

PART II



Systems of Power and Inequality

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One of the most important things to learn about race, class, and gender is that they are *systemic forms of inequality*. Although most people tend to think of them as individual characteristics (or identities), they are built into the very structure of society—and it is this social fact that drives our analysis of race, class, and gender as *intersectional systems of inequality*. This does not make them irrelevant as individual or group characteristics but points you to the analysis of *social structure* to think about how race, class, and gender operate; what they mean; and how they influence people's lives.

Locating racial oppression in the structure of social institutions provides a different frame of analysis than analyzing only individuals. Using a social structural analysis of race, class, and gender turns your attention to how they work as *systems of power*—systems that differentially advantage and disadvantage groups depending on their social location. Moreover, this means that no one of these social facts singularly predetermines where you will be situated within this system of power and social relationships. Thus, not all men are equally powerful and not all women are equally oppressed. When you focus on the intermingling structural relationships of race, class, and gender, you see a more complex, ever-changing, and multidimensional social order.

To repeat, neither race nor class nor gender operates alone. They do so within a system of simultaneous, interrelated social relationships—what we have earlier called the *matrix of domination*. This means that they also engage other

social facts—ethnicity, sexuality, age, disability, even the region where you live, and so forth. In this section we examine race, class, and gender from an institutional or structural perspective. And, later in the section, we examine how race, class, and gender also intersect with ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality. You will see that each of these systems of power and inequality intertwine—and they do so in different ways at different points in time. Thus, sexuality has become more visible as a system of social subordination; beliefs about sexuality have long served to buttress the beliefs that support racial and gender subordination. Likewise, a system of racial subordination has historically been one way that class structure was created: Some people accumulated property through the appropriation of other people's labor, even while groups who provided the labor that produced property for others were denied basic rights of citizenship, such as the right to vote, the right to marry, the right to own property, and the right to be considered a U.S. citizen.

Throughout Part II, you should keep the concept of *social structure* in mind. Race, class, and gender form a structure of social relations. This structure is supported by ideological beliefs that make things appear “normal” and “acceptable,” thus clouding our awareness of how the structure operates. Philosopher Marilyn Frye likens this to a birdcage. From the bird's point of view, you might see only one wire, thus wondering why you cannot just fly away. But when you see the whole structure of the cage, you realize there is a whole structure of containment enclosing the bird (Frye 1983). For example, one of the prevailing beliefs about racism is that it is largely a thing of the past, now that formal barriers to racial discrimination have been removed. But, as Charles Gallagher (“Color-Blind Privilege: The Social and Political Functions of Erasing the Color Line in Post-Race America”) points out in his formulation of *color-blind racism*, racism persists, even when it takes on new forms. Perhaps one “wire” from the cage has been removed—laws endorsing racial discrimination—but a whole structure of racism, including new belief systems, is in place.

Understanding the intersections among race, class, and gender—and how they interrelate with ethnicity and sexuality—requires knowing how to conceptualize each factor. Although we would rather not treat them separately, we do so initially here to learn what each means and how each is manifested in different group experiences. At the same time, the readings in this section examine the connections among race, class, gender, and other important social categories—namely, ethnicity and sexuality. As we review each in turn, you will notice several common themes.

First, *each is a socially constructed category*. That is, their significance stems not from some “natural” state, but from what they have become as the result of

social and historical processes. Second, notice how *each tends to construct groups in binary (or polar opposite) terms*: man/woman, Black/White, rich/poor, gay/straight, or citizen/alien. These binary constructions create the “otherness” that we examined in the first part of this book. Third, *each is a category of individual and group identity, but note—and this is important—they are also social structures*. That is, they are not just about identity but are also about group location in a system of power and inequality. Thus, as we move into Part II, you will see how they are part of the institutional fabric of society. More than being about individual and group identity, race, class, and gender—and the other systems that they intersect with—shape patterns in the labor market, families, state institutions (such as the government and the law), mass media, and so forth. This is a key difference, as we have seen, in a model that focuses solely on difference and one that focuses on the matrix of domination. That is, the matrix of domination forces you to look at social structures, while models of difference often dissolve into individual or group identities. Finally, *neither race, class, nor gender is a fixed category*. Because they are social constructions, their form—and their interrelationship—changes over time. This also means that social change is possible.

As you learn about race, class, and gender, you should keep the intersectional model in mind. One way to think about their interrelationship in a social system is to imagine a typical college basketball game. This will probably seem familiar: the players on the court, the cheerleaders moving about on the side, the band playing, fans cheering, boosters watching from the best seats, and—if the team is ranked—perhaps a television crew. Everybody seems to have a place in the game. Everybody seems to be following the rules. But what explains the patterns that we see and don’t see?

Race clearly matters. The predominance of young African American men on many college basketball teams is noticeable. Why do so many young Black men play basketball? Some people argue that African Americans are simply better in areas requiring physical skills such as sports, but there is another reality: for many young Black men, sports may seem the only hope for a good job, so sports, like the military, can seem like an attractive mobility route. Perceived promises of high salaries, endorsements, and merchandise can make young people believe sports are a path to success, thus, many young African American boys believe they can earn a good living playing professional sports. The odds of actually doing so are extremely slim. In truth, of the forty thousand African American boys playing high school basketball, only thirty-five will make it to the NBA (National Basketball Association) and only seven of those will be starters. This makes the odds of success 0.000175 (Eitzen 1999)! In the face of other systematic disadvantages posed by race, however, some will still think this is their best chance for success.

But does a racial analysis fully explain the “rules” of college basketball? Not really. Who benefits from college basketball? Yes, players (both Black and White, and, increasingly, immigrants) get scholarships and a chance to earn college degrees. Players reap the rewards, but who really benefits? College athletics is big business, and as amateur athletes the players are forbidden to take any payment for their skills. They may have the hope of an NBA contract or a college degree if they graduate. But few actually turn pro. Indeed, many never graduate from college. Among Division I Black basketball players, 60 percent graduate from college, compared with 82 percent of White male basketball players. However, graduation rates among Black male college athletes (including all sports) are slightly higher than among nonathletes, most likely because of the scholarship support they receive. Among women basketball players, graduation rates are virtually identical for White and Black women, at 64 percent and 62 percent respectively. Student-athletes have much higher graduation rates than nonathletes as well as higher graduation rates than male student-athletes (National Collegiate Athletic Association 2010).

Winning teams also benefit educational institutions. Winning teams garner increased admissions applications, more alumni giving, higher levels of corporate support, and television revenues. Simply put, athletics—including college athletics—is big business. Corporate sponsors want their names and products identified with winning teams and athletes; advertisers want their products promoted by winning players. Even though college athletes are forbidden to promote products, corporations create and market products in conjunction with prevailing excitement about basketball, sustained by the players’ achievements. Athletic shoes, workout clothing, cars, and beer all target the consumer dollars of those who enjoy watching basketball. And how many jobs are supported by the revenues generated from the enterprise of college basketball? Of course, there are the sports reporters, team physicians, trainers, and coaches—most of them defined as professionals. But there are also the service workers—preparing and selling food, cleaning the toilets and stands, and maintaining the stadium. A class system defines one’s place in this system of inequality, so much so that many of the service workers are invisible to the fans. So, while institutions profit the most—whether it be schools, product manufacturers, or advertisers—there are differential benefits depending on your “rank” within the system of basketball. And the stakes get even bigger when you move beyond college into the world of professional sports.

So, do race and class fully explain the “rules” of basketball? What about gender? Only in a few schools does women’s basketball draw as large an audience as men’s. And certainly in the media, men’s basketball is generally the public’s focal point, even though women’s sports are increasingly popular. In college

basketball, like the pros, most of the coaches and support personnel are men, as are the camera crew and announcers. Where are the women? A few are coaches, rarely paid what the men receive—even on the most winning teams. Those closest to the action on the court may be cheerleaders—tumbling, dancing, and being thrown into the air in support of the exploits of the athletes. Others may be in the band. Some women are in the stands, cheering the team—many of them accompanied by their husbands, partners, boyfriends, parents, and children. Many work in the concession stands, fulfilling women's roles of serving others. Still others are even more invisible, left to clean the restrooms, locker rooms, and stands after the crowd goes home.

Men's behavior reveals a gendered dimension to basketball, as well. Where else are men able to put their arms around one another, slap one another's buttocks, hug one another, or cry in public without having their "masculinity" questioned? Sportscasters, too, bring gender into the play of sports, such as when they talk about men's athletic achievements as heroic but talk about women athletes' looks or their connection to children. For that matter, look at the prominence given to men's teams in sports pages of the daily newspaper compared with sports news about women, who are typically relegated to the back pages—if their athletic accomplishments are reported at all. Sometimes what we don't see can be just as revealing as what we do see. Gender, as a feature of the game on the court, is so familiar that it may go unquestioned.

This discussion of college basketball demonstrates how each factor—race, class, and gender—provides an important, yet partial, perspective on social action. Using an intersectional model, we not only see each of them in turn but also the connections among them. In fact, race, class, and gender are so inextricably intertwined that gaining a comprehensive understanding of a basketball game requires thinking about all of them and how they work together. New questions then emerge: Why are most of those serving the food in concession stands likely to be women and men of color? How are norms of masculinity played out through sport? What class and racial ideologies are promoted through assuming that sports are a mobility route for those who try hard enough? If race, class, and gender relations are embedded in something as familiar and widespread as college basketball, to what extent are other social practices, institutions, relations, and social issues similarly structured?

Race, gender, and class divisions are deeply embedded in the structure of social institutions such as work, family, education, and the state. They shape human relationships, identities, social institutions, and the social issues that emerge from within institutions. You can see the intersections of race, class, and gender in three realms of society: the representational realm, the social

interaction realm, and the social structural realm. The representational realm includes the symbols, language, and images that convey racial meanings in society; the social interaction realm refers to the norms and behaviors observable in human relationships; and the social structural realm involves the institutional sites where power and resources are distributed in society (Glenn 2002: 12).

This means that race, class, and gender affect all levels of our experience—our consciousness and ideas, our interaction with others, and the social institutions we live within. And, because they are interconnected, no one can be subsumed under the other. In this section of the book, although we focus on each one to provide conceptual grounding, keep in mind that race, class, and gender are connected and overlapping—in all three realms of society: the realm of ideas, interaction, and institutions.

You might begin by considering a few facts:

- The United States is in the midst of a sizable redistribution of wealth, with a greater concentration of wealth and income in the hands of a few than at most previous periods of time. At the same time, a declining share of income is going to the middle class—a class that finds its position slipping, relative to years past (Warren 2009).
- Within class groups, racial group experiences are widely divergent. Thus, although there has been substantial growth of an African American and Latino middle class, they have a more tenuous hold on this class status than groups with more stable footing in the middle class. Furthermore, there is significant class differentiation within different racial groups (Charles 2006; Pattillo 2007; Lacy 2007).
- Women in the top 25 percent of income groups have seen the highest wage growth of any group over the last twenty years; the lowest earning groups of women, like men, have seen wages fall, while the middle has remained flat (Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto 2005). Class differences within gender are hidden by thinking of women as a monolithic group.
- Women of color, including Latinas, African American women, Native American women, and Asian American women, are concentrated in the bottom rungs of the labor market along with recent immigrant women (www.bls.gov).
- Poverty has been steadily increasing in the United States since 2000; it is particularly severe among women, especially among women of color and their children; in recent years, poverty has risen most among Hispanics (DeNavas-Walt et al. 2010).
- At both ends of the economic spectrum, there is a growth of gated communities: well-guarded, locked neighborhoods for the rich and prisons for the poor—particularly Latinos and African American men. At the same time, growth in the rate of imprisonment is highest among women (Glaze 2010).

Part II: Systems of Power and Inequality

This reading is much shorter than the first and is a brief preview of the subheading you'll be reading/summarizing throughout the semester. Please be able to identify and discuss the following.

- Social Structure
- Social Construct
- Three Realms of Society

In addition, continue to reflect on our first reading in regard to the "matrix of domination" and the pattern of intersections among race, class and gender.