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CHAPTER 6

Inequality by Race and Ethnicity

The Privileges of the Dominant

The Social Construction of Race and Ethnicity

Race, Ethnicity, and Minority Groups

Immigration and New Ethnic Groups

Explaining Inequality by Race and Ethnicity

Patterns of Prejudice and Discrimination

In a laboratory at the University of Colorado, Boulder, subjects in an experiment played video games as researchers recorded their moves. Presented with a rapid-fire series of pictures showing Black and White men holding various objects—cell phones, cameras, wallets, guns—subjects pressed one button if they considered a character harmless and another button to "shoot" characters they believed to be armed. Dr. Bernadette Park and her colleagues were studying people's split-second reactions to tests of decision making involving race and the potential for violence. When they analyzed the results, they found that the subjects, most of whom were White, had reacted more quickly to pictures of Black men with guns than to pictures of White men with guns. Subjects were also more likely to mistakenly shoot an unarmed Black character than an unarmed White character. The results were the same for Black subjects as for White subjects.

These results were not unusual. In a similar study at the University of Washington, Dr. Anthony G. Greenwald and his colleagues asked college students to distinguish virtual citizens and police officers from armed criminals. They found that subjects were more likely to

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misperceive and shoot at pictures of Black men than pictures of White men. For the last three decades, in fact, research has suggested that Americans are more likely to see Black men as being violent than White men (Correll et al. 2002; Goode 2002; Greenwald et al. 2003).

What are the social implications of these studies? At bottom, they reveal the deep-seated effect of race on our social perceptions and even our actions. On a collective level, our racial biases underlie the societal prejudice that members of ethnic and minority groups encounter every day. In this chapter we will see how the ascribed characteristics of race and ethnicity create social privilege for some and discrimination for others. We will see that race and ethnicity are socially constructed concepts rather than genetically determined traits. Though functionalists, conflict theorists, feminists, and interactionists have offered different explanations for the unequal treatment of Whites and Blacks, all agree that prejudice and discrimination are real, on both an individual and an institutional level.

The Privileges of the Dominant

One aspect of discrimination that is often overlooked is the privileges that dominant groups enjoy at the expense of others. For instance, we tend to focus more on the difficulty women have getting ahead at work and getting a hand at home than on the ease with which men avoid household chores and manage to make their way in the world. Similarly, we concentrate more on discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities than on the advantages members of the White majority enjoy. Indeed, most White people rarely think about their "whiteness," taking their status for granted. But sociologists and other social scientists are becoming increasingly interested in what it means to be "White," for White privilege is the other side of the proverbial coin of racial discrimination.

The feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh (1988) became interested in White privilege after noticing that most men would not acknowledge that there were privileges attached to being male—even if they would agree that being female had its disadvantages. Did White people suffer from a similar blind spot regarding their own racial privilege? she wondered. Intrigued, McIntosh began to list all the ways in which she benefited from her Whiteness. She soon realized that the list of unspoken advantages was long and significant.

McIntosh found that as a White person, she rarely needed to step out of her comfort zone, no matter where she went. If she wished to, she could spend most of her time with people of her own race. She could find a good place to live in a pleasant neighborhood, and get the foods she liked to eat in almost any grocery store. She could attend a public meeting without feeling that she did not belong, that she was different from everyone else.

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McIntosh discovered, too, that her skin color opened doors for her. She could cash checks and use credit cards without suspicion, browse through stores without being shadowed by security guards. She could be seated without difficulty in a restaurant. If she asked to see the manager, she could assume he or she would be of her own race. If she needed help from a doctor or a lawyer, she could get it.

McIntosh also realized that her Whiteness made the job of parenting easier. She did not need to worry about protecting her children from people who did not like them. She could be sure that their textbooks would show pictures of people who looked like them, and that their history texts would describe White people's achievements. She knew that the television programs they watched would include White characters.

These are only some of the privileges McIntosh found she took for granted as a result of her membership in the dominant racial group in the United States. Whiteness *does* carry privileges—to a much greater extent than most White people realize. In the following section we will examine the social construction of race and ethnicity—abstract concepts that have enormous practical consequences for millions of people throughout the world.

The Social Construction of Race and Ethnicity

In the southern part of the United States, if a person had even a single drop of "Black blood," that person was defined and viewed as Black, even if he or she *appeared* to be White. Clearly, race had social significance in the South, enough so that White legislators established official standards for who was "Black" and who was "White."

The so-called one-drop rule was a vivid example of the *social construction of race*—the process by which people come to define a group as a race based in part on physical characteristics, but also on historical, cultural, and economic factors. It is an ongoing process subject to some debate, especially in a diverse society such as the United States, where each year increasing numbers of children are born to parents of different racial backgrounds.

In the 2000 census, nearly 7 million people in the United States (or about 2 percent of the population) reported that they were of two or more races. Half the people classified as multiracial were under age 18, suggesting that this segment of the population will grow in the years to come. People who claimed both White and American Indian ancestry were the largest group of multiracial residents (Farley 2001; Grieco and Cassidy 2001).

This statistical finding of millions of multiracial people obscures how individuals handle their identity. The prevailing social construction of race pushes people to choose just one race, even if they acknowledge a broader cultural background. Still, many individuals, especially young

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adults, struggle against social pressure to choose a single identity, and instead openly embrace multiple heritages. Tiger Woods, the world's best-known professional golfer, considers himself both Asian and African American.

Ethnicity, too, is subject to social construction. Which ethnic groups are White, for instance? Do we consider Turkish and Arab Americans to be White? In the 1800s, Irish and Italian Americans were definitely viewed as non-White and were treated as such. Gradually, as other ethnic groups came to see them as White, Irish and Italian Americans became accepted members of mainstream society.

Social construction of race and ethnicity occurs throughout the world, as people in virtually all societies define their position in the social hierarchy in terms of race, ethnicity, and nationality. A dominant or majority group has the power not only to define itself legally but to define a society's values. Sociologist William I. Thomas (1923), an early critic of theories of racial and gender differences, saw that the "definition of the situation" could mold the personality of the individual. To put it another way, Thomas, writing from the interactionist perspective, observed that people respond not only to the objective features of a situation or person but also to the *meaning* that situation or person has for them. Thus, we can create false images or stereotypes that become real in their consequences. ***Stereotypes*** are unreliable generalizations about all members of a group that do not recognize individual differences within the group.

Using a TV remote control, how quickly do you think you could find a television show in which all the characters share your own racial or ethnic background? What about a show in which all the characters share a different ethnic background from your own—how quickly could you find one?

In the last 30 years, critics have pointed out the power of the mass media to perpetuate false racial and ethnic stereotypes. Television is a prime example: Almost all the leading dramatic roles are cast as Whites, even in urban-based programs like *Friends.* Blacks tend to be featured mainly in crime-based dramas.

We have seen how both ordinary people and powerful institutions like the media can influence our conceptions of race and ethnicity. How do sociologists conceive of race and ethnicity? The next two sections present a sociological overview of racial and ethnic groups in the United States—both the old, established groups and the new ethnic groups formed by recent immigrants.

Race, Ethnicity, and Minority Groups

Sociologists frequently distinguish between racial and ethnic groups. The term ***racial group*** is used to describe a group that is set apart from others because of obvious physical differences. Whites, African Americans, and Asian Americans are all considered racial groups in the United States. While race does turn on physical differences, it is the culture of a particular society that constructs and attaches social significance to these differences, as we will see later. Unlike racial groups, an ***ethnic group*** is set apart from others primarily because of its national origin or

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Table 6 – 1 Racial and Ethnic Groups in the United States, 2000

Classification	Number in Thousands	Percentage of Total Population
Racial groups		
Whites (includes 16.9 million White Hispanics)	211,461	75.1
Blacks/African Americans	34,658	12.3
Native Americans, Alaskan Native	2,476	0.9
Asian Americans	10,243	3.6
Chinese	2,433	0.9
Filipinos	1,850	0.7
Asian Indians	1,679	0.6
Vietnamese	1,123	0.4
Koreans	1,077	0.4
Japanese	797	0.2
Other	1,285	0.5
Ethnic groups		
White ancestry (single or mixed)		
Germans	46,489	16.5
Irish	33,067	11.7
English	28,265	10.0
Italians	15,943	5.7
French	9,776	3.5
Poles	9,054	3.2
Jews	6,000	2.1
Hispanics (or Latinos)	35,306	12.5
Mexican Americans	23,337	8.3
Central and South Americans	5,119	1.8
Puerto Ricans	3,178	1.1
Cubans	1,412	0.5
Other	2,260	0.8
Total (all groups)	**281,422**	

NOTE: Percentages do not total 100 percent and figures under subheadings do not add up to figures under major headings because of overlap among groups (e.g., Polish American Jews or people of mixed ancestry, such as Irish and Italian). Hispanics may be of any race. White ancestry data should be regarded as an approximation. See Yin 2001.

SOURCE: American Jewish Committee 2001; Bureau of the Census 2001h; Grieco and Cassidy 2001; Therrien and Ramirez 2001.

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distinctive cultural patterns. In the United States, Puerto Ricans, Jews, and Polish Americans are all categorized as ethnic groups (see Table 6–1).

MINORITY GROUPS

A numerical minority is any group that makes up less than half of some larger population. The population of the United States includes thousands of numerical minorities, including television actors, green-eyed people, tax lawyers, and descendants of the Pilgrims who arrived on the *Mayflower.* However, these numerical minorities are not considered to be minorities in the sociological sense; in fact, the number of people in a group does not necessarily determine its status as a social minority (or dominant group). When sociologists define a minority group, they are primarily concerned with the economic and political power, or powerlessness, of that group. A ***minority group*** is a subordinate group whose members have significantly less control or power over their own lives than the members of a dominant or majority group have over theirs.

Sociologists have identified five basic properties of a minority group—unequal treatment, physical or cultural traits, ascribed status, solidarity, and in-group marriage (Wagley and Harris 1958):

1. Members of a minority group experience unequal treatment as compared to members of a dominant group. For example, the management of an apartment complex may refuse to rent to African Americans, Hispanics, or Jews. Social inequality may be created or maintained by prejudice, discrimination, segregation, or even extermination.
2. Members of a minority group share physical or cultural characteristics that distinguish them from the dominant group. Each society arbitrarily decides which characteristics are most important in defining the groups.
3. Membership in a minority (or dominant) group is not voluntary; people are born into the group. Thus, race and ethnicity are considered *ascribed* statuses.
4. Minority group members have a strong sense of group solidarity. William Graham Sumner, writing in 1906, noted that people make distinctions between members of their own group (the *in-group*) and everyone else (the *out-group*). When a group is the object of long-term prejudice and discrimination, the feeling of "us versus them" can and often does become extremely intense.
5. Members of a minority generally marry others from the same group. A member of a dominant group is often unwilling to marry into a supposedly inferior minority. In addition, the minority group's sense of solidarity encourages marriages within the group and discourages marriages to outsiders.

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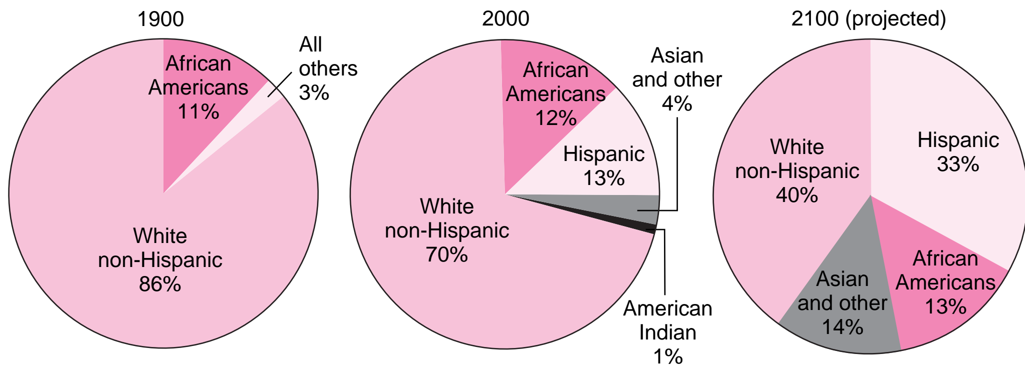

Figure 6 – 1

Racial and Ethnic Groups in the United States, 1900–2100 (Projected)

The racial and ethnic composition of what is today the United States is undergoing rapid change.

SOURCES: Author's estimate; Bureau of the Census 1975, 2000c; Grieco and Cassidy 2001; Thornton 1987.

RACE

The term *racial group* refers to those minorities (and the corresponding dominant groups) set apart from others by obvious physical differences. But what is an "obvious" physical difference? Each society determines which differences are important while ignoring other characteristics that could serve as a basis for social differentiation. In the United States, we see differences in both skin color and hair color. Yet people learn informally that differences in skin color have a dramatic social and political meaning, while differences in hair color do not.

When observing skin color, people in the United States tend to lump others rather casually into such categories as "Black," "White," and "Asian." More subtle differences in skin color often go unnoticed. However, such is not the case in other societies. In many nations of Central America and South America, people distinguish among color gradients on a continuum from light to dark skin. Brazil has approximately 40 color groupings, while in other countries people may be described as "Mestizo Hondurans," "Mulatto Colombians," or "African Panamanians." What we see as "obvious" differences, then, are subject to each society's social definitions.

The largest racial minorities in the United States are African Americans (or Blacks), Native Americans (or American Indians), and Asian Americans (Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, and other Asian peoples). Figure 6–1 provides information about the changing population of racial and ethnic groups in the United States over the past century. It suggests that the racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. population will change more in the next hundred years than it has in the last hundred.

ETHNICITY

An ethnic group, unlike a racial group, is set apart from others because of its national origin or distinctive cultural patterns. Among the ethnic

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groups in the United States are peoples with a Spanish-speaking background, referred to collectively as *Latinos* or *Hispanics,* such as Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, and other Latin Americans. Other ethnic groups in this country include Jewish, Irish, Italian, and Norwegian Americans. While these groupings are convenient, they serve to obscure differences *within* these ethnic categories (as in the case of Hispanics) as well as to overlook the mixed ancestry of so many ethnic people in the United States.

The distinction between racial and ethnic minorities is not always clear-cut. Some members of racial minorities, such as Asian Americans, may have significant cultural differences from other groups. At the same time, certain ethnic minorities, such as Latinos, may have obvious physical differences that set them apart from other residents of the United States.

Despite categorization problems, sociologists continue to feel that the distinction between racial groups and ethnic groups is socially significant. That is because in most societies, including the United States, physical differences tend to be more visible than ethnic differences. Partly as a result of this fact, stratification along racial lines is more resistant to change than stratification along ethnic lines. Members of an ethnic minority sometimes can become, over time, indistinguishable from the majority—although the process may take generations and may never include all members of the group. By contrast, members of a racial minority find it much more difficult to blend in with the larger society and to gain acceptance from the majority. In the next section, we will examine immigration and the process through which new ethnic groups gain a foothold in the United States. We will see that established racial and ethnic groups often feel threatened by competition from the new arrivals.

Immigration and New Ethnic Groups

A significant segment of the population of the United States is made up of White ethnics whose ancestors arrived from Europe within the last 100 years. The nation's White ethnic population includes about 46 million people who claim at least partial German ancestry, 33 million Irish Americans, 16 million Italian Americans, and 9 million Polish Americans, as well as immigrants from other European nations (see Table 6–1 on page 143). Some of these people continue to live in close-knit ethnic neighborhoods, while others have largely assimilated and left the "old ways" behind.

Many White ethnics today identify only sporadically with their heritage. ***Symbolic ethnicity*** refers to an emphasis on such concerns as ethnic food or political issues rather than on deeper ties to one's ethnic heritage. This identity is reflected in the occasional family trip to an ethnic bakery, in the celebration of a ceremonial event such as St. Joseph's Day

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among Italian Americans, or among Irish Americans, in particular concern about the future of Northern Ireland. Except in cases in which new immigration reinforces old traditions, symbolic ethnicity tends to decline with each passing generation (Alba 1990, Gans 1979).

White ethnics and racial minorities have often been antagonistic to one another because of economic competition—an interpretation in line with the conflict approach to sociology. As Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans emerge from the lower class, they compete with working-class Whites for jobs, housing, and educational opportunities. In times of high unemployment or inflation, any such competition can easily generate intense intergroup conflict.

The contemporary diversity of the United States is not accidental, but reflects centuries of immigration. The United States has long had policies to determine who has preference to enter the country. Often, clear racial and ethnic biases are built into these policies. In the 1920s, U.S. policy gave preference to people from western Europe, while making it difficult for residents of southern and eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa to enter the country. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, the federal government refused to lift or loosen restrictive immigration quotas to allow Jewish refugees to escape the terror of the Nazi regime. In line with this policy, the *S.S. St. Louis,* with more than 900 Jewish refugees on board, was denied permission to land in the United States in 1939. The ship was forced to sail back to Europe, where at least a few hundred of its passengers later died at the hands of the Nazis (Morse 1967; Thomas and Witts 1974).

Since the 1960s, policies in the United States have encouraged the immigration of people who have relatives here as well as of those who have needed skills. This change has significantly altered the pattern of sending nations. Previously, Europeans dominated, but for the last 40 years, immigrants have come primarily from Latin America and Asia (see Figure 6–2). This means that an ever-growing proportion of the United States will be Asian or Hispanic. To a large degree, fear and resentment of this growing racial and ethnic diversity is a key factor in opposition to immigration. Many people are very concerned that the new arrivals do not reflect the cultural and racial heritage of the nation.

Despite people's fears about it, immigration performs many valuable functions. For the receiving society, it alleviates labor shortages, such as in the fields of health care and technology in the United States. In 1998, Congress debated not whether individuals with technological skills should be allowed into the country, but just how much to increase the annual quota. For the sending nation, migration can relieve economies unable to support large numbers of people. Often overlooked is the large amount of money immigrants send *back* to their home nations. For example, every year, worldwide immigrants from Portugal alone send more than $4 billion *back* to their home country (World Bank 1995).

Immigration can be dysfunctional as well. Although studies generally show that immigration has a positive impact on the receiving nation's

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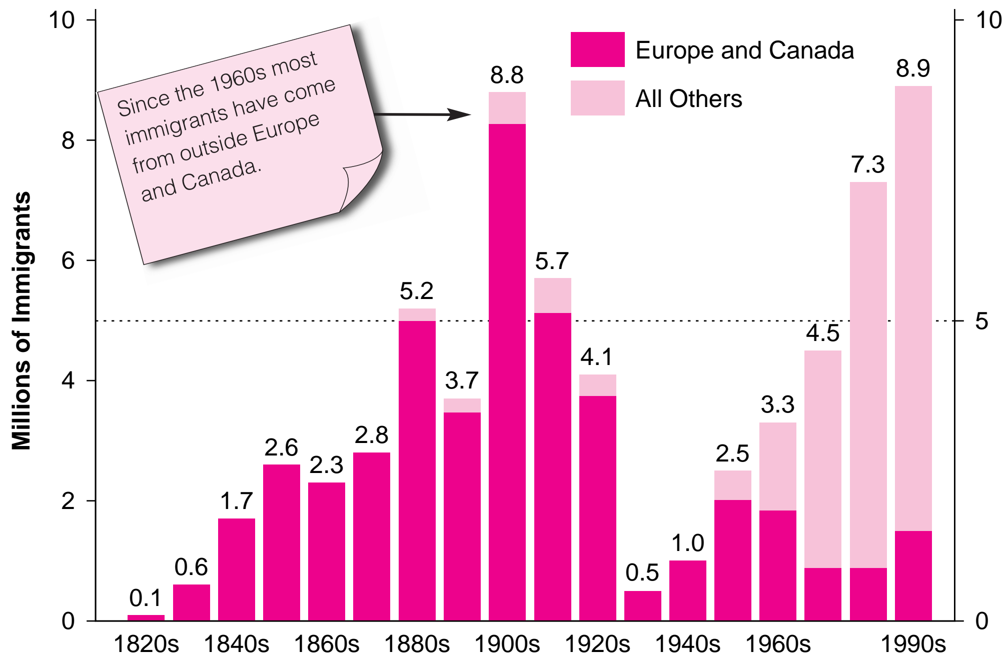

Figure 6 – 2

Immigration in the United States, 1820s–1990s

SOURCE: Immigration and Naturalization Service 1999a, 1999b. Projection for the 1990s by the author based on Immigration and Naturalization data.

economy, areas that accept high concentrations of immigrants may find it difficult to meet short-term social service needs. Furthermore, when migrants with skills or educational potential leave developing countries, it can be dysfunctional for those nations as well. No amount of payments sent back home can make up for the loss of valuable human resources from poor nations (Martin and Midgley 1999).

Conflict theorists note how much of the debate over immigration is phrased in economic terms. But this debate is intensified when the arrivals are of different racial and ethnic backgrounds from the host population. For example, Europeans often refer to "foreigners," but the term does not necessarily mean one of foreign birth. In Germany, "foreigners" refers to people of non-German ancestry, even if they were *born* in Germany; it does not refer to people of German ancestry born in another country who may choose to immigrate to their "mother country." Fear and dislike of "new" ethnic groups divide countries throughout the world (Martin and Widgren 1996).

Explaining Inequality by Race and Ethnicity

To understand how and why people make social distinctions based on race and ethnicity, we must turn to theory. All the major theoretical perspectives presume that culture, rather than biology, is the major

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determinant of racial-ethnic distinctions. Yet they offer quite different explanations for discrimination based upon these distinctions. Viewing race from the macro-level, functionalists observe that prejudice and discrimination based on race and ethnicity serve positive functions for dominant groups. In contrast, feminists and conflict theorists see the economic structure as a central factor in the exploitation of minorities. Interactionists stress the myriad ways in which everyday contact between people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds contributes to tolerance or hostility.

THE FUNCTIONALIST VIEW

What possible use could racial bigotry have for society? Functionalist theorists, while agreeing that racial hostility is hardly to be admired, point out that it indeed serves positive functions for those practicing discrimination.

Anthropologist Manning Nash (1962) has identified three functions that racially prejudiced beliefs have for the dominant group:

1. Such views provide a moral justification for maintaining an unequal society that routinely deprives a minority of its rights and privileges. Southern Whites justified slavery by believing that Africans were physically and spiritually subhuman and devoid of souls (Hoebel 1949).
2. Racist beliefs discourage members of the subordinate minority from attempting to question their lowly status, which would be to question the very foundations of society.
3. Racial myths encourage support for the existing order by introducing the argument that any major societal change (such as an end to discrimination) would only bring greater poverty to the minority and lower the majority's standard of living. As a result, Nash suggests, racial prejudice grows when a society's value system (for example, one underlying a colonial empire or a regime that perpetuates slavery) is being threatened.

Although racial prejudice and discrimination may serve the interests of the powerful, such unequal treatment can also be dysfunctional for a society and even for its dominant group. Sociologist Arnold Rose (1951) outlined four dysfunctions associated with racism:

1. A society that practices discrimination fails to use the resources of all individuals. Discrimination limits the search for talent and leadership to the dominant group.
2. Discrimination aggravates social problems such as poverty, delinquency, and crime and places the financial burden to alleviate these problems on the dominant group.

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3. Society must invest a good deal of time and money to defend the barriers to full participation of all members.
4. Racial prejudice and discrimination often undercut goodwill and friendly diplomatic relations between nations.

THE CONFLICT RESPONSE

Conflict theorists would certainly agree with Arnold Rose that racial prejudice and discrimination have many harmful consequences for society. Sociologists such as Oliver Cox (1948), Robert Blauner (1972), and Herbert M. Hunter (2000) have used the ***exploitation theory*** (also called the *Marxist class theory*) to explain the basis of racial subordination in the United States. As we saw in Chapter 5, Karl Marx viewed the exploitation of the lower class as a basic part of the capitalist economic system. From a Marxist point of view, racism keeps minorities in low-paying jobs, thereby supplying the capitalist ruling class with a pool of cheap labor. Moreover, by forcing racial minorities to accept low wages, capitalists can restrict the wages of *all* members of the proletariat. Workers from the dominant group who demand higher wages can always be replaced by minorities who have no choice but to accept low-paying jobs.

The conflict view of race relations seems persuasive in a number of instances. Japanese Americans were the object of little prejudice until they began to enter jobs that brought them into competition with Whites. The movement to keep Chinese immigrants out of the United States became most fervent during the latter half of the nineteenth century, when Chinese and Whites fought over dwindling work opportunities. Both the enslavement of Blacks and the extermination and removal westward of Native Americans were, to a significant extent, economically motivated.

However, the exploitation theory is too limited to explain prejudice in its many forms. Not all minority groups have been economically exploited to the same extent. In addition, many groups (such as the Quakers and the Mormons) have been victimized by prejudice for other than economic reasons. Still, as Gordon Allport (1979:210) concludes, the exploitation theory correctly "points a sure finger at one of the factors involved in prejudice, . . . rationalized self-interest of the upper classes."

THE INTERACTIONIST APPROACH

A Hispanic woman is transferred from a job on an assembly line to a similar position working next to a White man. At first, the White man is patronizing, assuming that she must be incompetent. She is cold and resentful; even when she needs assistance, she refuses to admit it. After a week, the growing tension between the two leads to a bitter quarrel. Yet, over time, each slowly comes to appreciate the other's strengths and talents. A year after they begin working together, these two workers

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become respectful friends. This story is an example of what interactionists call the *contact hypothesis* in action.

The ***contact hypothesis*** states that interracial contact between people of equal status who are engaged in a cooperative task will cause them to become less prejudiced and to abandon previous stereotypes. People will begin to see one another as individuals and discard the broad generalizations characteristic of stereotyping. Note the phrases *equal status* and *cooperative task*. In the example just given, if the two workers had been competing for one vacancy as a supervisor, the racial hostility between them might have worsened (Allport 1979; Schaefer 2004b; Sigelman et al. 1996).

As Latinos and other minorities slowly gain access to better-paying and more responsible jobs in the United States, the contact hypothesis may take on even greater significance. The trend in our society is toward increasing contact between individuals from dominant and subordinate groups. This may be one way of eliminating—or at least reducing—racial and ethnic stereotyping and prejudice. Another may be the establishment of interracial coalitions, an idea suggested by sociologist William Julius Wilson (1999b). To work, such coalitions would obviously need to be built on an equal role for all members.

No matter what the explanation for racial and ethnic distinctions—functionalist, conflict, or interactionist—these socially constructed inequalities can have powerful consequences in the form of prejudice and discrimination. In the next section, we will see how inequality based on the ascribed characteristics of race and ethnicity can poison people's interpersonal relations and deprive whole groups of opportunities others take for granted.

Patterns of Prejudice and Discrimination

In recent years, college campuses across the United States have been the scene of bias-related incidents. Student-run newspapers and radio stations have ridiculed racial and ethnic minorities; threatening literature has been stuffed under the doors of minority students; graffiti endorsing the views of White supremacist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan have been scrawled on university walls. In some cases, violent clashes have occurred between groups of White and Black students (Bunzel 1992; Schaefer 2004b).

Prejudice is a negative attitude toward an entire category of people, often an ethnic or racial minority. If you resent your roommate because he or she is sloppy, you are not necessarily guilty of prejudice. However, if you immediately stereotype your roommate on the basis of such characteristics as race, ethnicity, or religion, that is a form of prejudice. Prejudice tends to perpetuate false definitions of individuals and groups.

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Sometimes prejudice results from ***ethnocentrism***—the tendency to assume that one's own culture and way of life represent the norm or are superior to all others. Ethnocentric people judge other cultures by the standards of their own group, which leads quite easily to prejudice against other cultures.

One important and widespread form of prejudice is ***racism,*** the belief that one race is supreme and all others are innately inferior. When racism prevails in a society, members of subordinate groups generally experience prejudice, discrimination, and exploitation. Racism can be subtle and deep-seated, as the psychological experiments described in the opening of this chapter showed. Though many Americans both White and Black condemn racism, research results suggest that racist stereotypes—such as that of the violent Black male—may be rooted in our subconscious thought processes.

DISCRIMINATORY BEHAVIOR

Prejudice often leads to ***discrimination,*** the denial of opportunities and equal rights to individuals and groups based on some type of arbitrary bias. Say that a White corporate president with a prejudice against Asian Americans has to fill an executive position. The most qualified candidate for the job is a Vietnamese American. If the president refuses to hire this candidate and instead selects an inferior White candidate, he or she is engaging in an act of racial discrimination.

Prejudiced *attitudes* should not be equated with discriminatory *behavior.* Although the two are generally related, they are not identical, and either condition can be present without the other. A prejudiced person does not always act on his or her biases. The White president, for example, might choose—despite his or her stereotypes—to hire the Vietnamese American. This would be prejudice without discrimination. On the other hand, a White corporate president with a completely respectful view of Vietnamese Americans might refuse to hire them for executive posts out of fear that biased clients would take their business elsewhere. In this case, the president's action would constitute discrimination without prejudice.

Discrimination persists even for the most educated and qualified minority group members from the best family backgrounds. Despite their talents and experiences, they sometimes encounter attitudinal or organizational bias that prevents them from reaching their full potential. The term ***glass ceiling*** refers to an invisible barrier that blocks the promotion of a qualified individual in a work environment because of the individual's gender, race, or ethnicity (Schaefer 2004b; Yamagata et al. 1997).

In early 1995, the federal Glass Ceiling Commission issued the first comprehensive study of barriers to promotion in the United States. The commission found that glass ceilings continue to block women and minority group men from top management positions in the nation's

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industries. Although White men constitute 45 percent of the labor force today, they hold down a much higher proportion of the top positions. Even in the most diverse corporations, as listed in *Fortune* magazine in 2002, White men hold over 80 percent of both the board of directors seats and the top 50 paid positions. According to the commission, the existence of this glass ceiling results principally from the fears and prejudices of many middle- and upper-level White male managers, who believe that the inclusion of women and minority group men in management circles will threaten their own prospects for advancement (Bureau of the Census 2002a:367; Department of Labor 1995a, 1995b; Hickman 2002).

INSTITUTIONAL DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination is practiced not only by individuals in one-to-one encounters but also by institutions. Social scientists are particularly concerned with the ways in which structural factors such as employment, housing, health care, and government administration maintain the social significance of race and ethnicity. ***Institutional discrimination*** refers to the denial of opportunities and equal rights to individuals and groups that results from the normal operations of a society. This kind of discrimination consistently affects certain racial and ethnic groups more than others.

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1981:9–10) has identified various forms of institutional discrimination, including:

- Rules requiring that only English be spoken at a place of work, even when it is not a business necessity to restrict the use of other languages.
- Preferences shown by law and medical schools in the admission of children of wealthy and influential alumni, nearly all of whom are White.
- Restrictive employment-leave policies, coupled with prohibitions on part-time work, that make it difficult for the heads of single-parent families (most of whom are women) to obtain and keep jobs.

A recent example of institutional discrimination occurred in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the United States. In the heat of demands to prevent terrorist takeovers of commercial airplanes, Congress passed the Aviation and Transportation Security Act, which was intended to strengthen airport screening procedures. The law stipulated that all airport screeners must be U.S. citizens. Nationally, 28 percent of all airport screeners are legal residents but not citizens of the United States; as a group, they are disproportionately Latino, Black, and Asian. Many observers noted that other airport and airline workers, including pilots, cabin attendants, and even armed National Guardsmen

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stationed at airports, need not be citizens. Efforts are now being made to test the constitutionality of the act. At the least, the debate over its fairness shows that even well-meant legal measures can have disastrous consequences for racial and ethnic minorities.

In some cases, even ostensibly neutral institutional standards can turn out to have discriminatory effects. African American students at a midwestern state university protested a policy under which fraternities and sororities that wished to use campus facilities for a dance were required to post $150 security deposits to cover possible damages. The Black students complained that this policy had a discriminatory impact on minority student organizations. Campus police countered that the university's policy applied to all student groups interested in using these facilities. However, since overwhelmingly White fraternities and sororities at the school used their own houses for dances, the policy indeed affected only African American and other minority organizations.

Attempts have been made to eradicate or compensate for discrimination in the United States. The 1960s saw the passage of many pioneering civil rights laws, including the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act (which prohibits discrimination in public accommodations and publicly owned facilities on the basis of race, color, creed, national origin, and gender). In two important rulings in 1987, the Supreme Court held that federal prohibitions against racial discrimination protect members of all ethnic minorities—including Hispanics, Jews, and Arab Americans—even though they may be considered White.

For more than 20 years, affirmative action programs have been instituted to overcome past discrimination. ***Affirmative action*** refers to positive efforts to recruit minority members or women for jobs, promotions, and educational opportunities. Many people resent these programs, arguing that advancing one group's cause merely shifts the discrimination to another group. By giving priority to African Americans in admissions, for example, a school may overlook more qualified White candidates. In many parts of the country and many sectors of the economy, affirmative action is being rolled back, even though it was never fully implemented.

Discriminatory practices continue to pervade nearly all aspects of life in the United States today, in part because various individuals and groups actually *benefit* from them in terms of money, status, and influence. Discrimination permits members of the majority to enhance their wealth, power, and prestige at the expense of others. Less qualified people get jobs and promotions simply because they are members of the dominant group. Such individuals and groups will not surrender these advantages easily.

MEASURING DISCRIMINATION

Can discrimination be measured in terms of lost income or opportunities? Doing so is a complicated process. Researchers must first confirm

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that prejudice exists by assessing people's attitudes toward a minority group and showing that its members are treated differently from others. Then they must find a way to assign a cost to the discrimination.

Researchers have managed to draw some tentative conclusions, however, by comparing income data for African Americans versus Whites and for men versus women. As Figure 6–3 shows, with a median income of $43,525, White men earned 35 percent more than Black men in 2001, and nearly twice what Hispanic women earned. Though the gap between White and Black men's earnings was wide, both groups earned more than women, White, Black, or Hispanic. Black women, however, earned significantly less than White women ($27,335 compared to $31,575), indicating that they bore a double burden because of their race and gender. The strong disparity between Black women's and White men's incomes has remained unchanged over more than 50 years (Bureau of the Census 2001g).

These differences are not entirely the result of discrimination in employment, for members of the six groups are not equally prepared to obtain high-paying jobs. Past discrimination is a significant factor in the poor educational backgrounds of minority group members. Historically, taxpayers, who are predominantly White, have been unwilling to subsidize the public education of African Americans and Hispanics at the same level as White pupils. Test results in today's inner-city schools show the continuing effect of such discriminatory spending patterns.

To address this problem, researchers have compared the median incomes of Blacks and Whites, as well as men and women, with approximately the same educational level. As Table 6–2 shows, even though workers with higher educational levels generally earn more money than

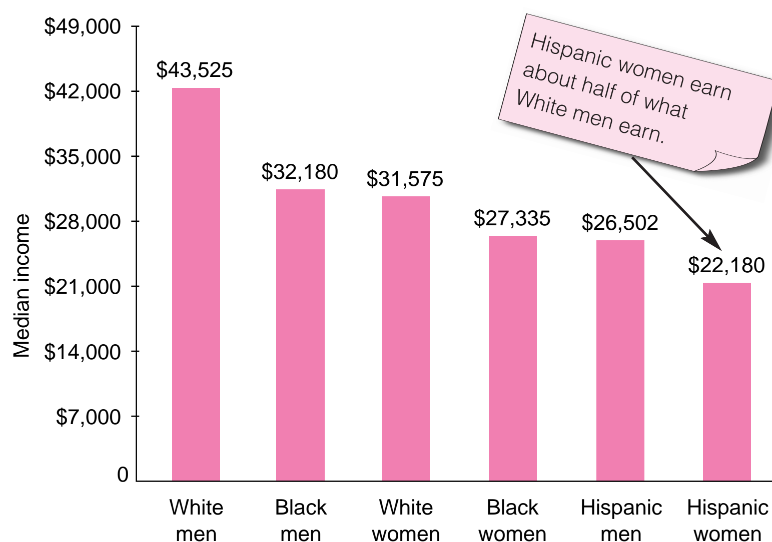

Figure 6 – 3
U.S. Median Income by Race, Ethnicity, and Gender, 2001

NOTE: *Median income includes all financial sources and is limited to year-round, full-time workers over 15 years of age. "White" refers to non-Hispanic.*
SOURCE: Bureau of the Census 2002b:78–80; 148–150.

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others, the disparity between the races and the sexes remains. The gap between the races does narrow a bit as educational levels rise; still, both African Americans and women lag behind. In some cases, the contrast is dramatic: women with a master's degree earn $6,000 less than men who have only a baccalaureate degree ($47,052 compared to $53,508).

The income gap shown in Table 6–2 may not be caused entirely by employment discrimination. The table shows only the level of schooling obtained by workers, not the quality. Though in recent years, efforts have been made to eliminate geographical disparities in school funding, racial minorities are still more likely than Whites to attend inadequately financed schools. Inequality of educational opportunity may also affect women, since educational institutions often shepherd women into low-paid sex-segregated occupations, such as nursing and elementary education.

What is the collective effect of discrimination in employment? Economist Andrew Brimmer (1995), citing numerous government studies, estimates that if employers used African Americans' talents and abilities, based on their formal schooling, to the fullest, the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) would be about 3 or 4 percent higher each year. Estimates of the economic cost of discrimination have not changed much since the mid-1960s. The percentage of GDP lost would be even higher,

Even at the very highest levels of schooling, the income gap remains between Whites and Blacks. Education also has little apparent effect on the income gap between male and female workers.

Table 6 – 2 Median Income by Race and Sex, Holding Education Constant, 2000

	Race		Sex	
	White Workers	**Black Workers**	**Male Workers**	**Female Workers**
Total	**$37,001**	**$28,007**	**$40,181**	**$28,977**
High School				
Nongrad	23,320	19,457	24,439	17,210
Grad	30,666	25,027	32,494	23,721
College				
Some college	34,522	29,057	38,650	27,190
Bachelor's degree	47,637	40,367	53,508	38,213
Master's degree	55,723	46,367	65,058	47,052
Doctorate degree	70,974	65,084	75,630	55,631

NOTES: Figures are median income from all sources except capital gain. Included are public assistance payments, dividends, pensions, unemployment compensation, and so on. Incomes are for all workers over 25 years of age. High school grad includes GED. Data for Whites are for White non-Hispanics. "Some college" excludes associate degree holders.

SOURCE: Bureau of the Census 2001g: Tables 8, 10, 76, 146.

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of course, if economists were to include losses from the underutilization of women's and other minorities' talents. The widespread practice of steering women toward low-paid, low-level jobs, even if they are qualified for more challenging and rewarding work, has a hidden cost to society.

Sociology Matters

Sociology matters because it makes us think about why some people in our society are treated better than others.

- Do you consider yourself to be prejudiced? If not, do you think you might have some subconscious prejudices that would show up in a video game like the one described in the chapter opening? Can you think of a way to change this type of automatic response?
- Are you White? If so, what privileges, perhaps because of your race or citizenship, do you enjoy that you have always taken for granted? Can you think of a way to reduce one or more of those privileges so that others can be more equal—and would you cooperate with such an effort?

Sociology matters because it makes us more aware of prejudice and discrimination against members of minority groups.

- Are you non-White? If so, what kinds of stereotyping and discrimination have you seen non-Whites experience? Do you think racial discrimination can be reduced through cooperative contact among people of different races?
- Are you or your parents recent immigrants to the United States? If so, what is the primary basis on which others react to you—your ethnic group, race, or country of origin? Do you think you or your children will someday blend into mainstream society in the United States, and if so, what might hasten that process?

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CHAPTER RESOURCES

Summary

The social dimensions of race and ethnicity are important factors in shaping people's lives. In this chapter, we defined the meaning of race and ethnicity and examined the social construction of these ascribed statuses. We discussed three theoretical perspectives on the unequal treatment of individuals based on their **racial** and **ethnic groups.** We noted some patterns of **prejudice** and **discrimination** against members of these groups, many of whom are recent immigrants. And we studied the economic effects of the unequal treatment of **minority groups.**

1. In the United States, people who are White enjoy numerous privileges that they rarely acknowledge, to themselves or to people of other races.
2. Race and ethnicity are socially constructed. The meaning people attach to the physical characteristics of certain groups, which are often expressed in **stereotypes,** gives race and ethnicity their social significance.
3. When sociologists define a **minority group,** they are concerned primarily with the economic and political power, or powerlessness, of the group.
4. A **racial group** is set apart from others by obvious physical differences, whereas an **ethnic group** is set apart primarily because of national origin or distinctive cultural patterns.
5. Over the last century, the racial and ethnic composition of immigrants to the United States has changed as the major sending nations changed. One hundred years ago, White ethnics from Europe predominated, but today's immigrants come mainly from Latin America and Asia.
6. Functionalists point out that to the dominant groups in a society, discrimination against minority groups may seem to be functional. But for society as a whole, discrimination can be dysfunctional.
7. Conflict theorists stress the harmful consequences of racial subordination. They see the unequal treatment of minority groups as an integral part of capitalism, a view known as **exploitation theory.**
8. Interactionists focus on the micro-level of race relations, pointing out the ways in which Whites dominate members of other racial and ethnic groups in everyday social interactions. According to their **contact hypothesis,** racial prejudice and discrimination can be reduced through cooperative contact between the races.

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9. **Prejudice** is a negative attitude toward an entire group, often an ethnic or racial minority. Prejudice is often based on **ethnocentrism**—the belief that one's own culture is superior to all others—or **racism**—the belief that one race is supreme and all others are inferior.
10. Prejudice often leads to **discrimination** against members of a minority group. Discrimination that results from the normal operations of a society is known as **institutional discrimination.**

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Key Terms

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