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SECTION III

THE MEANING OF DIFFERENCE



FRAMEWORK ESSAY

The first framework essay in this text considered how contemporary American master statuses are named, dichotomized, and stigmatized. The second essay focused on the experience of privilege and stigma that accompanies those master statuses. In this final section, we will look at the *meaning* that is attributed to difference. What significance are differences of race, sex, class, disability, and sexual orientation presumed to have? What difference does difference make? The concept of ideology is critical to understanding the specific meanings that are attributed to differences, and so we will focus on ideology in this essay.

Ideology

The concept of *ideology* originated in the work of Marx and Engels, particularly *The German Ideology* (1846). It is now a concept used throughout the social sciences and humanities. In general, an ideology can be defined as a widely shared belief or idea that has been constructed and disseminated by the powerful, primarily reflects their experiences, and functions for their benefit.

Ideologies are anchored in the experiences of their creators; thus, they offer only a partial view of the world. "Ideologies are not simply false, they can be 'partly true,' and yet also incomplete [or] distorted. . . . [They are not] consciously crafted by the ruling class and then injected into the minds of the majority; [they are] instead *produced* by specifiable, complex, social conditions" (Brantlinger, 1990:80). Because those who control the means of disseminating ideas have a better chance of having *their* ideas become the ones that prevail, Marx and Engels concluded that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas." Ideologies have the power to supplant, distort, or silence the experiences of those outside their production.

The idea that people are rewarded on the basis of their merit is an example of an ideology. It is an idea promoted by those with power—for example, teachers and supervisors—and many opportunities are created for the expression of the belief. Report cards, award banquets, and merit raises are all occasions for the expression of the belief that people are rewarded on the basis of their merit.

But certainly, most know this idea is not really true: People are not rewarded only or even primarily on the basis of their merit. The idea that merit is rewarded is only partly true and reflects only *some* people's experiences. The frequent repetition of the idea, however, has the potential to overwhelm contrary experience. Even those whose experience has not generally been that people are rewarded based on merit are likely to subscribe to this philosophy, because they hear it reproduced so often. In any event, there are few safe opportunities to describe beliefs to the contrary or have those beliefs widely disseminated.

Thus, the idea that people are rewarded on the basis of merit is an ideology. It is a belief that reflects primarily the experiences of those with power, but is presented as universally valid. The idea overwhelms and silences the voices of those who are outside its production. In effect, ideologies ask us to discount our own experience.

This conflict between one's own experience and the ideas conveyed by an ideology is implied in W. E. B. Du Bois's description of the "double consciousness" experienced by African Americans discussed in Framework Essay II (page 191). It is also what many feminists refer to as the double or fractured consciousness experienced by women. In both cases, the dominant ideas fail to reflect the real-life experiences of people in these categories. For example, the *actual* experience of poverty, discrimination, motherhood, disability, sexual assault, life in a black neighborhood, or in a gay relationship rarely coincides with the public discussion on these topics. Because those in stigmatized categories do not control the production or distribution of the prevailing ideas, *their* experience is not likely to be reflected in them. The ideology not only silences their experience; it may invalidate it even in their own minds: "I must be the one who's crazy!" In this way, the dominant discourse can invade and overwhelm our own experience, since what we know doesn't fit with it (Kasper, 1986; Smith, 1978, 1990).

An ideology that so dominates a culture as to become the prevailing and unquestioned belief was described in the 1920s by Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci as the *hegemonic*, or ruling, ideology. Gramsci argued that social control was primarily accomplished by the control of ideas, and that whatever was considered to be "common sense" was especially effective as a mechanism of social control (Omi and Winant, 1994:67). Commonsense beliefs are likely to embody widely shared ideas primarily reflecting the interests and experience of those who are powerful. We are all encouraged to adhere to "common sense" even when that requires discounting our own experience. The discussion of natural-law language that follows especially shows how this operates.

Conveying Ideologies: Natural-Law Language and Stereotypes

Hegemonic, or ruling, ideologies often take the form of commonsense beliefs and are especially embodied in stereotypes and what is called *natural-law language*.

Natural-Law Language When people use the word *natural*, they usually mean that something is inevitable, predetermined, or outside human control (Pierce, 1971). *Human nature* and *instinct* are often used in the same way. For example, "It's only natural to care about what others think," "It's human nature to want to get ahead," or "It's just instinctive to be afraid of someone different" all convey the sense that something is inevitable, automatic, and independent of one's will.

Thus, it is not surprising when, in discussions about discrimination, someone says, "It's only natural for people to be prejudiced" or "It's human nature to want to be with your own kind." Each of these "common-sense" ideas conveys a belief in the inevitability of discrimination and prejudice, as if such processes emerged independently of anyone's will.

Even for issues of which we disapprove, the word *natural* can convey this sense of inevitability. For example, "I am against racism, but it's only natural" puts nature on the side of prejudice. Arguing that something is natural because it happens frequently has the same consequence. "All societies have discriminated against

women, so there is little we can do about it" implies that something that happens frequently is therefore inevitable. But in truth, something that happens frequently could just as likely mean there is an extensive set of social controls ensuring the outcome.

At least three consequences follow from using natural-law language. First, it ends discussion, as if having described something as natural makes any further exploration of the topic unnecessary. This makes sense given that the word *natural* is equated with inevitability: If something is inevitable, there is little sense in questioning it.

Second, because natural-law language treats behavior as predetermined, it overlooks the actual cultural and historical variation of human societies. If something is natural, it should always happen. Yet there is virtually no human behavior that emerges everywhere and always; all social life is susceptible to change. Thus, natural-law language ignores the variability of social life.

Third, natural-law language treats individuals as passive, lacking an interest in or control over social life. If it is "natural" to dislike those who are different, then there is really nothing we can do about that feeling. It is no one's responsibility; it is just natural. If there is nothing I can do about my own behavior, there is little I could expect to do about the behavior of others. Human nature thus is depicted as a limitation beyond which people cannot expect to move (Gould, 1981). Describing certain behavior as "only natural" implies that personal and social change are impossible.

In all these ways—by closing off discussion, masking variation and change, and treating humans as passive—natural-law language tells us not to question the world that surrounds us. Natural-law language has this effect no matter what context it emerges in: "It's only natural to discriminate," "It's only natural to want to have children," "It's only natural to marry and settle down," "Inequality is only natural; the poor will always be with us," "Aggression and war are just human nature," "Greed is instinctive." In each case, natural-law language not only discourages questions, it carries a covert recommendation about what one *ought* to do. If something is "just natural," you cannot prevent others from doing it, and you are well advised to do it yourself. Thus, natural-law language serves as a forceful mechanism of social control (Pierce, 1971).

Natural-law language is used to convey hegemonic ideologies. It reduces the complexity and historic variability of the social world to a claim for universal processes, offering a partial and distorted truth that silences those with contrary experience. Natural-law language can make discrimination appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable. Thus, natural-law language itself creates and maintains ideas about difference.

Stereotypes A *stereotype* is a prediction that "members of a group will behave in certain ways" (Andre, 1988:259)—that black men will have athletic ability or that Asian American students will excel in the sciences. Stereotypes assume that all the individuals in a category possess the same characteristics. Stereotypes persist despite evidence to the contrary because they are not formulated in a way that is

testable or falsifiable (Andre, 1988). In this way stereotypes differ from descriptions. Descriptions offer no prediction; they can be tested for accuracy and rejected when they are wrong; they encourage explanation and a consideration of historical variability.

For example, "Most great American athletes are African American" is a description. First, there is no prediction that a particular African American can be expected to be a good athlete, or that someone who is white will be a poor one. Second, the claim is falsifiable; that is, it can be tested for accuracy and proven wrong (e.g., by asking what proportion of the last two decades' Olympic medal winners were African American). Third, the statement turns our attention to explanation and historical variation: Why might this be the case? Has this always been the case?

In contrast, "African Americans are good athletes" is a stereotype. It attempts to characterize a whole population, thus denying the inevitable differences among the people in the category. It predicts that members of a group will behave in a particular way. It cannot be falsified since there is no direct way to test the claim. Further, the stereotype denies the reality of historical and cultural variation by suggesting that this has always been the case. Thus, stereotypes essentialize: they assume that if you know something about the physical package someone comes in, you can predict that person's behavior.

Both stereotypes and natural-law language offer broad-based predictions about behavior. Stereotypes predict that members of a particular category will possess particular attributes; natural-law language predicts that certain behavior is inevitable. Neither stereotypes nor natural-law language is anchored in any social or historical context and, for that reason, both are frequently wrong. Basketball great Bill Russell's reaction when asked if he thought African Americans were "natural" athletes makes clear the similarity of natural-law language and stereotyping. As Russell said, this was a stereotypic image of African American athletes that deprecated the skill and effort he brought to his craft—as if he were great because he was black rather than because of the talent he cultivated in hours of work.

Stereotyping and Asian Americans As we have said, stereotypes explain life outcomes by attributing some essential, shared quality to all those in a particular category. The current depiction of Asian Americans as a "model minority" is a good example of this. This stereotype masks the considerable economic, educational, and occupational heterogeneity among Asian Americans. For example, the college degree attainment rate of Vietnamese Americans is only one-quarter the rate for Asian Americans overall. The model-minority stereotype is itself a fairly recent invention. Its origin is described by Robert B. Lee in Reading 49. Among those now called "model minority" are categories of people previously barred as unworthy to immigrate, denied citizenship through naturalization, and placed in internment camps as potential traitors.

In American culture, stereotypes are often driven by the necessity to explain why some categories of people succeed more than others (Steinberg, 1989). Thus, the model-minority stereotype is often used to claim that if racism has not hurt Asian Americans' success, it could not have hurt African Americans'.

The myth of the Asian-American "model minority" has been challenged, yet it continues to be widely believed. One reason for this is its instructional value. For whom are Asian Americans supposed to be a "model"? Shortly after the Civil War, southern planters recruited Chinese immigrants in order to pit them against the newly freed blacks as "examples" of laborers willing to work hard for low wages. Today, Asian Americans are again being used to discipline blacks. . . . Our society needs an Asian-American "model minority" in an era anxious about a growing black underclass. (Takaki, 1993:416)

A brief review of American immigration policy explains the misguided nature of the comparison between African and Asian Americans. From 1921 until 1965, U.S. immigration was restricted by quotas that set limits on the number of immigrants from each nation based on the percentage of people from that country residing in the United States at the time of the 1920 census. This had the obvious and intended effect of severely restricting immigration from Asia, as well as from Southern and Eastern Europe and Africa. The civil rights movement of the 1960s raised such national embarrassment about this quota system that in 1965 Congress replaced national-origin quotas with an annual 20,000-person limit for every nation regardless of its size. Within that quota, preference went first to those who were relatives of American citizens and then to those with occupational skills needed in America.

The result was a total increase in immigration and a change in its composition. Because few individuals from non-European countries could immigrate on the grounds of having family in America—previous restrictions would have made that almost impossible—the quotas were filled with people meeting designated *occupational* needs. Thus, those immigrating to the United States since 1965 have had high educational and occupational profiles. The middle- and upper-class professionals and entrepreneurs who have immigrated to the United States did not suddenly become successful here; rather, they continued their home-country success here. These high occupational and educational profiles have characterized immigrants from African as well as Asian countries.

The high Asian American educational and occupational profile has yielded the country's highest median *household* income, but not its highest *individual* income. The chart below compares family and individual income by race and shows the degree to which family size affects household income.

Race/ethnicity	Median family income	Median household size	Median per capita income
White (non-Hispanic)	\$45,904	2.45	\$25,278
Black	\$30,439	2.67	\$15,159
Latino	\$33,447	3.49	\$12,306
Asian American	\$55,521	3.10	\$22,352

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2001.

Thus, despite a higher educational profile, Asian Americans' per capita income lags behind that of non-Hispanic whites. The following 1999 data compare college graduation with unemployment and poverty rates.

Race/ethnicity	Percent with college degree	Unemployment rate	Percent of families in poverty
Whites	25.9%	3.7%	8.0%
Blacks	15.4	8.0	23.4
Latinos	10.9	6.4	22.7
Asian Americans	42.4	4.2	11.0

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; in Le, 2001.

A more telling statistic is how much more money a person earns with each additional year of schooling completed, or what sociologists call "returns on education." Using this measure, research consistently shows that for each additional year of education attained, Whites earn another \$522 [a year.] That is, beyond a high school degree, a White [worker] with four more years of education (equivalent to a college degree) can expect to earn \$2,088 [more] per year in salary.

In contrast, return on each additional year of education for a Japanese American is only \$438 a [year.] For a Chinese American, it's \$320. For Blacks, it's even worse at only \$284. What this means is that, basically, a typical Asian American has to get more years of education just to make the same amount of money that a typical White [worker] makes with less education. (Le, 2001)

While selective immigration goes a long way toward explaining the success of some recent immigrants from Asian countries, it's important to distinguish between people who are immigrants and those who are refugees. The circumstances of arrival and resettlement for those who have fled their home countries make the refugee population exceedingly heterogeneous and quite different from those who have immigrated to the United States (Haines, 1989). Thus, Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong refugees are unlikely to have the high occupational or educational profiles of other Asian immigrants.

The misguided contemporary formulation—if Asian Americans can make it, why can't African Americans?—echoes an earlier question: If European immigrants can make it, why can't African Americans? The answer to that question is summarized as follows:

Conditions within the cities to which they had migrated [beginning in the 1920s], not slavery, strained blacks' ability to retain two-parent families. Within those cities, blacks faced circumstances that differed fundamentally from those found earlier by European immigrants. They entered cities in large numbers as unskilled and semiskilled manufacturing jobs were leaving, not growing. The discrimination they encountered kept them out

of the manufacturing jobs into which earlier immigrants had been recruited. One important goal of public schools had been the assimilation and "Americanization" of immigrant children; by contrast, they excluded and segregated blacks. Racism enforced housing segregation, and residential concentration among blacks increased at the same time it lessened among immigrants and their children. Political machines had embraced earlier immigrants and incorporated them into the system of "city trenches" by which American cities were governed; they excluded blacks from effective political power until cities had been so abandoned by industry and deserted by whites that resistance to black political participation no longer mattered. All the processes that had opened opportunities for immigrants and their children broke down for blacks. . . . (Katz, 1989:51)

Stereotyping and African Americans Despite the significance of prejudice against blacks in American history, large-scale survey research on racial prejudice has been pursued only since the beginning of the 1990s (Sniderman and Carmines, 1997). That research shows a mixed picture.

While prejudice has decreased significantly over the last decades, negative stereotypes about African Americans still prevail among whites across all educational levels. "With the exception of citizens who are uncommonly well educated and uncommonly liberal, what is striking is the sheer pervasiveness throughout contemporary American society of negative characterizations of blacks" (Sniderman and Piazza, 1993:50). When whites are asked to select adjectives that describe "most blacks," few pick positive ones. Seventy-five percent are willing to describe African Americans as "friendly," but only "50–60 percent are prepared to describe blacks as 'smart at everyday things,' 'good neighbors,' 'hard-working,' 'intelligent at school,' 'dependable,' 'law-abiding,' or 'determined to succeed'" (Sniderman and Carmines, 1997:62–63). For negative characterizations, 20 percent of whites describe blacks as "irresponsible" and 50 percent say blacks are "aggressive or violent" (Sniderman and Carmines, 1997).

Still, when presented with real-life scenarios containing hidden tests of racial attitudes, whites who *said* they felt positively about African Americans appear to have actually *meant* it (Sniderman and Carmines, 1997). In addition, whites were less discriminatory when responding to scenarios about *individual* African Americans than they were when considering African Americans as a group.

Claims for government assistance made on behalf of blacks as *individuals* are treated [by white survey respondents] as those made on behalf of individual whites, and indeed, insofar as race makes a difference, a black who has lost his or her job meets with a more sympathetic and generous response [in the survey] than a white who has lost his or her job. On the other hand, when it comes to judgments about what blacks as a group are entitled to, a racial double standard manifestly persists. . . .

The evenhandedness characteristic of reactions to blacks as individuals is not characteristic of reactions to blacks as a group. We found significantly more support for government guarantees of equal opportunity for women than for blacks. (Sniderman and Piazza, 1993:13 and 169)

Well-educated whites did not operate from this double standard, but other whites—irrespective of their political orientation—did. "Thus, conservatives with a

high school education or less are almost three times as likely to approve of government assurances of equal opportunity for women as for blacks—plainly a double standard. But the same is true on the left” (Sniderman and Piazza, 1993:83). (Sniderman and Piazza argue that education lessens this double standard because it encourages consistency in thinking.) “Given this duality of response, it is easier to understand why whites see themselves as living in a world where the meaning of race has changed, while blacks see themselves as living in a world where its meaning has remained much the same” (Sniderman and Piazza, 1993:68).

Social Institutions and the Support of Ideologies

The specific messages carried by natural-law language and stereotypes are often echoed by social institutions. The term *social institution* refers to the established mechanisms by which societies meet their predictable needs. For example, the need to socialize new members of the society is met by the institutions of the family and education. In addition to these, social institutions include science, law, religion, politics, the economy, military, medicine, and mass media or popular culture. Ideologies—in our case ideologies about the meaning of difference—naturally play a significant role in the operation of social institutions. Thus, the readings in this section are organized around the social institutions of law, politics, economy, science, and popular culture. We have also included a section on language, but that is not generally considered a social institution *per se*.

In the discussion that follows, we will consider how late-19th- and early-20th-century science and popular culture constructed the meaning of race, class, sex, and sexual orientation differences. Throughout, there is a striking congruence among scientific pronouncements, popular culture messages, and the prejudices of the day.

Science The need to explain the meaning of human difference forcefully emerged when 15th century Europeans’ encountered previously unknown regions and peoples. “Three centuries of exploration brought home as never before the tremendous diversity of human behavior and life patterns within environments and under circumstances dramatically different from those of Europe. . . . Out of that large laboratory of human experience was born the [idea of the] conflict between nature and nurture” (Degler, 1991:4–5).

The “nature-nurture” conflict offered two ways to explain human variation. Explanations from the nature side stressed that the diversity of human societies—and the ability of some to conquer and dominate others—reflected significant biological differences among populations. Explanations from the nurture side argued that human diversity resulted from historical, environmental, and cultural difference. From the nature side, humans were understood to act out behaviors that are biologically driven. From the nurture side, humans were something of a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which particular cultural expectations were inscribed.

Whether nature or nurture was understood to dominate, however, the discussion of the meaning of human difference always assumed that people could be ranked as to their worth (Gould, 1981). Thus, the real question was whether the rankings

reflected in social hierarchies were the result of nature, and thus inevitable and fixed, or could be affected by human action and were thus subject to change.

The question was not merely theoretical. The 1800s in America witnessed appropriation of Native American territories and the forced relocation of vast numbers of people under the Indian Removal Act of 1830; the 1848 signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ending the Mexican-American War and ceding what is now Texas, New Mexico, California, Utah, Nevada, and Arizona to the United States with the 75,000 Mexican nationals residing in those territories becoming U.S. citizens; passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act; a prolonged national debate about slavery and women's suffrage; and the unprecedented flow of poor and working-class immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. The century closed with the internationally publicized trial of English playwright Oscar Wilde, who was sentenced to two years' hard labor for homosexuality.

Thus, whether social hierarchy reflected natural, permanent, and inherent differences in capability (the nature side) or was the product of specific social and historical circumstances and therefore susceptible to change (the nurture side) raised a profound question. Because Africans were held by whites in slavery, did that mean Africans were by their nature inferior to whites? Were Native Americans literally "savages" occupying some middle ground between animals and civilized humans, and did they therefore benefit from domination by those who supposedly were more advanced? Did the dissimilarity of Chinese immigrants from American whites mean they were not "human" in the way whites were? If homosexuality was congenital, did that mean homosexuals were profoundly different from heterosexuals? Were women closer to plants and animals than to civilized men? Were the poor and working classes composed of those who not only lacked the talents by which to rise in society but also passed their defects on to their children? In all, were individuals and categories of people located in the statuses for which they were best suited? This was the question driving public debate (Degler, 1991). If one believed that the social order simply reflected immutable biological differences, the answer to the question would likely be affirmative. That would not have been the case, however, for those who believed these differences were the outcome of specific social and historical processes overlaying a shared humanity. In all, the question behind the nature-nurture debate was about the *meaning* of what appeared to be *natural* difference. The answer to that question was shaped by the hegemonic ideologies of the time—especially those informed by science.

Charles Darwin's publication of *The Origin of the Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) shifted the weight of popular and scholarly opinion toward the nature side of the equation (Degler, 1991). In its broadest terms, Darwin's conclusions challenged head on the two central beliefs of the time (Darwin himself was quite distressed to have arrived at these conclusions [Shipman, 1994]). First, the idea of evolutionary change challenged "traditional, Christian belief in a single episode of creation of a static, perfect, and unchanging world." The significance of evolutionary change was clear: "If the world were not created perfect, then there was no implicit justification for the way things were . . ." (Shipman, 1994:18).

Second, Darwin's work implied that all humans share a common ancestry. If differences among birds were the result of their adaptation to distinctive environments, then their differences existed within an overall framework of similarity and common ancestry. By analogy, the distinctiveness of human populations might also be understood as "variability within overall similarity" (Shipman, 1994:22)—a shocking possibility at the time. "It was the age of imperialism and most non-Europeans were regarded, even by Darwin, as 'barbarians'; he was astonished and taken aback by their wildness and animality. The differences among humans seemed so extreme that the humanity . . . of some living groups was scarcely credible" (Shipman, 1994:19).

The idea that change in the physical environment resulted in the success of some species and demise of others (the idea of natural selection) bolstered the pre-existent concept of "survival of the fittest." This phrase had been authored by English sociologist Herbert Spencer, who had been applying evolutionary principles to human societies several years before Darwin published *The Origin of the Species*.

Spencer's position, eventually called *social Darwinism*, was extremely popular in America. Spencer strongly believed that modern societies are inevitably improvements over earlier forms of social organization and that progress would necessarily follow from unimpeded competition for social resources. In all, social Darwinism argued that those who are more advanced naturally rise to the top of any stratification ladder.

Through social Darwinism, the prevailing hierarchies—slave owner over people held in slavery, white over Mexican and Native American, native-born over immigrant, upper-class over poor, male over female—could be attributed to natural processes and justified as a reflection of inherent differences among categories of people. As one sociologist at the turn of the century framed it, "under the tutelage of Darwinism the world returns again to the idea that *might* as evidence of fitness has something to do with *right*" (Degler, 1991:13).

Social Darwinism has since been discredited, since it attributes the supremacy of certain groups to biology and evolution rather than to the exercise of power within specific historical and economic contexts. Social Darwinism lacked a socially or historically grounded explanation for social stratification. Instead, it treated those hierarchies as a reflection of the biological merit of categories of people. Thus, the ideology of social Darwinism was used to justify slavery, colonialism, immigration quotas, the criminalization of homosexuality, the forced relocation of Native Americans, and the legal subordination of women.

Spencer argued that the specialization of tasks, also called the *division of labor*, was the outcome of a biologically mandated evolution. The sexual division of labor "was a product of the organic law of progress," thus making equal treatment of men and women impossible and even potentially dangerous.

The social Darwinist position was used by those opposed to providing equal education for women. Just when American institutions of higher education were opening to women—Vassar College was founded in 1865, Smith and Wellesley 10 years

later, and by 1870 many state universities had become coeducational—biologist Edward Clarke published a book (1873) that argued that the physical energy education required would endanger women's reproductive abilities (an idea first put forward by Spencer). Clarke's case was based on meager and questionable empirical evidence, seven clinical cases, only one of which actually supported his position (Sayers, 1982:14). His work was a response to *social* rather than scientific developments, since it was prompted by no new discoveries in biology. Nonetheless, the book was an immediate and enduring success. For the next 30 years it was used in the argument against equal education despite the accumulation of evidence refuting its claims. While Clarke's research should have been suspect, it instead became influential in policymaking. In part, "the reason why Clarke's argument seemed so serviceable to those opposed to women's higher education was that it was couched in biological terms and thus appeared to offer a legitimate scientific basis for conservative opposition to equal education" (Sayers, 1982:11).

In a similar fashion, science shaped ideas about the meaning of same-sex relationships. By the turn of the century in Europe, a gay rights movement had arisen in Germany and gay themes had emerged in French literature (Adam, 1987). At the same time, however, an international move to criminalize sexual relations between men gathered momentum: a revision of the German criminal code increased the penalties for male homosexuality, the British imprisoned Oscar Wilde, and Europe and the United States experienced a social reform movement directed against prostitution and male homosexuality. (The possibility of sexual relations between women was not considered until later.)

The move to criminalize homosexuality was countered by physicians arguing, from a social Darwinist position, that homosexuality is the product of "hereditary weakness" and is thus beyond individual control. Though their hope was for increased tolerance, scientists who took this position offered the idea of "homosexuality as a medical entity and the homosexual as a distinctive kind of person" (Conrad and Schneider, 1980:184). Thus, they contributed to the idea that heterosexual and homosexual people were profoundly different from each other.

Science also supported the argument that people of different skin colors are different in significant, immutable ways. Certainly Spencer's idea of the survival of the fittest was understood to support the ideology that whites are superior to all people of color: "The most prevalent form of social Darwinism at the turn of the century was actually racism, that is, the idea that one people might be superior to another because of differences in their biological nature" (Degler, 1991:15).

The scientific defense of American slavery first emerged with the work of two eminent scientists, Swiss naturalist Louis Agassiz and Philadelphia physician Samuel Morton. Agassiz immigrated to America in 1840 and became a professor at Harvard. There he garnered immense popularity by countering the biblically based theory of the unity of all people (which attributed racial differences to "degeneration" from a shared origin) with a "scientific" theory that different races had descended from different moments of creation—"different Adams" as it was called (Gould, 1981:39).

Samuel Morton tested Agassiz's theories by assessing the skull capacity of people of different races. His idea was that the size of the skull would correlate with the intelligence of the race. His results "matched every good Yankee's prejudices—whites on top, Indians in the middle, and blacks on the bottom; and among whites, Teutons and Anglo-Saxons on top, Jews in the middle, and Hindus on the bottom" (Gould, 1981:53).

As we now know, Morton's findings were simply wrong. Others who replicated his measurements did not arrive at the same conclusions about skull capacity: There were "no significant differences among races for Morton's own data" (Gould, 1981:67). Morton's research was inadequate even by the scientific standards of his time. There is no evidence that Morton intended to deceive. Rather, his assumptions of white superiority were so firm that he was oblivious to his own errors and illogic, errors that yielded the conclusion of white superiority only because of his miscalculations.

The use of questionable research to support prevailing beliefs (Gould, 1981) was also evident in the development of intelligence testing. In 1904, Alfred Binet, director of the psychology lab at the Sorbonne, was commissioned by the French minister of public education to develop a test to identify children whose poor performance in school might indicate a need for special education. Binet developed a test with a series of tasks that children of "normal" intelligence were expected to have mastered. Binet's own claims for the test were fairly limited. He did not equate intelligence with the score produced by his test, arguing that intelligence was too complex a factor to be reduced to a simple number. Nor did he construe his test as measuring inborn, permanent, or inherited limitations (Gould, 1981).

Binet's hesitations regarding the significance of the test, however, were ignored by the emerging field of American psychology, which used intelligence as a way to explain social hierarchies. "The people who are doing the drudgery are, as a rule, in their proper places," wrote H. H. Goddard, who introduced the Binet test to America. Stanford psychologist Lewis M. Terman (author of the Stanford-Binet IQ test) argued that "the children of successful and cultured parents test higher than children from wretched and ignorant homes for the simple reason that their heredity is better" (Degler, 1991:50). Indeed, "Terman believed that class boundaries had been set by innate intelligence" (Gould, 1981:183).

Such conclusions were used to shape decisions about the distribution of social resources. For example, intelligence was described as a capacity like the capacity of a jug for a certain amount of milk. A pint jug could not be expected to hold a quart of milk; similarly, it was pointless to waste "too much" education on someone whose capacity was supposedly limited. The findings of intelligence testers were thus used to advocate particular social policies such as restrictions on immigration. While it is not clear that the work of intelligence testers *directly* affected the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 (Degler, 1991), the ultimate shape of the legislation limited immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, which was consistent with intelligence testers' claims about the relative intelligence of the "races" in Europe. These quotas barred the admission of European Jews fleeing the impending holocaust (Gould, 1981).

Still, by about 1930 a considerable body of research showed that social environment more than biology accounts for differing IQ scores and that the tests themselves measured not innate intelligence but familiarity with the culture of those who wrote the tests. In the end, the psychologists who had promoted intelligence testing were forced to repudiate the idea that intelligence is inherited or that it can be separated from cultural knowledge.¹

Whether measuring cranial capacity, developing paper-and-pencil intelligence tests, positing the effect of education on women, or arguing for hereditary weakness as an explanation of homosexuality, the work of these scientists supported the prevailing ideologies about the merit and appropriate social position of people of different sexes, races, ethnic groups, sexual orientations, and social classes. Most of these scientists do not appear to have been ideologically motivated; indeed they were sometimes troubled by their own findings. Still, their research was riddled with technical errors and questionable findings. Their research proved "the surprising malleability of 'objective,' quantitative data in the interest of a preconceived idea" (Gould, 1981:147). Precisely because their research confirmed prevailing beliefs, it was more likely to be celebrated than scrutinized.

Why were these findings eventually repudiated? Since they offered a defense of the status quo and confirmed the prevailing ideology, who would have criticized them?

First, the scientific defense of immutable hierarchy was eroded by the steady accumulation of evidence about the "intellectual equality and therefore the equal cultural capacity of all peoples" (Degler, 1991:61). A good deal of the research that made that point was produced by the many "prominent or soon to be prominent" scholars of African American, Chinese, and European immigrant ancestry who, after finally being admitted to institutions of higher education, were pursuing scientific research. Black scholars such as W. E. B. Du Bois and E. Franklin Frazier, and scholars of recent European immigrant ancestry such as anthropologists Franz Boas, Alfred Kroeber, and Edward Sapir, trenchantly criticized the social science of the day and by their very presence challenged the prevailing expectations about the "inherent inferiority" of people like themselves (Degler, 1991).

The presumptions about the meaning of race were also challenged by increased interracial contact. The 1920s began the Great Migration, in which hundreds of thousands of African Americans from the rural South moved to northern cities. This movement continued through two world wars as black, Latino, Asian, and Native American men joined the armed forces and women followed wartime employment

¹"... There is also a lot of evidence for the whole American population, for American ethnic groups, and for populations wherever tests are given that IQ is changing in ways that can't possibly be genetic because they happen too fast. It is widely recognized that average IQs are increasing fairly rapidly. These changes in IQ clearly must have more to say about relationships between testing and real performance, or about social patterns of learning, than about biologically rooted 'intelligence.' The genes of a large population don't change that fast unless there is a very dramatic episode of natural selection such as an epidemic. It is also widely recognized that African Americans are slowly but steadily gaining on white Americans in IQ" (Cohen, 1998:210).

opportunities. The 1920s also brought the Harlem Renaissance, an outpouring of creativity from black writers, scholars, and artists in celebration of African and African American culture. Overall, white social scientists "gained an unprecedented opportunity to observe blacks in a fresh and often transforming way" (Degler, 1991:197). Their attitudes and expectations changed as a result of this increased contact.

In sum, the scientific argument for the inherent inferiority of some groups of people was advanced by upper-class, native-born, white male faculty of prestigious universities. Few others would have had the means with which to disseminate their ideas or the prestige to make those ideas influential. These theories of essential difference were not written by Native Americans, Mexicans, women, gays, African Americans, or immigrants from Asia or Southern and Eastern Europe. Most of these people lacked access to the public forums to present their experiences until the rise of the antislavery, suffrage, labor, and gay rights movements. Insofar as the people in these categories could be silenced, it was easier to depict them as essentially and profoundly different.

Popular Culture Like the sciences, popular culture (the forms of entertainment available for mass consumption such as popular music, theater, film, literature, and television) may convey ideologies about difference and social stratification. At virtually the same time that social Darwinism gained popularity in America—indeed within two years of Louis Agassiz's arrival in the States—America's first minstrel show was organized. Like social Darwinism, minstrel shows offered a defense of slavery.

Minstrel shows, which became an enormously popular form of entertainment, were musical variety shows in which white males in "blackface" ridiculed blacks, abolitionism, and women's suffrage. Their impact can be seen in the movies and cartoons of the 1930s and 1940s and in current American stereotypes. The shows built on strongly negative stereotypes about blacks. As the shows traveled the country, their images were impressed on whites who often had no direct contact with blacks and thus no information to contradict the minstrel images.

The three primary characters of the minstrel show were the happy slave, Zip Coon, and the mammy (Riggs, 1987). The image of the happy slave—singing and dancing, naive and childlike, taken care of through old age by the master, a virtual member of the family—asserted that blacks held in slavery were both content and cared for. Zip Coon was a northern, free black man characterized by a ridiculous use of language and laughable attempts to emulate whites; the caricature was used to show that blacks lacked the intelligence to handle freedom. The mammy was depicted as a large and presumably unattractive black woman fully devoted to the white family she served. Like the happy slave, the mammy was unthreatening and content—no sexual competition to the white mistress of the house, no children of her own needing attention, committed to and fulfilled by her work with her white family. Thus, the characters of the minstrel show hid the reality of slavery. The happy slave and mammy denied the brutality of the slave system. Zip Coon denied the reality of blacks' organization of the underground railroad, their production of

slave narratives in books and lectures, and their undertaking of slave rebellions and escapes.

In all, minstrel shows offered an ideology about slavery constructed by and in the interests of those with power. They ridiculed antislavery activists and legitimized the status quo. Minstrel shows asserted that blacks did not mind being held as slaves and that they did not suffer loss and pain in the same way whites did. The minstrel show was not the only source of this ideology, but as a form of popular entertainment it was a very effective means of disseminating such beliefs. The shows traveled to all parts of the country, with a message masked as mere entertainment. The fact that they were part of popular culture made it easier to ignore their serious message—after all, they were “just” entertainment.

But within popular culture, an effective counter to the ideology of the minstrel show emerged through the speakers of the antislavery lecture circuit and the publication of numerous slave narratives. Appearing as early as 1760, these narratives achieved an enormous and enduring popularity among northern white readers. Frederick Douglass, former slave and the renowned antislavery activist, was the most famous public lecturer in the history of the movement and wrote its best-selling slave narrative. Whether as book or lecture, slave narratives provided an image of blacks as human beings. Access to these life histories provided the first opportunity for most whites to see a shared humanity between themselves and those held in slavery (Bodziock, 1990). Thus, slave narratives directly countered the images of the minstrel show. While popular culture may offer a variety of messages, all parties do not meet equally on its terrain. Those with power have better access and more legitimacy, but popular culture cannot be so tightly controlled as to entirely exclude the voice of the less powerful.

Conclusion

As Karl Marx first considered it, ideology was “the mechanism whereby there can occur a difference between how things really are in the economy and the wider society and how people think they are” (Marshall, 1994:234). In this framework essay, we have examined how science and popular culture sometimes support the pervasive ideologies about the meanings of color, class, sexual orientation, and sex. The readings that follow focus on law and politics, the economy, science, and popular culture as social institutions that construct what difference is understood to mean. For example, in Reading 48, Michael Oliver describes how scientific research structures the meaning that is attributed to differences in human abilities. Similarly, in Reading 40, William Bowen and Derek Bok consider the meaning that is made of differences in test scores, grades, and race in admission to elite institutions of higher education; in Reading 41, Cheryl Zarlenga Kerchis and Iris Marion Young explore whether, in the context of social change movements, difference between groups is understood to be something valued or something to transcend; and in Reading 54, Ronald Schmidt, Sr., describes the politically volatile meanings attributed to language choice. Indeed, each of the Supreme Court decisions described in Reading 38 is ultimately about the *meaning* of difference—for example, in the determination of citizenship or access to higher education, what meaning are we going to attribute to

race differences, or to sex differences? At the level of social institutions, the meaning that is made of difference has the potential for far-reaching impact.

KEY CONCEPTS

hegemonic Dominating or ruling. A **hegemonic ideology** is a belief that is pervasive in a culture. (page 309)

ideology A widely shared belief that primarily reflects the experiences of those with power, but is presented as universally valid. (pages 308–09)

natural-law language Language that treats human behavior as bound by natural law. (pages 309–10)

social Darwinism The belief that those who dominate a society are necessarily the fittest. (page 317)

social institution Established system for meeting societal needs; for example, the family. (page 315)

stereotype A characterization of a category of people as all alike, as possessing the same set of characteristics and likely to behave in the same ways. (pages 310–15)

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