

From the policies and practices of each of these institutions, influenced by our cultural values, categories of difference are created. Thus, when parents teach their child how to behave like a “lady” or act like a “gentleman,” they create categories of difference within the institutional context of the family.

Another context in which we create categories of difference is the **interpersonal context**—our daily interactions with others. In these interactions we rely on common guidelines for behavior (**norms**) to define situations and create these categories. For example, when an individual, operating on stereotypes based on race and ethnicity, labels another a “foreigner,” she or he is relying on what are assumed images of what is an “American.” As a result, she or he creates categories of difference within an interpersonal context.

Finally, we create categories of difference in **internal contexts** by internalizing the values and beliefs established in institutional and interpersonal contexts. When a girl decides to stop playing “rough” to avoid being labeled a “tomboy,” she is internalizing the ideas of what it means to be a girl that were taught to her by her family as well as her peers.

CONSTRUCTING RACE AND ETHNICITY

The institution of the state, which determines how the census should be taken and how individuals should be counted, plays an integral role in defining race categories in an institutional context. **Race** denotes a group of people who perceive themselves *and are perceived by others* as possessing distinctive hereditary traits. **Ethnicity** denotes a group of people who perceive themselves *and are perceived by others* as sharing cultural traits such as language, religion, family customs, and food preferences. As Omi and Winant illustrate in “Racial Formations,” what is important about the construction of race categories is not necessarily our perception of our own race but the recognition by social institutions of our membership in that race category. Furthermore, racial and ethnic categories are significant in that they are constructed in a hierarchy from “superior” to “inferior.” Tomás Almaguer explains in “Race, Racialization, and Latino Populations in the United States” (Reading 4) how members of some Latino/a groups construct members of others groups as inferior. The institutions of the economy and the state, as well as others, played an integral role in constructing them as inferior and in later “reconstructing” them as white and no longer an inferior race. Further, as Nguyen illustrates in “Becoming Suspects” (Reading 3), both prior to and after the events of September 11, 2001, the institution of the state constructed Pakistanis and Muslims as “other,” “terrorists,” and “the enemy.” Both authors illustrate that such processes of construction are tied to economic and political changes in the United States.

Racial categories are also constructed in interpersonal contexts. As Waters discusses in “Optional Ethnicities” (Reading 2), many of us, but particularly whites, will ask someone whose race or ethnicity is not immediately apparent, “What are you?” We do not, however, generally ask such a question of those

whom we perceive to be white. Thus, in our efforts to define others we not only attempt to construct distinct racial categories but we also create white as an “unmarked” category and as a standard against which all others are judged.

Finally, race is constructed in internal contexts, where we reinforce those categories and the meanings associated with them within ourselves. This process is particularly evident when a person of color who is light-skinned attempts or desires to “pass” as a white person. Through internalizing the idea that to be other than white is to be less valued, they participate in constructing race categories as well as the meanings associated with them.

CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL CLASS

The categories of social class are also constructed within institutional contexts. Although we may view social class as a result of how much **income** (wages and salaries from earnings and investments) and **wealth** (the total amount of valuable goods) a person possesses, it is in fact more than this. What class we belong to is determined not just by how much money we have or the material possessions we own but also by the institutions of our society, including state policies and the structuring of the economy. For example, definitions of poverty created by the government affect the access some members of our society have to certain important resources. The “Thrifty Food Plan”—the least costly of four nutritionally adequate plans designed by the Department of Agriculture, based on their 1955 Household Food Consumption Survey—demonstrates how the establishment of the **poverty line**—an annual income level below which a person or family was defined as poor and therefore entitled to certain benefits—creates who is seen as poor. The poverty line is problematic, however, in the way it is determined because it relies on material standards of the 1950s rather than contemporary standards. For example, expenses for items we consider essential today—for things such as transportation, childcare, technology—were not essential costs for families of the 1950s. As a result, while the government determined in 2012 that the poverty line for a family of four was \$23,050, a more accurate calculation, employing contemporary standards, would have been closer to \$40,000. The more accurate figure would result in doubling if not tripling the number of individuals defined as poor. Additionally, it is important to note that measures such as the poverty line miss a significant aspect of what it means to be poor. Poverty is more than how much money one has, it is also a process of social exclusion (Neal, 2004). According to the United Nations, “poverty is more than a shortage of income. It is the denial of opportunities and choices most basic to human development—to lead a long, healthy, creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem, and respect of others” (Townson, 2000). When institutions establish definitions and measures, they determine a person’s access to resources (i.e., the ability of people living in poverty to receive aid from the government). In this way, constructions of class provide the foundation for a