Why Race, Class, and Gender Still Matter

The United States is a nation where people are supposed to be able to rise above their origins. Those who want to succeed, it is believed, can do so with hard enough work and good enough effort because the nation is founded on the principle of equality. Although equality has historically been defined as the principle of equality, it is acknowledged that the nation has not always lived up to this principle in practice. In recent years, the United States has made progress in reducing the formal barriers to opportunity, but some groups still face significant challenges. Race, class, and gender continue to structure society in ways that value some lives more than others. Even with the formal barriers to opportunity removed, the United States remains highly stratified along lines of race, class, and gender.
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class, gender inequality was made apparent as permanent reality. Hillary Clinton represents the final achievement of cracking the glass ceiling for women in politics. The election of 2008 surprised many people by giving the United States two female candidates, both of whom are highly qualified women of color. This framing of the campaign suggests that Obama has a race but no gender, whereas Clinton and Palin are considered female candidates. This either/or thinking limited the discussion of gender into terms of public debate. For example, Clinton and Palin could be accused of playing the race card if they talked about issues of concern to African Americans. But did it affect Obama's campaign to be a good father instead of focusing on his family? Obama could be considered to be playing the so-called race card if he talked about issues of concern to African Americans. Despite this optimism, we think that race, class, and gender still matter and that both of these stories suggest the need for continued attention to race, class, and gender. In the absence of an inclusive perspective that took race, class, and gender into account, the connection between race and class was replaced by a new level of power. From a postmodern perspective, dominant forms of knowledge have been constructed largely from the experiences of the most powerful—that is, those who have the most access to resources for several days, and without basic necessities of food and water. The displacement of thousands of people as a result of Hurricane Katrina reflects the widespread inequity in the way that people were treated. Many people believe that Katrina was the result of inadequate planning and execution. The impact of Hurricane Katrina was felt by many, especially poor women and children. The current and future challenges of race, class, and gender inequality were made apparent as permanent reality.
totally outside the frame of vision of more powerful groups or distant by their views. If you move your age of sight to include those who have been overlooked, you may find that the experiences of excluded groups are often different from those of dominant groups. Furthermore, we should not forget about women when studying race or think only about Whites when studying gender. Completely new subjects can also appear. This is more than a matter of sharpening one's focus, although that is required for clarity. Instead, this new area of vision means actually seeing things differently, perhaps even changing the lens you look through—thereby removing the filters (or stereotypes and misconceptions) that cloud your vision. To begin with, knowledge is not just some abstract thing—good to have, but not all that important. There are real consequences to having partial or distorted knowledge. First, learning about other groups helps you realize the partiality of your own. When you learn about African American history, for example, you are likely to see African American contributions to the country in a different light. Knowing only the history of Puerto Rican women, for example, or seeing them in single-minded terms will not reveal the historical linkage between the oppression of Puerto Rican women and the exclusionary and exploitative treatment of African Americans, working-class whites, Asian American men, and similar groups. This is discussed by Ronald T. Takaki in his essay included here (“A Different Mirror”) on the multicultural history of American society. In this book we ask you to think about how race, class, and gender matter in the inclusive vision we present here matters on a global scale as well. Thinking from a perspective that engages race, class, and gender is not just about developing a race, class, and gender perspective; it is also about developing a perspective that engages race, class, and gender. It also changes how we understand social policy—policy that then reproduces, rather than solves, social problems. Thinking about race, class, and gender shape the experiences of oppressed groups. It also changes how we think about privilege and opportunity. The exclusionary thinking that comes from past frames of vision does not reveal the interconnections that exist among the different groups composing U.S. society. In doing so, we lose our understanding of what experience means. Knowing only the experiences of women and men, for example, is different from knowing the experiences of women and men. Knowing only the historical experience of women and men, for example, is different from knowing the historical experiences of women and men. If what you know is exclusionary, you are likely to act in exclusionary ways, thereby reproducing the racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia of society. This may not be because you are intentionally racist or sexist; it may simply be because you do not know any better. Challenging oppressive race, class, and gender relations is not just about developing a perspective that engages race, class, and gender. It means taking the experiences of women and men seriously and analyzing how race, class, and gender shape the experiences of both men and women—in different, but interrelated, ways. Likewise, the study of racial and ethnic groups begins by learning the diverse histories and experiences of these groups. In doing so, we lose our understanding of what race, class, and gender mean and recreate the experiences of other races and ethnic groups just as we would other races and ethnic groups. In doing so, we lose our understanding of what race, class, and gender mean and recreate the experiences of other races and ethnic groups just as we would other races and ethnic groups. 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Race, class, and gender as institutional systems that have had a special impact in the experiences of all people in this society. At any moment, the United States. Yet race, class, and gender intersect with other categories of experience, such as sexuality, ethnicity, age, ability, religion, and nationality. Historically, these intersections have taken varying forms from one society to another. Given the complex and changing relationships among these categories of analysis, we ground our analysis in the historical, institutional context of the United States. This structural influence—disadvantaged by the unique experiences that they have based on race, class, and gender—none of which is isolated from the effects of the others? Thus, we think that this can be seen as part of a matrix of domination framework to analyze race, class, and gender. A matrix of domination sees social structure as having multiple, interlocking levels of analysis, we ground our analysis in the historical, institutional context of the U.S. setting, so significant that in many ways they influence all of the other categories. Systems of race, class, and gender have been reproduced through economic, political, and social institutions. For example, the race, class, and gender in people's lives, intersections of race, class, and gender can be seen in individual stories and personal experience. In fact, much exciting work on the intersections of race, class, and gender appears in autobiographies, fiction, and personal essays. We do recognize the significance of these individual narratives and include many here, but we also emphasize social structures that provide the context for individual experiences. Thus, studying the connections among race, class, and gender reveals that divisions are manifested differently, depending on their configuration with the others. Thus, studying the connections among race, class, and gender can be seen as part of a matrix of domination framework—a framework that we think can be best understood by contrasting the difference framework to what might be called a difference framework of race, class, and gender. And increasing differentiation within racial-ethnic groups reminds us that race is not a monolithic category, as can be seen in the fact that white poverty is increasing more than among other groups, even while some whites hold the most power in society. How does the matrix of domination affect race, class, and gender studies? How do they provide the context for race, class, and gender studies?
one approach to difference places people in either/or categories, as if one is either Black or White, oppressed or oppressor, powerful or powerless, normal or different. Thinking relationally, the hallmark of the matrix of domination approach is that few of us fit neatly into any of these restrictive categories. For example, in the difference framework individuals are encouraged to compare their experiences with those supposedly unlike them. When you think comparatively, you might look at how different groups have, for example, encountered prejudice and discrimination or you might compare laws prohibiting interracial marriage. Some difference frameworks try to move beyond comparing systems of race, class, and gender by thinking in terms of an additive approach. The additive approach is reflected in terms such as triple jeopardy. 

When it comes to conceptualizing race, class, and gender, the matrix of domination approach and difference framework both view race, class, and gender as separate and independent. In contrast, when you think relationally, you see the social structures that simultaneously produce, maintain, and reproduce these differences. The additive approach can foster a view of oppressions as equivalent and as being the same. Thinking comparatively tends to assume that race, class, and gender constitute separate and independent components of human experience. For one thing, it tends to promote ranking the oppression of one group compared to another, as if the important thing were to determine who is most victimized. Furthermore, it frames one's understanding of different groups only within the context of other groups' experiences; thus, it can assume an artificial norm against which different groups are judged. Thinking comparatively tends to assume that race, class, and gender are separate and independent aspects of human experience. This is an important question and a necessary first step, but it is not enough.

Recognizing that difference encompasses more than race, class, and gender is a step in the right direction. But continuing to add on many distinctive forms of difference fosters a view of oppressions as equivalent and as being the same. One can begin with the concepts of race, class, and gender and continue to "add on" additional types of difference. Ethnicity, sexuality, and religion are often mentioned as additional forms of difference. This is an important question and a necessary first step, but it is not enough. Thinking comparatively can foster greater understanding of the complexities of race, class, and gender in the United States. What does diversity mean? Because the American public has become a more heterogeneous population, diversity has become a catchword for trying to understand the concept of difference. People use diversity to mean cultural variety, numerical representation, changing norms, and the inequalities that characterize the status of different groups. Diversity initiatives try to create race, class, gender relations. Because people are not "like us," "different from what?" this frame—"different from what?" this frame—fails to recognize that race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, and ethnicity matter; thus, groups who have previously been invisible.
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...including people of color, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, older people, and indigenous people because of its focus on structural systems of power and inequality. This means that race, class, and gender involve more than commonly recognized, however, these same groups continue to be defined as "other"; that is, they are perceived through dominant group values, treated in exclusionary ways, and subjected to social injustice and economic inequality.

The matrix of domination model requires analysis and criticism of existing systems of power and privilege; otherwise, understanding diversity becomes just one more privilege for those with the greatest access to education—culture per se, however, tends to look at the group itself rather than at the broader conditions within which the group lives. Of course, as anthropologists know, a sound analysis of culture situates group experience within these social and cultural conditions. This perspective can make experience seem to be just a matter of competing discourses, personifying "voice" as if the voice or discourse itself constituted lived experience. Second, the "voices" approach suggests that opening our awareness of distinct group experiences is important, but some approaches to diversity can erase the very real differences in power that exist within our society.

Diversity initiatives hold that the diversity created by race, class, and gender constitutes cosmetic differences of style, not structural conditions. Nonetheless, a narrow focus on culture tends to ignore so-called multiculturalism. Culture is traditionally defined as the "total way of life" of a group of people. It encompasses both material and symbolic components and is an important dimension of understanding human life. Analysis of culture per se, however, tends to look at the group itself rather than at the broader conditions within which the group lives. Of course, a sound analysis of culture situates group experience within these social and cultural conditions. This perspective can make experience seem to be just a matter of competing discourses, personifying "voice" as if the voice or discourse itself constituted lived experience. Second, the "voices" approach suggests that opening our awareness of distinct group experiences is important, but some approaches to diversity can erase the very real differences in power that exist within our society.

Finally, the matrix of domination framework challenges the idea that race, class, and gender create. For example, diversity initiatives have asked people to challenge the silence that has surrounded many group experiences. In this framework, people think about diversity as "listening to the voices" of a multitude of previously silenced groups. This is an important part of coming to understand race, class, and gender, but it is not enough. One problem is that people may begin hearing the voices as if they were disembodied from particular historical and social conditions. The very term diversity implies that understanding race, class, and gender is simply a matter of recognizing the plurality of views and experiences in society—as if race, class, and gender were benign categories that foster diverse experiences. Instead of systems of power that produce social inequalities.
view of how the nation is lived develops between the experiences that are given a place and those that are not. Hence, for a nation to ‘count’ and tell a story, those who experience the nation must develop narratives for the experiences they have. This process begins through the perspectives of those whose voices have not been heard. The book is on the institutional, or structural, bases for race, class, and gender. In the additive model discussed previously, race, class, and gender are social structural categories. This means that they are embedded in the institutional structure of society. Understanding them requires a social structural analysis—by which we mean revealing the race, class, and gender patterns and processes that form the very framework of society. Age, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, physical ability, region, and ethnicity also shape systems of relationship and meaning, you also can see the distinctive ways that other categories of experience intersect in society. The result is that what we know—about the experiences of different groups and the intergenerational privileges of others—is more than just adding in different group experiences to already established frameworks of thought. It means constructing new understandings and frameworks of thought. It means constructing new categories of race, class, and sex is about how we can use our intersectional perspective in our work.
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How much did you learn about the history of group oppression in your formal education? You probably touched briefly on topics such as the labor movement, slavery, women's suffrage, perhaps even the Holocaust, but most likely these were centered in the experiences of the most dominant groups, but the unwritten, untold subordinated truth can be a source of knowledge.

This is not just an intellectual exercise. As Haunani-Kay Trask shows ("From a Native Daughter"), there can also be a gap between dominant cultural narratives and people's actual experiences. As she, a native Hawaiian, tells it, the official history she learned in schools was not what she was taught in her family and community. Dominant narratives can try to justify the oppression of different groups, and people, women, and people of color, along with others. For that matter, how much of what you study now is based on research done primarily on middle-class college students, or on men. Or, how much of the literature you read and artistic creations that you study are the work of new immigrant populations, or Asian Americans, Latinos/as, African Americans, Native Americans, gays, lesbians, or women?

By minimizing the experiences and creations of these different groups, we are likely to objectify the experiences of millions of African Americans? the genocide of Native Americans? the absence of laws against child labor? the presence of laws forbidding intermarriage between Asian Americans and White Americans?

This book asks you to think more inclusively. What does it take for a member of one group (say, an Indian Muslim woman) to be willing to learn from and value the experiences of another (for example, a Black woman)? These essays show that, although we are caught in multiple systems, we can learn to see our connection to others. Learning to be willing to learn from and value the experiences of another group is not just an intellectual exercise; it is a way of revealing the social structures shaping collective experiences. In doing so, we discover our common experiences and see the impact of social institutions. Using the metaphor of a birdcage, Marilyn Frye artfully explains the concept of social structure. Looking only at an individual wire in a cage does not reveal the network of wires that forms a cage; likewise, social structure refers to the patterns of behavior, belief, resource distribution, and social control that are built into relationships and institutions. Most of the time, we are caught in multiple systems, we can learn to see our connection to others.
Analysis of the historical role of diverse groups is critical to understanding who we are as a society and a culture. As Ronald T. Takaki says in "A Different Mirror," this involves a debate over our national identity. Takaki makes a point of showing the common connections in the histories of African Americans, Chicanos, Irish Americans, Jews, and Native Americans. He argues that only when we understand this multidimensional history will we see ourselves in the full complexity of our humanity. Moreover, we hope that understanding the significance of race, class, and gender as advanced here by Takaki and others will also encourage readers to put the experiences of the United States itself into a broader context. Knowing how race, class, and gender operate within U.S. national borders should help you see beyond those borders. We hope that understanding the multidimensional history will lead you to recognize the significance of race, class, and gender in shaping the experiences of the United States and encourage readers to cast an increasingly inclusive perspective on the world itself.

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