



Race & Ethnicity

THE SOCIOLOGICAL
MINDFUL APPROACH

*Jacqueline Brooks, Heidi Sarabia
& Aya Kimura Ida*



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The Sociological Mindful Approach

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First Edition

Jacqueline Brooks, Heidy Sarabia, and Aya Kimura Ida

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Foreword

Cultivating Sociological Mindfulness

Michael Schwalbe

IN THE 1860S, MY GREAT-GREAT GRANDPARENTS emigrated from Germany to the United States. They didn't have college degrees or much money, and they didn't speak English, but they worked hard as farmers (my mother's side) and as builders (my father's side) and created prosperous lives for themselves. Their descendants worked hard, too, and became professors, lawyers, teachers, business owners, and university administrators. My siblings and I are these people. It's a true story of success in America. But you shouldn't believe it.

All stories are selective retellings of events, but the story I've just told—as a story about success—is so incomplete as to be misleading. My great-great grandparents came to places in Wisconsin populated by previous generations of German-speaking immigrants, so speaking German actually helped them integrate. There were established Lutheran and Catholic churches they could join. And from the 1840s to WWI (1914–1918), Germans were the dominant ethnic group in Wisconsin. All this made Wisconsin a hospitable place for my immigrant ancestors.

The story should also begin earlier. Before there was a state of Wisconsin to move to, before European immigrants could build farms, houses, or towns, the indigenous people had to be removed and their legal claims to the land nullified. If Wisconsin was hospitable to my great-great grandparents, it was in part because the Menominee, Ojibwe, Dakota, Potawatomi, Sauk, and Ho-Chunk people who had lived in the place called “Meskonsing” had been driven off, or put on reservations, by U.S. armies. The success of my ancestors came in part at the expense of the native people who were forcibly displaced.

I should add that my immigrant ancestors got to choose where they settled. Travel from Europe to the Upper Midwest in the mid-19th century might have been arduous, but it was undertaken voluntarily. As far as we know, no one was forced to emigrate to the U.S., forced to live in Wisconsin, or indentured to anyone to pay for the trip. My ancestors might not have arrived with much money, but, once here, they were able to enjoy the fruits of their labors.

And they could choose to do the kind of work they knew best and was most rewarding. This wasn't true for everyone.

The “hard work” part of the story needs qualifying, too. No doubt a lot of hard work was done along the way. Farming, building, raising families, running businesses, even studying, all take effort. On the other hand, as I know from my own life and observations, there were plenty of second and third chances; there was no systematic persecution or exclusion (except, at times, based on social class); and many open doors when it came to education and employment. Again, not everyone can say this. Lots of people worked just as hard or harder, but didn't get to benefit as much from their work.

When I say that my predecessors got to enjoy the fruits of their labors, did not face systematic persecution or exclusion, and had a wide field of economic opportunities, I am alluding to their status as “white.” This was the social category to which most north-central European immigrants readily assimilated, regardless of ethnicity. Being defined as “white” meant that they were not disparaged as an inferior stock of people, and enjoyed full civic and political rights. Though I don't know for sure, this fact of their lives was probably so taken for granted as to be invisible; my great-great grandparents probably never thought to compare themselves to Native Americans or people of African ancestry, but only to other European immigrants. Nonetheless, being defined as “white” mattered a great deal, whether it was thought about or not.

Often when I've heard others with backgrounds similar to mine tell their immigrant ancestor stories, the stories are mainly of the first kind: leaving home with few resources, struggling to adapt to a new world, and achieving success through hard work. I could tell that kind of story, but it would be mostly myth. It would ignore the social and historical conditions that made success possible. It would also imply that others who did less well lacked the wherewithal to succeed, when in fact their progress might have been blocked by exclusion, discrimination, and fewer economic opportunities—all matters beyond their control.

The point of telling my story in two different ways is not to tell about me, but to suggest how we can all be more mindful when looking at how our lives are rooted in social and historical conditions. If we fail to consider these conditions, we end up with an incomplete and misleading picture. We might also end up misunderstanding the current state of the world, because we haven't considered how that current state came about. I want to suggest how we can do better—how we can more fully and accurately understand the social world and our place in it—by practicing sociological mindfulness.

Sociological Mindfulness¹

In a book called *The Sociologically Examined Life: Pieces of the Conversation* (Oxford, 2018, 5th edition), I explain in detail what it means to look at the world in a sociologically mindful way. There isn't space

¹ Portions of this section are adapted from *Making a Difference: Using Sociology to Create a Better World* (Oxford University Press, 2020), by Michael Schwalbe.

here to go over all that ground, but I can describe several ways of being sociologically mindful that are especially important for understanding race and ethnicity. It might help to start with a walk in the woods.

Imagine three people on that walk. One person is a botanist, another is an entomologist, and the third is a photographer. By virtue of training and mental habit, each perceives something different. The botanist sees varieties of trees and plants arrayed in typical patterns. The entomologist sees diverse insect life and how the forest sustains it. The photographer, perhaps barely aware of types of trees, plants, or insects, sees colors, forms, light, and shadows. In one sense it is the same forest, yet it is experienced differently by each person, because each practices a different kind of mindfulness.

To be mindful, then, is to pay attention to the world in a particular kind of way, using concepts that heighten our awareness of certain aspects of reality. Mindfulness also implies non-judgmental awareness—being attuned to the present moment, and accepting the evidence provided by our senses without immediately labeling it good or bad. The purpose of postponing judgment (which might come later) is to minimize its potential for biasing perception. Being mindful doesn't guarantee that we will see the truth, but it does help us see more of what we need to see to form a truer picture of the world.

Just as we can become mindful of the natural world—in the ways of botanists, entomologists, photographers, and other trained observers—we can become sociologically mindful of the social world. Below I describe how to be mindful of the social world in ways that can help us gain insight into race and ethnicity. In each case, what I urge is paying attention to matters that we might otherwise take for granted, or not see at all, as is often the case before we have learned what there is to see.

Mindfulness of the Social World as Humanly Made

The first step in being sociologically mindful is learning to see the social world as humanly made. Because we are all born into pre-existing groups—families, communities, societies, nations—with established cultures and ways of doing things, it can seem like the social world is a reality as hard as a mountain range or as independent of human will as the weather. But this is not really so. All parts of the social world—all the groups, organizations, institutions, political and economic systems; all our beliefs, values, symbols, and practices; all the social categories to which we belong—were created, once upon a time, by people.

It might seem obvious that the social world is created by people. Where else would it come from? Yet we often experience it as apart from us, or over and above us. This experience is reflected in how we talk about the social world. We say that the *market* did this or that, or that the *economy* did this or that, or that *technology* drives change, or that *globalization* is transforming society. And so on. When we think about and talk about the social world in this way—as if it were made of things and forces that are independent of human action—we subtly reinforce the idea that it is unchangeable and that what we do doesn't matter.

Being sociologically mindful means, in part, recognizing that the social world is humanly made and paying attention to how this occurs. When people invent new concepts and ideas; when they share new ideas with others; when they create new groups and organizations; when they build new

tools and technologies; when they come up with new ways of doing things together; when they devise new laws and policies; when they reject old ways of thinking—they are changing the social world. So while it might seem that the social world is as solid and steady as a mountain range, in fact it's changing all the time, and we participate in this process, to some degree, every day.

Mindfulness of Interdependence and Connections

In Western societies, especially the U.S., we tend to think of ourselves as making our way through life as individuals. We are of course individuals in the sense that each of us is a discrete organism in which a single mind has emerged. Yet this singularity can be exaggerated to the point of obscuring our interdependence with others. Were it not for this interdependence, we could not even become self-conscious creatures. Recognizing this interdependence is another part of being sociologically mindful.

Our ability to think in human ways—to name and understand the things of the world, including ourselves—depends on learning to use the language spoken by those around us. We also learn from others how to behave in proper ways so that we can avoid trouble and get along in the world. Unlike other animals, little adaptive behavior is hardwired into us; we need to learn, from the examples and instruction of others, how to participate competently in social life. This includes learning that we are members of groups and social categories, and that these forms of belonging are a source of the meanings we attach to ourselves and others.

To see the interdependence through which we become human is to see one set of connections in social life. Another set of connections concerns organizations and institutions. Consider, for example, education.

The way education is organized in the U.S. is connected to how the economy is organized. Just think of how schools and education are made to serve the interests of business and employers. The economy, in turn, is connected to how government is organized and operates. Connections can run in the other direction as well. Education can affect government and the economy by shaping people's values, desires, and abilities to participate. To be sociologically mindful is to recognize the need to look at the whole—to understand any one part of society by looking at how it is connected to other parts, and how the parts work together.

Here is one more connection, perhaps especially relevant to understanding race and ethnicity: how government operates—the way it distributes power and orchestrates its exercise—matters for the creation of social categories. *Who belongs to which racial or ethnic group? Who is a citizen? Who is an adult?* Often it is the most powerful groups, using the levers of government, who set criteria for category membership, to serve their political or economic interests. This implies that our sense of identity is linked to the distribution of power in society. To understand who we are requires mindfulness of these connections.

Mindfulness of Differences, Commonalities, and Inequalities

In social life, differences are often readily observable. We see that people come in various shapes, sizes, ages, skin tones, and so on; they dress, talk, gesture, and decorate themselves differently.

We might also see that they eat different foods, listen to different music, and play different sports. Some of these differences are ones we associate with ethnic cultures (or subcultures). Some are associated with social class, gender, or membership in other social categories. Most of us are already highly attuned to such differences.

Heightened awareness of difference can, however, lead us to overlook what we have in common. When we see difference, we often forget that all people have similar needs and desires for love and respect, for meaning and purpose, for fair treatment, for opportunity to develop their potentials, and for happiness. Being mindful of these human commonalities is crucial for understanding others and resolving conflict, especially when what we see on the surface makes us seem, at first, more different than we really are.

This doesn't mean that all differences are benign. We must be mindful, too, of inequalities. When one group claims more wealth, status, or power for itself, or hoards opportunities, this is not a harmless difference. It is not like an interesting variation in style of speech, clothing, music, or food; rather, it's something that we might want to consider changing or abolishing, presuming that we value fairness and equality. In any case, being sociologically mindful about the distinction between differences and inequalities can help us figure out which arrangements we want to preserve and which we want to change.

Mindfulness of Process and Change

Suppose we study the social world and discover harmful and unjustifiable inequalities among groups defined by race or ethnicity. Suppose, too, that we want to change these arrangements to create a more just and equal society. Is this possible? Sometimes the task seems so daunting that people throw up their hands in frustration and say, "Nothing can be done! The world is too big to change!" This is a misperception.

Understanding prospects for social change depends on mindfulness of the social world as made up of processes. For ease of expression, we often talk about organizations—universities, banks, armies, hospitals, corporations—and institutions—higher education, government, the family, the market—as *things*, but these "things" are really just people interacting in patterned ways on a regular basis. One kind of pattern we call a university, another kind we call a bank, another kind we call a corporation, another kind we call a sports team, and so on. This way of looking at organizations and institutions reminds us that changing the social world does not mean trying to take down a mountain range or fill in the ocean with a shovel. It means changing the patterned ways in which we do things together, and this is a much more doable kind of project.

Being mindful of process helps us see that inequality is not the result of mysterious forces. We can look at how resources are transmitted in families, how skills and self-confidence are nurtured (or not) in schools, how people gain access to (or are excluded from) the networks through which information and opportunities are obtained, how gatekeepers and bosses make decisions about employees, how changes in the economy expand or diminish opportunities, how rules of the game are made, interpreted, and enforced. Behind every unequal outcome there is a process that can be analyzed

by answering *How?* questions. If we understand these processes, we're in a better position to try to change them.

Several times I've used the image of a mountain range to suggest something big and solid—the opposite of a squishy process. But as any geologist will tell you, mountains are part of processes, too. They rise when tectonic plates collide, and decline as wind and snow and rain wear them down. We don't normally see this happen because it takes millions of years, and human lives are relatively short. The same principle applies to the social world. As with mountains, the social world, though it appears stable from day to day, is changing all the time. This happens because we are always jointly engaged in learning, problem solving, inventing, and figuring out better ways to do things together. If we are mindful of these processes, we realize that what's constant in human social life is not fixity but change.

Being sociologically mindful helps us see that making a difference is possible. Because the social world is always being made and remade through our actions and through the ideas we share with others, what we do—how we participate in this process—matters. Of course we can't change the social world by ourselves overnight. But anything we choose to do differently changes our immediate social environment and has the potential to ripple outward and lead to wider changes. Although being sociologically mindful helps us understand how this is possible, it doesn't tell us precisely what to do. That is something we must continually figure out, given the problems and changing circumstances we face.

Sociological Self-Awareness

The social world is not just a reality that exists outside of us. We are also part of that reality. What's more, the social world gets *inside* us in a variety of ways. The language and symbols with which we think; the values we use to tell right from wrong; the beliefs and concepts that enable us to make sense of the world; the standards by which we judge ourselves and others; the social categories in which we anchor our identities—all these come from the communities in which we're raised. This is why sociologists say that humans are thoroughly social creatures.

It is one thing, however, to acknowledge that we are social creatures, shaped by our environments, and another to reflect on how this is true for us as individuals. The latter requires looking at ourselves in a sociologically mindful way. *Where did our values and beliefs come from? How did we learn to interpret and evaluate things in the ways we do? How are our identities products of the groups and categories to which we belong? How have our priorities been shaped by the reward systems we've faced? What has our suffering allowed us to see? What has our privilege kept us from seeing?* These are just some of the questions we might ask if we reflect on ourselves in a sociological way.

Sometimes people resist this kind of self-reflection because it seems to threaten their sense of individuality. I think this comes from a narrow idea of what individuality means. It cannot mean that we are unlike everyone else in every way; that's not possible—we all fit into society by sharing values and beliefs with other members of a community, and by having experiences in common. So a better way to think of individuality might be as exercising the capacity to reflect on our thoughts and

feelings, and on how our thoughts and feelings are rooted in social life. When we do this, we diminish the power of inherited, unexamined ideas to steer our thoughts and behaviors, while gaining power to think for ourselves. Our agency as individuals is thereby enhanced.

Developing sociological self-awareness can change us in other ways. One thing it can do is reduce feelings of defensiveness or guilt that often arise when studying inequality. For example, people in a group that has historically enjoyed economic and political dominance might reject an analysis that highlights their advantages—not because the analysis is wrong, but because it evokes guilt. Being sociologically self-aware reduces this tendency because it helps us see that we did not invent the oppressive beliefs and practices that still cause problems today. If we can look at ourselves in this analytic, non-judgmental way—seeing ourselves as products of history, culture, and social organization—we can perhaps see more clearly what is going on in the social world, how we fit into it, and what we might like to change.

At the same time that being sociologically self-aware can reduce guilt and help us overcome blind spots, it helps us see where our responsibilities lie. If we recognize that we are the inheritors of oppressive arrangements, and that we have internalized beliefs that justify these arrangements, it becomes clear that making change is up to us. When we become aware that the beliefs and practices we've inherited cause unnecessary suffering, we have a choice: to continue to perpetuate these beliefs and practices, or to try changing them. Once we become sociologically self-aware, we become responsible for making this choice.

Being sociologically self-aware also means recognizing that we are products not only of the past but of the present as well. This is an important insight for pursuing social change. It brings the realization that our ability and willingness to pursue change depend a great deal on our relationships to others and our membership in groups and communities. The failure to appreciate this fact is itself a product of a culture that discourages sociological self-awareness, especially when it comes to thinking about how we can help make change happen.

Often we are led to believe that change happens because of the actions of moral heroes, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, Cesar Chavez, or Mohandas Gandhi. What is thus obscured is the need for organizing, for collective action, and for mutual support among people who challenge the status quo. If we are sociologically mindful, we recognize the importance of organizing and collective action; if we are sociologically self-aware, we recognize that our participation in, and contribution to, social change likewise depends on connections to others. It is through these relationships that we come to see what needs to be changed and why. Others also support us—and we them—when change requires struggle, as it often does. The truth is, no one, no matter how heroic, makes change alone.

There is another reason we need others to make change. If we are sociologically self-aware, we know that our view of the social world is limited; no matter how much we learn, we always see the world from the standpoint of our experiences as members of particular groups and categories. This means there are some things we will see well and clearly, and other things only dimly, if at all. It is other people who can help us overcome these blind spots. That is why I say that it is through relationships

with *different* others—by listening to and empathizing with them—that we come to see what needs changing. This includes changes in the social world and in ourselves.

Because of how our lives are organized, because of the paths of least resistance that are laid down for us, it can be hard to encounter others, especially different others, in ways that encourage honest listening and empathizing. Still, we can try; it's not impossible to choose to seek out others, other perspectives, and new understandings. In fact, that's much of what education is about, and it's what this book makes possible: encountering new perspectives and ways of understanding social life. Here, in your hands, is a way to become more sociologically mindful and sociologically self-aware. I hope you will engage with it, allowing it to help you see more of the world that has made you and how you can participate in remaking that world.

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

On March 18, 2008, then presidential candidate Barack Obama delivered a speech on race and politics at the National Constitutional Center. Eight months before his historic presidential win, Obama addressed one of the most salient and complex issues that continually agitates American debate. During his eight-year term, Obama would comment on a range of racially motivated incidents that affected communities of color and faith throughout the United States. Today, these incidents continue. Yet, the leading political response to these acts has changed in tone. Defenders of white supremacy and nationalism have gained a significant foothold on influencing racial discourse and discourse of faith. In the following photo, members of the Alt-right clash with counter-protestors at Emancipation Park in Charlottesville, Virginia, during the August 2017 Unite the Right Rally (Figure I.1). Tensions flared over the planned removal of the statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee. During the conflict, Heather Heyer, a thirty-two-year-old civil rights activist, was killed by an Alt-right motorist, who drove into a group of counter-protestors. In a tepid response to the violent rally, President Donald Trump blamed both sides of the confrontation, inflaming an already volatile situation. Public backlash to Trump's comments were swift and abundant. So, which America are we? The one that uses racist rhetoric to defend "American values?" Or the one that engages in anti-racist praxis? Regardless of how you respond to this question, it is hard to deny that the American collective consciousness seems battered and bruised from mixed messages that espouse racial hatred or demonstrate racial unity. It is in the midst of this confusion and uncertainty that we chose to assemble this book. Undergraduate students walk into courses on race and ethnic inequalities with the same confusion, often using their own personal experiences to decide which version of the United States makes most sense to them.



FIGURE I.1 Charlottesville's Unite the Right Rally.

The works reflected in this text elucidate the complexity of racial and ethnic inequalities, referring back to America's long, troubled history with race, emphasizing the role of social institutions in perpetuating race inequalities, and exposing the intersection of race, class, gender, and other social inequalities. We encourage students to take an active role in the educational process, using each work as a source of individual and collective reflection.

The Sociological Mindfulness Approach

Students bring various experiences and assumptions into the classroom that can foster anxieties about offending someone or being offended themselves. As a result, students become passive learners, making it difficult to comprehend complex issues and subsequently detaching from the course material. In order to grasp the breadth of racial discourse and ease tensions that arise when engaging in such discussions, we frame our approach using *sociological mindfulness*. As articulated by Schwalbe, sociological mindfulness encourages us to see the world for what it is, reinforcing “how our lives are intertwined and how our words and deeds help or harm others in nonobvious ways” (Schwalbe 2005, 4).

Employing sociological mindfulness allows students and instructors to remain actively conscious of the ideas, events, and interactions that shape our lives, even when these factors seem separate from our own experiences. The *sociological mindfulness* framework allows the reader to remain engaged and holds each student accountable for the development of their own sociological consciousness. We encourage students to become problem solvers in the arena of race discourse, rather than passive observers or casual critics of social events.

Organization of the Book

We invite students to reflect on their own observations and experiences by providing a range of scholarly works from theoretical macro-level works to micro-level narratives. Overall, we highlight four main goals: introduce students to fresh narratives about current issues of race and ethnic inequality; connect larger macro-level explanations of race and ethnic inequalities with personalized experiences; reveal how theory connects to the gathering of empirical evidence; and fuel critical discussion by confronting the concerns students hold about present-day race discourse.

We organize the book into nine sections. Each section begins with an engaging student narrative, followed by an editor's introduction. The subsequent chapters presented in each section offer discussion questions and resources to support knowledge building.

Section I: Theorizing Race, Racism, and Race Inequalities: Sociological theory offers explanations as to how race and ethnic inequalities become perpetuated within our social institutions and throughout our social interactions. This section addresses a range of sociological explanations, such as intersectionality, color-blind racism, race formation theory, critical race theory, and race group positioning.

Section II: Identity, Wellness, and Society: This section addresses the complex relationship between the social construction of race and one's identity development. We focus on the present-day challenges that individuals face in negotiating their identities in a society that maintains racial stereotypes yet desires to be "race neutral." The chapters in this section address the experiences of South Asian Americans, implicit bias, and the relationship between race and ethnic inequalities and health outcomes.

Section III: Intersectionality: Race, Class, Gender, and Beyond: This section addresses the intersections of race, class, gender, and religious identity. In addition, this section introduces students to how race and ethnic inequalities are perpetuated within the social institutions of work, the economy, religion, and the criminal justice system. The chapters in this section discuss Sandra Bland, the experiences of American Muslims, and how race informs the experiences of individuals employed as care workers.

Section IV: Education: In this section we challenge students to reflect on their educational careers before college, their present-day experiences, and their lives after graduation. The chapters in this section address how university campuses negotiate racial discourse, the lack of inclusivity in education, and the experiences of students of color in high school and college.

Section V: Popular Culture and the Media: This section is tailored to meet the concerns of students who find it difficult to navigate the terrain of popular culture, which is saturated with racialized and sexualized images. The sociological mindfulness approach will allow students the opportunity to reflect on their own actions as consumers and creators of popular culture. The chapters in this section address racialized images, the commodification of race, especially in entertainment, how technology informs racial discourse and collective activism, and how documentary film can help to address America’s sordid, racialized past.

Section VI: Family and Partnerships: As a social institution, the family represents one of the most powerful mechanisms through which we develop our social identities and learn about other social groups. In this section, students will engage in narratives that reveal how broader race and ethnic inequalities shape family dynamics. The chapters in this section address parenting after Ferguson, raising a child in a foreign country, and interracial relationships.

Section VII: Racialized Immigration Policies: In this section we seek to engage students in classroom dialogue that provokes them to think about who they are as public individuals. What does it mean to have a “voice” in American politics? What does it mean to be marginalized in American politics? Current political rhetoric has made us confront how we interpret and connect with varying perspectives, especially views related to immigration. Students will use the sociological mindfulness approach to evaluate where they stand in the milieu of political discourse, especially given that race shapes much of the dialogue. The chapters in this section address violence at the US-Mexico border, the criminalization of immigrant status, and the influence of public policy on educational attainment for immigrant populations.

Section VIII: Coloniality in the Twenty-First Century: Moving students beyond a discussion of domestic ethnic and race relations allows them to see the universality of racial prejudice and discrimination. It is important for students to understand that race inequality is not solely a “US problem,” but exists as a destructive force in many areas around the globe. The sociological mindfulness approach will allow students to see commonalities with groups they may think of as “the other.” The chapters in this section address colonialism, race and ethnic discourse in Guatemala, the politics of borders, and racial dynamics in Colombia.

Section IX: Mobilizing for Social Change: In this section, we will round out each student’s journey by addressing the active ways that we can reimagine race and ethnic relations and support anti-racist praxis. The chapters in this section address the activism of immigrant groups, community activism, and the struggles of African Americans, Asian Americans, and indigenous groups to gain ground against systemic racism.

—Jacqueline Brooks, Heidi Sarabia, and Aya Kimura Ida

Reference

Schwalbe, Michael. 2005. *The Sociologically Examined Life: Pieces of the Conversation*. 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.

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Section I

Theorizing Race, Racism, and Race Inequalities

Student Narrative

My first day of undergrad at Sacramento State was one of the prime highlights of my life. I was set to accomplish my dream of obtaining my degree—so I could go out into the world and be my “best self.” I was thrilled at the thought of being a student at a real university. Yet, my happiness was short lived. Immediately, I noticed that out of thousands of students on campus, I was a part of the minority. In most of my classes I was the only African American. In my Urban Education course, I was one of three African American students in the class. The racial demographic of this class along with the dynamics of the subject matter, revealed the powerful intersections of race and class and the prevalence of structural racism. I began to struggle with these revelations, feeling increasingly uncomfortable and conflicted—feeling that I could not be myself. W.E.B. Du Bois argued that a double-consciousness includes the sense of “twoness,” stating that “one ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength keeps it from going asunder” (Du Bois 2007, 15). This is how I felt as an African American who grew up poor, studying alongside White students from more privileged backgrounds. I struggled to fit in. My standpoint was definitely different from the other students in the class based on my everyday life experiences and having grown up in an urban neighborhood. I was forced to police my thoughts

before I responded to questions presented about the subject material. This was so disheartening to me. I had to police my tone, so as not to evoke emotion when talking about or responding to my classmates and the professor, so as not to come across as the stereotypical “angry Black woman.” Eventually, I realized that I was censoring more than my thoughts. I was responding based on how I thought White people view me through the “veil.” How sad that I thought about how others felt about me first, before speaking my own truth. It has not been easy, but I have learned to lift the “veil” and see myself as the intelligent African American woman that I am—in and out of the classroom.

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Learning Objectives

After you read this section on “Theorizing Race, Racism, and Race Inequalities,” you should be able to:

1. Define sociological theory.
2. Compare and contrast race formation theory, critical race theory, color-blind racism, and intersectionality.
3. Define a racial project.

Editor’s Introduction

Jacqueline Brooks, PhD

Throughout this text, we will encourage you to be “mindful” of your social identities. As Schwalbe explains in the introduction, mindfulness challenges us to consider where we exist in the race hierarchy, the patterns that contribute to our social identities, how we benefit from our social location, how we are disadvantaged, and how we disadvantage others. This is a weighty, yet necessary, task if we hope to make strides in dismantling structural and interpersonal racism. For Kendra, everyday activities, practices, and interactions consistently remind her of where she fits in the racial

hierarchy. How frustrating to sit in a college classroom, which encourages the free expression of ideas, and feel trapped by stereotypes. In Section IV, we will discuss *stereotype threat* and its harmful effect on student achievement. For Kendra, identifying the intersections of race, class, and gender is filtered through multiple experiences that challenge her to contemplate her “black-ness,” “woman-ness,” and class standing.

We tend to think of racism as a character flaw rather than a destructive force that embeds itself within the fabric of social life. Several years ago, I attended a conference where I was asked to complete an exercise from an “able-centered” perspective. The facilitator of the exercise sought to “snap us out” of our perceived notions of what ability means and recognize our “able-bodied privilege.” I found this difficult, as I felt compelled to contextualize the exercise based on my social location as an African American and a woman. I struggled to be mindful of my “able-ness,” as I sought to understand the experiences of those with physical and mental challenges. I consider myself well versed in theories of intersectionality, yet I floundered when asked to imagine how ableism exists as an intersecting form of oppression. Like ableism, racism transcends personal likes and preferences; it is a social phenomenon so enmeshed within the norms of our everyday lives and social structures that we fail to recognize its existence. I am guessing that you, too, will struggle to be mindful of your individual dislikes and preferences, as we ask you to review the works in this text from a “race-centered” or “ethnic-centered” perspective. As you move through the text, remind yourself that mindfulness is a process, not a solitary, one-time act. This means that although you may have experienced racism or ethnocentrism yourself, it is still necessary to be mindful of your own assumptions, beliefs, values, and behaviors. What better place to start than with sociological theory—the process of explaining how and why we do what we do?

In sociology, pondering why our social behavior takes certain forms is just as important as gathering the empirical evidence that reveals the existence of social patterns. This text highlights the many ways in which marginalized groups experience race and ethnic inequalities. Most of the readings rely on quantitative and qualitative data to illustrate the effect of structural racism, the daily struggle of negotiating race and ethnic identities, or the economic, health, or financial effect of racism. In addition, you will find that many of these readings steep their arguments in **sociological theory**, which unlike theories in the natural sciences tends

to be more evaluative and critical (Appelrouth and Edles 2016). We utilize theory to organize the observations and facts that make up social life. Appelrouth and Edles (2016, 2) state that, in essence, theory helps us make sense of the world around us “because it holds assorted observations and facts together.” As we struggle to organize our social world, we rely on “implicit assumptions and unacknowledged presuppositions that mean interpretations of social reality rely more on *what we think we observe and know*, rather than what is factual” (Appelrouth and Edles 2016, 2) Yet, as Sears and Cairns (2016) argue, it is difficult to make the argument for theory in a data-driven world, preoccupied with collecting empirical evidence. “Formal theories guide and inform the process of study and observation, helping to define what the problems are in the first place and how they might be addressed” (Sears and Cairns 2016, 45). Theory is a tool of investigation, not a hindrance to it.

So, how do we make sense of race and ethnic inequalities, especially when the idea of “race” is socially constructed, rendering it fluid and vulnerable to change? The story of race in the United States is complex and tenuous—its discourse has been shaped by religion, politics, law, economics, and geography. The social constructions of race and ethnicity have become so embedded in the American psyche that we have lost much of our creative power to rethink how they exist within our lives and social institutions, through a process of **reification**. Thus, the race and ethnic categories that we socially construct become interpreted as fixed, discrete social-psychological spaces that do not offer much room for change. The theories discussed in this reading attempt to break race and ethnicity from this constraint.

We will discuss two camps of sociological theory: **structural theories of inequality** and **theories of interaction**. Structural theories emphasize the historical shaping of racial hierarchies through the power of social institutions. Theories of interaction emphasize relational spaces, how our interpretations of race and ethnicity influence our identities (i.e., relationship to oneself based on collective meaning) and how these interpretations influence our interactions with others (i.e., interpersonal relationships). We will discuss **critical race theory**, **race formation theory**, **color blind racism** and **intersectionality**, keeping in mind each theory does not occupy a discrete, static location within one camp or the other.

Important Terms and Concepts

Before we address the different sociological theories that explain race and ethnic inequalities, we should define a few important terms and concepts. The sociological approach to race and ethnic inequalities bases its understanding on the premise that race and ethnicity reflect distinct **social constructions**, meaning race and ethnicity are created by human social beings, and do not reflect biological differences between social groups. We rely not only on our sociological knowledge, but also the theories and empirical evidence of other disciplines such as, psychology and biology to make this assertion. Historically, scholars have not always supported this idea. In fact, just as people used to believe the earth was flat, scholars believed that race groups differed by real, essential, and discernable physical traits, even suggesting that African-Americans, for example, were sub-human, and lacked the intelligence of whites. Some of these ideas still exist today. I am guessing you have heard people discuss the athletic superiority of African American athletes. This may sound like a compliment, but this notion relates back to a time when we connected perceived physical traits to specific race groups. Yet, when we compare human beings at the genetic level, we learn that we share nearly 99.9 percent of the same genes with other humans, and that there is more genetic variation within racial groups than between them (about 8.6 times more) (Graves 2005). Therefore, along with many other scholars across the academy we conclude that racial difference does not exist on the genetic level. So, where does it exist? We ask people to self-identify based on race and ethnic classifications. What knowledge are we asking people to employ in order to make that determination?

We define **race** as a group that based on its perceived physical traits receives different treatment in society. Further, we acknowledge that the perceived physical traits we use to make distinctions among race groups are often, arbitrary characteristics such as, hair texture, size and shape of nose, eye color, and skin color. If we were to line up the world's population, we would see that these physical characteristics exist across the spectrum of the human species, no one race group gets to claim ownership of curly hair, for example. Finally, we attach social meaning not only to the arbitrary, perceived physical traits, but to the race classifications themselves. In section V, you will read Sweet's (2020) work on the racialization of children's toys. You will learn that a scientific experiment revealed that African-American

girls, when asked, would rather play with white dolls, than dolls that represented their race group (Sweet 2020; Clark and Clark 1947). This research showed that we attach “good characteristics” to the representation of whiteness, and “bad characteristics” to the representation of blackness. We will discuss this idea throughout the text.

We define ethnicity as the shared culture of a social group, such as religion, history, language, dress, and food. For example, you may identify your race group as Asian-American, but self-identify with the culture of Korea. Or, you may identify your race group as white, but self-identify with the culture of Italy. Some people can immediately, and easily self-identify with an ethnic group, while others have difficulty identifying with a specific ethnic group. This could occur for several reasons. First, as European immigrant groups began to blend into an over-arching “American culture,” and some of these groups became accepted as “white,” ethnic distinctions began to dissipate. Thus, groups were no longer treated as “Italian,” but were treated as members of the white dominant group. Second, historical records lack information that allows groups such as African-Americans to readily identify with a specific ethnic group. Recall that enslaved Africans were treated as property, thus record-keeping was limited to basic demographic information relevant to sales and purchases.

Finally, we define **racial ideologies** as perspectives that fortify the racial structure, or challenge the racial structure. For example, perspectives that utilize **ethnocentrism** (the view that the United States is superior to other nations), and/or **xenophobia** (fear of immigrant populations), reflect racial ideologies that buttress the existing racial structure, where “acceptable” whites occupy the highest position on the racial hierarchy, and receive the privileges and protection afforded to those at the top. We have seen these racial ideologies weaponized against immigrant populations such as migrant workers from Mexico. We will learn much more about how we racialize immigration in sections VII and VIII. Conversely, anti-racist praxis that encourages acknowledgement of white privilege, and works to dismantle racial structures is an example of a racist ideology as well. Later in this section, Brooks will discuss how anti-racist praxis develops among whites, and how it can be used to challenge the racial hierarchy.

Now that we have a basic understanding of some important terms and concepts, let’s discuss several sociological theories.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) stems from the theorizing of Karl Marx, who placed great emphasis on the role of the economic order in structuring (mostly) class inequalities (e.g., as corporate profit increases, the value of the worker decreases). It reinvigorates Marxist ideas by addressing inherent inequalities in many of our social institutions, such as law, politics, education, and religion, that affect the lives of marginalized groups, especially race and ethnic minorities. Thus, the power and privileges of social institutions maintain an inverse relationship to the quality of life of marginalized groups (e.g., the militarization of the police force and its effect on predominantly black and brown low-income communities). CRT's emphasis on social institutions challenges us to consider how we legitimize and perpetuate racial hierarchies and their subsequent harmful effects on individuals and groups.

Collectively, works that utilize critical race theory claim the following: 1) racism is *not* abnormal; 2) racism benefits the privileged, thereby solidifying its existence; 3) racism is a fluid, changing feature of social life that works in tandem with other social inequalities; and 4) racism influences our personal and interpersonal experiences (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw 1993). Further, CRT critiques the construction of race and race identities within social institutions, exposing how racial categories and definitions are used to subjugate communities of color. For example, within the criminal justice system, consciously or unconsciously, labeling communities of color as “thugs” or “aggressive” influences interactions between law enforcement and marginalized communities. Similarly, constructing negative perceptions of students of color as “emotionally disturbed” or “unteachable,” influences interactions between underrepresented groups and faculty, administrators, and peers.

Race Formation Theory

As mentioned above, Marxist theorizing touted class as the paramount force creating social inequalities. Simultaneously, it marginalized the power and influence of other forms of social inequalities, such as race and gender. Omi and Winant responded to this problem in *Racial Formation in the United States*, walking us through the historical changes that have shaped shifting racial ideologies (1986). In their latest edition (2015), Omi

and Winant reiterate that race is not reducible to class, illustrating how race functions separately from class, deserving of its own sociological inquiries. Further, they describe the *racialization process*—revealing how race becomes contextualized within social arenas, such as politics, education, and the criminal justice system. More specifically, they describe how racial projects contribute to the birth and perpetuation of racial ideologies. They state,

A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive or ideological practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning. Racial projects are attempts both to shape the ways in which social structures are racially signified and the ways that racial meanings are embedded in social structures. (Omi and Winant 2015, 125)

Specifically, what is a *racial project*? For Omi and Winant, racial projects control racial discourse, coaching us to interpret, respond, and identify in specific ways. Let us use the Black Lives Matter (#BLM) movement as an example. In response to ongoing police brutality, especially against black men, #BLM challenges us to consider how racial stereotypes, racial prejudice, and racial hatred shape interactions between African Americans and the police. Regardless of whether you actively participate in #BLM or not, you have an opinion about its objectives and actions. Thus, you become drawn into the discourse, debating the relevance of the movement, its connection to your personal life, and its overall objectives. Similarly, we can classify the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, which protested the removal of Confederate statues as a racial project as well. Shielding their protest under the banner of “Unite the Right,” white nationalist protesters referenced President Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign promises, stating their goals were in line with Trump’s efforts to “take back the country.” This coded language, used widely in American politics, masks underlining racial prejudice and bigotry. Again, whether we were present at the rally or not, we interpret, respond, and identify with its actions in ways that draw

us into the larger, national, race discourse. You will learn more about Omi and Winant's theorizing in this section.

Color-Blind Racism

You may have heard someone state the following: "I'm not a racist! I have a black friend," or "I get along with everyone. I don't see color!" For Bonilla-Silva (2013), these retorts exemplify color-blind racism, a perspective that ignores the existence of a racial hierarchy, overlooking the multiple inequities served upon people of color. The stories that we tell about racism, our experiences or others', illustrates the structure of racial grammar—the rules, semantics, and logics that justify, legitimize, and present the racial order as normal. We communicate the existence and power of the racial order through storytelling (racial grammar) that "normalizes" white privilege and demonizes the powerless (Bonilla-Silva 2012). For example, rather than cite historical, structural racism as a contributor to residential segregation, a color-blind perspective argues that people self-segregate, so they can live next to people "just like them." Bonilla-Silva (2013) identifies four central frames used by whites that mask racist views and perceptions: **abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and the minimization of racism**. Each frame reduces or erases the existence of a racial hierarchy and its harmful effects on communities of color.

Abstract liberalism refers to the use of "equal opportunity" and "meritocracy" arguments to eschew racism (e.g., "There are plenty of jobs out there, why can't you find one?"). This perspective implies that an "equal playing field" exists and that, as long as you are willing, opportunities will come your way. However, demand-side practices that reserve jobs for the most-preferred workers push people to the margins of the labor market, and sometimes out of the labor market altogether. The next time you are at a casual dining restaurant notice the race and gender of the workers at the front of the restaurant (e.g., hostess, wait staff, and managers) as opposed to the workers at the back of the restaurant (e.g., cooks, dishwashers, and bussers). This is sociological theory in action! Naturalization anecdotes identify personal motives or reference the status quo as factors in social phenomena such as residential segregation (e.g., "People choose to be like people just like themselves," or "This is how it's always been"). For example, this perspective explains residential segregation as a patterned behavior

created by mass self-segregation. It does not recognize how practices such as redlining force people of color into certain neighborhoods. A descendant of biological racism, cultural racism shoves blame onto communities of color (e.g., “They’re lazy,” or “It’s just part of their culture to have so many kids”). This perspective relies on the apathy that stereotypes provide. It is much easier to form stereotypes about people than getting to know them. It is easier to point the finger at perceived personal group decision-making than identify how social institutions perpetuate social phenomena such as poverty. Minimization tactics draw attention away from historical, structural inequities (e.g., “Slavery happened a long time ago,” or “People are just people. No one is trying to be racist”). This perspective white-washes history, and implies that we are “good people.” In order to understand our present-day struggles with race and ethnic inequalities we need to study history from a transparent view. One that reveals the harshness and brutality of our racial past. The application of mindfulness steers us away from labeling each other as “bad” or “good,” and simply asks that we evaluate our present-day situation with care and honesty.

Each central frame flies in the face of our real experiences of racism, historical injustices, and ongoing racial inequities, which makes it more difficult to eradicate racism.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality challenges us to consider how people *experience* their multiple social identities—simultaneously, as they intermingle in one social body. Thus, my race, ethnicity, class, sex, gender, age, and ability shape the social collective that continuously evolves into what becomes “me.” I filter my social understanding through these social identities, and I am impacted by power differentials within social institutions based on my social identities. At the most basic level, “intersectionality focuses awareness on people and experiences—hence on social forces and dynamics—that, in monocular vision, are overlooked” (MacKinnon 2013, 1020). Intersectionality views social inequalities as multiplicative, often simultaneous experiences, which do not outrank one another. Thus, race, class, and gender nest within one another as multiplicative social inequalities (Collins 2015). This perspective does not dismiss the social categories of race, class, and gender as distinct, separate social experiences. We are, of course, at times much more impacted

by one than the other. Yet, it recognizes that our lives are raced, as much as they are classed and gendered. To ignore the influence of one diminishes the value of one's social experiences. I am guessing that you have selected a **master status** for yourself, meaning one of your social identities influences your sense of self more than another. For example, my race tends to be my master status. For someone else it could be their role as a parent, or for another person it could be their occupation. Yet, we are far more than just that one social identity. Parenting takes on a different shape and form if you are wealthy and white, in contrast to being black and impoverished. Working as an attorney may have different consequences for a Latinx man than a white woman. For some of us, our social identities bring privileges, or protection, within social institutions. In spring 2020, the United States along with the rest of the world, faced the dire impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic. As states across the nation implemented “stay-at-home” orders, businesses shuttered their doors, workers lost their jobs, and first responders risked their lives serving the public. Although the long-lasting effects of the pandemic remain to be seen, we know that economic disruption affects communities of color the quickest and do the most damage (Massey and Denton 1998). The intersectionality of race and class renders these communities particularly vulnerable to major structural economic upheavals.

Drawing from racial formation theory, intersectionality emphasizes the influence of racial hierarchies on the lived experiences of marginalized groups. For example, how people are situated within racial hierarchies denotes whether their lives are protected through privilege or vulnerable to disadvantage. In addition, racial formation theory and critical race theory inform how race meaning and race identity influence social interaction and behavior. For example, after 9/11, Arab and/or Muslim groups in the United States were targeted as “terrorists” and portrayed as such in the media, on television, and in films. Although the racial hierarchy did not shift, the perception of Arab and Muslim Americans as untrustworthy influenced their experiences in the workplace, in school, and traveling in and outside the United States. The contentious travel restrictions, ordered by the Trump administration and referred to as the “Muslim Ban,” indefinitely denies immigrant and nonimmigrant visas to seven countries—five Muslim-majority (i.e., Libya, Iran, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen) and Venezuela and North Korea. In this case, the intersections of race and religious social inequalities influence the creation of oppressive social policy.

Mindfulness

Theory encourages us to remain flexible. Theoretical perspectives do not offer definitive, concrete conclusions to racial discourse. Rather it is important for theory to remain flexible, open to change and reinterpretation. This means that theory, like individuals, must be self-reflective. None of the theoretical approaches we have discussed could survive academic scrutiny without, at times, analyzing their own arguments, suppositions, and assumptions. Often, when teaching, I communicate to students that beliefs—what we hold to be true—are difficult for humans to change. Think about your journey through higher education. Have you ever encountered an idea or a fact that you found difficult to *believe*? One of the hardest things to do as an undergraduate is confront the many ideas, values, and norms that we learned from our families and peers. In fact, this may be the first time that you have been asked to reconsider what you learned in the past. In order to engage the educational process, you will need to develop the ability to be self-reflective. This does not mean you should tear down everything that went into your upbringing. It means asking, is there another way to look at this? I grew up in a charismatic, fundamentalist church. My family members were preachers, evangelists, deacons, and Sunday school teachers. When I was older, I joined an even stricter church. I was not allowed to wear pants, cosmetics, or jewelry or date. In many ways the church was an extension of what I learned as a youth. In other ways it challenged me to question what I truly believed. For a long time, I thought my belief was revealed in my actions. However, as I grew more disgruntled with the behavior of the church, I realized what I believe is separate from what I was being asked to do. Aha! A moment of self-reflection. I am not sure if you will experience such a dramatic shift in your educational journey; however, I encourage you to remain open to it. Just like the theoretical perspectives we discussed, a moment of self-reflection can help strengthen your worldview.

Section Readings

This section presents three readings that discuss the application of sociological theory to race and ethnic inequalities. Each reading focuses on a specific sociological theory(ies).

In “Intersectionality’s Definitional Dilemmas,” Patricia Hill Collins reflects on how researchers and theorists define intersectionality across

multiple disciplines. Often, diffusing terms and concepts across academic fields leads to diluted and fragmented meanings. Given its importance in elucidating how social inequalities converge, generating different experiences for social groups, how we define and apply intersectionality requires a common approach. Collins attempts to provide some clarity and direction regarding the assumptions of intersectionality. Rather than produce definitive, fixed assumptions, Collins establishes a guiding framework that when wielded, is amenable to diverse perspectives, approaches, and applications.

In “Racial Formation Rules: Continuity, Instability, and Change,” Omi and Winant revisit their seminal work on the construction and persistence of racial hierarchies within American society. The authors address the shifting definition and constructions of racial hierarchies within a range of social institutions such as criminal justice and education.

In “Obstacles to White Anti-racist Praxis: Notes on Sociological Theory,” Brooks addresses the relationship between social protests and the development of a white race consciousness. Using Blumer’s Race Group Position theory, Du Bois’s notion of the “veil,” Brooks argues that how whites identify as members of “race groups” and how they perceive of the “other” can hinder or encourage anti-racist sentiments and behaviors.