



## *Definitions for Key Terms and Concepts*

### **Race**

“Race” is a relatively modern, complex, social, human construct. Our attempts to group and classify individuals based on this construct often have interesting outcomes. For example, the United States Census Bureau now lists 63 possible combinations of six basic racial categories and provides a “write in” area on the census form to accommodate individuals who identify themselves in a way that is not addressed on the form. Research indicates that while there is some genetic variation in human beings, most of the differences are at the individual level and only a very small percentage of genetic variation can be traced to differences between groups. The scientific foundation for race has been called into question for over 100 years.

But does the lack of scientific support for race and racial categories support the position that race is not real and therefore we should stop talking about it? The answer is emphatically no. This is both a misunderstanding and a dangerous position. Race may indeed be a scientific fiction but it is a social reality. And this reality produces disturbing social consequence. First of all, it is not the categories, however ill defined, that are the problem; it is the social meaning we give to race and the consequences of racial hierarchy and racialized structures. The space we occupy as human beings is a social space with social meaning. This is equally true of our concept of the self as it is of our social concept of the racial self. But we do not get rid of difficult social facts by ignoring them. This is regression at best and colorblind racism at worst. It confuses process with goals.

The following standardized definitions have been used to define race:

- A local geographic or global human population distinguished as a more or less distinct group by genetically transmitted physical characteristics.
- A group of people united or classified together on the basis of common history, nationality, or geographic distribution. Example: the German race.
- A division of mankind possessing traits that are transmissible by descent and sufficient to characterize it as a distinct human type

Sources: Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary; The Free Dictionary at <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/race> (referenced on January 18, 2007;

In contrast, the following definitions suggest the problematic nature of race as a construct:

Race, technically, refers to differential concentrations of gene frequencies responsible for traits which, so far as we know, are confined to physical manifestations such as skin color or hair form; it has no intrinsic connection with cultural patterns and institutions.

Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*.  
[http://www.euroamerican.org/library/definitions\\_race.asp](http://www.euroamerican.org/library/definitions_race.asp).

(Referenced on January 18, 2007)

Race is a group that is socially defined but on the basis of physical criteria.

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[http://www.euroamerican.org/library/definitions\\_race.asp](http://www.euroamerican.org/library/definitions_race.asp).

(Referenced on January 18, 2007)

## **Ethnicity**

Defining concepts is a treacherous enterprise when the act of defining makes static something that is argued to be dynamic. At the most general level of defining ethnicity--the non-polemic dimension—we understand that the definition of this concept encompasses a group of people. The polemic resides in understanding what makes an identifiable group of people a group (a social group). What binds them together? Although not necessarily exhaustive, these common bonds forming an ethnic social group could be any array of cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, religious, behavioral, national, or tribal characteristics.

In identifying the bonds that would make a conglomerate of individuals a group, we enter into the realm of "othering," of manufacturing borders that on one side underscore homogeneity and on the other heterogeneity (i.e., difference). Nevertheless, the understanding of ethnicity requires spatial contextualization. For example, the present understanding of ethnicity in the U.S. is informed by developments after WWII, a historical period that also informed the understanding of race within the U.S. The analytical shift that occurred in this period represented an underplaying of race and a new emphasis on the saliency of ethnicity, prompted in part by an attempt to debunk the biological understanding of race. In other words, ethnicity was portrayed to focus on cultural aspects of groups of individuals while race was portrayed to represent a passé biological essentializing of groups of individuals.

## **Colorblind Racism**

"Colorblind racism" means a less blatant form of racism, yet maybe even more powerful than racism in the past. Since the civil rights acts of the 1960s, some people think that racism is a thing of the past, that there is full equality in the society now that all people have rights under the law. This view is incorrect and incomplete.

An emerging school of sociologists and other social science researchers is responding to intellectuals such as Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom (*America in Black and White: One Nation Indivisible*, 1997), and Shelby Steele (*A Dream Deferred*, 1999), who assert that discrimination is old news. Consisting mostly, but not entirely, of conservatives, this group says the country needs to transcend race by acknowledging the progress made over the past several decades. Race-conscious policies, they argue, stir up resentment among whites while also promoting a lack of ambition among people of color by holding them to a lower standard.

As support for their claims, they point to the genetic evidence provided by the Human Genome Project that race has no biological foundation as a way to categorize people. They also cite a 1998 statement by the American Anthropological Association that explains "race" as a classification system invented in the 18th century to justify status differences between European settlers and conquered and enslaved peoples, then expanded to support efforts such as the Nazi extermination of Jews.

In August 2002, the American Sociological Association took a stand against such attempts to abolish "race" as untrue and irrelevant. In a statement, the professional society urged social scientists not to ignore race classifications or stop using them as a research tool, even though they may be biological fiction. "Those who favor ignoring race as an explicit administrative matter, in the hope that it will cease to exist as a social concept, ignore the weight of a vast body of sociological research that shows that racial hierarchies are embedded in the routine practices of social groups and institutions," the society wrote.

Source: Urban Dictionary <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=colorblind+racism>  
Referenced on November 28, 2006

### **Democratic Merit**

Consider the traditional admissions process at selective colleges and universities. There has been too much attention focused on looking for predictors of student success based on past achievement. There has been too little attention devoted to looking for ways that our institutions can invest in students based on a commitment to future success. A transformative agenda would move from a reward-based system that rewards individual past achievement to an investment-based system that invests in the broader democratic potential of our society. This investment-based system is called "democratic merit." It is a system that seeks to broaden our agenda and encourages future action to promote the conditions of a thriving democracy. For example, when faculty are hired or students are admitted to the academy, democratic merit challenges us to reconsider if it is enough to look only for individuals who have already succeeded. It pushes us to shift our gaze and invest in communities and students whose very success means future success for all.

### **Intersectionality**

This analytical approach of difference presumes the interrelated nature of various axes of social differentiation. Rather than imagining race, gender, class, and sexuality as separate and at times additive modes of social experience, an intersectional approach assumes that these categories affect one another in very profound and interrelated ways.

### **Linked Fate**

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said in his Letter from a Birmingham City Jail, "We are all caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever effects one directly effects all indirectly." The work of the Kirwan Institute seeks to help spread the basic understanding that what affects one of us affects us all. Our fates—as a society, as families, and as individuals—are linked. The ideology of American individualism and the narrative of the American dream tend to obscure this simple truth.

Inequality is a sign of an economically and socially inefficient society where proper investments are not made in human capital and much of the population cannot meet its creative potential. These disparities and inequities make our nation less competitive, reduce our vitality, and depress opportunities for all. We must learn to advocate and organize around our linked fate.

"It is not so much a matter of having exact rules about how precisely we ought to behave, as of recognizing the relevance of our shared humanity in making the choices we face." (Amartya Sen, 1999)

## **Communities of Opportunity**

Opportunities in our society are geographically distributed and often clustered throughout metropolitan areas, creating clusters of “high” and “low” opportunity neighborhoods. A person’s location within this “web of opportunity” plays a decisive role in determining his or her life-long potential. For example, good schools produce higher home values and attract higher income residents, who then are targeted by businesses seeking a well educated work force and residents who have significant discretionary income. These reinforcing relationships magnify conditions in both high- and low-opportunity areas. Unfortunately, fair access to these opportunity structures is limited by spatial arrangements and regional dynamics such as exclusionary zoning, poverty concentration, fragmentation, and sprawl. A central component of the Institute’s work is promoting the communities of opportunity framework to energize greater regional equity and healthier communities. This model of fair housing and community development utilizes Professor Powell’s opportunity based opportunity-based housing model to connect low-income families to regional opportunities such as good jobs and high quality schools and to target resources into opportunity deprived neighborhoods.

## **Structural Racism**

The word “racism” is commonly understood to refer to instances in which one individual intentionally or unintentionally targets others for negative treatment because of their skin color or other group-based physical characteristics. This individualistic conceptualization is too limited. Racialized outcomes do not require racist actors. Structural racism refers to a system of social structures and the interaction of these structures that produce cumulative, durable, race-based inequalities. It is also a method of analysis that is used to examine how historical legacies, individuals, structures, and institutions work interactively to distribute material and symbolic advantage and disadvantages along racial lines.

The structural racism lens helps us trace current disparities to the structures in which they are embedded. For example, the government opened the suburbs to whites by subsidizing home mortgages for whites through the National Housing Act of 1934, implemented by the Federal Housing Administration (then called the Federal Housing Authority). This act, combined with FHA lending that disproportionately and purposefully benefited suburban whites, created racially homogenous unequal neighborhoods.

## **Targeted Universalism**

Race and class inequalities are inextricably linked, and collective solidarity across the races can be achieved only by fleshing out their intersections, not by ignoring them. What we need is a paradigm that combines a call for the universal with attention to the particular experience of marginalized Americans. Universal programs, while reminding us that we are all part of the same social fabric, often ignore the fact that different populations are situated differently in the economic and social status landscape of the society. Even if a program is universal, it can be perceived as targeted if a disproportionate number of a disfavored group benefit. An alternative to either a straight universal program or a solely particularistic program is to pursue what we call “targeted universalism.” This is an approach that supports the needs of the particular while reminding us that we are all part of the same social fabric.