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Conceptualizing Racism

President Johnson's Commission on Civil Disorders, created as a response to the nationwide violent uprisings from 1965 to 1968, states "This is our basic conclusion: Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal."¹ This was untrue then and remains untrue and tends to support the historical facade surrounding racism. The operative word "moving" is false. We have *always* been two nations, one white, one of varied hues, one rich, one poor—separate and unequal.

—Shirley Better

UNDERSTANDING RACISM: KEY CONCEPTS AND CONSTRUCTS

Race: A Societal Invention

While this book focuses on racism, I must hasten to say at the outset that the term *race* is a **social construct**. A social construct is a culturally determined label.² That is, the classifying of individuals by external physiological differences is purely a societal product. Race, as used in social discourse in America, is a bogus term. There is no biological validity to the term "race"; the science of biology and microbiology has demonstrated that only slightly beneath the skin there is little difference between the so-called major three races.³ Current DNA research suggests that all humankind can be traced back to one female. That being said, the reality of our lives is that our opportunity to share in the fullness of life is predicated on this social construct. Thus being born Latino, African American, or Native American in America has immediate and often negative outcomes. American minorities

are more likely to be poor, to suffer discrimination, and to earn less income than whites over their lifetime. Consequently, it is of the utmost importance to understand the ramifications of racism and its power in our society.

I view the terms "race" and "ethnicity" as separate and distinct concepts within the discussion of race relations in the United States. Some scholars use the terms interchangeably. I believe that this is done to neutralize the term "race" and thus reduce its importance in American society. While I agree that the term is bogus, the reality is that *race* continues to have an overwhelming influence over all aspects of American life. Therefore the social condition cannot be erased or softened by eliminating the term and substituting ethnicity. **Ethnicity** refers to any social grouping that is defined or set off by religion, language, national origin, and cultural differences, or some combination of these categories.

Race, as a social construct, is an ambiguous and changeable concept, because who is included within each category has changed over time. Hacker points out that Jews, the Irish, and dark-skinned Mediterraneans were not considered white for a generation or more of living in this country.⁴ What American history has taught us is that skin coloring is not the dominant characteristic that determines racial classification. The degree of darkness of the skin as a measure of the social status of a person rests entirely on the interpretation of the dominant group at any point in history. Thus, biological variation has no meaning except what we give to it. **Race** refers to differential concentration of gene frequencies responsible for traits that are confined to physical manifestations such as skin color or hair form. It is no more significant to our behavior than the color of our eyes. Having brown eyes or gray eyes contributes nothing to the essence of our being; the same is true regarding the significance of skin coloring to who we are.

The Origins of Racial Classification

It seems crucial that we explore the origins of race. It will surprise many students to learn that race is a relatively current social development. Since race has only been used to categorize human variation in recent times, it is possible to reverse its use in our society. Most historians of science consider that modern categorization of the human species started with Carolus Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist, who in 1735 published *Systemae Naturae*, the first version of an extensive classification plan. Johann F. Blumenbach put forth his systematic racial classification in his 1775 treatise, *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind*. He concluded that there were five human races: Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American, and Malay. Blumenbach introduced the term "Caucasian" because he believed the Caucasus region in Russia produced the world's most beautiful women.⁵ Other European scientists during this period extended the study of placing humans into groups

based upon physical attributes such as skin coloring, hair texture, and body build. Banton and Harwood aver that "Scientific theories of race failed to gain widespread acceptance and importance until 1865, with the emancipation and rise of blacks as a strong political force."⁶

This classification of humans into superior and inferior groupings parallels the age of European conquest of Asia and Africa. It appears that the creation of "races" went hand and glove with the determination of white skin superiority, which supports the claim I make in this book that the use of race is a thinly disguised rationale for economic exploitation. My thesis is that the biological connection of superior and light skin coloring came as a justification to support the permanency of slavery and land acquisition. Smedley suggests that, "By the end of the eighteenth century, the social construct of a hierarchical racial grouping had reached a critical mass. 'Race' became a potentially comprehensive worldview emanating from and compatible with the existing reality of the power relationship [between countries], the goals of European countries as they expanded their control through worldwide conquest."⁷ Thus, the racial sorting becomes a convenient political connivance employed by Europeans who were at that time conquering Africa and Asia and subjugating their people. It provided a "scientific" justification for the exploitation of inhabitants of conquered countries by using skin coloring and other physical attributes as a method for supporting white skin domination. Racism is a Western invention coming out of a need to explain the huge gap in the power, wealth, and influence of European countries over the rest of the world.

Race Ideology

Smedley provides an in-depth analysis of race ideology in her book, *Race in North America*, and I will summarize her examination here as a prelude to further discussion of racism.⁸ **Race ideology** is defined as the belief in hereditary differences and their immutability. This belief lies at the heart of understanding the persistence of racism in America. Race ideology suggests that physical features such as skin color and hair texture are linked to biology or human nature. Smedley asserts, "We think we see 'race' when we encounter certain physical differences. What we really 'see' is the social meanings that have been imbedded by the ideology of race. Physical features have been institutionalized as markers of lower or higher race status."⁹ In short, biology is linked to social stratification. Thus race ideology requires that darker-skinned persons be relegated to the lower rungs on the social ladder. Moreover, through the hierarchy of racial groups, those at the lower end were considered less than human, which allowed for the dual distinction of being somewhat human, but also the property of someone else. Property rights proved to be more powerful than human rights. This is

exhibited many times over by the judicial decisions that reinforced the property rights of the English over the human rights of Africans and Native Americans. Over time this belief system has become unassailable as the truth. It is formidable, as we will see throughout this text, because it has been utilized to maintain the wealth and social status of powerful whites. Most scientists will not support the notion that genes and ancestry preordain anyone to automatically have any given traits, intelligence, or lifestyle. Yet most Americans consciously or unconsciously continue to believe that people who are "racially" different are necessarily culturally different.

Two powerful and contradictory forces dominated discussions regarding the hierarchy of races during the early days of American colonization: Judeo-Christian doctrine and "scientific" race ideology (see Figure 1.1). The Judeo-Christian doctrine expounded the sameness of all humans who were created by God. It held that all humans have a soul and certain inalienable rights. However, the plantation owners and others needed to maintain a hierarchical view of humans, for this allowed for the continued exploitation of certain groups, Native Americans and Africans. The dominance of the Christian religion in the colonies compelled the English to justify maintaining slavery.

Representatives of slave owners joined forces with the growing authority of science in the nineteenth century to justify slavery. Scientists substantiated and strengthened the ideology of race, stating that it was a part of a natural ordering system. However, subjugation of the Native Americans and Africans simply reflected the use of superior armed forces, and was not the ramification of a natural classification of human beings.

It is crucial to understand that maintaining permanent enslavement of the Africans was critical to European aims of land acquisition and wealth. Growing tobacco, the main money crop in the South, required a huge labor force. The colonists found it convenient to support the theory that blacks were inferior and not like whites to ensure a supportive social and political environment for slavery. Thus slavery developed a racist characteristic as a means to justify its continuance. Moving the Native Americans off the desirable land was also supported by the dogma of race worthiness. The Europeans lumped to-

Race Ideology	Judeo-Christian Doctrine
"Scientific"	Religious Creed
Physical features linked to worthiness	All humans are created by God with inalienable rights
Property Rights	Human Rights
Social Darwinism	Humanitarianism
Social Construct	

Figure 1.1. Powerful Forces of American Ideology

gether all Indians regardless of cultural and physical differences into one single group of more or less "savage" beings. Race ideology was used repeatedly to support America's policy of broken treaties, stolen lands, enforced apartheid, and impoverishment. It was not until the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act in 1924 that Indians were given American citizenship.

The fierce debate that centered on Christian beliefs and race ideology had the effect of crystallizing the dogma of physical features being linked to worthiness of an individual. On one side were those who support the hierarchy of human groups and met all attempts to establish a culturally pluralistic society with strong resistance, even violence. Examples of American groups who represent this stream of thought include the Ku Klux Klan, the neo-Nazis, and the skinheads. On the other side was the message of equality, freedom, and human rights espoused by the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the abolitionist movement, and the civil rights movement.

OTHER THEORIES OF RACIAL INEQUALITY

Mario Barrera developed an excellent compilation of theories on the existence of racial inequality in his book, *Race and Class in the Southwest*. A **theory** is the analysis of a group of social phenomena in their relation to one another. Barrera's framework of theories is offered here to expand your awareness of the variety of beliefs that have been developed over the centuries. Many of these theories have fallen out of favor from time to time, only to be recycled and repackaged for use again to justify racism, or to support unfair racial preferences. On the following pages, I have summarized Barrera's more detailed discussion of each theory.¹⁰

Deficiency Theories

Biological Deficiency Theory

This category suggests that racial inequality can be attributed to genetics and thus hereditary inferiority on the part of certain races. Although these theories are generally held in disrepute, there is a resurgence from time to time, as for example, in the work of educational psychologist Arthur Jensen. In his 1972 book *Genetics and Education*, he dealt with the question of differences between blacks and whites in the measurement of IQ. Jensen speculates that a substantial part of these differences may be due to biological inheritance. His theories are generally not taken seriously. One reason for this is the serious methodological problems such as the heavy reliance on IQ test scores, universally acknowledged now as very imperfect measures of anything that could be considered general intelligence.

Deficiencies in Social Structure

This theory argues that minority racial groups in the United States are held back by problems within the social structure of those groups. Below are two examples.

Daniel Moynihan's 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, argues that historical factors have created a weak family structure among African Americans and that this weakness creates emotional and attitudinal problems, such as emotional instability and male role confusion. A vicious circle is set up with economic problems reinforcing their weak family structure. The problem with this theory is that it looks at the glass as half empty. One could look at the African American family and marvel at its strengths. For example, Moynihan stated that black females headed one-fourth of the families, and therefore, the family was pathological. He could have just as easily stated that given the over two hundred years of slavery, the breakup of the family, and the great migration from the farms of the South to the inner cities of the North, three-fourths of all black families remain intact.

D'Antonio and Form's 1965 report, *Influentials in Two Border Cities*, describes the condition of political powerlessness of the Chicano residents of El Paso, Texas. This powerlessness they attributed to such structural deficiencies among Chicanos as a lack of political insight, a "low level of social integration," and factionalism.

The problem with social structure theories is methodological. Social disorganization or political fragmentation might as easily be seen as results rather than as causes of the racial inequality.

Cultural Deficiency

These theories blame inequality on one or more traits of the group in question. They emphasize attitudes and values, rather than social structure, although the two types of factors are often linked together in the models.

Edward Banfield's *The Unheavenly City* argues that inequality is due to a "lower class culture," consisting of such traits as a present rather than future orientation, and poor work habits. Herschel Manuel suggests that Chicanos do poorly because of a language handicap and such values and attitudes as fatalism, present rather than future orientation, dependency, and lack of success orientation that lead directly to problems in school. His theory suggests that Mexican American culture is highly traditional and nonadaptive to the requirements of upward mobility in an industrial society.

Cultural deficiency theories lack methodological rigor. They search the cultural inventory of the group until some presumed traits are discovered that hold the group back from achievement and social mobility. These pre-

sumed traits then constitute the explanation. However, the cultural apparatus of any people is so complex that certainly negative as well as positive traits will be found. Additionally, the cultural characteristics they point to can be considered deficiencies only within a given institutional framework. For instance, we know that a Chinese monolingual child will have difficulties in American schools. However, this is a "deficiency" only if the society fails to provide special educational opportunities for the child. If not provided, the deficiency is in the educational system itself.

Bias Theories

These theories consist of attitudes and feelings of the dominant group in the society, and thus tend to put the responsibility on the Anglo majority rather than on the minorities.

Discrimination and Prejudice

A classic work in this area, Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944), maintains that racial discrimination itself causes the status of African Americans. He places great emphasis on the concept of the vicious circle, that is, the disadvantaged condition of blacks reinforces the prejudice of whites by confirming their low opinion of blacks.

Discrimination, Prejudice, and Pathology

Kenneth Clark's work focuses on prejudice and discrimination, but he includes a deficiency component consisting of a set of ghetto pathologies that are pictured as mutually reinforcing. While bias theories have their own problems, the general approach is not so much wrong as incomplete. Most—except for Myrdal's—lack a historical perspective.

Structural Discrimination Theories

These theories locate the source of minority disadvantage in the social structure of the society as a whole.

Caste-Class School

In Dollard's 1957 book, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, the social structure of the American South is described as a combination of caste and class. Caste was characterized by endogamy (prohibition of marriage outside the caste) and by rigid barriers between the division. Class was seen as nonendogamous and as allowing social mobility. Prejudice was seen as a

defensive attitude intended to preserve white prerogatives in the caste situation. The weakness of this theory is the use of the term "caste" which comes from India; there is no exact equivalent in America.

Internal Colonial Theory

Neocolonialism is the economic and political policies by which a more powerful country or entity indirectly maintains or extends influence over other countries, areas, or people.

- **Internal Colonialism:** Sociologist R. Blauner theorizes that the United States operates an internal colony through its economic and political domination of ethnic enclaves: ghettos, Indian reservations, barrios, and Chinatowns. These enclaves are closely patrolled by local law enforcement organizations. The inhabitants have little voice in the functioning of their communities or the society at large.
- **Marxist theories:** Supporters of Marxism would accept Blauner's theory regarding ethnic and racial communities, but would add that the colonization is maintained to insure economic domination by the ruling class.

EXPLANATION OF TERMS

Racism is an individual act or an institutional practice that perpetuates inequality, based on racial membership. **Individual racism** relates to individual actions, which may or may not be supported by a personal belief in stereotypes. Figure 1.2 provides a graphic example of the attitudes, practices, and structures for both individual and institutional racism. Many times people who do not consider themselves to be racist behave in ways that disadvantage minorities because their beliefs and behavior have been conditioned over time by racial stereotypes. One example of this would be the comedian Michael Richards, who after a venomous verbal attack in 2006 on African Americans at a nightclub stated the he was not a racist.

Stereotyping is the process of maintaining a standardized image or mental picture of a group or race to which all members of the group or race are said to conform. Individual racist action results in disadvantaging or subjugating the person of the targeted group and/or enhancing the privileges of the person from the dominant group. The store owner who suspects that minority customers are likely to steal and watches them more closely is acting out these beliefs. While the behavior of the storeowner doesn't in a direct way disadvantage the minority person, it cer-

tainly produces tension for both individuals. Further, the action of being watched for criminal intent places an undue burden on the person of color, often eliciting feelings of self-consciousness and rage that rob the person of a feeling of well-being. Thus the action by the storeowner in this scenario does disadvantage the minority person, if only to make the person uneasy.

Institutional racism denotes those patterns, procedures, practices, and policies that operate within social institutions so as to consistently penalize, disadvantage, and exploit individuals who are members of nonwhite racial/ethnic groups. (See figure 1.3.) Institutional racism functions to reinforce white skin privilege in all facets of American life.¹¹ It provides a graphic example of attitudes, practices, and structures for both individual and institutional racism. There are, of course, other definitions for racism, which differ with the above definition. For example, Cyrus proposes that "Eurocentric prejudice and discrimination result in racism."¹² Thus, he gives equal weight to attitudes and actions. Though Hacker supports to a large extent the definition that I offer, he also includes negative feelings and attitudes as the central ingredient of racism.¹³ In the seminal book *Institutional Racism in America* by Knowles and Prewitt, the authors devote pages to defining the term through the use of examples within institutions. However, they are generally in agreement with me on the definition of institutional racism.¹⁴

Wellman eloquently describes white racism as being a strategy to maintain privilege, and this has most successfully been accomplished through social institutions. **Social institutions** are social aggregates of society. Knowles and Prewitt suggest, "They are fairly stable social arrangements and practices through which collective action are taken."¹⁵ Sociologists studying racism in the early part of the twentieth century were not unaware of the structural implications or societal barriers of racism.¹⁶ However, there continues to be an unwillingness to move beyond attitudes and feelings, even as social scientists are more knowledgeable about how social organizations function. This treatise suggests that the central reason for institutional racism is the desire for economic advantage. Negative attitudes and feelings are viewed as a byproduct of the original need to justify the economic exploitation.

Institutional Racism denotes those patterns, procedures, practices, and policies which operate within social institutions so as to consistently penalize, disadvantage, and exploit individuals who are members of non-white groups.

Individual Racism relates to personal actions, which may or may not be supported by a personal belief in stereotypes.

Unfortunately, too many social scientists and policy makers equate prejudice with all racism, and cling to nonstructural (societal) barriers to account for its persistence. Again and again there is the focus on a feature story of a Southern whose racist act startles the country, or use as an example a marginal group like the KKK. Why is this so? Because it is comforting for many Americans to believe that racism is just a matter of ignorance of a particular back-

	Individual	Institutional
Beliefs	Negative stereotypes of "people of color" The presumption of white supremacy Acceptance of social inequality	The presumption of white supremacy Acceptance of social and economic inequality The maintenance of white skin privilege
Attitudes	Hostility Fear Prejudice Intolerance Cultural blindness and deafness to racism	Commitment to maintenance of inequality between the races/ethnic groups Individuals are personally responsible for their own economic outcome
Practices	Negative verbalizations Use of pejorative name-calling Hostile actions	Neglect Discrimination Isolation Segregation Exclusion Exploitation Physical attacks Genocide
Structures	Customs/Traditions that reinforce inequality Informal rules of behavior that reinforce racism Conscious and unconscious behavior patterns Cultural blindness/cultural deafness	Laws (Jim Crow laws) Formal policies, practices, and procedures Informal policies, practices, and procedures

Figure 1.2. Comparison of Individual and Institutional Racism

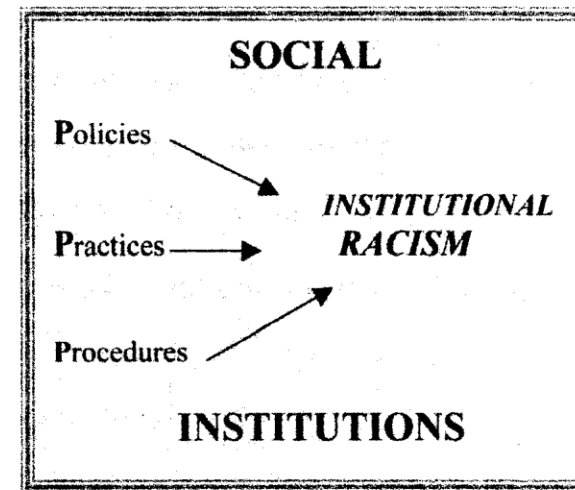


Figure 1.3. Institutional Racism

ward or fringe group of individuals. To accept that racism is purposely in place within American institutions to preserve white privilege would mean to acknowledge that America is not, at its roots, a just and meritorious society. As Americans, we are educated to see our country as a land of opportunity for all who are willing to work hard and abide by the laws of American society. Liberty, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness are such basic values in American society that it is painful to admit that we have not lived up to our credo. It is easier to blame the victims of inequality or lunatic fringe groups than to admit the reality of basic injustice that exists in the United States.

It is exceedingly difficult for us to control our institutions which, being products of their history, cannot but perpetuate practices which advantage the typical white and handicap the typical minority person. Historically, the dominant group in American society, Europeans, has justified its rule and exploitation of minority groups by building into its social institutions ideology as well as practices that supported this domination. Schools, city councils, businesses, county offices, newspapers, congressional committees, and welfare agencies, though often in the hands of enlightened persons, remain dominated by practices that produce racial inequities. This chapter will not examine the historical development of racism, for there are many fine treatises on the subject.¹⁷

Attitude and Action as a Litmus Test

There continues to be some disagreement over the meaning of racism, which contributes to the continued misuse of other terms often equated with

it, as suggested earlier. For example, the terms bigotry, bias, and prejudice are used as if these words are interchangeable with racism. Bigotry, bias, and prejudice relate to acts of belief, judgment, or opinion. Racism denotes actions that have power. It refers to the power to act in ways that exploit another person based on membership in a particular racial or ethnic group. The point to remember is that racism is a negative *action*, which subjugates a race or ethnic group. This permits another race to maintain some form of control over them and thereby secure personal privilege.

Therefore, every person who has negative feelings toward a particular person or group is not necessarily racist. The person may be biased, bigoted, or prejudiced, but that does not give him or her the mantle of racist. To be a racist one must be in a position to *act out* in ways that exploits or disadvantages another person. Further, the negative action must be a consequence of the person's membership in a racial/ethnic group. Racism requires the ability to act out negative feelings in such a way as to disadvantage a person or group because of their racial/ethnic membership. Of course, nonaction that results in disadvantaging minorities is also racist. For example, if an employer refuses to hire a person who is Latino/Asian/African American, this would constitute a racist act.

It is not necessary for a person to have negative feelings toward a person of another ethnic group to act out in a racist manner. It is quite possible that a person is entirely knowledgeable about the fact that "race" is a societal term and has little validity biologically. The person may be well aware that there are no differences that matter between "the races." Even so, the person may still use race as a means to exploit another person. For example, suppose we have the owner of a plant who decides to hire only Mexican Americans for his factory because he knows he can pay them lower wages and not provide them with health benefits. Does he have to believe that Mexican Americans are mentally and socially inferior to him to create the disparity in the employment? Of course not. The owner may be fully aware that there is no difference biologically between them. However, he is also aware that he can get away with paying them a lower wage just because they are Mexican American. By maintaining lower wages for the Mexican American workers, the owner is enhancing his own financial status. Thus the owner's racist action does not emanate from negative feelings or stereotyping but from an economic motive. This example points out the importance of the distinguishing between feelings and action in defining racism.

ON THE VALUE OF WHITENESS

Explanation of the Term "Whiteness"

When we focus on race relations in America, we are unaccustomed to discussing whiteness. When we talk about racism, we tend to concentrate on

the victims, who are members of minority groups. However, it is crucial to examine whiteness in any discussion of racism. Not doing so would be the same as studying the poor—who are often the casualties of economic policy—and not examining the rich and powerful who develop and control those policies. Euro-Americans must begin to see their role in perpetuating white skin privilege if there is to be a serious dialogue about racism.

Let us first define terms. **Whiteness** denotes a privileged socioeconomic status conferred upon a group often identified by light skin coloring, specifically Caucasians. While this definition is useful in a general way, there are subtle nuances to whiteness. Light skin coloring is not the sole determinant for privileged status. Hacker discusses the historical inclusion of outgroups who currently are perceived as white.¹⁸ The Irish, Jews, Italians, and Eastern Europeans were not considered white when they landed on American soil, even though they were accepted as Caucasian. Only through assimilation over one or more generations were these groups accepted as white. Consider, are Arabs considered white in America at this time? Whiteness is synonymous with racial superiority; it confers on a designated group *unearned privileges*. American society, because of the desire for economic gain, has used skin coloring as a means of creating a privilege status for specified groups.

The Privilege of Whiteness

Euro-Americans rarely refer to themselves as "white." Why is this so? I surmise that this omission is much like the default built into a computer. In the computer, default is the automatic selection by a program in the absence of a choice made by the user. Whiteness is automatically assumed in the absence of a stated classification—the privilege of assumption. Thus, in the media, the term "the white man" is unnecessary, simply saying "the man" implies this. In all other instances the person's race or ethnicity is used to describe him. Possibly another reason that whites stumble over using the term is that consciously or subconsciously there is the realization of the true connotation of the term in American society—that being white means being special. Whiteness is not only supported by Euro-Americans; people of color and European immigrants do as well. European immigrants come to this country and are often marginalized. How do you get on the right side, the white side? You behave like the white side. One way of doing this is to be against those groups that whites are against by adopting racist actions. Thus, American minority groups often find themselves discriminated against by immigrant groups who are not accepted by mainstream society either. Ironically, there are also individuals within American minorities who support whiteness. This is done as a way of gaining favor with those in power. We find high-ranking African Americans and Latinos

supporting laws that exploit people of color. In exchange for their support they are accepted and compensated by the power elite.

Another way of looking at the privilege of whiteness is to put it into a historical perspective. All of our social institutions—schools, the criminal justice system, banks, the workplace—have been created and recreated by white men. Thus, there is a natural fit between maleness and whiteness in all American institutions; white males easily succeed in a system invented for them and by them. Recent challenges by women and people of color in the form of affirmative action edicts have pointed up the ultimate control by white males. Whites have special entitlements; however, only those with heightened sensitivity perceive themselves as privileged. Most Euro-Americans think of whiteness as the norm. This unearned privilege equates with the advantages of being right handed. Pick up a pair of scissors, grab a door handle, or sit at a lunch counter. They are designed for “righties.” But what right-handed person ever thought of himself as privileged? This unearned special status that permeates our society supports institutional racism. Consequently, white skin privilege cannot be viewed as a quirk of American society.

In her book, *White Man Falling*, Ferber suggests that one way of examining whiteness is to explore the group that most exemplifies the extreme of white privilege—white supremacists. She suggests that they offer a clear doctrine that fiercely defends white skin privilege. Ferber states, “In studying white supremacist groups there has been a tendency to focus on leaders in a particular movement and to explore the character traits that lead an individual to join this movement. However this contributes to the belief that racism is somehow rooted in one’s personality rather than institutionalized in our society and culture at every level.”¹⁹

Viewing white supremacy as extremism often results in absolving the mainstream population of its racism. It implies that white supremacists are the racist fringe in contrast to some nonracist majority. One should view white racism as a continuum or a scale with groups such as the neo-Nazis at the extreme of the scale, but all Euro-Americans having some degree of involvement and/or benefit in white skin privilege.²⁰

The Capital in Whiteness

Institutional racism and the value of whiteness merge as one, for whiteness is used to maintain unearned privilege through the structure of institutional racism. Institutional racism and whiteness complement each other for the capital of whiteness is generated from the benefits derived from institutional racism. Institutional racism is the mechanism used to ensure unearned entitlements. Lipsitz offers another viewpoint on the maintenance of whiteness in his book, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*. He looks at American racial inequality from the vantage point of white skin privilege. Lipsitz believes that

social, cultural, and micro-economic forces encourage white people to expend time and energy on the creation and re-creation of whiteness.²¹ He explains that “whiteness has a cash value; it accounts for the advantages that come to individuals through profits made from housing secured in discriminatory markets. [Advantages] were gained through intergenerational transfers of inherited wealth passed on due to the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations.”²² Like institutional racism, investment in whiteness is everywhere in American culture, yet is often difficult to see. Lipsitz argues that Euro-Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness because it provides them with resources, power, and opportunity. Because Americans are ignorant of their history, they are blinded to the systematic progression of the investment in whiteness or institutional racism generated by slavery, segregation, conquest, and colonialism. Both have been elevated, as we will learn, by liberal and conservative social policies. However, because of a contrived history, Americans are unable or unwilling to follow the interwoven system of racism. Instead, we produce largely cultural explanations for institutional racism.

In the past, the power of whiteness depended on not only white hegemony over people of color but also on manipulating disenfranchised groups to fight against each other to curry favor with whites. There is the episode of African Americans, former slaves, riding with the American cavalry throughout the West to conquer the Indian tribes. Native Americans returned runaway slaves because whites offered a bounty for them; some Native Americans also held Africans in slavery. One of the first chartered African American units in the army went to war against the Comanches in Texas. The defeat of the Comanches in 1870 ignited a mass migration by Spanish-speaking residents of New Mexico into the areas of West Texas, formerly occupied by the vanquished Native American tribes.²³ There have been, of course, many examples throughout American history of the American minorities forming coalitions to fight **oppression** and discrimination. The Seminoles in Florida frequently recruited African slaves to fight against abusive settlers. Native American tribes often harbored runaway slaves, an arrangement that benefited both groups.

Eliminating Whiteness

There are an increasing number of workshops and books that focus on this topic. The discussion of whiteness in American society, a relatively new area of study, offers a new way of thinking about inequality. The term “white race” is as much a social construct as the term race itself. The term “whiteness” denotes an unearned status in a society that strives to be a meritocracy, and as noted previously, the perpetuation of this special status has reinforced widespread misery throughout the country. Therefore, if we are to become a true meritocracy, whiteness has to be abolished. To rid our

country of racism, we must rid ourselves of the power of the term, the concept, and the reality of whiteness. Opposing whiteness should not be construed to mean opposing white people, but rather opposing the unearned status and rewards conferred on whites. Just as African Americans have abandoned the term "black" to identify themselves, so should Euro-Americans give up the term "white." Both terms contain negative connotations. Several scholars suggest that whites will need to critically examine how whiteness has become synonymous with oppression while creating a space for a white [Euro-American] identity.²⁴

As the final admonition in his book, Lipsitz comments on this needed new direction:

In the years ahead we still have ample opportunities to see what white people are made of, to see whether we can transcend our attachments to the mechanisms that give whiteness its force and power. We need to learn why our history has been built so consistently on racial exclusion and why we continue to generate new mechanisms to increase the value of past and present discrimination. How can we account for the ways in which white people refuse to acknowledge their possessive investment in whiteness even as they work to increase its value every day? We can't blame the color of our skin. It must be the content of our character.²⁵

Given the benefits that whites receive in society, one must ask this question regarding the future: why would they give it up?

SUMMARY

This chapter began with a discussion of the bogus term "race" and how it is a social construct. Next we examined the social events that brought rise to the creation of racial categorizations. Two major ideologies were explored—the race ideology and Judeo-Christian doctrine—for their contribution to the ongoing debate about racism in America. Offered were a range of theories to explain the presence of racial inequality. This was followed by an analysis of terms the author views as crucial to the discussion and understanding of her two theories designed to explain the persistence of institutional racism in America. Finally, the focus turns to the meaning and value of whiteness and its role in the persistence of racial inequality.

KEY TERMS

ethnicity. Any social grouping defined or set off by religion, language, national origin, and cultural differences, or some combination of these categories.

individual racism. Individual disadvantaging actions that may or may not be supported by a personal belief in stereotypes.

inequality. The pattern of unbalanced distribution of economic, political, and social goods and services within a society.

institutional racism. Those patterns, procedures, practices, and policies that operate within social institutions so as to consistently penalize, disadvantage, and exploit individuals who are members of nonwhite racial/ethnic groups.

oppression. A sense or condition of being forced to assume; a particular stance with respect to oneself, the world, and the demands of change. It is a pattern of hopelessness and helplessness, in which one sees oneself as static, limited, and expendable.

prejudice. An irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics; the act of prejudgment.

race. Differential concentrations of gene frequencies responsible for traits which, so far as we know, are confined to physical manifestations such as skin color or hair form, facial and bodily characteristics. It has no intrinsic connection with cultural patterns and institutions.

race ideology. The belief in hereditary (biological) differences between social groups and that these differences are constant and unchangeable.

racism. An individual or institutional practice that perpetuates inequality, based on racial or ethnic membership.

social construct. A culturally determined label.

social institution. Social aggregates that serve to maintain the society. They are fairly stable social arrangements and practices through which collective action are taken. They serve to maintain the society. Major American institutions are education, business and labor, politics, law enforcement, housing, health, and public welfare.

stereotypes. Labels, identities, or "pictures in the mind" that are attributed to different social groups so that the entire group is pigeonholed as falling within a given category. Stereotyping is considered to be pervasive in that almost all groups are subject to generalized classification. Stereotyping can be both positive and negative.

theory. The analysis of a group of social phenomena in their relationship to one another.

whiteness. A privileged socioeconomic status conferred upon a group, and often identified by light skin coloring, specifically refers to Caucasians.

GROUP ACTIVITIES

1. Describe an occasion when you felt you were being treated differently from others because of your racial/ethnic group membership.

2. Find a current newspaper article that exemplifies institutional racism. Discuss within your study group how the article reveals institutional racism.
3. Discuss the differences between biological deficiencies and social structure deficiencies.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the most important ingredient necessary to act racist?
2. What social and economic factors lead to slavery becoming a racist system?
3. How is bigotry and racism different?
4. Explain the term "whiteness."
5. Why is it that Euro-Americans do not recognize their ethnicity?
6. What is meant when the author says "whiteness" is the default?
7. Define the term "race ideology." What is its relationship to racism?
8. How does whiteness gain capital?
9. Define and give an example of a structural discrimination theory.

NOTES

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3. Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror* (New York: Little, Brown, 1993), 24–50; John Kromkowski, *Race and Ethnic Relations 95/96* (Guilford, CT: Dushkin Publishing, 1996), 10–16.
4. Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995).
5. See chapter 7, "The Rise of Science: Sixteen- to Eighteenth-Century Classifications of Human Diversity," in Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).
6. Michael Banton and Jonathan Harwood, *The Race Concept* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), 28.
7. Smedley, *Race in North America*, 169.
8. See chapter 1, "Some Theoretical Considerations," in *Race in North America*.
9. Smedley, *Race in North America*, 27–29.
10. Mario Barrera, *Race and Class in the Southwest* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979). See chapter 7.
11. See chapter 1, "Institutional and Ideological Roots of Racism" in the seminal book *Institutional Racism in America*, edited by Louis Knowles and Kenneth Prewitt

(Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), for one of the original discussions of the term "institutional racism."

12. Virginia Cyrus, *Experiencing Race, Class, and Gender in the United States* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 1993), 11–13.
13. See discussion in chapter 2, "Race and Racism," in Hacker, *Two Nations*.
14. Knowles and Prewitt, *Institutional Racism*, 1–7.
15. Knowles and Prewitt, *Institutional Racism*, 5.
16. David Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
17. A thorough discussion of the history of racism can be found in the following books: Fredrickson, George M., *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Davis, Thomas J., *Race Relations in America: A Reference Guide with Primary Documents* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2006).
18. Hacker, *Two Nations*.
19. Abby L. Ferber, *White Man Falling* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 9.
20. Much more detailed discussion of the origins of ideologies about race can be found in Theodore Allen's two-volume work, *The Invention of the White Race* (New York: Verso, 1994, 1997); and Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1996).
21. George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).
22. See the introduction in Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*.
23. Lamar Howard, *Texas Crossings: The Lone Star State and the American Far West, 1836–1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), xiii.
24. Elaine Manglitz, "Challenging White Privilege in Adult Education: A Critical Review of the Literature," *Adult Education Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (February 2003): 119–134.
25. Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 233.