

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 16  
**Naturalizing inequality: Social race and gender**

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- Last time we started looking at how inequality and hierarchies are constructed
  - that is, how people come to accept inequality and hierarchies of wealth, power, status, etc. and consider them natural and normal
  - Marx suggested that the capitalist class consciously, intentionally tries to convince people that inequality of socioeconomic classes are natural and necessary
  - but what about other kinds of inequality, such as inequality by gender or ethnicity?
- Inequality and hierarchies must be **constructed** in people's minds
  - we have to learn what the categories are
    - man, woman, gay man, and etc.
    - white, black, Asian, Latino, etc.
    - these categories are arbitrary
      - members of other cultures might learn to categorize people differently
        - like the Ju/'hoansi, who categorized African-Americans as "whites"
    - but as we learn how to categorize people and practice using the categories...
      - we come to think that the categories are real
      - that is, we naturalize them
  - we also have to learn what qualities are associated with each category, and how they rank relative to each other
    - men are strong, aggressive, control their emotions, etc.
    - men are more likely to be in positions of power than are women at work, in politics, etc.
    - men grill the steak; women do the shopping, complicated cooking, and cleanup
    - in general, men are in the privileged, dominant, higher-ranked position relative to women, gay men, and others
  - this process of constructing ideas in people's minds is both cultural and social
    - social: in that we learn the categories, their features, and their relative ranking from the people around us
    - cultural: in that we end up sharing these ideas with the other members of our culture
- Systems of inequality and hierarchy not only must be constructed, but also must be **naturalized**
  - made to seem natural, normal, necessary, acceptable, and right... part of the natural order of the world
  - Naturalizing inequality may involve...
    - learning *theories or arguments* that explain or justify the inequality
      - such as "men are physically stronger and are more aggressive leaders, so naturally they tend to hold the dominant positions"
      - or "African-American families tend to be dysfunctional, so naturally their kids tend to fail in school and later life"
    - I am NOT saying these are correct, only that such beliefs tend to naturalize hierarchies
      - the first helps to naturalize a hierarchy by gender

- the second helps to naturalize a hierarchy by social race
- learning *ways of speaking and thinking*
  - that lead us to unconsciously assume that that a hierarchy is natural
  - that lead us to unconsciously assume that certain categories have certain positions in the hierarchy
    - like we might if we frequently use certain metaphors in speaking and thinking, like:
      - white = clean, pure, good
      - black = dirty, polluted, evil
      - so naturally, when we categorize people using these terms, we will tend to think of the “white” category of people as ranking higher than the “black” category
  - that lead us to not see that the hierarchy exists at all
- For example, in European and US society, we have inequality based on social race
  - that is, a hierarchy of social races
    - recall that social race categories are just arbitrary social constructs
    - but we do classify people this way, nonetheless
  - Even if you think overt racism is fading (which is not at all clear), racism is still important in US society
    - just recently (March 20, 2010), African-American US Representatives James Clyburn (D-S.C.) and Emanuel Cleaver (D-Mo.) were called the “n-word” as they walked by Tea Party protesters
    - in the next days, Clyburn got emails and faxes of similar racist abuse, including pictures of nooses and gallows
    - this was just a particularly public example
  - how is the idea that African-Americans are inferior constructed in people’s minds?
    - How is it naturalized so that some people believe it, or tolerate it?
    - Peggy McIntosh addresses part of an answer in her famous 1988 article, *White Privilege*
      - But FIRST: notice that she uses racial categories as givens, without examining whether they are objectively valid
        - she is referring to *social race* as constructed in our particular culture (white, black, etc.)
        - for her argument, it does not matter if it is “real” biologically
          - people really classify each other this way, whether that is realistic or not
          - so she focuses instead on how the categories of races work in our society
    - McIntosh argues that racism is constructed similarly to sexism
      - US men know that women are underprivileged
        - but not that men are over-privileged
          - women earn less than average for any given work
          - that means that men earn MORE than average for that work
          - men are privileged; they are overpaid simply because of their sex
        - but we don’t think about it that way
      - our culture constructs the gender hierarchy primarily in terms of disadvantages to women, not advantages to men

- this leads (or conveniently allows) both men and women to not even see the hierarchy, or gender ranking
- we think in terms of solving cases of unfairness to women
- not of questioning the dominance of men
- or the whole idea of inequality by gender
- ignoring male over-privilege allows men to avoid recognizing the unfairness and ignore it
  - so no one does anything to change it
  - and the gender hierarchy continues
- McIntosh argues that racism is similar
  - whites tend to acknowledge that African-Americans are disadvantaged relative to others
  - but not that whites themselves are over-advantaged in the same ways
- **white privilege**: unearned assets due to being white
  - that benefit whites every day
  - but are hidden
  - doors open more easily every day by no virtue of one's own
  - [analogy to my experience as a gringo in Peru]
- white privilege remains hidden because acknowledging it would contradict other cultural ideals
  - the ideology of equal opportunity, meritocracy, level playing field
  - that is, acknowledging white privilege exposes a contradiction between our real and our ideal culture
    - ideal culture:
      - equal opportunity
      - level playing field
      - whites have personally earned whatever they have
    - real culture:
      - whites have unearned advantages
      - opportunities are not equal
      - the playing field is not level
      - some of what whites have is due to their social race, not only their own efforts
- contradictions like this cause **cognitive dissonance**:
  - discomfort, irritation due to encountering that some of one's beliefs are not compatible with each other
    - by analogy to musical dissonance: two tones that don't form a pleasant chord (harmony), but instead clash irritatingly (dissonance)
    - recognizing white privilege causes cognitive dissonance because two things we believe cannot both be true at once
    - as in a white American thinking:
      - “I do not participate in racism”
      - “White privilege is real, so I benefit from racism”
      - Uh-oh... these are contradictory... one of them must be false...

- Ouch! Cognitive dissonance!
- People tend to try to avoid cognitive dissonance
  - often by learning ways of thinking that permit us to avoid the dissonance
    - deny the problem
      - “what BS, that’s just liberals being politically correct!”
      - “that’s just stuff the professor said in class, it does not apply to my real life!”
      - “forget that, what are you doing this weekend?”
    - get irritated when someone points it out
    - ignore or avoid it by not thinking about the issue
    - use ways of thinking and speaking that hide the dissonant (conflicting) ideas
  - the tendency to avoid the discomfort of cognitive dissonance is probably one reason why people tend to deny that racism exists in the US
- One way of thinking and speaking that can hide a hierarchy, preventing cognitive dissonance, involves the use of...
  - **marked** and **unmarked** terms for categories
    - a natural, harmless linguistic structure
    - but one that often conveniently hides underlying assumptions
    - **unmarked category**: the default category, assumed unless specified otherwise
      - often because it is the most common form
    - **marked category**: a variant form that must be specified (marked) as different from the default
      - consider the word “pig”
      - if you picture a pig, you probably think of a full-grown pig
      - to specify a baby pig, you have to indicate the age specifically by adding further detail, “marking” the term as a baby:
        - pig + let = “piglet”
        - pig + baby = “baby pig”
      - “pig” includes adults and infants, but we assume adult unless otherwise specified
      - so adult pig is the unmarked category: “adult” is assumed unless the phrase is marked to indicate otherwise
      - piglet or baby pig is the marked category: it must be specified as being different from the default, unmarked category
    - if someone says “prime minister”, you probably think of a man
      - it is necessary to say “female prime minister” to bring that image to mind
      - in the field of prime ministers, male is the unmarked category, and female is marked
  - not all categories have marked vs. unmarked forms
    - some categories must always be specified, because there is no “default”
    - English often forces us to specify sex when we are talking about a person
    - “him” or “her”, “his” or “hers”
      - to avoid specifying a person’s sex, you have to use a more complicated phrase like “a person”

- all the terms in these sets are marked
- there is no easy unmarked term that includes both sexes unless otherwise specified
- So: “white” is the unmarked category of Americans
  - the normal, default, unstated category of Americans
  - while all other social races are marked categories of Americans
    - that is, deviations from the norm
- Evidence: just listen to the terms:
  - people of color
    - as opposed to colorless people?
    - no, as opposed to everyone else, that is, as opposed to the default category: white
  - ethnic food
    - as opposed to food for people with no ethnicity?
    - no, as opposed to food for people of the default ethnicity: white Americans
    - white ethnicity is such an assumed, normal default that white people may feel...
      - that they have no ethnicity at all
      - that only other groups have ethnic identities
- From a “CSU Leader” newsletter in 2006:
  - “The ethnicity of bachelor’s and master’s degree earners increased largely across the board in almost all ethnic categories, with the largest increases being in the numbers of Asian Americans and Latinos graduating. Ethnic groups currently make up an increasing majority of students in the CSU”
  - here, “ethnic groups” are marked as different from the norm
  - the assumed, unmarked, “non-ethnic” norm is “white”
  - “whites” are just normal students
  - they are so obvious that they are not even mentioned
- this is because whites have been the majority in most of the US for a long time
  - the most common type usually becomes the unmarked, typical category
    - sensibly enough
- why do marked and unmarked categories matter here?
  - 1. they can affect how we think about racial categories
    - using “white” as the unmarked, assumed category when speaking and thinking may lead to unconsciously
      - thinking that “white” is normal, typical, best
    - having to use marked categories to refer to African-Americans, Asian-Americans, etc. when speaking and thinking may lead to unconsciously
      - thinking that all the marked categories are deviations from the norm
  - 2. using marked vs. unmarked categories leads us to speak and think in a way that hides inequality
    - visualizing “white people” as the unmarked, default category...
      - hides the fact that some things we say or think about “people” really apply primarily to “whites”
    - allows us to speak and think as if race were not involved
    - we say “people advance according to their abilities”

- that is, normal, typical, people: we think of white people
- we can say and think this about “people” without having to acknowledge that it applies mostly to *white* people
- but we say “black people are at a disadvantage”
  - since white is the default...
  - our language leads us to visualize anything about non-whites as an exception to the normal rule
  - rather than half of a two-sided process in which if blacks are behind, then whites are ahead
- if our language had no unmarked category for social race, we would have to specify the social race whenever we mentioned people
  - We would have to say “Non-black people advance according to their abilities...”
  - that would force us to notice the racial hierarchy all the time
- hiding contradictions is probably not the purpose of unmarked categories
  - but it certainly is an effect
- Marked and unmarked categories are just a matter of language
  - they arise simply as an efficient way of talking about categories when one is more common than the rest
  - Yet, as we speak and think about “people” vs. “ethnic people”, we constantly imply that
    - whiteness is the norm, and best
    - other identities are different from the norm
    - our society is not basically unequal or hierarchical
      - it just has some exceptions to its general rule of equality
  - is this language *influencing* how we think?
  - or language *revealing* how we think?
- Since our language leads white people to think of themselves as the normal, default category,
  - whites may feel no racial or ethnic identity
    - others have race or ethnicity; whites don’t
    - just as in the CSU Leader quotation
  - so racism does not seem relevant to whites
  - Racism seems to affect only other people, those with race...
  - but as McIntosh points out, racism *does* affect whites
    - the effects are positive for whites
- see McIntosh’s list of privileges
- one more way of thinking that hides the racial hierarchy
  - our culture constructs the concept of “racism” in terms of individual, negative acts
  - since most whites don’t think they do “racist” things,
    - they can feel that they are not involved in racism
  - but whites do gain from white privilege
- White privilege is mostly due to **systemic racism**
  - racial inequality or hierarchy built into social systems

- systemic racism is all the ways that the deck is stacked against members of some social races, and in favor of others
- example: “racial disparities” based on
  - Where people live
  - Educational options available to them
  - Norms of speech and dress, etc.
- example: people tend to help, mentor, hire, promote, etc. those they are comfortable with
  - which tends to mean those with similar experiences
  - which tends to mean those of similar social race
  - since positions of privilege are disproportionately held by whites,
  - each generation of whites has a systemic advantage
- Thinking of racism as individual acts helps keep this systemic racism invisible to whites
  - allowing the racial hierarchy to continue
- So: hierarchy by social race is constructed in part by people learning to think in ways that minimize cognitive dissonance:
  - by simply denying or ignoring the hierarchy
  - by using “white” as the unmarked category
    - which constantly re-states the racist assumption that whiteness is normal and non-whiteness is not
    - while also hiding the very existence of race in the lives of white people,
      - since whiteness rarely has to be stated
      - since we don’t have to specify whiteness, we can ignore that social race is involved at all
  - by constructing (thinking of) racism as individual, negative acts
    - which hides the racial hierarchy of systemic racism
  - undoubtedly by other means, too
  - People (of all races) may do this without malice, but
    - it makes life easier for whites by reducing cognitive dissonance
    - it allows whites to continue benefitting from white privilege
    - the unfairness is hidden, so people with power are not motivated to try to change it
    - so the racial hierarchy is continually reinforced, recreated every generation, and continues
- Another kind of inequality: based on gender
  - In *Society and sex roles* (Friedl 1978), Friedl asks
    - What leads to gender inequality?
    - Why is it greater in some societies than in others?
  - Friedl’s article illustrates a different approach
    - Where McIntosh looks at language and thought,
    - Friedl looks for a material (economic) explanation
    - These are not mutually exclusive
      - both kinds of explanation may be right at the same time

- These are just two of many possible anthropological approaches
- First, consider the range of gender inequality in known societies
  - No true matriarchies, ever, as far as we can tell
  - In some societies, women and men shared power
    - where women were frequently chiefs (African Lovedu) or controlled food production and distribution (Iroquois)
    - But men still had access to power or held other powerful roles
    - Women were relatively equal, but not dominant in these cases
  - But in most societies, men have more of the power
  - Why?
- Friedl's claim: Power goes to those who control distribution of scarce resources outside the family
  - outside the family = in the public sphere
  - people who control scarce, valued goods in public gain networks of obligations, alliances, prestige that they can call on for cooperation and support
- Among foragers
  - Men often control distribution of hunted meat
    - They gain reputations, friends, allies...
    - They are then well placed to control trade in other goods
  - While plants gathered by women are distributed only within the family
    - so women establish fewer alliances, obligations, less prestige, have fewer people and resources to call on for support, etc.
- Why is labor divided in this way by gender?
  - Childbearing and child care can only be done by women, who can breast feed
  - which inhibits them from hunting, leaving that to men
- Support for Friedl's claim: survey of societies in which men control distribution of scarce resources in public to different degrees
  - Washo: Native American foragers in Sierras around Tahoe
    - males and females collected food together
      - especially in large group rabbit hunts where everyone's contribution was needed
    - Relatively equal power, freedom of action
  - Hadza: Foragers in Africa, speak a click language related to that of the Ju/'hoansi
    - men and women collect food separately but share little
    - Both gather; large animal kills are rare, shared
    - Still relatively equal power, freedom of action
  - Tiwi: Foragers on Melville and Bathurst Islands, just off the northern coast of Australia
    - men hunt significant meat and bring it back to distribute, women gather for families
    - Males dominant
      - Women must always be married
        - Betrothed at birth, remarried at husband's death
      - Men make alliances by exchanging daughters, sisters, and mothers in marriage
- Eskimo: a slightly broader term than Inuit; mostly icebound arctic
  - males hunt almost all food and other materials, women process it

- Extreme inequality
- Women treated as objects: used, abused, traded by men
- How do the Ju/'hoansi fit into this?
  - which case do they most resemble?
  - could their practices like “insulting the meat” have an effect on gender inequality?
  - is this a cultural construct (about the need to control young men’s arrogance) overriding the effect of an economic reality (men bring in the valued meat) on gender roles?
- Applied to our society:
  - As long as
    - women handle spending for supporting the family,
    - while men handle spending on cars, sports, consumer goods that they can show to others or talk with others about like computers and large TVs, etc.,
    - women will have less power and recognition
  - Jobs that give women authority over resources (business spending, public policy spending, etc.) advance women’s status
  - Friedl would argue that current trends of women increasingly controlling resources in public as consumers, business people, and politicians
    - do not merely *reflect* gender roles that are changing for other reasons
    - instead, these *cause* women’s status to become more equal to men’s
- Is there another way? Is it possible for a non-foraging society to have social equality?
- Robbins reading about the Hutterites
  - a Christian religious movement related to Amish and Mennonites
  - non-competitive, low-consumption, non-ostentatious ideology
    - based on religious belief
    - children are carefully raised to share the same values
  - family equality in wealth and power
  - but great gender inequality
    - might their system still work without low status for women?
    - why is that necessary?
  - also other drawbacks (from our point of view):
    - limited freedom
    - need to continually “branch” into new colonies, etc.
  - could the Hutterites succeed without the surrounding society that IS highly hierarchical?
    - that is, does their relative equality depend on the inequality of others?