



Do not copy, post, or distribute

1

LOOKING AT RACE AND ETHNICITY—AND POWER

Sarah Becker, Ifeyinwa Davis, and Crystal Paul

LEARNING QUESTIONS

- 1.1 What is the connection between racial slavery in America and the social construction of race?
- 1.2 How are racial categories tied to power, and how have they changed in meaning over time?
- 1.3 What is intersectionality? How does intersectionality help us understand the ways people experience racial inequality?
- 1.4 What are the sociological definitions of race, ethnicity, prejudice, discrimination, ethnocentrism, and racism?
- 1.5 How might you best handle the challenges that come with a course about race and ethnicity?

Has anyone ever advised you to steer clear of certain topics at a dinner party? If so, what did they tell you not to talk about? Politics? Religion? How much money someone has? Their embarrassing family secrets?

If you search “topics to avoid in polite conversation” on the Internet, race is not likely to come up in your results. Why is that? Race is among topics people avoid in “polite conversation,” especially in interracial (i.e., cross-race) settings. Why is talk about race so taboo we can’t even be honest about the fact that many people avoid talking about it?

In this chapter, you take a first step toward unpacking the complex history of race that helps explain why so many people don’t talk about it—particularly with people who do not share their race or ethnicity. We explore how race as a concept is rooted in the development of racial slavery in America, myths about its biological origins, and its ties to power. We examine its socially constructed nature and the importance of thinking about it intersectionally. Finally, we discuss how you can best prepare yourself to engage fully in a course on race and ethnicity.

WHAT ARE RACE AND ETHNICITY? WHY DO THEY MATTER?

We all know what “race” refers to, right? Ask most people, and they will probably refer to skin color or a handful of labeled human groups: White, Black, Asian, or Latinx¹, for example. The belief that humans can be sorted into separate groups based on visible markers such as skin color, hair type, and facial features illustrates one basic assumption about race: that it is biological. After all, we classify people based on what we see. But have you ever heard someone accuse a White person of “acting Black”? Or thought someone was White, only to learn later they identify as Latinx, Asian, Black, Pacific Islander, American Indian, or mixed race? These kinds of experiences reveal race is **socially constructed** or created by human beings in their interactions with one another.

¹ Latinx is a gender-neutral and nonbinary term we use in place of Latino/Latina or Hispanic.

Race is a system of organizing people into groups *perceived* to be distinct because of physical appearance (not genetic makeup). We tend to categorize people into racial groups based on their skin tone, facial features, and other physical cues. Our categorizations may not match how people racially identify themselves.

Ethnicity is not the same as race, though the two are often conflated. **Ethnicity** is shared cultural heritage including, but not limited to, a person's birthplace or country of origin, familial ties and lineage, religion, language, and other social practices. People of different ethnicities can fall in the same racial category. For example, a Nigerian person who recently immigrated to the United States and an African American person whose family has been in the United States for generations are ethnically distinct but share the racial classification of Black in America.

Race as a Concept Rooted in North American Racial Slavery and Colonialism

Race is so central to the American experience that people easily assume humans have always viewed one another as belonging to different racial groups. However, race as a concept is relatively recent in human history. It emerged alongside the birth of science as a means of knowing the world and solidified in connection with the development of a system of racial slavery in the United States. **Racial slavery** was a unique form of enslavement forcing lifelong servitude onto one group of people based on new ideas about race and racial categories. In other words, race and racism's emergence was not just about people (later labeled as White) coming into contact with foreign "others." Power, economics, ideology, and a constellation of other social and historical factors fed the development of race. Most importantly, race-based worldviews solidified because of colonizers' desire to control a captive labor force.

Colonialism is a tactic of expanding one nation into another geographic area through violent social control practices. Control generally takes one of two forms: co-option of a segment of the colonized space's preexisting social hierarchy (i.e., getting some people in the colonized country to go along with the takeover because they can profit from it) and/or slaughter and expulsion of Indigenous populations coupled with repopulation by immigration from the colonizing country (i.e., killing or relocating residents and moving your own people in) (Allen 2012). Colonialist practices often work to weaken or destabilize a target population's culture (social practices, languages, traditions, customs) and identities in order to maintain power and erode their social status.

CONSIDER THIS

How do you identify ethnically? Do you engage in practices tied to your ethnicity? If yes, what are they? If no, why do you think that is? Can you link your ethnic practices to the history of race in the United States?

Biological/Social Data on Race

A popular misconception about race is that it is biological. Scholars across multiple fields, however, have carefully documented how race is *not* a biological reality. For example, genes that produce skin color and other attributes we associate with race are just a small fraction of the genes in our bodies. We know there are more biological differences between people in the *same* racial category than there are differences across racial categories. Powerful groups constructed the concept of race and racial superiority to justify racist practices, such as racial slavery.

Even today, the repercussions of this creation are very real. For example, we know race impacts health outcomes, stress levels, access to health care, maternal and fetal mortality rates, criminal justice system experiences, education, employment opportunities, and income and wealth disparities. Race affects identity and our social networks and relationships. Race influences these aspects of human life in ways that accumulate disadvantages for people in marginalized racial status positions and advantages to those in dominant racial status positions.



PHOTO 1.1 Combating high maternal and fetal mortality rates is a complex task. Black-woman-centered Black-owned businesses work to address the social problem through education, advocacy, and personalized birth services.

Ariel Skelley/Getty Images

The effects of race, however, are not uniform. How you experience it depends on your social class, country of origin, residence, ethnicity, embodiment, sexuality, and many other aspects of social identity and status. For example, as Chapter 3 explores, race is not understood the same way in different global settings. Also, its meaning and systems of categorization (i.e., who counts as White, Black, and more) have shifted over time.

DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.1

Letter to Your Race(s)*

In this exercise, you will think about the impact race has on your life and experiences.

Write a one-page letter to your race(s) as if it were a person. If you could talk to it, what would you tell it? If it were a person, what would you ask it? How would you let it know how it has affected your life? How does the history of slavery in the United States affect what you would say to your race? Note that you are not writing a letter to all the people in your racial category (e.g., “Dear White people”). Instead, you are writing to your racial category, with all its social constructions, as if it were a single person (e.g., “Dear Whiteness”; “Dear Latinx-ness”; “Dear Blackness”).

Your instructor may ask you to write your letter as homework and then share it with other students in class. If your class is online, your instructor may ask you to read it aloud in online video discussion forums or share with others in written format.

*This assignment is modeled after Dr. Dana Berkowitz’s “Dear Gender Letter” activity at Louisiana State University. Her assignment and our recrafted version of it were inspired by the 2017 “Dear Masculinity” campaign undergraduate student Eneale Pickett started at University of Wisconsin-Madison, represented in KC Councilor’s art in *Male Femininities* (Berkowitz, Windsor, and Han, forthcoming).

Check Your Understanding

1. What is the difference between race and ethnicity?
2. What are the two primary means of maintaining colonial social control?
3. What is the relationship between biology and racial categories?

4. What are two ways race impacts people's lives today?
5. What does it mean to say race is socially constructed?

HOW IS POWER RELATED TO RACE? DOMINANT AND SUBORDINATE GROUPS

One of the primary reasons race plays such an important role in society is its connection to power relations. **Power** is the possession of authority over individuals, groups, or systems. To have power over someone or something suggests garnering and maintaining influence. The way we see race today emerged from a context where one group (later seen as “White”) was conquering and extracting resources from other groups of people across the globe (Allen 2012; Smedley 2011). Those with power used race as a tool to dominate vulnerable populations.



PHOTO 1.2 The Catholic Church helped set moral foundations for slavery. Pope Nicholas V (pictured here) issued a Papal Bull in 1455 giving the Portuguese king permission to “invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue” all “enemies of Christ” in colonial territories, to seize their property and possessions, and to “reduce their persons to perpetual slavery” (Davenport 1917).

Chris Hellier / Alamy Stock Photo

Power, Dominance, and the Construction of Race

As early as the 1500s, European men were writing in the new tradition of a “scientific method.” They typically used secondhand data sources such as missionary, colonizer, or traders’ diaries—all of which were tainted by European cultural biases and judgments. Nonetheless, authors used that data to sort humans into ranked groups. At first, and for nearly 200 years, they did so in ways that acknowledged a common human ancestry. If and when they used the term *race*, it typically referred to familial or generational lines or to types of people belonging to the same species (Smedley 2011). It was not until westward expansion intensified the slaughter of Indigenous populations and a system of racial slavery emerged in European colonies that the idea of multiple human origins and distinct races fully crystallized into a dominant worldview. This was no accident. Seeing some people as less human than others was critical to preserving White Americans’ claims to moral authority while enslaving, stealing from, murdering, and brutalizing other people.

Racial classification systems in this pseudo-scientific literature grouped humans into categories based broadly on phenotypic markers such as skin color, hair texture, and skull shape. Europeans maintained influence over science as a discipline, which began associating physical differences with assumed behavioral and psychological differences such as group ethics (or lack thereof). Methods and data used by writers on the subject were flawed, and in some cases *made up*, but still justified the enslavement of African people for more than 400 years and the near elimination of American Indian populations.

Europeans further sustained their power over ways of understanding human groups by writing the history of their colonization efforts in ways that erased dominated populations’ narratives or framed them as morally depraved and developmentally stunted. These efforts are a good example of Karl Marx’s classic argument: people who control the means of production also control the ruling ideas (Marx and Engels 1932).



PHOTO 1.3 The “Indian Mounds” at Louisiana State University, dating back 9,200 years, are the oldest human-made structures still in existence in the Americas (and older than the Great Wall of China, Stonehenge, and the Egyptian Pyramids). LSU sits on traditional territories of the Bayougoula and Chahta Yakni peoples.

CONSIDER THIS

How many classes in high school taught you about Indigenous, Black, Asian, or Latinx American history? Do you know how many of the texts you read were written by authors from those backgrounds? How many were written by White people? What difference might this make for how you understand “American history”?

The Relationship of Other Racial Categories to Whiteness

One way power manifests in racial categorizations is largely invisible. Whiteness is often seen as a neutral reference category: the basis for what counts as generically “human.” For example, it is easier for White people to see themselves as humans or Americans without qualifiers. People of color do not have this luxury. Their race is so visible in daily experiences that they are more likely to have a strongly defined racial identity. Whiteness also occupies a position of centrality when it comes to mainstream cultural images. When someone mentions Santa Claus, for example, most people immediately picture a White man with a large belly and snow-white beard. If a particular Santa is phenotypically different than that, you often hear people refer to him as “Black Santa” or “Asian Santa,” while White Santa is just “Santa.”

Whiteness is slippery in this way; it is often difficult to describe what exactly counts as Whiteness because it operates invisibly. The invisibility of Whiteness teaches us about the power it holds; often-times, we can only define Whiteness by characterizing what it is *not*. Whiteness, then, becomes a reference category for other racial groups, further contributing to its exertion of power.

DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.2**Making Whiteness Visible**

This exercise helps make visible how Whiteness and other racial categories relate to power.

1. Pick a cultural symbol of your choice. For example, you might choose Santa, Jesus, God, doctor, mom, or professor. First, consider the term on its own. Write down a description of the image as it is typically portrayed in popular media. Second, reconsider the term with different racial-ethnic descriptors (e.g., Asian doctor, Black doctor, Latinx doctor). How do the racial-ethnic versions of the term relate to what you originally described?
2. Explain what this exercise teaches us about the relationship between race and power.
3. Then write a paragraph on how you think this impacts people’s lives. Be prepared to share your thoughts with your peers.

Beyond the White/Black Dichotomy

Many people think about race in terms of White and Black while other people of color, such as Asians and Latinxs, experience race by occupying something called the “racial middle” (O’Brien 2008). This term challenges us to think about race beyond a Black/White dichotomy. It gets us to think about how groups like Asians, Latinxs, and Native Americans are sometimes viewed in comparison to White or Black people. For example, as Chapter 9 discusses, Asian Americans are often viewed as a “model minority” or “honorary Whites.” Indigenous persons, American Indians, or Native populations, on the other hand, are frequently left out of sociological research altogether—an alarming fact, considering how they also face racism in the United States. Moreover, when researchers do include them, they often do so in ways that homogenize the group rather than acknowledging how categories like “Native American” are made up of a tremendous variety of nations and cultural traditions, such as Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota, Diné/Navajo, and Houma.

Examples of How Racial Categorizations Have Changed Over Time

The United States Census provides a good illustration of how racial categories have changed over time. From 1790 to 1950 census workers called enumerators recorded people's race for them, according to bureau directions. From 1960 onward, people could self-select one racial identification. Beginning in the year 2000, people could check multiple racial categories. This means a person could be racially classified very differently, depending on census year.

Here are some examples to illustrate how census racial categories have historically shifted (Parker et al. 2015):

- First, Black people were only counted as enslaved peoples, but in 1820, the census added a “free colored persons” category.
- “Mulatto” was a category from 1850 to 1890 and 1910 to 1920.
- Native American populations were not in the census until 1860—and then enumerators only counted those assimilated into White society.
- Asian categories did not appear until 1860, when the census added “Chinese.”
- In 1970, the census instructed mixed-race people to choose one race or be automatically counted as their father's race.
- In 1980 and 1990, if those same people chose multiple categories, the census typically assigned them to their mother's race.
- Before 1970, census workers filled out census forms for people. In doing so, they categorized people who were White and another race as members of the non-White race

As the last example illustrates, one theme in racial categorization is competition over who is counted and treated as White—because the social context is one where White people have historically had more rights and privileges than other people. Census rules therefore limited who counted as White (Parker et al. 2015). You may already be familiar with the “one drop rule,” a law mandating people with any amount of non-White blood in their lineage be legally classified and treated as a person of color. The last example in the list provides an example of how the census once followed that rule.

Whiteness carrying social and legal benefits is a powerful force that has influenced race relations since colonial times. It is one of the reasons Irish people, for example, who came to the United States with a long history of being colonized and oppressed by the British, quickly “came to insist on their own Whiteness and on White supremacy” (Roediger 2007, 137) rather than fighting for racial equality alongside Black people. You will learn more about this in Chapter 7.

Resistance to Race-Based Systems of Inequality

From the beginning, people disadvantaged by a racial classification system doling out unequal life chances have resisted. The threat of violent resistance to institutionalized racial inequality has always loomed large for those benefitting from that inequality. White slaveholders, for example, intensely feared insurrections by enslaved peoples. Revolts by enslaved peoples took place throughout the South, with some of the most significant occurring in Louisiana, South Carolina, and Virginia.

In the largest rebellion by enslaved peoples ever to occur in the South, more than 500 enslaved people from three Louisiana parishes came together to march toward New Orleans in January 1811. Armed and formidable in numbers, the rebels caused substantial damage to plantations they crossed. Just days after the revolt began, however, resisters were met by federal troops, and many of their leaders were put to death. Some were beheaded. White authorities placed their heads on stakes along the river around the property of plantations resisters came from, to serve as a constant reminder of rebellion's consequences. This uprising is recognized today in artwork by Woodrow Nash at the Whitney Plantation Museum in Wallace, Louisiana, as part of an optional extended tour for visitors, because it is so graphic in nature.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s is probably the most widely known example of Black people's efforts to challenge racism in the United States. Many people are familiar with leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. A long list of lesser-known moments and activists, however, remain largely invisible to the public. Sociologist in Action Dr. Lori Latrice Martin works to address this in her scholarship and activism.



PHOTO 1.4 Activists and scholars in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, worked hard to recognize the 1953 Baton Rouge Bus Boycott. Pictured here are committee members who got a bench installed in memory of the 1953 protesters. Dr. Lori Latrice Martin is fifth from the left.

Courtesy of Dr. Lori Latrice Martin. Photo by Tat Yau.

SOCIOLOGISTS IN ACTION

Dr. Lori Latrice Martin

Memorializing Local Black History

I am proud to follow in the tradition of Black intellectual thinkers committed to using their time and talents to improve the quality of life of historically marginalized groups. This tradition is very strong among sociologists. W. E. B. Du Bois and E. Franklin Frazier are two well-known sociologists who exemplify this commitment. I firmly believe I have a responsibility both as a sociologist and resident of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to contribute to efforts addressing community-identified needs. It is also important to me that my employer, Louisiana State University (LSU), is not only *in* the community but an integral part of the community.

Raising awareness about historic and contemporary contributions of neighborhoods is vital to revitalization efforts and to the accumulation of community cultural wealth. I was afforded the opportunity to work on such a project with the predominately Black community of South Baton Rouge, also known as Old South Baton Rouge and the Bottoms, situated near LSU. South Baton Rouge was a thriving community prior to the 1960s, before highways and other public policies literally divided the area. The Bottoms included a host of historic houses of worship, Black-owned businesses, and the only school in the area where Black people could earn a high school diploma. South Baton Rouge was also the site of one of the first successful bus boycotts.

I assembled and cochaired a committee of local community leaders to work on an effort to honor the men, women, children, and organizations that made the 1953 Baton Rouge Bus Boycott possible. The boycott was organized in response to a number of racial injustices. First, a law was passed in the early 1950s eliminating Black-owned buses. A few years later, bus fares increased. Black riders were forced to sit in the back of the bus. At times, Black riders were forced to stand, even though seats were available in the front section reserved for White riders.

The city council soon passed an ordinance allowing Black riders to sit anywhere on the bus. However, the bus drivers—all White men—protested and resisted the ordinance and the council revoked it. In response, the Black community organized and refused to ride city buses. They created a car ride share, which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used as a model during the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott. The Baton Rouge boycott ended with a compromise that allowed Black riders to sit anywhere on the bus with the exception of the first few seats, which were reserved for White riders.

Thanks to the committee's efforts, the Toni Morrison Society Bench by the Road Project supported our efforts and allowed us to recognize the bravery and commitment of those who participated in this important—but little remembered—bus boycott. They donated one of their memorial benches—one of fewer than 30 such benches in the world. I am proud to have played a critical role in publicly marking and ensuring people will remember this important moment in history.

Lori Latrice Martin is a professor in African and African American studies and in the Department of Sociology at Louisiana State University.

Discussion Question

How might the preservation of local history serve as a catalyst for social and economic development in underresourced communities?

Check Your Understanding

1. What were two fundamental flaws of early “scientific” publications on race?
2. What does it mean to say people who control the means of production also control the ruling ideas? How does this apply to race?
3. What is one way Whiteness operates as an invisible norm or standard?
4. What does the U.S. census reveal about how racial categories have shifted over time?

MORE THAN A MEMBER OF A RACIAL GROUP: INTERSECTIONALITY

Recognizing intersectionality is a key tool of modern resistance to racial and other forms of oppression. Coined in 1991 by lawyer and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw, **intersectionality** refers to how the social categories we belong to—such as social class, gender, and race—are interconnected and work together to reinforce our advantages or disadvantages in society. This helps us see, for example, that all women's experiences are not the same and vary according to their other social positions such as race, citizenship status, or class.



PHOTO 1.5 Mareta McDonald (left) and Heeya Datta (right), two LSU PhD women students with varying experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

left, Sadie O'Keefe; right, ©Jishnu Datta

Contrasting the experiences of two LSU graduate students during the COVID-19 crisis reveals how women's experiences vary by race, citizenship, and other status positions. Maretta McDonald, a Black working-class doctoral candidate and U.S. citizen, worried about COVID exposure for herself and her loved ones, due to the disproportionate infection and death rates among Black Americans (Russell and Carlin 2020). Heeya Datta, an Indian doctoral student on a student visa, did not have family members at higher comparative risk, but she feared deportation when the Trump administration announced it would force international students whose degree programs were entirely online in fall 2020 to leave the United States (a decision that was later revoked) (Anderson and Svrluga 2020).

Intersectional Approaches to Activism

History provides examples of activists who approached their work with an intersectional perspective even before the term was coined. Journalist Ida B. Wells took an intersectional approach when documenting cases of thousands of Black men lynched in her time. Wells advocated for Black people's lives by writing about how race, gender, and power worked to create this horrific reality. As she wrote in *Lynch Law*, "[Rape] is only punished when White women accuse Black men, which accusation is never proven. The same crime committed by Negroes against Negroes, or by White men against Black women is ignored even in the law courts" (1893, 2). Gender and racial stereotypes worked together to portray White (but not Black) women as helpless victims and Black (but not White) men as violent sexual predators. Her brave and tireless journalistic work helped people understand these patterns.



PHOTO 1.6 Ida B. Wells risked her life to write about lynching in America. She did so in a way many claim was sociological in its approach to data and analysis. (Photo from University of Chicago Illinois Special Collections Research Center.)

Sarin Images / GRANGER.

CONSIDER THIS

In Germany, many museums and historical sites document the Holocaust's horrifying atrocities. How might people's understanding of racial slavery and terror, and modern race relations, in the United States be different if sites like these were common here?

A push for intersectional activism and scholarship moved feminism from the second wave into more inclusive third-wave approaches. The Combahee River Collective played an important role in this process. Combahee was a national Black lesbian feminist organization in Boston, Massachusetts, in the 1970s. Named after the Combahee River Raid led by Harriet Tubman during the Civil War, the Combahee River Collective (1979) is most known for its Combahee River Collective statement, which emphasizes the shortcomings of the White feminist movement's exclusion of Black women's realities. As the collective put it,

As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort White women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and Black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the White women's movement is by definition work for White women to do, but we will continue to speak to and demand accountability on this issue.

The collective explored multiple forms of oppression with an intersectional lens, criticizing how racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism all work together to oppress people in a variety of ways. As the statement proclaims, "The inclusiveness of our politics makes us concerned with any situation that impinges upon the lives of women, Third World and working people." Women in Combahee have since become involved with many forms of activism, even transnationally. Member Margo Okazawa-Rey, for example, went on to earn her doctorate in education from Harvard, to hold scholarly positions across the nation, and to produce scholarship and engage in direct activism focusing on militarism, violence against women, and capitalism. She is a cofounder of PeaceWomen Across the Globe, which networks women peace activists transnationally and works to make women's contributions visible.

Another example of intersectional activism beyond American borders can be seen in rural Latin America. At the sixth congress of the Latin American Coordinating Committee of Rural Organisations, women activists came together to address global capitalism and its impacts on other forms of exploitation, such as gender oppression (Frayssinet 2015). In doing so, they made clear how a historical social class split between urban and rural women made alliances difficult. They clearly articulated how an intersectional approach, which acknowledges those class differences, could help infuse activism in Latin America by addressing issues such as the following:

- Women produce 50% of Latin America's food supply but hold only 30% of land titles
- The need to preserve seeds as rural women historically have and resist corporate efforts to make the practice illegal so farmers are forced to buy seeds
- Higher rates of violence against women in rural areas
- Pesticide spraying negatively impacting rural residents' health

As these examples make clear, when people look at multiple forms of oppression, their efforts to combat injustice can potentially impact a much larger number of lives. Ida B. Wells forced people to recognize gender- and race-based violence as it manifested in lynching. Pushing second-wave feminists to acknowledge their racial biases totally transformed feminism. And rural Latin American women gathering collectively helped bridge a class divide and bring urban and rural women together to address capitalism's negative impacts in the region.

DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.3

Intersectional Themes in the Arts

For this exercise, you will think of and explain an intersectional theme in the arts.

Think of a creative work (e.g., a song, a television show, a movie, a painting) with an intersectional theme or message that acknowledges how race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other parts of social status are tied together.

Write a one- to two-paragraph essay explaining the theme and how the work reflects it. Be prepared to share your essay with your classmates.

Check Your Understanding

1. What is intersectionality?
2. Who is Ida B. Wells, and how was her work intersectional?
3. How does intersectionality help explain the tensions between second- and third-wave feminists?
4. How can using an intersectional approach help transform activist work?

DEFINING TERMS RELATED TO RACE AND ETHNICITY

You will need to understand sociological terms used in this class. For example, it is hard to have a good discussion of racism if not everyone knows the sociological definition of the concept.

Prejudice is believing one group is superior to another. Prejudice can occur without power or action. Anyone can be prejudiced. **Ethnocentrism** is believing one's own ethnic group is superior to others and therefore seeing other groups' language, cultural practices, and other ethnic distinctions as inferior in comparison to one's own. **Discrimination** occurs when somebody treats people differently based on prejudicial beliefs about their race, ethnicity, sex, class, age, sexual orientation, ability, religion, belief system, or other aspect of their status. Anyone can engage in discrimination. Not everyone has the power to make their prejudicial feelings or discriminatory actions impactful, however.

When prejudicial beliefs and/or discriminatory actions lead to widespread harm for a specific racial group, we are talking about **racism**. Racism *can* involve coupling (a) the belief that one racial group is superior to another and (b) the power to enforce consequences in favor of the preferred group and to the detriment of other groups. In an era of colorblindness, however, we can find many examples of racism without anyone involved ever saying they think White people are superior or that Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, Latinx, Native American, or multiracial people are of any less value or worth. In other words, racism today can exist without overt prejudice, as simply part of the normal operation of society.

The Emergence of Colorblind Racism

One of the ways racism today can exist without openly admitted prejudice is through colorblind ideology and practices. **Colorblindness**, or pretending one does not "see color" or treat people differently because of it, crept its way into the consciousness of many Americans after Jim Crow segregation and 1960s civil rights movement successes. Acting on racist feelings or publicly sharing racist thoughts was suddenly looked down on and mostly relegated to the confines of home and/or all-White private spaces. White people, aware overt racism was declining in social acceptability, learned not to commit openly racist acts, to fear being labeled a racist, and started insisting on their own colorblindness.

Explored more in Chapter 5, **colorblind racism** is a dominant racial ideology colloquially referred to as "racism lite" by sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2018). It operates discreetly, with social actors who frequently make mention of "not seeing color" while advocating for the maintenance of White

supremacist ideals in the form of structural inequalities such as mass incarceration, housing discrimination, and wealth inequality.

It is also reflected in ostensibly “colorblind” social policies that are supposed to apply to everyone but in practice disproportionately negatively affect people who are not White. The 2020 killing of Breonna Taylor is a good example. She was shot to death by police executing a no-knock warrant as they conducted a drug investigation. Startled and fearing for their lives, her boyfriend fired his (licensed) gun through the door as the intruders tried to enter and they returned fire, killing Breonna. The police did not find any drugs on the premises (Simko-Bednarski, Snyder, and Ly 2020).

No-knock warrants, allowable in specific legal circumstances, are not equally applied across race. Disproportionately applied to Black and brown citizens, they are part of the reason Black women have higher rates of violent victimization by police (Ritchie 2017). They also lead to higher rates of physical and psychological injury among populations of color (Lopez et al. 2018).

DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.4

Reflecting on Colorblind Language and Racism

In this exercise, you will analyze colorblind language.

Colorblind racism often manifests itself in specific language styles that generally allow White people to “talk nasty about minorities without sounding racist” (Bonilla-Silva 2010). Have you ever heard a person say or do any of the following?

- “I’m not prejudiced, but . . .” (followed by a prejudiced statement)
- “Some of my best friends are . . .” (after making a prejudiced statement about people in the group the person’s “best friends” belong to)
- “I’m not [Black/Latinx], so I don’t know” (followed by a prejudiced statement)
- “Yes, but couldn’t that just be due to [social class, poverty, or any other factor that isn’t race]?”
- Stutter, take awkward lengthy pauses, repeat themselves, say *um* or *ah* a lot, or simply be incoherent when talking about race

Reflect on one of the times you have heard (or heard of) someone saying or doing one of these things. Briefly write down the story and then answer the following questions.

1. Who was part of the interaction?
2. Why do you think the person said what they did?
3. How might these language choices affect the possibility of honest conversation about race?

Structural, Cultural, and Interpersonal Racism

Structural mechanisms that reproduce racism are often seen as racially neutral. **Structural mechanisms** are large-scale factors and practices typically constructed by White people in positions of power. No particular person has full control over them. Instead, they are built into institutions and legal systems. Housing segregation is a good example. Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton’s (1993) groundbreaking work *American Apartheid* identifies racial residential segregation as a principal cause of racial inequality in American society. Racial segregation in housing leads to multiple types of racial disparities (e.g., in wealth, education, interactions with the criminal justice system, and exposure to pollution and other environmental problems).

People also experience racial oppression through culture. This can be seen in misrepresentation or misuse of cultural symbols, music, art, religious beliefs, legal systems, food, language, or other aspects of people of color’s traditions and histories for more powerful (typically White) groups’ entertainment or profit. A prominent example is school and sports teams’ use of images of Native American peoples for mascots. Consider the Washington Redskins in American football or Cleveland Indians in baseball. Mascots for both teams use Native images adorned with sacred iconography—clothing, headdresses, jewelry, prayer sounds, acts of war—but stripped of their original meaning, promoting a corrupted,

distorted, inauthentic, and damaging portrayal of Native American populations (Guiliano 2013). In 2020, after many years of protests by Native American and other social justice organizations and as widespread support for #BlackLivesMatter grew (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020), Washington's football team announced it would finally change its name, and Cleveland's baseball team dropped "Indians" from its name (De la Fuente and Sterling 2020).

People also experience racism interpersonally, or in social actions, communications, or exchanges between two or more people in small or intimate groups. Often exhibited in the form of **racial microaggressions**, or harmful interpersonal statements or behaviors (usually by White people toward people of color), individuals who are not negatively impacted by such interactions typically do not notice them. For example, White people may be unaware of the pain associated with the following examples of microaggressions:

- A Muslim woman of color wearing a headscarf getting scowled at in the supermarket
- People touching a Black woman's hair without asking
- A coworker assuming his Mexican friend always wants to eat tacos

Other more obvious microaggressions you may have encountered include a friend or family member asking someone who looks racially ambiguous, "What are you?"; someone asking an Asian, Latinx, or other person of color, "Where are you *really* from?" when they first provide an answer like "Cleveland"; individuals assuming an Asian person is successful in school *because* they are Asian; or people speaking louder to a Latinx person because they assume they can't speak English well. These interactions may seem innocuous, but all function to identify the person as other or not belonging.

More serious forms of racism can be found in interpersonal relations, too. Widespread discrimination in employment, for example, can start at the interpersonal level. Research consistently demonstrates that even before entry into the workplace, people of color are screened by race, limiting their opportunities for success. Several formal and informal studies (see Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004, and Kang et al. 2016, among others) have shown people with White-sounding names are much more likely to be invited for an interview than those with Black, Latinx, Asian, or other names of (assumed) non-White racial or foreign origin. Later chapters cover this topic in more depth. At its base, however, practices like these position White people for higher levels of employment and economic success while disadvantaging people of color.

CONSIDER THIS

Researchers have found evidence of interpersonal discrimination benefiting White students and disadvantaging students of color at American universities. How could these informal practices affect people's chances for success in and after school?

Check Your Understanding

1. What are prejudice, ethnocentrism, and discrimination, and how are these concepts distinct from racism?
2. What are racial microaggressions?
3. What are some examples of racism at the structural, cultural, and interpersonal levels?

HOW YOU CAN PREPARE FOR THIS CLASS

If we look across research covered in this chapter, one thing should be clear: taking a class about race, racism, or race relations will not be the same experience for everyone. If you've gone through life "not seeing color" or were encouraged to believe people of color are poor, less educated, or locked up at

higher rates because of character flaws such as laziness or their community's lack of morals or inability to raise children “the right way,” you have a lot to unpack before you can accurately understand how race influences modern social life. If you've experienced or witnessed these manifestations of racial inequality directly, you might begin the class with a stronger understanding of racial inequality but could have to deal with listening to classmates go through the messy process of unlearning victim-blaming logics that situate causes of racial disadvantage in the people who disproportionately experience it (Becker and Paul 2015).

Things to Expect

Courses on race are also about *power*. This means you need to learn how race and racism benefit people in a dominant group while harming marginalized persons. In other words, it means studying both people of color and White people. It also means diving into what history and social science tell us about how power works. You will examine mechanisms and practices that create and sustain race-based uneven access to resources, opportunities, and positive life outcomes, while being mindful of how other aspects of a person's status (such as gender, class, or nationality) affect their experiences with race.

Studying race when people are often discouraged from talking about or acknowledging it for fear of being labeled racist or of being accused of “playing the race card” can be difficult. It is likely to be uncomfortable. Prepare yourself for this. Rather than fighting against the discomfort, you can anticipate and potentially accept it.

Studies show that White students unfamiliar with accurate historical accounts of racial slavery or of people's struggles to fight racial inequality might experience challenging emotions in a class on race: guilt, anger, resentment, or fear, for example (DiAngelo 2018; McIntosh 2009). Students of color might experience a different set of challenging emotions, such as anxiety, depression, or frustration (Mitchell and Donahue 2009; Tatum 2017). But there can also be emotional overlap and space for connection.

Picture a White student who grew up in a mostly Mexican working-class neighborhood. They might not share experiences with wealthy White peers who grew up in all-White spaces. Think of an upper-middle-class multiracial woman with a White dad and Black mother. She might just be coming to understand how social class and light skin (if she has it) gave her privileges her Black peers who grew up working poor didn't get. So, while you can anticipate discomfort associated with honestly addressing racial inequality and racism, you can also prepare for the liberation that comes from facing emotionally challenging subjects head-on with openness, bravery, and integrity.

Racial Terminology in This Book

As you read this book, you will notice that we use a variety of terms to indicate the different racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Depending on generation, region, context, and various other factors, people within the same racial or ethnic group often use different terminology (e.g., Native, Native American, Indigenous, American Indian, Indian, specific tribal affiliation and Hispanic, Latino, Latina, Latinx, specific nation). We also capitalize *Black* and *White* when referring to these two racial groups. This helps us relay that Black and White “are both historically created racial identities” (Appiah 2020). It is important to remember that racial and ethnic terms, like race and ethnicity themselves, are socially constructed and vary over time and place.

Be Aware That Race and Racism Affect Everyone—Even Toddlers

Many people believe young children “don't see race.” Debra VanAusdale and Joe Feagin's (2001) *The First R: How Children Learn About Race and Racism* blows this assumption out of the water with data gathered in a daycare observing and carefully documenting kids' behavior. Their work shows how children as young as 2 or 3 quickly ascertain race-based meanings associating Whiteness with goodness and superiority. Consider a boy who is a member of an interracial family. By the age of 3, he had already picked up on White beauty standards, complimenting his White sisters' hair as “pretty” while insisting his thick, curly hair was not. In addition, little kids quickly learn adults are uncomfortable talking about race and do not want them talking about it either. As a result,

preschoolers in VanAusdale and Feagin's study knew to keep their comments about racial difference, often issued in the midst of play, out of adults' earshot. This allowed adults to continue to believe little kids don't see race.

DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.5

When, Where, and How Have You Talked About Race?

In this exercise, you will think about why and how conversations about race differ among racial groups.

Write answers to the following questions and be prepared to share your thoughts on Question 3:

1. Did your parents talk to you frankly about race as a child? Did they give you "the talk" about "surviving interactions with police or other members of authority" (Whitaker 2016, 303) and/or facing racism in America?
2. Have you witnessed "two-faced" racism, where White people publicly claim not to see race but in all-White spaces openly express prejudice (Picca and Feagin 2007)?
3. How do you think your answers to these questions might compare to your peers'? Your classmates'? Why? What difference might that make for your ability to connect with or understand one another?

VanAusdale and Feagin's data underscore a theme in this chapter: many Americans, in particular White Americans, have been taught since a very young age that talking about race is taboo. For that reason, honest and respectful conversation about it can be incredibly challenging in a classroom setting. A few basic guidelines of engagement can help make your classroom experience less turbulent, though, if you adopt them.

First: Be radically self-honest. Being honest with yourself about what you have learned and experienced around race in your lifetime is a crucial starting point. For example, it's important to identify any racist ideas you've internalized. Without acknowledging them and understanding where they come from, you cannot change the ways they might impact your behavior. Interrogating your own beliefs and experiences is a crucial step on the path to developing a fuller and more accurate picture of how race and racism impact your life and society, broadly speaking.

Second: Choose to believe one another. If someone shares an experience or viewpoint, you and your classmates can analyze it, think about its connection to broader social patterns, explore its ramifications, and link it to course materials. Sharing personal stories can be scary in a classroom full of strangers, especially when learning about race and racism, which many of us have been taught to deny or not talk about—so give each other the benefit of the doubt. Believe what people say about their own lives, even when subjecting one another's experiences to critical analysis.

Third: Recognize the difference between personal opinions and research. No one has the authority to speak for *all* straight people, gay people, people of color, women, men, students at your university, or even for *one* other person without their consent. Say what *you* believe and feel when talking about a personal experience or viewpoint. If making an assertion beyond that, find research-based evidence to support it and cite the studies you reference. Always be clear about which of the two you are doing. Ask yourself *Am I talking about personal views or discussing research findings? How can I be clear, careful, and honest about the sources of my knowledge?*

CONCLUSION

As you can see, taking a course focused on race and ethnicity can be illuminating and challenging. It can also be empowering. The first step in understanding racial and ethnic issues today is learning how they affected society's past, as Chapter 2 will help you do.

CHAPTER REVIEW

1.1 What is the connection between racial slavery in America and the social construction of race?

How we think about race today emerged alongside racial slavery in colonial/early America. Thinking about races as groups with different biological origins—some less human than others—developed when English colonists needed a justification for (a) forcing lifetime hereditary enslavement on Africans brought to the colonies against their will and (b) slaughtering members of Native American nations. This reveals how race is tied to power and social relations, not science or biology.

1.2 How are racial categories tied to power, and how have they changed in meaning over time?

In addition to its rootedness in racial slavery and violence against Indigenous people, other aspects of race reveal its ties to power. One way power can be seen is in the invisibility of Whiteness. Whiteness is often seen as neutral or generically “human.” No one calls traditional Santa images “White Santa,” for example, in the way they call him “Black Santa” if he is Black. In addition, the U.S. census helps us see how racial categorizations have changed in law and social practice over time.

1.3 What is intersectionality? How does intersectionality help us understand the ways people experience racial inequality?

Intersectionality refers to seeing how social categories we belong to—such as class, gender, and race—are interconnected and work together to reinforce our advantages or disadvantages in society. It helps reveal things like (a) how women’s experiences vary according to factors like race, citizenship status, and social class or (b) how men and women’s experiences with race and ethnicity might be dissimilar.

1.4 What are the sociological definitions of race, ethnicity, prejudice, discrimination, ethnocentrism, and racism?

Prejudice is believing one group is superior to another. Ethnocentrism is believing one’s own ethnic group is superior to others and the practice of negatively assessing other groups’ languages, cultural practices, and other ethnic distinctions in comparison to one’s own. Discrimination occurs when somebody treats a person differently based on prejudicial beliefs about their race, ethnicity, sex, class, age, sexual orientation, ability, religion, belief system, or other aspect of status. Racism is when prejudicial beliefs and/or discriminatory actions lead to widespread harm for a specific racial group because members of the prejudiced/discriminatory group are disproportionately in positions of power. In an era of colorblindness, racism can also exist without overt prejudice.

1.5 How might you best handle the challenges that come with a course about race and ethnicity?

Be honest with yourself about preexisting beliefs you carry into class. Unpacking them, thinking about where they come from, choosing to believe people who share experiences in class, and being clear about the difference between personal opinion and research can help make a challenging academic dive into race, ethnicity, ethnocentrism, and racism easier for yourself and your peers.

KEY TERMS

Colonialism (p. 4)	Prejudice (p. 14)
Colorblind racism (p. 14)	Race (p. 4)
Colorblindness (p. 14)	Racial microaggressions (p. 16)
Discrimination (p. 14)	Racial slavery (p. 4)
Ethnicity (p. 4)	Racism (p. 14)
Ethnocentrism (p. 14)	Socially constructed (p. 3)
Intersectionality (p. 11)	Structural mechanisms (p. 15)
Power (p. 6)	