconnected network of institutions that maintain racial hierarchies (e.g., how housing, education, employment, and criminal justice collectively reproduce disadvantage).
- Even when individuals hold non-racist beliefs, systemic and institutional racism can persist because they are built into organizational norms and social structures.

### Example 6: Institutional Racism in Education

Standardized tests can advantage students from wealthier, predominantly white districts (better-funded schools, more test prep resources), while disadvantaging students of colour from under-resourced schools.

## 9 Critical Race Theory (CRT)

### Definition 17: Critical Race Theory

A theoretical framework that examines how racial discrimination is embedded in social structures, institutions, and laws. CRT asserts that racism is not merely individual bias but is maintained to preserve white privilege and power.

- Originated by scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s.
- Key tenets:
  - Racism is ordinary, not aberrational.

- Race is a social construct with real material consequences.
- Interest convergence: Advances in racial justice occur only when they align with white interests.
- Voice-of-Color: People of color can speak to their own experiences of systemic oppression.
- CRT analyzes how legal, economic, and political institutions perpetuate racial inequalities.

#### Example 7: Interest Convergence

The Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) desegregated public schools. CRT scholars argue this was possible partly because the U.S. government wanted to present a more equitable image abroad during the Cold War, thus aligning Black civil rights with national interests.

## 10 Racial Domination

#### Definition 18: Racial Domination

A system of power in which one racial group controls the social, political, economic, and cultural institutions, thereby dominating other racial groups.

- **Dimensions of Racial Domination:**
  - *Symbolic power*: Who is considered “normal” versus “other.”
  - *Political power*: Which groups have the authority to write laws or policies.
  - *Social power*: Who is included or excluded in social networks.
  - *Economic power*: Who controls resources, employment opportunities, and wealth accumulation.
- Because we tend to explain racial inequalities as individual failings, we often overlook this multi-dimensional domination.

## 11 Theoretical Paradigms on Race and Ethnicity

- **Functionalism:**
  - Sees race and ethnicity as playing a role in maintaining social order—constrained by norms and institutions that assign roles to different groups.
  - *Critique*: Tends to legitimize the status quo and downplay structural inequalities.
- **Conflict/Critical Sociology:**

- Focuses on how power relations and economic interests shape racial hierarchies.
- Argues that racial categories are used by dominant groups to exploit marginalized groups.

- **Symbolic Interactionism:**

- Studies how individuals interpret and give meaning to race and ethnicity in everyday interactions.
- Examines how racial “scripts” are performed, negotiated, or resisted in daily life.

**Sample Question 1: Comparison of Paradigms**

Explain how each of the following paradigms approaches the study of race and ethnicity:

- (a) Functionalism
- (b) Conflict/Critical Sociology
- (c) Symbolic Interactionism

## 12 The Moral Imperative

- Recognizing that racial discrimination is a structural pathology (rather than an individual pathology) creates a moral imperative for change.

- **Levels of Racial Projects:**

- *Institutional level:* Reform policies, laws, and institutional practices to remove racialized disadvantages.
- *Interpersonal level:* Challenge everyday microaggressions, prejudiced language, and discriminatory behaviors.
- *Individual level:* Reflect on one’s own implicit biases, unlearn stereotypes, and practice anti-racism in daily life.
- Moving from a *non-racist* stance (passive non-discrimination) to an *anti-racist* stance (active dismantling of racial inequities).

### **Sample Question 2: Moral Imperative in Practice**

Identify and discuss one concrete example of how an institution (e.g., a school, workplace, or criminal justice system) can shift from non-racist to anti-racist policies. What changes would need to be made at each of the following levels?

- (i) Institutional policies and practices
- (ii) Interpersonal interactions among staff or community members
- (iii) Individual attitudes and behaviors