What Characterizes Race and Ethnic Groups?

Migration, war and conquest, trade, and intermarriage have left virtually every geographical area of the world populated by groups of people with varying ethnicities. In this section, we consider characteristics that set groups apart, especially groups that fall at the lower end of the stratification system.

Minority Groups

Several factors characterize minority groups and their relations with dominant groups in society (Dworkin and Dworkin 1999):

1. Minority groups are distinguishable from dominant groups due to factors that make them different from the group that holds power.
2. Minority groups are excluded or denied full participation at the meso level of society in economic, political, educational, religious, health, and recreational institutions.
3. Minority groups have less access to power and resources within the nation and are evaluated less favorably based on their characteristics as minority group members.
4. Minority groups are stereotyped, ridiculed, condemned, or otherwise defamed, allowing dominant group members to justify and not feel guilty about unequal and poor treatment.
5. Minority groups develop collective identities among members to insulate themselves from the unaccepting world; this in turn perpetuates their group identity by creating ethnic or racial enclaves, intragroup marriages, and segregated group institutions such as churches.

The Concept of Race

Racial minority is one of the two types of minority groups most common in the social world. A race is a group identified by a society because of certain biologically inherited physical characteristics. However, in practice, it is impossible to accurately identify racial types. Most attempts at racial classifications have been based on combinations of appearance, such as skin color and shade, stature, facial features, hair color and texture, head form, nose shape, eye color and shape, height, and blood or gene type. Our discussion of race focuses on three issues: (1) origins of the concept of race, (2) the social construction of race, and (3) the significance of race versus class.

Origins of the Concept of Race

In the 18th and 19th centuries, scientists attempted to divide humans into four major groupings—Mongoloid, Caucasoid, Negroid, and Australoid—and then into more than 30 racial subcategories. In reality, few individuals fit clearly into any of these types. The next Sociology in Your Social World provides insight into the origins of racial categories that have had a major impact on history and form the basis for many conflicts today.

From the earliest origins in East Africa more than 7 million years ago, humans slowly spread around the globe, south through Africa, north to Europe, and across Asia. Many scholars believe humans crossed the Bering Straits from Asia to North America around 20,000 BCE and continued to populate North and South America (Diamond 1999:37). Physical adaptations of isolated groups to their environments originally resulted in some differences in physical appearance—skin color, stature, hair type—but mixing of peoples over the centuries has left few if any isolated “pure” races, only gradations as one moves around the world. Thus, the way societies choose to define race has...
come about largely through what is culturally convenient for the dominant group.

In the 1970s, the United Nations, concerned about racial conflicts and discrimination, issued a “Statement on Race” prepared by a group of eminent scientists from around the world. This and similar statements by scientific groups point out the harmful effects of racist arguments, doctrines, and policies. The conclusion of their document upheld that (1) all people are born free and equal both in dignity and in rights, (2) racism stultifies personal development, (3) conflicts (based on race) cost nations money and resources, and (4) racism foments international conflict. Racist doctrines lack any scientific basis, as all people belong to the same species and have descended from the same origin. In summary, problems arising from race relations are social, not biological, in origin; differential treatments of groups based on “race” falsely claim a scientific basis for classifying humans. Biologically speaking, a “race” exists in any life form when the two groups cannot interbreed, and if they do, the offspring are infertile/sterile. This is not true of any group of human beings. So what is the problem?

Social Construction of Race: Symbolic Interaction Analysis

Why are sociologists concerned about a concept that has little scientific accuracy and is ill defined? The answer is its social significance. The social reality is that people are defined or define themselves as belonging to a group based in part on physical appearance. As individuals try to make meaning of the social world, they may learn from others that some traits—eye or nose shape, hair texture, or skin color—are distinguishing traits that make people different. Jean Piaget, famous cognitive psychologist, described the human tendency to classify objects as one of our most basic cognitive tools (Piaget and Inhelder [1955] 1999). This inclination has often been linked to classifying “racial” groups. Once in place, racial categories provide individuals with an identity based on ancestry—“my kind of people have these traits.”