



## CHAPTER 1

# Differences and Similarities



Jess Walker/McGraw-Hill Education

As I am writing this chapter, the 2020 coronavirus pandemic has been in the United States for only about six months. The full toll of the physical, emotional, social, and economic devastation remains to be seen.

But even at this stage, the effects have been felt in every corner of society: The staggering disruption this virus has already wrought on people's lives is unprecedented. Every student in the country—from grade school to graduate school—is doing their coursework online. Terms like "social distancing," "sheltering in place," "self-quarantine," "flattening the curve," "contactless payment," "contact tracing," "the COVID fifteen," and "PPE (personal protective equipment)," unknown half a year earlier, have quickly become part of our everyday lexicon.

Like other crises in our history (think of the Great Depression, two world wars, and the attacks of September 11, 2001), this one has served as a powerful symbol of the common ways Americans have always thought about themselves and others. On the one hand, the pandemic has served as an inarguably devastating reminder of our commonalities. All of us, no matter our social standing or political affiliation, have been called upon to make major sacrifices to keep ourselves healthy and to stem the tide of the virus. Even while maintaining a safe social distance, strangers have come together in other ways to share in the collective pain of this tragedy: Communities have rallied to take care of their own, from creative video interactions to drive-by birthday celebrations. From the outset, people have been helping their less-mobile neighbors by shopping for them or delivering much needed supplies. Getting annoyed at the slow driver in front of you on the highway or fuming over the fact that your local grocery store was out of your favorite brand of ice cream didn't seem worth it anymore. All those trivial irritations that once drove us to distraction no longer seem so significant compared to the powerful need to salve our psychic wounds and take care of one another.

And yet through all the mutual misery, the pandemic exposed an unmistakable and all-too-predictable darker side of the American landscape: one marked by distrust, inequality, and racial suspicion. It didn't take long, for instance, for people to turn on one another. Hostile protesters took to Twitter and to state capitals to excoriate—and on occasion violently threaten—government and public health officials for imposing *any* limitations on their freedom of movement. At the other end of the spectrum, indignant neighbors launched angry invectives at the reckless scofflaws who blithely violated social distancing orders by getting too close to them in stores or who masklessly cavorted with others on beaches or in bars and crowded parks.

Early on, it appeared as if the virus was going to be an equal opportunity destroyer brutally crossing racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and social class boundaries. After all, even famous athletes, entertainers, tycoons, and politicians were falling ill. But it didn't take long for social differences to emerge. However, as one columnist put it, "No description of the coronavirus is more misleading than calling it 'the great equalizer'" (Reich, 2020, p. 1).

Page 6

City and state statistics quickly revealed that people of color were contracting the virus and dying from it at disproportionately high rates. Although the Navajo Nation has only about 175,000 residents, it has more COVID-19 deaths than 13 entire states (Reich, 2020). Nursing homes where residents are predominantly Latinx or African American were twice more likely to get hit by the virus than those with predominantly white residents ("The racial divide," 2020). In Illinois, 43% of those who died from the virus were African American, even though they comprised only 15% of the state's population. In Louisiana, 70% of the people who died were Black, though only a third of the population (cited in Eligon, Burch, Searcey, & Oppel, 2020). Experts cited several reasons for this disparity, including a greater likelihood of suffering from health compromising conditions like diabetes and less access to effective health care.

Inequalities were also evident in people's abilities to adjust their lives to the new reality: For instance, when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended that people wear face coverings in public—even homemade ones—to stem the spread of the virus, many people of color expressed fears that wearing scarves or handkerchiefs over their faces could easily exacerbate racial profiling and put Blacks and Latino/as in added danger. As one person put it, "I want to stay alive but I also want to stay alive" (quoted in Alfonso, 2020, p. 1).

Simply working from home was also a luxury that not everyone could enjoy. When stay-at-home orders were issued in most states, lower income workers still had to physically go to their jobs—often using public transportation to do so. While there was evidence that people in the highest income areas had cut their movement considerably, poorer areas didn't see a comparable drop. To put it another way, roughly 40% of the poorest, two-thirds of workers were able to work from home. For the highest wage earners, it was 71% (Reeves & Rothwell, 2020).

Heightened concern with the increased exposure to infection that this situation created led low-income workers in grocery stores, delivery services, fast food, and other industries to protest in hopes of getting their employers to provide enough compensation or at least protection to lessen the increased health risks (Valentino-DeVries, Lu, & Dance, 2020). In an ironic twist, these workers—heretofore comprising the disrespected marginal and unskilled wing of the labor force—were now being hailed as heroes because their work was considered essential to the economy and to the well-being of those more fortunate.

Poor children, too, suffered. Teachers at wealthy, private schools had the resources to make remote learning as similar as possible to what it looked like prior to the pandemic. Those at underfunded public schools were only able to videoconference with their students sporadically given their students' unreliable wireless connectivity. Rather than leveling the educational playing field, the pandemic seemed to widen the gap (Goldstein, 2020).

Page 7

Even the ability to maintain social distance was not equally distributed. Low-income people are more likely than wealthier individuals to live in close quarters (tiny jam-packed apartments, RV parks, and the like), where personal space is at a premium. Living in densely packed conditions—what one journalist called "the perils of proximity"—not only increased the risk of infection but also increased levels of conflict, tension, and anxiety (DeParle, 2020). Reliance on sometimes crowded public places for the demands of everyday life—buses, laundromats, convenience stores, food banks—only exacerbated the problem.

When COVID-19 testing was still in dangerously short supply, some prominent celebrities and other wealthy individuals were able to obtain tests even though they exhibited no symptoms and had no known contact with anyone who had tested positive for the virus, as was required by some testing regulations (Twohey, Eder, & Stein, 2020). A highly exclusive gated community in St. Tropez on the French Riviera had its own private testing facility for well-to-do residents. Twitter and Instagram were filled with images and videos of the rich and famous sheltering in place in spacious mansions, with pools, game rooms, and fully equipped gyms. Those who could afford it were able to escape densely populated cities like New York and Chicago and hunker down in secluded vacation homes or island villas. The billionaire David Geffen provoked public outrage when he posted photos on Instagram showing him "quarantined" on his \$590 million super yacht in the Caribbean. All this came precisely at a time when millions of people were crammed in tiny apartments, unable to pay their rent because they'd been laid off. Even the \$2 trillion stimulus package—the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act—that was meant to provide most citizens with a bit of financial relief contained lucrative tax breaks for wealthy individuals and corporations (Ward, 2020).

Perhaps even more insidious than these imbalances was the racial suspicion and bigotry that quickly emerged. Historically, in the wake of a national catastrophe there typically seems to be a desire to look for someone—or a group of someones—to blame. It wasn't enough that the "enemy" in this case was a microscopic virus. Many people wanted a villain to hold responsible ... and even hate. So early on, when the message emerging from some social commentators and even the President was that the pandemic was caused by a "Chinese virus," anti-Chinese—indeed, anti-Asian—sentiment bubbled to the surface. At a time when the number of confirmed cases worldwide only numbered in the hundreds of thousands, attacks against Asians had already begun to grow. People reported being spit on, screamed at, and even physically attacked (Tavernise & Oppel, 2020). A Texas teenager stabbed three Asian Americans—including a two-year-old girl—at a department store because "he thought the family was Chinese and infecting people with the coronavirus" (Melendez, 2020, p. 1). As one public health worker put it, "We're still more worried about someone looking Asian coughing into our shirt than about understanding best practices to stop the spread" (quoted in Torres, 2020, p. 1). The director of the FBI even expressed concern over an increase in hate crimes targeting Asian Americans.

Page 8

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It’s not surprising that in terrifying times when all people want is to feel safe and secure, the things that mark us as different take on added weight, overwhelming all that we might have in common. Easily visible distinctions become the chief criteria for deciding who is trustworthy and who is suspect, who is harmless, and who is dangerous.

The coronavirus pandemic wasn’t the first time that we let our differences divide us, and sadly it probably won’t be the last. A quick glance back in time reveals that virtually every minority group in this country—be it racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, gender-based, or class-based—has had or continues to have its own historical moment of suspicion and persecution:

- From 1619, when the first Black slaves arrived, to 1865, when the 13th Amendment was ratified, outlawing slavery, millions of African Americans endured the hardships of forced servitude. After emancipation, they continued to be brutalized through the practice of lynching and other forms of violent intimidation.
- After centuries of mistreatment and forced relocation of Native Americans, the Homestead Act of 1862 gave any U.S. citizen the right to lay claim to 160 acres on land that had been recently cleared of Native Americans. The Dawes Allotment Act of 1887 granted parcels of reservation land to individuals rather than to particular tribes. It was believed that if individuals owned their own land, adopted white clothing and ways, and were responsible for their own farms, they would gradually lose their Indian-ness and be assimilated into the white population.
- In the mid-19th century, war with Mexico and westward expansion redrew national boundaries, enabling white settlers to freely move into lands previously inhabited by Mexicans.
- In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, several laws, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Scott Act, and the Geary Act, barred Chinese immigrants from entering the country and stripped those already here of many of their legal rights.

- Early 20th-century immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Greece, Poland, Russia, and other Eastern European countries were subjected to varying degrees of hostility and discrimination. Business owners routinely prevented individuals from these groups from applying for jobs that were open to other whites. The National Origins Act of 1924 established quotas on immigrants from southern and Eastern Europe.
- During the Great Depression of the 1930s, poor refugees from Oklahoma who moved westward in search of work were exploited, beaten, and forced to live in shantytowns known as “Hoovervilles.”
- Japanese Americans (and some non-Japanese Asian people) were forcibly relocated from their homes to high-security internment camps after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and our entry into World War II.
- The attacks of September 11, 2001, incited unprecedented levels of anti-Muslim sentiment. In the weeks and months after the attacks, individuals who “looked Middle Eastern” were beaten up on the street or taunted in their schools. Some found themselves stopped and interrogated by law enforcement officials because they fit a stereotypical terrorist profile. As one political scientist put it a decade after the attacks, “9/11 was this moment that we came together, and it lasted about three-and-a-half minutes” (quoted in Goodstein, 2011, p. A1).

In short, the tension between similarity and difference—what brings us together and pushes us apart—has been the hallmark of the American experience for centuries. While we take great pride in the fact that we are a nation of immigrants, the responses to people who are different are often tinged with tension, distrust, and hostility. In this chapter, we’ll look at this phenomenon from a [sociological perspective](#)—a way of examining everyday social life that emphasizes the interplay between societal forces and personal characteristics—in influencing people’s thoughts, actions, feelings, judgments, and interactions. Why do people distinguish between “us” and “them”? Are some aspects of difference more desirable than others?



## SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN EVERYDAY LIFE: DRAWING LINES

As a rule, I hate clichés. Several years ago, I (jokingly) told my university's student body president, who was preparing her speech for the commencement ceremony, that if she used any clichés (like "Today we embark on a life's journey filled with exciting new challenges" or "In my four years here, I learned to think outside the box"), I'd change the "A" she just got in my sociology class to an "F." But clichés always have some kernel of truth to them. Take this one: *No two people are alike*, for example. Obviously, no two people could ever be *exactly* alike. Walk down a bustling city street someday (when masks and social distancing are no longer required), and you'll no doubt see an eye-popping assortment of human sizes, shapes, skin colors, and ages. Spend a little time getting to know the people you meet and you'll unearth a vast range of different mannerisms, life experiences, attitudes, values, ideas, tastes, likes, dislikes, and so on. Even if you encounter identical twins you'll soon be able to distinguish one from the other. Your faith in clichés would soon be restored!

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Page 10

But let's imagine, in a science-fiction sort of way, what the world would look like if we take that trite statement to a ridiculously extreme conclusion. What if no two people were alike in *any* way? That is, what if we shared absolutely nothing with anyone else—no physical characteristic, no personality trait, no life experience? Imagine that every single human being was their own unique sex, age, or race. Imagine if no two people had the same educational experiences, the same relationships with their parents, the same number of siblings, or the same socioeconomic status. What if no two people prayed to the same god, spoke the same language, told time the same way, obeyed the same laws, enjoyed the same music, or found the same food tasty? In this imaginary world, meeting someone for the first time would be like meeting a new life form from another planet. You wouldn't be able to place that person into any sort of existing social category. You wouldn't be able to draw on your past experiences with people who possess similar characteristics. You could assume nothing about anyone you meet... ever. In such a world, life would be utterly chaotic and unmanageable.

So, there are some limits to the applicability of this little cliché. Obviously, there's something more to this society than 340 million or so completely "unlike" individuals living in the same geographic region of the world. It turns out that each of us—even the most strikingly distinctive person you know—actually has quite a bit in common with other Americans. We're not clones, of course, but we do share membership in particular categories. With some people, we have a gender in common; with others, a sexual orientation, a race, an ethnicity, a religion, or a social class.

Although at times it's to our advantage to recognize and celebrate our individual uniqueness, at other times it's the similarities that provide us with the comfort of knowing that there are people out there who are like us. Perhaps you've attended a festival or parade devoted to the collective expression of pride in your ethnic group. If you're Irish, you're lucky enough to have one day a year devoted to your heritage: St. Patrick's Day. Or maybe you've found yourself in a different city and attended a religious service at your religion's local church, synagogue, or mosque, and felt reassured by the fact that these strangers shared your spiritual beliefs, prayed the same way you do, and knew the words to your favorite hymns. After I graduated from college, I traveled through Europe for 2 months. While on an overnight train in Denmark, I had the odds-defying experience of meeting another traveler who happened to come from my hometown. I didn't know her, but I instantly felt a connection as we talked about neighborhoods, restaurants, and landmarks that only someone from that town could appreciate.

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Page 11

If you think about it, the fact that we're able to live together in a reasonably stable way most of the time is possible only because we have many things in common that we can easily count on. You can assume, for instance, that upon initiating a handshake with someone you've just met, this person won't slap or spit on your extended hand but instead will hold it for a second and release it. Indeed, our everyday lives rely on hundreds of these taken-for-granted bits of information that we assume others understand as we do. These things are so common, so immediately understood, that we rarely have to think about them.

We come to further appreciate these commonalities when we're faced with situations in which we *can't* assume that everybody knows what we know. If you've ever spent time in a foreign country, for instance, you probably felt some disorientation when you first arrived. Some of the confusion could no doubt be attributed to not knowing the language well enough to read street signs or ask people for directions or order from a restaurant menu. But you probably quickly realized that you lacked more than just an understanding of the vocabulary. You lacked knowledge of the common, taken-for-granted assumptions of everyday life. You didn't share the rules, the unspoken code of behavior that people with common cultural understandings unquestioningly live by. What's the acceptable way to greet people on the street? How do you tip in a restaurant? How close do you stand next to a stranger on a crowded bus? In a diverse society like ours, we may experience similar uncertainties when we come into contact with people from other racial, ethnic, religious, or class groups.

So the trick to living in a complex society like ours where people differ on some social dimensions but share others is finding a way to balance the things that make us dissimilar with the things that make us alike. At what point, for instance, does strong pride in our heritage or ethnicity become exclusionary, intolerant, and maybe even intimidating to those who don't belong? Wearing a large crucifix around your neck or flying a Confederate battle flag from your car's antenna may be expressions of pride that hold people of a particular community together, but they can also evoke extreme emotions in others who don't share those beliefs or sentiments and who may even feel threatened by them.

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Page 12



Deciding when, where, and with whom to highlight certain differences is a constant struggle of social life. Some distinguishing features are, of course, more important than others. We don't attribute much significance to differences in eye color or foot size or whether people have earlobes or not. But differences in race, gender, social class, and sexual orientation carry enormous cultural, historical, political, and economic weight in this society.

Some of the things that mark us as different may even be considered positive or even fashionable. For instance, when it comes to food, music, or art, many of us enjoy having access to the diverse palette of ethnic influences. Neighborhoods are considered hip if they have an abundance of ethnic restaurants from which to choose or some trendy shops offering collections of ethnic-themed goods different from what one usually finds at a generic shopping mall. These kinds of differences aren't threatening. Instead, they're safe because they give people an opportunity to taste another way of life without actually having to live it.

But dabbling in ethnoracial differences can become particularly controversial when the trappings of one group are "borrowed" by another. The fashion industry has always made use of such borrowing, whether it's Kenyan necklaces in Japan, geisha makeup in Namibia, or the scores of European designers incorporating the trappings of African American street style. According to one writer, the impulse to play "dress-up" in someone else's culture is nearly universal (Wang, 2019, p. 2). These actions are often portrayed as entertaining ways of expressing solidarity for another group's way of life, like when non-Native Americans decorate their homes in a Navajo motif, a white student wears a Chinese-style dress to prom, or celebrities like Kylie Jenner or Miley Cyrus wear their hair in cornrows or dreadlocks. To one author, "cultural [borrowing]—like globalization—isn't just inevitable; it's potentially positive. . . . The exchange of ideas, styles, and traditions is one of the tenets and joys of a modern, multicultural society" (Avins, 2015, p. 4).

To many members of ethnoracial minority groups, however, such borrowing is anything but a cool way of paying homage to someone else's traditions. Instead, it is **cultural appropriation**, a dangerous and dehumanizing form of exploitation in which the customs, looks, and practices of one ethnoracial culture are adopted by members of another. They believe that marginalized people should be able to speak for themselves and not simply be seen from the perspectives of more privileged groups. To critics, cultural appropriation becomes a phony way to be "edgy," a means of taking part in another ethnoracial group without actually *being* a member of that group. In other words, one can enjoy the accouterments of another race or ethnicity without suffering the disadvantage that actual members of those groups experience on a daily basis (hooks, 1992). White teenagers blasting hip-hop music from their cars may get angry glances from annoyed onlookers, but they don't face the same risk of being labeled fearsome "thugs" that Black teens playing the same music might face. An African American actress once asked, "What would America be like if we loved black people as much as we loved black culture?" (quoted in Sehgal, 2015b, p. 14).

It would seem that some social differences are at no risk of being appropriated. Take poverty, for instance. Distinctive lifestyles associated with a lack of wealth don't have quite the aura of exotic desirability that ethnoracial differences can sometimes have. Poor or working-class people may wear clothes, eat food, or engage in leisure activities that distinguish them from middle- and upper-class people. But these differences are not choices that express their pride in being poor; they're ways of life that reflect limited or nonexistent opportunities to live differently. Poor people have a different diet from wealthier people because they can't afford anything else. Have you ever heard someone say, "Hey, I'm starving, let's order some poor people's take-out?" Not likely. The former chief executive at the health food chain, Trader Joe's, generated controversy a few years ago when he opened a store called "Daily Table" that sells expired or cosmetically blemished food to low-income customers. Critics claimed he was simply selling "poor people rich people's garbage" (Reeves, 2013, p. 16).

Indeed, any sort of celebration of a "poverty lifestyle" strikes many people as cruel and insensitive. For instance, when you think of vacation tours, what comes to mind? World-renowned temples? Famous monuments? Natural wonders? Over the past decade or so, however, chartered tours of some of the world's worst slums in places like Brazil, India, and South Africa have grown in popularity. On such trips—referred to as *slum tourism* or *poortourism*—groups of Western tourists are guided through crowded, dirty scenes of human misery, ostensibly to learn about and empathize with those who live in abject poverty. But one study of tourists visiting a slum in Mumbai, India found that visitors were motivated primarily by curiosity rather than the desire to understand poverty (Ma, 2010).

And yet, there are times when components of poverty are appropriated by wealthier individuals and turned into something trendy. For instance, poor people have always had to live in smaller homes than wealthier people because it's all they can afford. However, the contemporary "tiny house" phenomenon—where people choose to live in minuscule, movable homes—has become so fashionable that one writer refers to it "ostentatious minimalism" (Staley, 2018, p. 12). Similarly, the current "shabby chic" fashion fad—where people pay hefty sums of money to buy jeans riddled with tears and holes—is an example of how individuals who have money to buy intact clothing can voluntarily adopt a hardship that extremely poor people are forced to endure, strip it of its association with poverty, and make it stylish.

But in general, the lifestyle of poor or working-class people is rarely seen as hip. In fact, poor and working-class people are more likely to be seen as a direct threat to the sensibilities and values of wealthier people than to be seen as an inspiration to them. When a trailer park or a low-income apartment complex is feared to bring down the property values of an adjacent middle-class neighborhood, residents usually don't celebrate. Instead, they're more likely to mobilize all their energies and resources to prevent such an "intrusion."



## “CLASSIFIED” INFORMATION: FORMING IMPRESSIONS

Humans have a powerful tendency to define, classify, and categorize. Among the ways they apply this tendency is to sort themselves and their fellow humans into groups. Every human society—from the simplest to the most complex; from the most uniform to the most diverse—has a means by which members differentiate themselves from one another.

People begin defining, differentiating, and ranking things early on. When children are first learning to talk, they begin to understand that tangible objects fall into broad distinct categories: Apples and oranges are “fruits,” Chihuahuas and Great Danes are “dogs,” Lego trucks and stuffed animals are “toys,” and so on. They also learn that these categories can be distinguished from other categories: Fruits are different from vegetables, dogs are different from cats, and toys are different from tools. Eventually, they learn that people can also be categorized and differentiated. As they get older, children spend a huge chunk of their lives ruthlessly making us/them distinctions and then ranking people in terms of those distinctions. Preschoolers often use racial and ethnic concepts to define others (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Indeed, judging and ranking others is probably the defining feature of social life in American elementary, middle/junior high, and high schools. As early as the third grade, children develop sophisticated ways of including some and excluding others that result in a clearly identifiable power hierarchy among nine-year-olds (Adler & Adler, 1998). Young people typically go beyond the most obvious types of distinctions (gender, race, religion, age, grade level) to more specific lifestyle traits and labels, such as jocks, preps, burnouts, emo, geeks, hip hop, metal-heads, punks, goths, health goths, gangstas, and so on.

Page 15

When I was a preteen growing up in southern California, two broad groups dominated social life at my middle school: *surfers* (who were white) and *low-riders* (who were Latinx). The labels originally derived from specific recreational activities: surfing and driving cars that sat low to the ground. But one didn’t have to surf or even have a drivers’ license to be a member of either group. The labels were simply shorthand for creating broad divisions that paralleled ethnic and social class differences. The two groups rarely interacted with one another and fights between them were common. The creation and maintenance of such boundaries provided the interpersonal landscape on which everything else in school seemed to be built: friendship, romance, popularity, leisure activities, physical safety, and so on.

Eventually (and luckily!), most of us come to realize that the categorical cliques that are so vital to us as teenagers are based on rather superficial information—what a person wears, what kind of music they listen to, what jargon they use, how they carry their book bag, and so on. But other criteria maintain their importance throughout our lives. We never stop defining group boundaries in terms of countries, regions, religions, generations, races, sexes, classes, political groups, families, and so on (Epstein, 1997). We all know the powerful role that these differentiating characteristics play in everyday life.

Indeed, we highlight the importance of this information each time we meet someone and immediately draw inferences about that person based on a quick assessment of their membership in particular social groups. We learn—from others, from past experiences, from the media—the cultural significance in this society of gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and sexuality. For instance, if all you know about someone you meet for the first time is that she identifies as female, you might initially assume that she’s probably more compassionate, more nurturing, and less aggressive than if she was male. Likewise, if all you knew about a person was that they were in their late 60s, you might conclude that they are close to retirement, enjoy the “oldies” radio station, go to bed while it’s still light out, and have no idea what TikTok is. Imagine you’re about to start your first year in college and you learn that your roommate is of a different race and comes from a different state or, for that matter, a different country. Think about all the inferences you’d make about this person even before you meet them. “She’s Korean? I bet she’ll be studying all the time.” “He’s from Texas? Well, I guess that means I’m doomed to a steady dose of Tim McGraw or Blake Shelton on iTunes.” “She’s originally from France, eh? She probably wears scarves all the time, smokes cigarettes, and constantly complains about how awful American food is.”

Page 16

Of course, these sorts of conclusions can never (or should never) be final. Forming impressions and expectations of others on such a tiny amount of information can never be completely accurate. Certainly, we don’t want to admit that our interchanges with others depend on that person’s sex or race or religion. But, whether we like it or not and whether it’s fair or not, we always begin social interactions with these kinds of culturally defined ideas about how people in certain social groups are likely to act, what their values might be, and what we think their tastes are. These initial assumptions save us the energy of having to start from scratch in forming impressions of every single person we meet.



## VARIATION BETWEEN GROUPS, VARIATION WITHIN GROUPS

When thinking about the implications of race, class, gender, and sexual diversity for people's everyday experiences, there is a tendency to focus on the differences that exist between broad groups (for instance, between men and women, between poor and rich people, between heterosexuals and homosexuals, or between African Americans and Asian Americans). This emphasis on between-group differences can obscure both the differences that exist among individuals within groups as well as the similarities that exist between individuals who belong to different groups. It may be fashionable to talk about men and women as being from different planets, but such a conclusion overshadows the fact that they are much more alike than they are different. Similarly, if you're white, it's tempting to view African Americans, Latino/as, Asians, and Native Americans as uniform (what sociologists call *homogeneous*) communities of "others," with similar values, interests, and behaviors, even though there is tremendous variation within each of these groups. In [Chapter 3](#), we will examine how this tendency is reflected in our racial language—for instance, using the term "Asian" to lump together a variety of people with very different languages, cultures, and immigrant experiences.

At the individual level, the tendency to overlook within-group variation can have important consequences. Students of color at predominantly white universities, for example, report that their white fellow students and even their white professors often look to them in class to provide a "minority perspective" on particular issues (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 2000). Similarly, the thoughts, beliefs, and actions of a lone female executive in a predominantly male company may be taken by her male coworkers as typical of all women (Kanter, 1987). The assumption underlying such experiences is that members of a particular race or gender are so similar that one individual can be a spokesperson for the entire group.

But when we think of our own group—be it based on race, ethnicity, gender, class, or sexual orientation—we're more inclined to highlight or at least pay heed to the diversity of individuals within it. We're less willing to generalize about our own group because we know, from firsthand experiences with fellow members, that we don't all believe the same things, act the same way, or speak with a singular voice.

Page 17

I teach at a private liberal arts university in the Midwest. My students are predominantly white (though this is less true than it used to be), and many come from wealthy families. As a way of introducing the topic of race in the introductory course I teach, I sometimes start by asking my students to list the features that they think are typical of African Americans. It's a startling question. They usually balk at the request, not wanting to "appear racist." Nevertheless, I push forward by assuring them that I'm asking for common stereotypes, not necessarily what *they* think. When they're finished compiling that list, we do the same for Latino/as, and then for Asian Americans. I don't filter or modify their lists. I simply record on the board what they mention. Once they get beyond their initial discomfort, they have little trouble identifying these traits. Some of the characteristics they mention are positive (for instance, Asian families are supportive and tight-knit); others are distinctly negative (for instance, African American families are weak and prone to instability).

When they're finished, I ask them to list the traits that characterize whites. Here the discussion usually grinds to a screeching halt. The white students have more difficulty with this question than the previous ones. It's not because they fear how they'll be perceived. It's because they can't think of anything. I don't come to their rescue. I let them struggle. After a while, some version of the following conversation inevitably ensues:

*Student:* "What kind of whites are you talking about?"

*Mr.:* "What do you mean?"

*Student:* "Well, there are too many kinds of white people to generalize."

*Mr.:* "OK, what kinds of white people are there?"

*Student:* "Are you talking about poor white trash? They're definitely different from rich whites."

*Mr.:* "Uh-huh. Go on."

*Student:* "Some whites are very religious and others are atheists. Also they might be of different nationalities, come from different parts of the country. You know, they're all different. There's no way you can come up with something they all have in common."

*Mr.:* "You're absolutely right! [The student usually beams with pride at this point for being a good sociologist.] But why didn't you ask me what kind of African Americans or Latino/as or Asian Americans I had in mind when I asked you to characterize them? Surely there are rich Asians and poor Asians. There must be religious Latino/as and nonreligious Latino/as out there. Some African Americans live in big cities and others live on farms, right?"

Page 18

My point in these discussions is not to reinforce stereotypes or to publicly humiliate my students. Instead, it is to illustrate how our relative perspectives determine our perceptions of between-group and within-group diversity. These mostly white students were flummoxed by the question because of the obvious variety they saw in the category "white." Being a member of a majority racial group conferred on them the privilege of thinking about their whiteness in terms of individuality and not in terms of common traits (Waters, 2010). Yet, when considering other groups, they were more inclined to fall back onto broad generalizations, even though there's just as much within-group diversity among African Americans, Latino/as, and Asian Americans as there is among whites. They soon realize that it's misleading to try to ignore these within-group differences to talk about all African Americans, all Latino/as, all Asians, or all whites as if they were homogeneous groups. For that matter, it would be misleading to discuss all heterosexuals, all poor people, or all men as if they all looked alike, acted alike, and believed the same things.



## THE POWER OF “NORMAL”: ALL DIFFERENCES ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL

To “vary” is to deviate or to depart from what is expected. Variations fall outside the typical. When musicians talk about variations on a theme, they imply that there is a main, core composition from which other same goes for human difference. A term like “diversity” means variety; but it also implies that there is a standard way of being from which others deviate. If your campus is like most, conversations about “diversity” are increasingly common and heated in recent years. But chances are when most of people talk about “diversity,” it’s usually in terms of underrepresented groups (the “variations”) rather than of the dominant group.

Let’s look at this more closely. In a racially imbalanced society like ours, whiteness, in general, is the unlabeled yardstick against which “nonwhite” racial groups are evaluated (Dyer, 2012). Likewise, “middle-class” “males” are the taken-for-granted standards of class, sexuality, and gender. Each year, the information technology company, ProQuest, makes available a compendium of population statistics covering all aspects of this massive database contains entries for “Women,” “Poverty,” “Black, African American population,” “American Indian, Alaska Native population” “Asian and Pacific Islander population,” and “Hispanic or Latino population,” but none for “Men,” “Middle class,” or “white population.”

Consider the legalization of same-sex marriage (see [Chapter 7](#) for a lengthier discussion of this issue). In the summer of 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage was legal nationwide. More than just a symbolic gesture, such recognition came with many rights and privileges traditionally accorded only to heterosexual married couples, such as coverage on spousal insurance policies and inheritance rights. Many people viewed this change as a positive step forward in the movement for civil rights. The hope was that same-sex married couples would soon become as unremarkable as straight married couples. But, notice how the movement for marriage rights reinforces the idea that the standard of intimacy toward which people are presumed to want to aspire is heterosexual marriage. In fact, some legal scholars have voiced concern that the legalization of same-sex marriage could result in the reduction or even abolition of certain benefits for unmarried gay partners.

Indeed, only until pretty recently, the cultural and media representation of every aspect of romance simply presumed a world in which men were sexually attracted to women and vice versa. Even today, mainstream ads that depict same-sex couples remain rare. Around Valentine’s Day, you’d be hard pressed to find ads that *don’t* depict men and women embracing, gazing longingly into each other’s eyes, buying each other expensive jewelry, or enjoying the Sunday paper together in bed in their pajamas. Furthermore, the heterosexual standard is even apparent in academic scholarship. A mountain of space is devoted to articles on why people are homosexual, but few researchers bother to ask the question: Why are people heterosexual?

The fact that we make assumptions about what’s “normal” and what’s “diverse” may seem insignificant, but it is at the root of much social conflict. If different categories of people were arranged horizontally—that is, with all groups aligned on the same level—there’d be no problem. We’d all simply be part of a “vast cultural smorgasbord” (Anderson, 2001). However, in all societies, such distinctions tend to be arranged vertically, resulting in a ranking of groups. In every society, some people make the rules and others must live by those rules; some are granted the right to make important decisions and others must endure the consequences of those decisions; some enjoy everyday privileges that provide comfort and stability and others lack such privileges and experience constant struggles in their lives as a result. It’s no surprise that given the historical arrangement of power relations in this society, the standard of social comparison continues to be white, heterosexual, middle-class, and male. These differences determine access to resources, future goals and aspirations, and overall life chances. Systems of difference are always associated with systems of power and privilege (O’Brien, 1999).

Indeed, groups with significant social power typically have the luxury of remaining unexamined. Universities routinely offer courses in “Women’s Studies,” “African or Latinx Studies,” or “Queer Studies,” but rarely are there courses in “Men’s Studies,” “White Studies,” or “Heterosexual Studies.” For people who identify themselves as African American, Latinx, Asian, and Native American in this society, for example, race and ethnicity may be the pivot around which the rest of their lives circles. For whites, race is something they rarely have to think about; it’s a characteristic that other groups have. In [Chapter 5](#), we’ll see how such racial “invisibility” creates and reinforces positions of authority and dominance. Similarly, men have the luxury of living in a society where gender inequality is typically seen as a “women’s issue.” Like most people in dominant positions, men are largely unaware of the small and large advantages the social structure provides them. The same can be said for middle- and upper-class individuals and for heterosexuals.

In examining the roles that race, class, gender, and sexuality play in determining an individual’s position of privilege or disadvantage in society, it’s important to note that these factors can often conflict, even within the same person. The complex intersections of privilege are apparent in this sociologist’s memoir:

*As the first and, for a while, only child of upper-middle-class, Orthodox Jewish parents growing up in New York City, race and class privilege came easily to me, but it was gender that has always been problematic. I understood in some vague way that it would have been preferable had I been born a boy. . . . At another time and in another place, perhaps, my parents would have found the birth of a girl child so burdensome that they would have simply abandoned me or sold me into marriage as an infant. . . . But I was fortunate; I was born into a family that did not have to choose which of its children to feed and clothe, or which would receive medical treatment and which would die from neglect. In this respect, a potential fate for others of my gender was mitigated by my class (Rothenberg, 2000, pp. 9–10).*

Similarly, a white lesbian enjoys social advantages because of her race but disadvantages because of her gender and sexuality. Black lesbians face disadvantage on three levels. As one author puts it, “Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining ‘straightness’ is our last resort” (quoted in Collins, 1990, pp. 195–196).

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## STRATIFICATION, POWER, AND PRIVILEGE

It doesn't take being on the wrong end of "normal" to know that people categorize others in comparison with themselves, make judgments about those others, and then act toward them on the basis of those judgments. From there, it's just a short step to understanding that inequality is woven into the fabric of all societies through a structured system of [stratification](#), the ranking of entire groups of people that perpetuates unequal rewards and life chances. Just as geologists talk about strata of rock that are layered one on top of another, the "social strata" of people are arranged from low to high.

Stratification systems can be based on a variety of different dimensions and statuses. Sometimes groups of people are ranked on the basis of what sociologists call ascribed statuses. An [ascribed status](#) is a social identity or position that we obtain at birth or develop into involuntarily as we get older. Race, sex, ethnicity, religion, and family status (that is, the identity as someone's child or grandchild) are all usually considered ascribed statuses. As we age, we enter an ascribed identity called "teenager," followed by "middle-aged person," and ultimately "elderly." We can try to hide our "membership" in these positions (by wearing a toupee or buying a more youthful wardrobe), and sometimes people go to great lengths to change their ascribed status (as when individuals have sex-reassignment surgeries), but for the most part, ascribed statuses aren't positions we choose to occupy: An [achieved status](#), in contrast, is a social position or identity we take on voluntarily or earn through our own efforts or accomplishments, like being a student, an entrepreneur, a spouse, or a sociologist.

Of course, the distinction between an ascribed and an achieved status is not always obvious. Some people become college students not because of their own efforts but because of their parents' influence. In theory, you can choose to identify with any religion you want, but chances are that the religion with which you identify is the one your parents belong to. But some people decide to change their religious membership later in life. More importantly, sex, race, ethnicity, and age may be ascribed statuses, but they have a direct effect on our access to desirable or affluent achieved identities.

Page 22

All societies, past and present, use ascribed and achieved statuses to create some form of stratification, although they may vary in the degree of inequality between strata. Most Western societies today rely on socioeconomic status as the primary criteria by which individuals and groups are stratified. [Socioeconomic status](#) refers to the prestige, honor, respect, and power associated with different social class positions in society (Weber, 1970). Socioeconomic status is obviously influenced by wealth and income, but it can also be derived from achieved characteristics, such as educational attainment and occupational prestige, and from ascribed characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and family pedigree. For instance, high school teachers have much higher occupational prestige than carpenters, plumbers, or mechanics (Davis & Smith, 1986), even though teachers usually earn substantially less. Organized criminals may be multimillionaires and live in large estates, but they lack prestige and honor—and therefore socioeconomic status—in mainstream society.

## THEORIES OF INEQUALITY

For well over a century, sociologists have been trying to figure out why societies are unequal and stratified. Let's take a brief look at the two main groups of theories regarding stratification: structural-functionalism and conflict theories. These groups of theories differ dramatically in their conclusions about the role of stratification in human societies.

### *Structural-Functionalism*

According to [structural-functionalism](#), society is a complex system composed of various parts, much like a living organism. Just as the heart, lungs, and liver work together to keep an animal alive, so, too, do all the elements of a society's structure work together to keep society alive. From this perspective, if an aspect of social life does not contribute to social order and ultimately to society's survival—that is, if it is dysfunctional—it will eventually disappear. Things that persist, even if they seem to be harmful, unfair, or disruptive, must persist because they contribute somehow to the continued existence of society (Newman, 2021).

Page 23

So how can society benefit in the long run from inequality? Societies are made up of a variety of different roles that people must fill in order for society to function. In complex, modern societies, these roles are allocated through a strictly defined division of labor. If the tasks associated with all social positions in a society were equally pleasant, were equally important, and required the same skills, who got into which position would make no difference. But structural-functionalists argue that it does make a difference. Some occupations, such as teaching and medicine, are more important to a society than others and require greater ability and training. Society's dilemma is to make sure that the most competent people perform the most important tasks. One way to ensure this distribution of tasks is to assign higher rewards—better pay, greater prestige, more social privileges—to some positions in society so that they will be attractive to the people with the necessary talents and abilities. Those who rise to the top are seen as the most worthy and deserving because they're the ones who can do the most good for society (Davis & Moore, 1945).

The functional importance of a position is not enough to warrant a high place in the stratification system, however. If a position is easily filled—even if it is vital for society's survival—it need not be

The functional importance of a position is not enough to warrant a high place in the stratification system, however. If a position is easily filled—even if it is vital for society's survival—it need not be heavily rewarded (Davis & Moore, 1945). For instance, there is perhaps no more important occupation in a society than trash collection. Imagine what our society would be like without people who remove our trash. Not only would our streets be clogged with litter, but disease would be rampant and our collective health and longevity would suffer in the long run. Or consider the hospital janitors during the coronavirus pandemic who cleaned and disinfected rooms and hallways at significant risk to their own health. But garbage collection and janitorial work are neither prestigious nor considered worthy of high salary. Why not? According to the structural-functionalist perspective, it is because we have no shortage of people with the skills needed to collect garbage or apply disinfectant to floors. And it doesn't take much training to learn how to do these things. Physicians also serve the collective health needs of a society. But because of the intricate skills and extensive training needed to be a doctor, society must offer rewards high enough to ensure that qualified people will want to become one.

According to structural-functionalism, then, inequality is inevitable and necessary. Societies have to assign different levels of importance to different positions. They can't all be equal. And we all benefit in the long run when our most qualified members fill our most important positions. So, it's appropriate that certain "important" people earn a lot and accumulate a lot. If we take the functionalist argument to its logical conclusion, then there should be a direct correlation between the average salaries of a given occupation and its importance in society.

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Page 24

But a quick look at the salary structure in our society reveals obvious instances of highly rewarded positions that are not as functionally important as positions that receive smaller rewards. For instance, George Clooney earns \$239 million a year. Judge Judy pulls in \$147 million a year. Ed Sheeran earns \$110 million a year. The soccer player Lionel Messi makes \$111 million. The author James Patterson sells his novels to the tune of \$86 million a year (*Forbes*, 2019). You might think that actors, TV personalities, pop singers, soccer players, and authors serve vital social functions by providing the rest of us with a recreational release from the demands of ordinary life, and the best entertainers and athletes do have rare skills, indeed. However, society probably can do without another feature film, made-for-television court hearing, concert, soccer match, or piece of escapist fiction more easily than it can do without competent physicians, scientists, computer programmers, teachers . . . or even trash collectors and janitors, who earn substantially less in a year than what many celebrities earn in a day.

Furthermore, what this perspective overlooks is the fact that stratification can be unjust and divisive, a source of social disorder (Tumin, 1953). The argument that only a limited number of talented people are able to occupy important social positions is probably overstated. Many people have the talent to become doctors. What they lack is access to training. And why are some people—women and racial and ethnic minorities—paid less for or excluded entirely from certain jobs (see [Chapter 6](#))? Finally, when functionalists claim that inequality and stratification serve the needs of society, we must ask, Whose needs? A system of slavery obviously meets the needs of one group at the expense of another, but that doesn't make it tolerable.

In a class-stratified society, those individuals who receive the greatest rewards have the resources to make sure they continue receiving such rewards. Over time, the competition for the most desirable positions will become less open and less competitive—less a function of achievement than ascription. In such circumstances, the offspring of "talented"—that is, high-status—parents will always have an advantage over equally talented people who had the bad sense to be born into less successful families.

### *Conflict Theories*

Structural-functionalism has been criticized for accepting existing social arrangements without examining how they might exploit or otherwise disadvantage certain groups or individuals within the society. The [conflict perspective](#) addresses this deficiency by viewing the structure of society as a source of inequality, which always benefits some groups at the expense of other groups. Social inequality is neither a necessity nor a source of social order. Instead, it is a reflection of the unequal distribution of power in society and is a primary source of conflict, coercion, and unhappiness.

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Page 25

According to perhaps the most famous conflict theorists, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848/1982), stratification ultimately rests on the unequal distribution of resources—some people have them, others don't. Important resources include money, land, information, education, health care, safety, and adequate housing. The "haves" in such an arrangement can control the lives of the "have nots" because they control these resources and are ultimately the ones who set the rules. According to this perspective, a system of stratification allows members of the dominant group to exploit those in subordinate positions as consumers, renters, employees, and so on, thereby reinforcing their own superiority over others. Hence, stratification virtually guarantees that some groups or classes of people (those who have less) will always be competing with other groups or classes (those who have more). The fundamental proposition of this perspective is that stratification systems will always serve the interests of those at the top and not the survival needs of the entire society.

Marx's original theory was, in essence, a wholesale critique of capitalism. [Capitalists](#)—those who own the means of producing the goods and services society needs, and to whom others must sell their labor in order to survive—have considerable influence over what will be produced, how much will be produced, who will get it, how much money people will be paid to produce it, and so forth. Such power allows them to control [workers](#)—who neither own the means of production nor have the ability to purchase the labor of others. Hence, capitalists control other people's livelihoods, the communities in which people live, and the economic decisions that affect the entire society. Marx and Engels supplemented this two-tiered conception of class by adding a third tier, the petite bourgeoisie, which is a transitional class of people who own the means of production but don't purchase the labor power of others. This class consists of self-employed skilled laborers and businesspeople who are economically self-sufficient but don't have a staff of subordinate workers.

Rich and politically powerful individuals—who not coincidentally tend to come from advantaged gender and ethnoracial groups—frequently work together to create or maintain privilege, often at the expense of the middle and lower classes (Hacker & Pierson, 2010). What the conflict perspective gives us that the structural-functionalist perspective doesn't is an acknowledgment of the interconnected roles that economic and political institutions play in creating and maintaining a stratified society (Newman, 2021). In such a structure, the rich inevitably tend to get richer, to use their wealth to create more wealth for themselves, and to act in ways that will protect their interests and positions in society.

Page 26

You'd expect constant attempts by those at the bottom to transcend their lowly status and seek control over limited resources. But such revolutions rarely occur in human societies. Why not? Marx and Engels argued that those in power have access to the means necessary to create and promote a reality that justifies their exploitative actions. Their version of reality is so influential that even those who are disadvantaged by it come to accept it. They called this phenomenon [false consciousness](#). False consciousness is crucial because it is the primary means by which the powerful classes in society prevent protest and revolution. As long as large numbers of poor people continue to believe that wealth and success are solely the products of individual hard work and effort rather than of structured inequalities in society—that is, believe what in the United States has been called the American Dream—resentment and animosity toward the rich will be minimized and people will perceive the inequalities as fair and deserved (Robinson & Bell, 1978).

Marx's theory was based on 19th-century economic systems. In his time, the heyday of industrial development, ownership of property, and control of labor in a capitalist system were synonymous. Most jobs were either on farms or in factories. It made sense to lump into one class all those who didn't own productive resources and who depended on wages from others to survive, and into another class all those who owned property and paid wages. However, the nature of capitalism has changed a lot since then. Today a person with a novel idea for a product or service, a computer, and a telephone can go into business and make a lot of money. Corporations have become much larger and more bureaucratic, with a long, multilevel chain of command. Ownership of large companies lies in the hands of stockholders (foreign as well as domestic), who often have distant connections or even no connections at all to the everyday workings of the business. Thus, ownership and management are separated. The powerful people who run large businesses and control workers on a day-to-day basis are frequently not the same people who own the businesses.

With these changes in mind, some sociologists have revised Marx's original argument. For instance, sociologist Erik Olin Wright and his colleagues (Wright, 1976; Wright, Costello, Hachen, & Sprague, 1982; Wright & Perrone, 1977) have developed a model that incorporates both the ownership of means of production and the exercise of authority over others. The capitalist and petite bourgeoisie classes in this scheme are identical to Marx and Engels's. What is different is that the classes of people who do not own society's productive resources (Marx and Engels's worker class) are divided into two classes: managers and workers.

Wright's approach emphasizes that class conflict is more than just a clash between rich people and poor people. Societies have, in fact, multiple lines of conflict—economic, political, administrative, and social. Some positions, or what Wright calls *contradictory class locations*, fall between two major classes. Individuals in these positions have trouble identifying with one side or the other. Managers and supervisors, for instance, can ally with workers because both are subordinates of capitalist owners. Yet, because managers and supervisors can exercise authority over some people, they also share the interests and concerns of owners. During labor disputes in professional sports, for example, coaches often struggle with the dilemma of whether they represent the interests of the owners or the players (Newman, 2021).

Page 27

Other sociologists have criticized Marx's exclusive reliance on economic factors to explain inequality. The early 20th-century sociologist Max Weber (1970) identified two other sources of inequality—prestige and power—in addition to the control of property, wealth, and income. [Prestige](#) is the amount of honor and respect people receive from others. Class position certainly influences prestige, but so can family background, physical appearance, intelligence, political clout, and so on. [Power](#) is the ability to influence others and to pursue and achieve one's own goals. Wealth, prestige, and power usually coincide, but not always. Sometimes groups with little if any wealth have managed to have their voices heard and have exerted a powerful influence on more advantaged groups. In 2004, for example, cooks, housekeepers, and bellboys went on strike at four San Francisco hotels. Two days later, workers were locked out of 10 other hotels. The strike eventually spread to nearby Monterey. The actions of these low-wage laborers discouraged visitors from coming to the Bay Area and had an enormous effect on the local economy. Imagine what would happen if the trash collectors in your town went on strike?

Recently, the conflict approach to social inequality has expanded even further by incorporating race, ethnicity, and gender. For instance, workers of color may share a class location with whites, but as you'll see in [Chapter 6](#), the lower wages that working-class ethnoracial minorities earn as well as their concentration in particular low-paying occupations double their vulnerability to exploitation (Feagin & Feagin, 2004). Furthermore, as long as workers see their primary adversaries as other workers who are competing with them for scarce jobs (such as immigrants or members of other ethnoracial minorities), their anger will be directed toward one another and not upward against those in positions of power. Indeed, research has shown that downward mobility (Silberstein & Seeman, 1959) and the rapid influx of new ethnic groups into a community (Bergesen & Herman, 1998) are associated with higher levels of ethnic hostility, conflict, and backlash violence. One might conclude that it is in capitalists' best interest to foster ethnoracial divisions among workers, thereby preventing them from unifying and taking advantage of their numbers to seek a more equitable division of resources.

Page 28

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Page 28

Another variety of the conflict perspective that has become particularly popular among sociologists in the last several decades is the [feminist perspective](#). Feminist sociologists focus on gender, more so than class or socioeconomic status, as the most important source of conflict and inequality in social life. They argue that in nearly every contemporary society, important social institutions—education, economy, politics, religion, family—are controlled and dominated by men. Men use a variety of methods—including violence, exploitation, and other forms of discrimination—to reinforce their dominance. Consequently, women have less power, influence, and opportunity than men do. In families, for instance, women have traditionally been encouraged to perform unpaid household labor and child care duties, whereas men have been free to devote their energy and attention to earning money and power in the economic marketplace. Women's lower wages when they do work outside the home are often justified by the assumption that their paid labor is secondary to that of their husbands. But as women in many societies seek equality in education, politics, careers, marriage, and other areas of social life, their activities inevitably affect the broader structure of society.

Early forms of feminist thinking were often criticized for ignoring race and class and trivializing the experiences of poor women and women of color. So, more recent feminists (sometimes called "gender rebellion feminists" [Lorber, 1998]) focus on the complex connections between inequalities based on sex and gender and inequalities based on race, ethnicity, social class, and sexuality. By looking at the intersections among these varieties of difference, we can see what all disadvantaged segments of society have in common and how they're unique (Collins, 2004).

## THE PRIVILEGE OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

Ethnoracial, gender, class, and sexual differences and similarities are an enormously powerful component of stratification systems because they determine life chances and access to important social resources. Sociologists use the term [cultural capital](#) to refer to the status characteristics that can influence a person's social and economic opportunities. For instance, many top universities reserve a certain number of positions for "legacies," applicants whose parents are alumni of that institution. At some highly selective universities, like Harvard and Princeton, legacies are five times as likely to be accepted as unconnected applicants with similar or better credentials (cited in Mandery, 2014). Family name, in this case, can serve as a form of cultural capital. In a society that values physical appearance, beauty is also cultural capital that can be exchanged for economic advantage. Economists have even coined the term *beauty premium* to refer to the economic advantages attractive people enjoy.

Page 29

Handsome men earn, on average, 5% more than their less-attractive counterparts (good-looking women earn 4% more); pretty people get more attention from teachers, bosses, and mentors. . . . Fifty seven percent of hiring managers [in a recent survey indicated that] qualified but unattractive candidates are likely to have a harder time landing a job, while more than half advised spending as much time and money on "making sure they look attractive" as on perfecting a résumé. (Bennett, 2010, p. 47)

Likewise, membership in advantaged gender, ethnoracial, and sexuality-based groups can serve as cultural capital as well, as illustrated by the historical preference for white, male, heterosexual employees over women, people of color, and homosexual or transgendered individuals.

Cultural capital can also provide advantage in the form of access to social connections and networks. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina decimated the Gulf Coast of the United States. The storm did not affect all residents equally; however. The vast majority of the evacuees who suffered for days in the sweltering darkness of the Superdome and convention center in New Orleans were poor people of color who came from the most vulnerable parts of the city. Certainly, these were individuals who didn't have the necessary resources to evacuate prior to the hurricane and didn't have the money to stay in hotels even if they could have gotten out (see [Chapter 8](#) for more detail). But they also lacked cultural capital in the form of social connections—people who could have given them rides, negotiated discounted hotel rates for them, or provided lodging in their own homes (Sander, 2005).

The more privileged one's status, the larger one's endowment of cultural capital. In [Chapters 5](#) through [8](#), I will examine the biological, political, educational, and economic imbalances that result from the cultural capital that people amass by virtue of their membership in certain groups.



## CONCLUSION

This introductory chapter hints at several key themes that will percolate through the remainder of this book. In what ways are we different from one another? How are we the same? Is similarity or difference more important in our everyday lives? Are all differences inevitably associated with inequality? How is inequality constructed and reinforced in interpersonal experiences? How is it embedded in our language, our culture, and our social institutions? In addressing these general questions, I will pay particular attention to the interactions of key social characteristics that we use to differentiate ourselves from others: race (and ethnicity), gender (and sex), sexuality, and social class. No characteristics are as influential as these in determining our identities, our life chances, and the shape of our social institutions.

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Page 30

In any book that focuses on identities and inequalities, the use of particular terminology to refer to dimensions of social identity carries significant cultural and political weight. People often choose words carefully when referring to themselves and others. However, there is never complete consensus about the acceptability or unacceptability of particular terms. Nor is there agreement about the clarity of boundaries between groups or even how permanent they are. And the term of choice in one decade may fall out of favor in the next. Thus, my choice of words in this book inevitably runs the risk of offending at least some readers some of the time. But in the interests of consistency, I will use the terms *sex* and *gender* when referring to dimensions like cisgender/transgender, girls/boys, women/men, and femininity/masculinity; I will use the terms *sexuality* or *sexual orientation* when discussing people's erotic identities (homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, and so on). I will use the terms *race*, *ethnicity*, and *ethnoracial* when examining the lives of people who identify themselves as Asian American, Native American, Latinx, African American, and white. If I use the term *minority groups*, I will be referring not to statistically underrepresented groups but to those that have historically been disadvantaged in this society. Indeed, a purely statistical definition of minority may soon be obsolete. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, for instance, about 1 in 3 residents is of a race other than white (ProQuest Statistical Abstract, 2014); by 2050, it's projected to be more than 1 in 2 (Martin & Midgley, 2010).

In addition, I will make the argument that race, class, gender, and sexuality are not biological givens but are, to a large degree, social constructions. Hence, whenever I refer to members of particular groups (for example, females, heterosexuals, lesbians, transgender, cisgender, whites, Asian Americans, and so on), I am talking about those people who self-identify as members of these groups. The first step in exploring the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality is respecting the way that individuals define themselves.



## [INVESTIGATING IDENTITIES AND INEQUALITIES]

### *Identity inheritance: Climbing up (or down) your family tree*

The concept of cultural capital is important because it shows that social advantage and disadvantage do not emerge from differences in material wealth alone. Indeed, cultural capital consists of all the social assets that lead to differences in material wealth. Any characteristic, possession, or identifier that can be exchanged for economic gain can be considered a form of cultural capital. Often, people are unaware that they even have these noneconomic forms of capital. Take, for instance, a person's family heritage. Wealthy parents often endow their children with reputations, connections, and cultured knowledge that will aid them as they grow up. Sometimes simply inheriting a family name is enough to provide economic, educational, and political advantages. Poor parents are less able to pass on such cultural capital to their children and instead are likely to leave their children a legacy of disadvantage that they must fight to overcome.

Page 31

To understand how cultural capital is handed down from generation to generation, construct your own family tree. Go as far back into the past as you can. You may need to ask your parents, grandparents, and other older relatives about long-deceased ancestors. Face-to-face interviews are best, but you may have to conduct your interviews over the phone or via e-mail, Zoom, Skype, or FaceTime. If family artifacts are available (for example, old letters, diaries, photo albums, home movies/videos, heirlooms), use them for insight into the identities and lives of your ancestors.

You may focus on one side of your family or both sides. If there have been remarriages in your family's past, try to obtain information on the various familial branches.

For each person in the tree, identify the primary occupation and the highest level of education they achieved. Look for patterns in family members' experiences that are linked to race, ethnicity, culture, gender, social class, and religion. It would be helpful to determine how your family first came to the United States. If some of your ancestors lived their whole lives in another country, you can examine how their experiences and achievements differed from those of (1) family members who immigrated to the United States or (2) those who lived here their entire lives.

Can you detect a pattern of upward or downward socioeconomic movement in your family? Did relatives from previous generations graduate from college? Did any attend the college you presently attend? Has some career legacy been handed down from generation to generation? For instance, has a family business, dwelling, or tract of property stayed in the family across generations? How do the occupational and educational paths of men and women differ in your family?

Now examine how your family history has influenced *your life*. Can you identify ideals, values, beliefs, and traditions you have that you think you've inherited from members in previous generations? How do your own career aspirations compare with those of your ancestors? If you have or expect to have children, what are your career and educational aspirations for them?

After a thorough examination of your family experiences, ask yourself this question: Does your family tree support the contention that cultural capital is hereditary?