

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

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Since the mid-1980s, scholarship and college courses that address multiple dimensions of inequality under the rubric of race, class, gender, and (recently) sexuality studies have grown rapidly. Most courses now employ a set of readings, many of which are drawn from a growing number of anthologies. A strength of this approach is its presentation of the diversity of human experiences and the multiplicity of critical perspectives. A weakness is its failure to convey the commonalities in race, class, gender, and sexuality analyses of social reality. To aid in teaching and research on race, class, gender, and sexuality, this article presents six common themes that characterize this scholarship. Race, class, gender, and sexuality are historically and globally specific, socially constructed power relations that simultaneously operate at both the macro (societal) and micro (individual) levels of society. Scholarship in this tradition emphasizes the interdependence of knowledge and activism.

People's real life experiences have never fit neatly into the boundaries created by academic disciplines: Lives are much more complex and far reaching. Just as the social, political, economic, and psychological dimensions of everyday life are intertwined and mutually dependent, so too are the systems of inequality—race, class, gender, and sexuality—that limit and restrict some people while privileging others. Increasingly, interdisciplinary studies, including Women's Studies and multicultural studies, are extending the range of the curriculum; such programs are critical sites for the development of meaningful commentar-

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ies on human social and psychological realities that reflect such complexities (Magner, 1996).

It is in Women's Studies—not in racial or ethnic studies, not in social stratification (class) studies in sociology, not in psychology or in other traditional disciplines—that race, class, gender, and sexuality studies first emerged.¹ Because of its critical stance toward knowledge in the traditional disciplines, its interdisciplinary approach, and its orientation toward social change and social betterment, Women's Studies has been most open to self-critique for its exclusion of multiply oppressed groups, such as women of color, working-class women, and lesbians (Baca Zinn, Weber Cannon, Higginbotham, & Dill, 1986; Weber Cannon, Higginbotham, & Leung, 1988).

Since these initial writings, scholarship and college courses that simultaneously address these multiple dimensions of inequality under the rubric of race, class, gender, and, increasingly, sexuality studies have grown rapidly. Texts in most courses now consist of a set of readings selected by individual faculty and/or of one of a growing number of anthologies on the topic (Andersen & Collins, 1995; Anzaldúa, 1987a, 1987b; Baca Zinn & Dill, 1994; Chow, Wilkinson, & Baca Zinn, 1996; Cyrus, 1993; Rothenberg, 1995). The strength of these anthologies is that they demonstrate the significance of race, class, gender, and sexuality by presenting a wide array of diverse human experiences and analyses across these dimensions. Students are encouraged to move beyond thinking about major social and personal issues solely from their own viewpoints or from dominant group perspectives. The major limitation is that anthologies provide little direction in identifying the themes and assumptions that pull these diverse perspectives together. We are given little guidance about what constitutes a race, class, gender, and sexuality analysis of social reality. In part, this omission parallels the development of the field of race, class, gender, and sexuality studies, which began by revealing diverse experiences across these dimensions to counter the monolithic views of the social world put forth in both mainstream and Women's Studies scholarship.

Now, however, scholars are beginning to search for and to identify common themes and approaches that characterize the work in race, class, gender, and sexuality studies (cf. Baca Zinn & Dill, 1996). This process should invite debate and critique, further the development of the scholarship, and help provide one or more frameworks for teaching about this work. This article presents six themes that currently characterize this scholarship. By reminding us of some questions that need to be asked in any analysis of human society, these themes can guide the race, class, gender, and sexuality analyses we conduct for our research, our teaching, and our social activism.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY STUDIES

In the 1970s and 1980s, women of color, the majority of whom were poor or working class, were especially vehement in voicing their opposition to theories

of and perspectives on social reality that focused on a single dimension—especially on gender, but also on race, class, or sexuality. They argued that the multidimensionality and interconnected nature of race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies are especially visible to those who face oppression along more than one dimension of inequality. Patricia Hill Collins (1990), author of *Black Feminist Thought*, identifies the “interlocking nature of oppression” as one of three recurring themes in the work of Black feminists. Collins notes that this theme dates back at least to Sojourner Truth, who in the mid-19th century said: “There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, and not colored women theirs. You see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as before” (cited in Loewenberg & Bogin, 1976, p. 238).

When Black women began to critique recent gender scholarship for its exclusionary practices, they focused on conducting analyses that began from the experiences of Black women, putting them at center stage. *The Black Woman* (Cade, 1970), *Ain't I a Woman* (hooks, 1981), *The Black Woman* (Rodgers-Rose, 1980), “The Dialectics of Black Womanhood” (Dill, 1979), and “Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All Inclusive Sisterhood” (Dill, 1983) were among the first critical perspectives on Black women published as books or articles in major feminist journals.

The irony of ignoring groups whose experiences typically reflected the confluence of multiple major dimensions of inequality was captured in the oft-cited title of one of the first anthologies in Black Women's Studies: *All the Women Were White, All the Blacks Were Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982). Since that time, the critique of the White middle-class bias in Women's Studies has been joined by a critique of the male bias in racial ethnic studies, harkening back to the words of Sojourner Truth. And the study of race, class, gender, and sexuality has been expanded by studies of other groups of women of color (cf. Amaro & Russo, 1987; Anzaldúa, 1987b; Baca Zinn & Dill, 1994); of other oppressed groups, such as gays and lesbians (cf. Barale & Halperin, 1993; D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988; Greene, 1994); and, more recently, of privilege itself: for example, studies of the social construction of whiteness (cf. Frankenberg, 1993; McIntosh, 1995; Roediger, 1991) or of masculinity (cf. Brod & Kaufman, 1994; Connell, 1995; Messner, 1992).

As a recently developing field, race, class, gender, and sexuality studies has not yet produced a wide range of competing theories about the nature of race, class, gender, and sexual hierarchies. Rather, it has begun to generate debates about the most productive ways of conceptualizing race, class, gender, and sexuality; about the nature of their relationships to one another; and about their manifestations in everyday life (see, e.g., Collins et al., 1995, pp. 491–513; West & Fenstermaker, 1995, pp. 8–37).

The scholarship has been characterized more by diversity of content and commonalities in perspective than by competing or conflicting interpretations. Perhaps these common themes arise because the field is young and the research and writing has come primarily from women of color and other marginalized

groups who share an “outsider within” perspective (Collins, 1991). Although inside the academy by virtue of their status as professors, writers, researchers, and scholars, these groups also have an outsider’s view of the knowledge that the academy has produced because they are women of color, come from working-class backgrounds, and/or are gays and lesbians. Much of the new scholarship follows the tradition established by early writers who made women of color the center of attention, describing their everyday lives. Seeing the world through the eyes of oppressed groups raises new questions about our preconceived notions of many aspects of social reality—from the social relations of domestic work to what it takes to be a “good” mother to the American Dream that talent and hard work will produce material success (Dill, 1988; Glenn, 1992; Hochschild, 1995; Rollins, 1985).

At the same time that it questions traditional scholarship and interpretations of the lives of oppressed as well as dominant groups, the scholarship on race, class, gender, and sexuality also tends to avoid grand theorizing about the essential natures of these hierarchies. Scholars instead emphasize that these social constructs cannot be understood outside of their context in the real lives of real people. And, in part, because examining race, class, gender, and sexuality simultaneously forces one to acknowledge the multiple angles of vision that are brought to bear in any social situation, scholars in the field are reluctant to put forth a single unifying theory of the dynamics of these processes (Collins, 1990).

Some of the dominant themes in the new scholarship, which are also emerging in gender, sexuality, and race scholarship, can be broadly subsumed under the label of social constructionist theories and in recent work on “multiracial feminism” (Baca Zinn & Dill, 1996). They emphasize the historical and social contingencies of these dimensions and, to some extent, their macro social structural character and their basis in power relations (cf. Brod & Kaufman, 1994; Connell, 1985, 1995; Frankenberg, 1993; Omi & Winant, 1994; Thorne, 1993; West & Fenstermaker, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

COMMON THEMES IN RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY SCHOLARSHIP

I have identified six common themes in this new scholarship. Five of them describe the way that race, class, gender, and sexuality are conceptualized as systems of oppression; the sixth is an epistemological assumption.

1. Contextual. Race, class, gender, and sexuality are contextual. Although they persist throughout history, race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies are never static and fixed, but constantly undergo change as part of new economic, political, and ideological processes, trends, and events. Their meanings vary not only across historical time periods, but also across nations and regions during the same period. Because race, class, gender, and sexuality must always be understood within a specific historical and global context, research

tends to avoid the search for common meanings that would apply to all times and all places.

For example, in the post-Civil Rights era in the United States, the racial signifiers “Latino/a,” “Asian American,” “People of Color,” and “Native American” developed when people from different cultures, tribes, and national origins were treated as a single racial group by a dominant culture that failed to recognize differences among “racial” ethnic groups. Many members of these groups subsequently organized politically to resist their joint oppressions, and out of those political movements new racial identities were forged (Omi & Winant, 1994). These labels did not exist before the 1960s, and even today some people identify with them and others do not, signifying the fluid, political, historically specific, and social meaning of race.

Additionally, during the mid-19th century, dominant cultural conceptions of femininity became associated with the warm, personal, “private” sphere of home, whereas masculinity became associated with the cold, “public” sphere of the labor market. As Carol Tavis (1992, p. 265) notes:

People began to attribute to inherent male and female characteristics what were actually requirements of their increasingly separate domains. Thus, women were expected to provide warmth, nurturance, and care, and forgo achievement; men were expected to provide money and success, and forgo close attachments. The masculine ideal, tailored to fit the emerging economy, was to be an independent, self-made, financially successful man. Masculinity now required self-control: no gaudy displays of emotion; no weakness; no excessive self-indulgence in feelings. Femininity required, and soon came to embody, the opposite.

Despite the pervasiveness of these images, numerous race, class, and gender scholars have noted that not *all* women and men were included in these ideals of masculinity and femininity. Men of color were not extended a family wage, and women of color were already in the paid labor market, doing domestic work, other low-wage service work, or agricultural work. Further, the ideal traits held up for men and women of color contrasted sharply with those for White women and men. For example, after Reconstruction the ideal dominant culture image of the “good” African American man was the Sambo image: a happy-go-lucky, silly, and stupid person who was often afraid of the dark (Goings, 1994). The image provided a justification for slavery and at the same time reduced the perceived physical and sexual threat posed by real African American men. The Mammy image was the female parallel to Sambo: a happy asexual slave who so loved the master’s family—and slavery itself—that she would willingly give over her life to the care and nurturance of slave-owning White families (Collins, 1990; Goings, 1994). As the ideal White man was strong, independent, and emotionless, Sambo—like White women—was weak, dependent, and full of emotion. White women were to nurture their families, whereas emotionally strong Mammies could have no families of their own, just as they could have no sexuality. In sum, the meanings of masculinity and

femininity are differently constructed throughout history for different social groups through social processes that produce and maintain a racialized, class-bound, heterosexist patriarchy.

2. *Socially constructed.* Race, class, gender, and sexuality are social constructs whose meaning develops out of group struggles over socially valued resources. The dominant culture defines the categories within race, gender, and sexuality as polar opposites—White and Black (or non-White), men and women, heterosexual and homosexual—to create social rankings: good and bad, worthy and unworthy, right and wrong (Lorber, 1994). It also links these concepts to biology to imply that the rankings are fixed, permanent, and embedded in nature. That is, dominant groups define race, gender, and sexuality as ranked dichotomies, where Whites, men, and heterosexuals are deemed superior. Dominant groups justify these hierarchies by claiming that the rankings are a part of the design of nature—not the design of those in power. Subordinate groups resist the binary categories, the rankings associated with them, and the biological rationales used to justify them. Critical examination of either process—polarizing or biologizing—reveals that race, gender, and sexuality are based neither in polar opposites nor in biology but are social constructs whose meanings evolve out of group struggles (Garnets & Kimmel, 1991; King, 1981; Lorber, 1994; Omi & Winant, 1994).

When we say that race, gender, and sexuality are social constructs, not fixed biological traits, we also mean that we cannot *fully* capture their meaning in everyday life in the way that social scientists often attempt to do by employing them as variables in traditional quantitative research. When race, gender, and sexuality are treated as discrete variables, individuals are typically assigned a single location along each dimension, which is defined by a set of presumably mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories. This practice reinforces the view of race, gender, and sexuality as permanent characteristics of individuals, as unchangeable, and as polarities—people can belong to one and only one category. The practice cannot grasp the relational character, the historical specificity, or the conflicting meanings that arise in everyday life (Omi & Winant, 1994). “Mixed race” people, for example, often have no place in the schemas provided. And what of the people who see themselves as bisexual or as heterosexual at one time of life and gay or lesbian at another?

The case of social class provides an instructive contrast to race, gender, and sexuality ideologies. The dominant ideology of social class is that it is not binary, polarized, or biological. Instead, the United States is seen as having an open economic system where talent and hard work—not inherited physical traits—are the primary determinants of one’s economic location (Hochschild, 1995). Our system is not seen as polarized between rich and poor, capitalists and workers, or middle and working classes. Rather, it is viewed as a continuous ladder of income and resources, where people can slide up and down based on their own efforts and abilities—not on their biology (Vanneman & Weber Cannon, 1987). In the final analysis, the real power of the middle and upper classes is reinforced through this ideology as well as through the race, gender,

and sexuality ideologies because all obscure the forces that underlie the social hierarchy. In the case of social class, however, unfair hierarchy is obscured by referring to ability and effort rather than by referring to biological superiority. Social class ideology disavows biology and categorical binaries, yet justifies hierarchy and dominance nonetheless. The case of social class makes very clear that ideologies are created to justify hierarchies and need not be based in binaries or biology, nor need they be internally consistent or logical. To justify the power and control of the dominant group, ideologies of dominance develop in different ways over time and in different social contexts and can rest on fundamentally very different—even seemingly contradictory—beliefs.

For over a century, social expectations of women's work and family roles, for example, have been rationalized by the biological fact that women can bear children. Middle-class mothers who stay at home to care for their children are often viewed by the dominant culture as "good mothers," yet poor women who do the same are viewed as lazy or "welfare queens." How can women's reproductive capacities prescribe their roles as mothers when we have different expectations for mothers of different classes, races, and sexual orientations?

Furthermore, the biological relationship of women to children is far more complex than ever before and is even now being challenged as a basis for legally defining motherhood. Today, when women and men have so many different biological and social relationships to their children, the courts are increasingly being asked to mediate questions of who should rear children. Consider the following "mothers":

- *traditional mothers*: women who have a genetic, gestational, and legally sanctioned social relationship to the child
- *lesbian mothers*: women whose biological relationship may be the same as that of traditional mothers, yet whose legal status as mothers is often challenged because of their sexual orientation
- *surrogate mothers*: either genetic mothers who provide an egg, but do not bear the child; or gestational mothers (as in the case of Baby M) who have no genetic relationship to it, but bear the child
- *social mothers*: foster mothers, adoptive mothers, or "other" mothers who have no direct genetic or gestational relationship to the child, but play a significant role in raising the child (cf. Collins, 1990).

Each of these ways of mothering is constructed in race, class, gender, and sexual hierarchies that prescribe the meanings attached to them and shape the legally prescribed rights of these mothers to rear children. Chesler (1986, p. 280) discusses why we have the phenomenon of surrogate mothers at all:

Racism is the issue, and why thousands of babies are "unsuitable" (for adoption). Ownership is the issue, and the conceit of patriarchal genetics. "Barren women" are the issue, and why some women must come to feel an excruciating sense of failure because they cannot bear a child. . . . And guilt and money, and how women can earn both, are the issues that need honest attention.

Race, class, gender, and sexuality are social constructions that are constantly undergoing change both at the level of social institutions and at the level of personal identity. They are not fixed, static traits of individuals, as is implied when they are treated either as biological facts or as categorically fixed variables in a research model. They are, however, deeply embedded in the practices and beliefs that make up our major social institutions. The permanence and pervasiveness they exhibit illustrate their significance as major organizing principles of society and of personal identity.

3. *Systems of power relationships.* Perhaps the single most important theme is that race, class, gender, and sexuality are historically specific, socially constructed hierarchies of domination—they are power relationships. They do not merely represent different lifestyle preferences or cultural beliefs, values, and practices. They are power hierarchies in which one group exerts control over another, securing its position of dominance in the system, and in which substantial material and nonmaterial resources—such as wealth, income, or access to health care and education—are at stake (Baca Zinn & Dill, 1996; Connell, 1987, 1995; Glenn, 1992; Vanneman & Weber Cannon, 1987; Weber, 1995; Weber, Hancock, & Higginbotham, 1997; Wyche & Graves, 1992). Race, class, gender, and sexuality are thus fundamental sources of social conflict among groups.

The centerpiece of these systems is the exploitation of one group by another for a greater share of society's valued resources. That they are based in social relationships between dominant and subordinate groups is key to understanding these systems. There can be no controlling males without women whose options are restricted; there can be no valued race without races that are defined as "other"; there can be no owners or managers without workers who produce the goods and services that the owners own and the managers control; and there can be no heterosexual privilege without gays and lesbians who are identified as "abnormal" or as "other."

Race, class, gender, and sexuality are not just rankings of socially valued resources—who has more income or prestige. They are power relationships—who exerts power and control over whom (Baca Zinn & Dill, 1996; Connell, 1987, 1995; Glenn, 1992; Griscom, 1992; Kahn & Yoder, 1992; Vanneman & Weber Cannon, 1987; Weber, 1995; Weber et al., 1997; Yoder & Kahn, 1992)? The groups that have power in a social system influence the allocation of many types of resources. In one sense, then, the procurement of socially valued resources can be seen as the end product—the spoils to the victors—of struggles for power. To maintain and extend their power and control in society, dominant groups can and do use the resources that they command. So socially valued resources, such as money and prestige, accrue to those in power and, once procured, serve as tools for maintaining and extending that power into future social relations.

Although scholars studying race, class, gender, and sexuality tend to see them as power relations, this perspective is not universally accepted. Ethnic

approaches to race (cf. Glazer & Moynihan, 1975), gradational perspectives on class (reviewed in Vanneman & Weber Cannon, 1987), sex/gender differences, and gender roles (for a review, see West & Fenstermaker, 1995), and moral or biological approaches to sexual orientation all conceive of these dimensions as differences that are not ultimately power based. Differences between women and men, gays and straights, and among racial and ethnic groups are taken as primarily centered in women's and men's social roles and in cultural variations in traditions such as food, clothing, rituals, speech patterns, leisure activities, child-rearing practices, and sexual practices.

These perspectives often downplay or ignore the very real struggles over scarce resources that accompany location in these different groups. A similar tradition in the field of stratification—the gradational approach—sees class inequality as represented by relative rankings along a scale of prestige or income (a ladder image), not by the struggle between opposing groups for scarce resources (for reviews see Lucal, 1994; Vanneman & Weber Cannon, 1987). In the gradational perspective, no oppositional relationships exist between positions on a scale; it is a continuum along which some people simply have more than others.

Perhaps because race, class, gender, and sexuality studies primarily emerged from the experiences and analyses of groups who face multiple dimensions of oppression, and perhaps because power relationships are simply much more apparent when more than one dimension of inequality is addressed, the cultural difference, gradational, or ranking perspective is almost nonexistent in race, class, gender, and sexuality studies. The view that power relations are central is almost universal.

Looking at the *relational* nature of these systems of inequality rather than the differences in rankings of resources that accompany these systems forces us to focus on privilege as well as on oppression. Because the one cannot exist without the other, any analysis of race, class, gender, and sexuality must incorporate an understanding of the ways in which the privilege of dominant groups is tied to the oppression of subordinate groups. Consequently, the scholarship in this field has begun to explore the social constructions of Whiteness (cf. Frankenberg, 1993; McIntosh, 1995; Roediger, 1991), of masculinity (cf. Brod & Kaufman, 1994; Connell, 1995; Messner, 1992), and of heterosexual privilege (Giuffre & Williams, 1994; Rich, 1980).

4. *Social structural (macro) and social psychological (micro).* Race, class, and gender relations are embedded and have meaning at the micro level of individuals' everyday lives as well as at the macro level of community and social institutions. To grasp the significance of race, class, gender, and sexuality in society, we must examine their meaning in both contexts. In fact, a key aspect of such analyses involves explicating the linkages between broad societal level structures, trends, and events and the ways in which people in different social locations live their lives. In the last 25 years, for example, U.S. society has undergone major shifts in the distribution of wealth, income, jobs, and housing

and in the health status of its people. Race, class, gender, and sexuality power relations structure the ways in which these societal trends develop and play out among different groups of people.

Macro social structural trends are often represented analytically as a set of lifeless statistics about different populations. When we look at statistics summarizing national trends in economic or health indicators, for example, it is difficult to know exactly what they mean for the way people live their lives. But when we closely follow the everyday lives of a group of people, we can learn how they live with financial constraints, how they feed their families, how they deal with the stresses they face, how they manage work and family life, how they stay healthy.

It is in families and individual lives where race, class, gender, and sexuality scholarship has made perhaps its most important contributions. This work has begun to identify the ongoing struggles of subordinate groups to resist negative and controlling images of their group—to resist internalizing the limits to self-esteem, self-valuation, and collective identity imposed by the dominant group (cf. Bookman & Morgen, 1987; Collins, 1990; Comas-Díaz & Greene, 1994; Weber et al., 1997).

Because of the distorted images of subordinate groups that pervade society's institutions such as education and the media, subordinate groups are viewed by many as weak human beings who passively accept—and even deserve—a lesser share of society's valued resources. However, subordinate groups actively resist oppression and devaluation in numerous ways every day. Although, as a consequence of their location in subordinate social locations, they often lack *institutional power*, subordinate group members can and do use other forms of personal power and collective action to resist unfair treatment and to struggle for group power. Daily acts of resistance can range from the individual psychological process of rejecting negative group images and affirming positive group images to group activities designed to produce social change. Acts of resistance also range from passive forms such as work slow-downs or excessive and carefully planned use of sick leave (to ensure maximum disruption of the workplace) to active measures such as public protests, marches on Washington, strikes, or violence (Bookman & Morgen, 1987). For example, through public protest and persistent demand for civil rights laws, which made racial discrimination in education, housing, employment, and other areas of society illegal, African Americans were able to shift greater educational and economic opportunity and earning power in their direction.

Although the barriers of oppression are material and ideological, the resources associated with one's social location in the matrix of dominance and subordination are both material and psychological (Collins, 1990; Weber et al., 1997). Nonmaterial psychosocial resources have important consequences for social and psychological well-being that in turn affect one's ability to secure material resources. Psychosocial resources associated with one's social location include positive feelings of well-being and self-respect that result from a strong connection to and identity with a group of people who share a common history

and life experiences (Comas-Díaz & Greene, 1994). Developing a positive identity and feelings of self-respect is easier for dominant groups whose own experiences serve as the public model for how all people should live their lives. Because social institutions such as schools are structured to support the White middle class, such children are usually raised in families with greater access to resources to help them succeed in school. They enter school with greater expectations for success; teachers expect their success and, therefore, give them more attention. Teachers' positive orientations enhance the children's sense of self-worth, thus further improving their performance and their chances for school success (Oakes, 1985; Ornstein & Levine, 1989; Polakow, 1993).

Occupying a subordinate location in the race, class, gender, and sexuality systems, however, does not necessarily equate with a lack of psychosocial resources (Comas-Díaz & Greene, 1994). Working-class, Latino/a children, for example, growing up in the *barrio* may develop such intangible resources if they are surrounded by loving family members and neighbors who convey a sense of each child's special worth as an individual and as a Latino/a. And this psychosocial resource can serve as the foundation for a healthy defense against negative or rejecting messages from the dominant society. Resistance to the pressures of structured inequality within subordinate group communities can, in fact, be a psychosocial resource that can be used in a collective struggle against oppression and in a personal journey toward self-appreciation and good mental health.

The key aspect of dominance, then, is not whether people have access to psychosocial resources but whether the social order supports or constrains people's development. The concept of hegemonic ideologies refers to beliefs about what is right and proper, which reflect the dominant group's stance and pervade society. Controlling images refer to dominant culture beliefs about subordinate groups; these images serve to restrict their options and to constrain them. Although society has many conceptions of working women, for example, only one is hegemonic, taking precedence over other conceptions and serving as the standard against which the value or worth of all other conceptions of working women is measured.

When you hear the phrase "today's working woman" mentioned in the media or in a popular magazine, what kind of woman comes to mind? In all likelihood, no matter what your race, class, gender, or sexual orientation, you think of a White, heterosexual, professional woman working hard in a position of some power in the labor force. She is most likely married, but if she is single, she is certainly young. This image of today's working woman is not only atypical, it is antithetical to the reality of work for most women today. Only 28.7% of working women are in professional, managerial, or administrative positions, and many of those hold little real power in the workplace (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1995).

Why would such an atypical image come to mind? Because this image is the dominant, hegemonic conception of working women. It represents the image of the most powerful race, class, and sexual orientation group of women. It is

grossly overrepresented in the media, because it is set up as the model, the ideal against which other working women are to be judged. By its repeated presentation in the media (e.g., most women seen on television are White, middle-class, professional women), the image distorts the public perception, leaving the impression that the attainment of positions of power among women is far more possible than is actually the case. By masking the true nature of race, class, gender, and sexuality oppression, the image helps to preserve the status quo. The image further sets up a standard for judgment that most women cannot attain. If they come to believe that their failure to measure up is a result of their personal limitations—a lack of talent, desire, or effort—they internalize the oppression. If, on the other hand, they are aware of the dominant belief system nature of and the structural barriers to attaining the “ideal,” they resist internalizing the oppression and have the potential for self-definition and self-valuation, a process critical to the survival of oppressed groups.

To comprehend the human agency, resilience, creativity, and strength of oppressed group members, one must view the actions and motivations of subordinate group members through their own lenses, not through the lenses of the controlling images of the dominant culture. Recognition of the history of subordinate group resistance helps to counter the cultural myths and beliefs in the dominant culture that the subordinate place of these groups is a “natural” aspect of society.

Race, class, gender, and sexuality scholarship has clarified the notion of internalized oppression, as well as the processes within communities that enable them to survive and the individuals within them to define themselves, value themselves, and build community solidarity (Collins, 1990; Weber et al., 1997). The Civil Rights Movement, racial and ethnic pride, gay pride, and women’s movements are collective manifestations of resistance to negative and controlling images of and structures constricting oppressed groups. Interestingly, the American labor movement has been too weak and invisible to provide a positive counterimage that workers can employ to resist oppression.

5. *Simultaneously expressed.* Race, class, gender, and sexuality simultaneously operate in every social situation. At the societal level, these systems of social hierarchies are connected to each other and are embedded in all social institutions. At the individual level, we each experience our lives and develop our identities based on our location along all dimensions, whether we are in dominant groups, subordinate groups, or both.

That almost all of us occupy both dominant and subordinate positions and experience both advantage and disadvantage in these hierarchies means that there are no pure oppressors or oppressed in our society. Thus, race, class, gender, and sexuality are not reducible to immutable personality traits or other seemingly permanent characteristics. Instead, they are social constructions that often give us power and options in some arenas while restricting our opportunities in another.

From this principle we cannot argue that we are all oppressed or that our oppressions can simply be added up and ranked to identify the most oppressed

group or the most victimized individuals. We cannot say that disadvantage on any two dimensions is the same as on any other two. No simple mathematical relationship can capture the complexity of the interrelationships of these systems. And yet recognizing that each of us simultaneously experiences all of these dimensions—even if one is foregrounded in a particular situation—can help us see the often obscured ways in which we benefit from existing race, class, gender, and sexuality social arrangements, as well as the ways in which we are disadvantaged. Such an awareness can be key in working together across different groups to achieve a more equitable distribution of society's valued resources.

The final characteristic describes a common epistemology of race, class, gender, and sexuality scholarship.

6. *Interdependence of knowledge and activism.* Race, class, gender, and sexuality scholarship emphasizes the interdependence of knowledge and activism (Baca Zinn & Dill, 1994, 1996; Collins, 1990). These analyses developed as a means of understanding oppression and of seeking social change and social justice. The "truth value" or merit of this knowledge depends on its ability to reflect back to social groups their experiences in such a way that they can more effectively define, value, and empower themselves to seek social justice.

When we think of race, class, gender, and sexuality as historically specific, socially constructed power relations that simultaneously operate at both macro and micro levels, a more complex set of questions arises than from analyses of a single dimension. The following is an example from everyday life that illustrates the simultaneous impact of these hierarchies on a fundamental social identity in the United States today.

RACE, CLASS, GENDER, SEXUALITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY

Consider how masculinity is differently defined by and for heterosexual, White, middle-class males and for other groups of men, such as gays, working-class White men, and men of color. When you hear about such groups as the Michigan Militia or the Ku Klux Klan, you likely think of White working-class men. If you hear of the Crips or the Bloods, you likely think of Black or Latino, working-class, male gang members. Research by Kathleen Blee (1991) on *Women of the Ku Klux Klan* and by Karen Joe and Meda Chesney-Lind (1995) on female gang members has clearly documented that women are active participants in both worlds. Nonetheless, in the dominant culture ideology, these worlds are almost exclusively associated with working-class men.

How is masculine identity socially constructed for working-class males? The dominant culture portrays men in these groups as valuing physical strength, aggressive behavior, and dominance over women and as devaluing emotional sensitivity and intellectual development.

Consider now the dominant image of White professional/middle-class males. These men are deemed superior based on their positions of power and authority

in the labor force, by their financial or material wealth, by their intellectual prowess and knowledge, and, increasingly today, by their emotional sensitivity—but *not* by their physical strength or aggressiveness.

In the popular documentary *Hoop Dreams* (Marx, Gilbert, Gilbert, & James, 1994) and in Michael Messner's (1992) *Power at Play: Sport and the Problem of Masculinity*, we see the difference in how schools steer athletically talented working-class men toward careers in athletics. Sports represent a career that fits with racialized conceptions of what is suitable for working-class men. And because they represent one of the few legitimate avenues for upward social mobility, sports careers are sought by working-class and lower class men—despite the almost insurmountable odds against making a lifelong career in sports. Only 6% or 7% of high school football players ever play in college, and only 2% of eligible college football or basketball athletes ever sign a professional contract. The chances of attaining professional status in a sport are 4 in 100,000 for a White man, 2 in 100,000 for a Black man, and 3 in 1,000,000 for a U.S.-born Latino (Messner, 1992, p. 45).

Athletically talented, White, middle-class men, in contrast, are steered into college to achieve the academic credentials to work in the middle class—as professionals, owners, managers, or administrators. Athletics are seen as a way of building positive character traits, such as competitiveness, camaraderie, and determination, and of providing valuable avenues for social networking in the middle class. Sports are almost never considered as a career in themselves.

The dominant conception of masculinity in capitalist economies portrays “real men” as those who have power in the economic realm, where ownership, authority, competitiveness, and mental—not physical—labor are valued. Physical strength or physically aggressive behavior is not a valued method of maintaining power and control.

Sports do, however, serve an important role in constructing masculine identities for the many men who play them. As Messner's (1992) research shows, sport is an institution created by and for men. Misogyny and homophobia, as exhibited in extremely derogatory language toward women and gay men in the context of sports, serve as bonding agents for heterosexual men by separating them from anything “feminine.” Expressing strong antigay sentiments enables men to be intimate without being sexual. And objectifying women through derogatory language enables men to be sexual without being intimate, a process that fits with maintaining a position of control over women and men of lower status in the race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies (Messner, 1992).

In sum, many masculinities operate in the United States today. What it means to be a man—or a woman, a husband or a wife, a father or a mother—depends on one's *simultaneous* location in the race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies.

CONCLUSIONS

This conceptual framework for understanding race, class, gender, and sexuality can support our teaching by guiding the content we select for classes, the

questions we bring to the analysis of course readings and materials, and the ways in which we promote positive interaction across race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies in the classroom. First, it provides a framework for conceptualizing and assessing the diverse readings that currently constitute courses on gender and diversity. To convey the complexities of these intersections we need to select course content—readings, lectures, films—that highlight the intersections of multiple dimensions of oppression. Providing students with a set of themes to help them review the diverse materials they read can be a useful pedagogical tool.

Second, rather than providing a set of answers, I hope these themes raise some questions and issues to consider in our analyses of social reality. I am increasingly convinced that the most important tools we bring to the analytical process are the questions we ask.

Race, class, gender, and sexuality are contextually rooted in history and geography. Ask how the dynamics we study might vary in different places and at different times. It is important to take account of the histories and global contexts of particular groups to understand their current situations. Taking a broad historical and global view also enables us to see the tremendous changes that have taken place in each of these systems over time and the diversity across social geography and thus to recognize the potential for change in situations we face every day.

These systems are socially constructed, not biologically determined. Ask if gender and race are taken to determine how people should act out of some notion of biological or social imperative. Is seeing gender or race as an immutable fact of people's lives either privileging them or relegating them to certain inferiority? How might we view a situation differently if someone of a different race, class, gender, or sexual orientation were in it?

The race, class, gender, and sexuality systems operate at the social structural (macro) and the social psychological (micro) levels. When we analyze a particular social event, the interpersonal and psychological manifestations of oppression are often more readily apparent. The broad macro-level forces that shape events are more remote and abstract and are, therefore, more difficult to see. Ask about those structures.

In looking at the case of White male backlash against affirmative action, for example, we can easily see angry White men out to push back gains made by women and people of color and to maintain their position of power and control. We can dismiss them as "oppressors" or bad people. When we ask about the broader race, class, gender, and sexuality forces that shape this situation, however, we also see that the recent decline in our economy has rendered many White men vulnerable to loss of jobs, income, and health. White men's anger in part comes out of their different expectations—out of their sense of privilege. If we are to collaborate to achieve economic change that benefits most people, we must recognize the ways in which many White men, as well as other people, are vulnerable in the present economy.

These systems are simultaneously experienced. All operate to shape every-

one's lives at all times. Ask about all of the systems in every situation. Although one dimension may appear to be in the foreground, go beyond the obvious and ask about the less visible dimensions.

Make the connection between activism for social justice and the analyses you conduct. Ask about the implications for social justice of the perspectives you employ, the questions you ask, and the answers you obtain. Does the analysis provide insights that in a political context would likely serve to reinforce existing power relations? Or does it illuminate processes of resistance or avenues for self-definition or self-valuation that could transform the race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies? How might people in different social locations react to and employ this analysis? To what ends?

Race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies are power relationships. Always ask who has the socially sanctioned power in this situation. What group gains and what group loses? Try not to confuse personal power with social power. Individuals can be powerful by virtue of their insight, knowledge, personalities, and other traits. They can persuade others to act in ways they want. But personal power can be achieved in spite of a lack of socially sanctioned power. It is the power that accrues from occupying a position of dominance in the race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies that enables large numbers of people in similar locations to have privileges/advantages in a situation. And it is their systematic and pervasive embeddedness in all our major institutions that makes race, class, gender, and sexuality such critical systems to understand.

Finally, when we change the content that we teach to be more inclusive and to address the complexities of race, class, gender, and sexuality, we need to change our pedagogy as well. Learning about diversity is most likely to take place when classroom interactions and activities promote positive intergroup interaction across race, class, gender, and sexuality. Themes in the scholarship suggest some strategies for shaping positive classroom dynamics across difference.

That race, class, gender, and sexuality are socially constructed, not fixed traits of individuals, means that we cannot accept group membership as a guarantee of the privileged knowledge or experience of any dominant or subordinate group member in our classes. The socially constructed nature of these dimensions means that the experiences and perspectives that students have—for example, even in the same racial group—vary by their age and the region and community they grew up in, as well as by their gender, class, and sexual orientation.

Acknowledging the diversity of experiences among our students need not, however, lead to an unfettered relativism that denies the significance of group membership or the greater impact of some dimensions than others on life chances and options. Because we recognize that power is the foundation on which these systems rest, we must acknowledge the differential power that dominant and subordinate groups wield in the classroom as well as in society at large. Members of dominant groups are less likely to know about subordinate groups and are more likely to rely on stereotypes (Fiske, 1993), speak in class,

receive eye contact, have their opinions correctly attributed, and have their contributions shape group responses to tasks (cf. Webster & Foschi, 1988). Teaching strategies that acknowledge these tendencies and contradict them can upset the normative balance of power in the classroom and can increase understanding. They include ground rules to guide classroom discussion; introductions of students that acknowledge their race, ethnicity, and other statuses while identifying them as unique individuals; equal time for talking; and group projects (see Weber Cannon, 1990, for discussion).

Having students address the simultaneity of race, class, gender, and sexuality can help them to understand that there are no pure oppressors nor oppressed people, and that each of them must reflect on their own privilege as well as on their experiences of oppression. They cannot deny their privilege or claim absolute victim status. Recognizing their own multiple locations can open them to the complexities in the lived realities and experiences of others.

And finally, the interdependence of knowledge and activism that is central to race, class, gender, and sexuality scholarship suggests that certain kinds of learning activities can be especially effective. Active learning projects, particularly those that involve students in working together toward solutions to social problems, are especially likely to engage students and to facilitate positive group interaction.

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NOTE

1. Although many scholars still refer to this growing field of study as race, class, and gender studies, I include sexuality because, as I argue, these structures of inequality and the meanings they engender are socially constructed in historically specific time frames and regional locations. Their meanings are not fixed, immutable, or universal but instead arise out of group struggles over socially valued resources, self-determination, and self-valuation. In recent years, the mass movement of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals for social power and self-determination has precipitated significant scholarly attention to sexuality. Our growing awareness and understanding of the pervasiveness and comprehensiveness of the system of compulsory heterosexuality has begun to place it at the center of political and intellectual attention along with race, class, and gender as essential elements in a comprehensive understanding of contemporary human social relationships and psychological processes. To date, however, the scholarship on sexuality is much less developed than work addressing the other dimensions, and race, class, and gender research is only beginning to integrate this new dimension.

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