11.2: Racial, Ethnic, and Minority Groups

While many students first entering a sociology classroom are accustomed to conflating the terms "race," "ethnicity," and "minority group," these three terms have distinct meanings for sociologists. The idea of race refers to superficial physical differences that a particular society considers significant, while ethnicity describes shared culture. And the term "minority groups" describe groups that are subordinate, or that lack power in society regardless of skin color or country of origin. For example, in modern U.S. history, the elderly might be considered a minority group due to a diminished status that results from popular prejudice and discrimination against them. Ten percent of nursing home staff admitted to physically abusing an elderly person in the past year, and 40 percent admitted to committing psychological abuse (World Health Organization 2011). In this chapter we focus on racial and ethnic minorities.

What Is Race?

Historically, the concept of race has changed across cultures and eras, and has eventually become less connected with ancestral and familial ties, and more concerned with superficial physical characteristics. In the past, theorists have posited categories of race based on various geographic regions, ethnicities, skin colors, and more. Their labels for racial groups have connoted regions (Mongolia and the Caucus Mountains, for instance) or skin tones (black, white, yellow, and red, for example).

Social science organizations including the American Association of Anthropologists, the American Sociological Association, and the American Psychological Association have all taken an official position rejecting the biological explanations of race. Over time, the typology of race that developed during early racial science has fallen into disuse, and the social construction of race is a more sociological way of understanding racial categories. Research in this school of thought suggests that race is not biologically identifiable and that previous racial categories were arbitrarily assigned, based on pseudoscience, and used to justify racist practices (Omi and Winant 1994; Graves 2003). When considering skin color, for example, the social construction of race perspective recognizes that the relative darkness or fairness of
skin is an evolutionary adaptation to the available sunlight in different regions of the world. Contemporary conceptions of race, therefore, which tend to be based on socioeconomic assumptions, illuminate how far removed modern understanding of race is from biological qualities. In modern society, some people who consider themselves “white” actually have more melanin (a pigment that determines skin color) in their skin than other people who identify as “black.” Consider the case of the actress Rashida Jones. She is the daughter of a black man (Quincy Jones), and her best-known roles include Ann Perkins on Parks and Recreation, Karen Filippelli on The Office, and Zooey Rice in I Love You Man, none of whom are black characters. In some countries, such as Brazil, class is more important than skin color in determining racial categorization. People with high levels of melanin may consider themselves “white” if they enjoy a middle-class lifestyle. On the other hand, someone with low levels of melanin might be assigned the identity of “black” if he or she has little education or money.

The social construction of race is also reflected in the way names for racial categories change with changing times. It’s worth noting that race, in this sense, is also a system of labeling that provides a source of identity; specific labels fall in and out of favor during different social eras. For example, the category “negroid,” popular in the nineteenth century, evolved into the term “negro” by the 1960s, and then this term fell from use and was replaced with “African American.” This latter term was intended to celebrate the multiple identities that a black person might hold, but the word choice is a poor one: it lumps together a large variety of ethnic groups under an umbrella term while excluding others who could accurately be described by the label but who do not meet the spirit of the term. For example, actress Charlize Theron is a blonde-haired, blue-eyed “African American.” She was born in South Africa and later became a U.S. citizen. Is her identity that of an “African American” as most of us understand the term?

What Is Ethnicity?

Ethnicity is a term that describes shared culture—the practices, values, and beliefs of a group. This culture might include shared language, religion, and traditions, among other commonalities. Like race, the term ethnicity is difficult to describe and its meaning has changed over time. And as with race, individuals may be identified or self-identify with ethnicities in complex, even contradictory, ways. For example, ethnic groups such as Irish, Italian American, Russian, Jewish, and Serbian might all be groups whose members are predominantly included in the “white” racial category. Conversely, the ethnic group British includes citizens from a multiplicity of racial backgrounds: black, white, Asian, and more, plus a variety of race combinations. These examples illustrate the complexity and overlap of these identifying terms. Ethnicity, like race, continues to be an identification method that individuals and institutions use today—whether through the census, affirmative action initiatives, nondiscrimination laws, or simply in personal day-to-day relations.

What Are Minority Groups?

Sociologist Louis Wirth (1945) defined a minority group as “any group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination.” The term minority connotes discrimination, and in its sociological use, the term subordinate group can be used interchangeably with the term minority, while the term dominant group is often substituted for the group that’s in the majority. These definitions correlate to the concept that the dominant group is that which holds the most power in a given society, while subordinate groups are those who lack power compared to the dominant group.
Note that being a numerical minority is not a characteristic of being a minority group; sometimes larger groups can be considered minority groups due to their lack of power. It is the lack of power that is the predominant characteristic of a minority, or subordinate group. For example, consider apartheid in South Africa, in which a numerical majority (the black inhabitants of the country) were exploited and oppressed by the white minority.

According to Charles Wagley and Marvin Harris (1958), a minority group is distinguished by five characteristics: (1) unequal treatment and less power over their lives, (2) distinguishing physical or cultural traits like skin color or language, (3) involuntary membership in the group, (4) awareness of subordination, and (5) high rate of in-group marriage. Additional examples of minority groups might include the LBGT community, religious practitioners whose faith is not widely practiced where they live, and people with disabilities.

Scapegoat theory, developed initially from Dollard’s (1939) Frustration-Aggression theory, suggests that the dominant group will displace its unfocused aggression onto a subordinate group. History has shown us many examples of the scapegoating of a subordinate group. An example from the last century is the way Adolf Hitler was able to blame the Jewish population for Germany’s social and economic problems. In the United States, recent immigrants have frequently been the scapegoat for the nation’s—or an individual’s—woes. Many states have enacted laws to disenfranchise immigrants; these laws are popular because they let the dominant group scapegoat a subordinate group.

Summary

Race is fundamentally a social construct. Ethnicity is a term that describes shared culture and national origin. Minority groups are defined by their lack of power.

Section Quiz

The racial term “African American” can refer to:

1. a black person living in the United States
2. people whose ancestors came to the United States through the slave trade
3. a white person who originated in Africa and now lives in the United States
4. any of the above

Answer

D

What is the one defining feature of a minority group?

1. Self-definition
2. Numerical minority
3. Lack of power
4. Strong cultural identity
Ethnicity describes shared:

1. beliefs
2. language
3. religion
4. any of the above

Which of the following is an example of a numerical majority being treated as a subordinate group?

1. Jewish people in Germany
2. Creoles in New Orleans
3. White people in Brazil
4. Blacks under apartheid in South Africa

Scapegoat theory shows that:

1. subordinate groups blame dominant groups for their problems
2. dominant groups blame subordinate groups for their problems
3. some people are predisposed to prejudice
4. all of the above
Short Answer

Why do you think the term “minority” has persisted when the word “subordinate” is more descriptive?

How do you describe your ethnicity? Do you include your family’s country of origin? Do you consider yourself multiethnic? How does your ethnicity compare to that of the people you spend most of your time with?

Further Research


References


Glossary

dominant group
a group of people who have more power in a society than any of the subordinate groups

ethnicity
shared culture, which may include heritage, language, religion, and more
minority group
any group of people who are singled out from the others for differential and unequal treatment

scapegoat theory
a theory that suggests that the dominant group will displace its unfocused aggression onto a subordinate group

social construction of race
the school of thought that race is not biologically identifiable

subordinate group
a group of people who have less power than the dominant group