

Culture, “Race,” and Ethnicity: Basic Premises & Key Definitions

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Culture

“a set of more or less shared understandings and interpretations that include ideas about what is important and what is real as well as strategic and stylistic guidelines to action. Such ideas and guides may be embedded in myths and stories, expressed openly in ritual activity, communicated implicitly in extended processes of socialization, learned through shared experience, or sustained in other ways. ... What links group members to one another is the perception that to a large degree they think alike or at least view aspects of their own lives and certain critical features similarly.” (Cornell & Hartmann)

“Race”–Related Theories and Concepts: Corrections and Refinements

“*Racial realism*” holds that “humankind is comprised of an array of distinct and definable ‘races’ within an objective ontological order,” rooted in innate group differences (Sung, 2015). “*Biological racial-realism* presumes that classifying people by race corresponds to inborn, substantive intergroup differences in biological (and usually social) traits.” (Sung, 2015; 2020)

“*Race*” as a *Social Construct: A Sociological Framework* (Berger & Luckmann, *The Construction of Social Reality*)

World-Building. “Society is a dialectic phenomenon in that it is a human product, and nothing but a human product, that yet continuously acts back upon its producer.” (Berger, *Sacred Canopy*)

- A. Externalization
- B. Objectivation
- C. Internalization
- D. Institutionalization
- E. Socialization

The Origins of “Racial Realism.” “Fifteenth-century European colonizers invented racial group concepts to facilitate the conquest, subjugation and exploitation of indigenous peoples and their lands (Hannaford; Fredrickson). Racial classificatory systems—enshrining Europeans as the ideal ‘race’ destined to rule over and Christianize the other ‘races’ of the world on God’s behalf—were the organizing principle on which colonial societies were established. From the outset, racial classification assigned individuals to hierarchically-ranked groups to which the goods of the community were distributed differentially, based on physical attributes (chiefly skin-color). Influential Enlightenment philosophers, especially Kant, argued that ‘natural, separate divisions, akin to subspecies, exist within humankind’ (Sung, 2001) and that whites were the superior race from which others had declined. ‘Race science’ was developed on these tenets. ‘Biological racial realism,’ affirming whites’ superiority, reinforced majority opinion and leaders’ efforts to implement additional race-based, dominative and exclusionary social policies, creating political, legal, socioeconomic, and other disparities that continue to structure and condition contemporary life.” (Sung, 2020)

“***Racialization***’ describes a context in which ‘race’ has been *institutionalized* (i.e., has become ‘the way we do things around here’): one ‘wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities and social relationships’ (Emerson & Smith) because culture and systems are organized by race and operate to reinforce it” (Sung, 2015).

“[D]ue to the origins of the idea of race, the [placement of people in racial groups always means some form of **hierarchy**. This is why we may define a racialized society, in part, as one that allocates differential rewards by race.” (Emerson & Smith)

“A **racialized society** ‘allocates differential economic, political, social and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines: lines that are socially constructed.’” (Woodberry & Smith, “Fundamentalism et al.,” in Emerson & Smith)

Ethnicity

Ethnic group: “a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood [e.g. kinship patterns, geographic concentration, religious affiliation, language, and physical differences].” (Schermerhorn)