

Book Review

The social construction of difference and inequality: Race, class, gender, and sexuality by Tracy E. Ore

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This is the 4th edition of a textbook on oppression that is based on socially constructed identity. Ore, the editor, assembled 65 essays, journal articles, newspapers, magazines and book chapters. The chapters in this book are not tightly intertwined since they were selected from many different sources, different time periods, and include theoretical, individual experiences and empirical research. The variety of styles of writing, and content presented from academic, personal, and journalistic sources makes for a very interesting reading and learning experience. There is coherency in the common themes found throughout the book. The themes are the following:

- Race, gender/sex, sexuality and class are socially constructed via political, social, and economic institutions. It is a fallacy to regard these categories as biological or natural.
- The bifurcation of such categories as black/white, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, middle class/poor denies the many varieties within these categories, invalidates the realities that people face, as well as maintains oppression.
- This social construction creates the externalization and internalization of these constructed identities. Reality becomes objectified and people believe this is who they really are and who others are.
- There are historical changes in the construction of race, gender, and

so on. These identities are dynamic and change according to context.

- Since these identities are not natural or fixed social change and human liberation are possible.
- Important acts of freedom are self-definition and renaming of reality.
- Oppression and privilege is experienced by all of us in different degrees and it is a first step to understand this in order to bring about social change.
- Social change needs to occur at the individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels.
- Recognize the intersection of race, sex/gender, sexuality and class and how these oppressions reinforce and rely on one another.
- Understand the institutional barriers in order to deconstruct and reconstruct these statuses.

Tracy Ore provides introductions to each of the four parts of the book. They include concepts and frameworks to help the reader to understand and critically analyze the readings, recognizing the impact of one's own status on the analysis. There are a set of questions for students at the conclusion of every reading that focus on the themes of the book. They are helpful in encouraging students to think critically. Since the book has so many examples of the themes, this review will discuss selected examples.

Part 1 addresses how and why the social construction of differences occurs. In Part 1 #1 reading the social construction of race is assessed from a theoretical and historical perspective that ultimately concludes that we can move beyond race because it is a dynamic concept. Part 1 #2 reading makes the clear distinction between white people choosing to identify with an ethnic group that may have positive benefits and will not have adverse consequences whichever choice they make, and black people being forced to identify with a negative construction of their identity. It also makes the important point that individualistic thinking of white people creates barriers to understanding the lack of choice others have and the need for collective remedies such as affirmative action. Part

1 #3 reading is very relevant to today regarding the fear based policies of post 9/11 that have the impact of making all Muslims possible suspects of terrorism and spilling over into other immigrant populations. It describes the decimation of communities, indefinite detentions and deportations. It is powerful in depicting the experiences of particular Muslims affected by these policies. Part 1 #4 reading provides an historical account of Jewish people who were perceived to be nonwhite immigrants before WWII in the U.S. and fared poorly as a result of this. After WWII they were incorporated into a white status and so shared in the economic prosperity of other whites by receiving benefits of policies such as the GI bill. Black people continued to do poorly since their continuing nonwhite status prevented them from receiving benefits from federal policies. Part 1 #5 reading is an historical account of the wealth gap between black and white people and shows that barriers to black people accumulating and passing their wealth on to family are institutionally created. This discrimination against blacks continues to operate today and adversely affects their opportunities and quality of life. Part 1 #6 reading is an essay that shows how the media operates against the formation of class consciousness and shapes the illusion of an egalitarian society. This article does not belong in Part 1 but rather would fit better in Part II showing how institutions affect social stratification. The lack of references does not give this reading the credibility that it should have to be included in the book. Part 1 #7 reading is an article on the intersection of race and class and how laws, policies and court decisions create inequality much more than the acts of individuals. Part 1 #8 discusses corporate welfare and does not contribute to the themes in this book.

The social construction of gender will be reviewed in the following examples. Part 1 #10 reading is a solid conceptual piece on how gender is constructed. It explains that sex and gender are "best conceptualized as points in a multidimensional space." (p.124) and people have the right to define their own gender. The author of Part 1 #11 reading is a transgendered person who raises the provocative idea that although

gender has been defined by anatomy it is really "a state of mind" (p.128) that would best be served by not conforming to gender norms but discovering and expressing one's unique identity. Part 1 #12, reading is an interesting account of the social construction of manhood that indicates for one to be considered a successful man, men must define themselves in opposition to women and other men. The psychological costs for men who emulate this and for those who receive their aggression are great. The author posits a redefinition of American manhood. The last reading reviewed in this section is Part 1 #16 reading in which a transgendered person describes her ability to know the key cues of how to look and act in order to be identified as male or female. She views herself as without gender, and is so aware of its social construction that she decides when she wants to portray a gender identity and does so when she chooses.

Part II of the book provides an introduction and readings that explain how institutions such as the family, the economy and the media, social and economic policies and social forces of language and social control affect people's lives. Part II #17 reading provides an historical account of the family and how it has been constructed to maintain oppression and privilege, creating inequality especially for women of color and ethnic women. Part II #19 reading demonstrates how economic inequalities intersect with sexism to create hardship for some families because of lack of appropriate policies (e.g., living wage, childcare). In Part II #20 reading the author makes the case for legalizing same sex unions. This would likely eliminate some of the oppressive ideology that exists about families as well as open up the family institution to more diversity. Part II readings #21 and #22 provide an effective juxtaposition of inequalities in schools and their impact on poor children and the privileges of the rich passed on to their children. Poor children in woefully inadequate schools are trained to accept low paying jobs, while young rich youth in boarding schools are offered every opportunity so they can attend good colleges and ultimately assume positions of power. Part II #23 reading describes the shameful practice in the U.S. of taking Native American

children and placing them in boarding schools where they were stripped of their identity and forced to try to assimilate to white culture. The experiment was a dismal failure.

The articles on the impact of economic and governmental policies illustrate their power in maintaining the status quo. Part II #26 reading shows how those who live in the inner city are rendered jobless and without the habits and practices needed for employment. It points out the strong impact of the intersection of race and class. Part II #27 reading is a research study of employers who were interviewed in one city regarding who they selected to be hired. It shows how they discriminate on the basis of race, ethnicity and class because of their biased perceptions about the relationship between group membership and productivity. Part II #29 reading shows the relationship between life outcomes (health) and social inequality. There is a positive correlation between increasing inequality, poor health and mortality. Part II #30 reading is a critique of the 1996 welfare reform in the U.S. indicating that race/ethnicity biases provided the impetus for this repressive policy. The operationalization of the policy particularly disadvantages black women and legal immigrants.

One of the social forces that is used to maintain the pejorative social construction of gender is violence. This idea is illustrated well in reading #44 which examines the occurrence of rape against young women on college campuses. Some fraternities and bars assist in socially constructing the settings where there will be a greater likelihood of rape.

Part III provides mostly personal accounts of experiences of the oppressed, but in one case a more privileged person, to give one a greater understanding of what it is like to actually experience oppression and privilege. Part III reading #53 provides a poignant account of a gay Native American suffering the effects of being an outsider both within and outside his culture. The power of oppression on the basis of race and sexuality is shown in the fear he expresses. He states that sometimes when he is in a room with close white friends he feels panic. "I wonder if I will leave the room alive" (p.666). In Part III #55 reading there is

a compelling statement of one person's efforts to integrate the identities of gender, ethnicity, national identity and feminism and not allow others to define him. This person has developed the ability to be comfortable living at the "margins of categories" (p.680).

The last section of the book Part IV is about changing systems of oppression and privilege and realizing that change must occur at different levels, from the individual to the institutional. There is redundancy in this section to other readings in the book and the readings do not flow well together. There are not enough examples of efforts to transform systems and the vision, strategies and tactics to do so. Part IV #63 reading provides practical guidelines for becoming an ally for persons of color. The information would be helpful for being an ally to people from other oppressed groups as well. It covers role, justifications people use for not being supportive, tactics and assumptions necessary in the struggle to eliminate "isms." Part IV #65 reading is what Part IV needs to include more of in this book. It is a description of a current social movement of Latinos to organize labor and build coalitions between U.S. and Mexican maquiladoras.

The book, overall is impressive in its veritable encyclopedic portrayal of oppression across a variety of statuses and roles and its overt and subtle manifestations amongst individuals and groups. It informs and raises consciousness about what systemic and individual acts maintain the status quo. It provides hope with the knowledge of the social construction of these unequal and unjust statuses and the possibility of dismantling and reconstituting them to enable freedom and self-actualization. The last section of the book needs to be strengthened with the addition of articles that provide examples of efforts to change the institutions and policies that create "prisons" for people.

Biographical Note: **Linda Cherrey Reeser** is professor and Coordinator of the Bachelors of Social Work Program at Western Michigan University in Michigan, U.S.A. She received her Ph.D in social work from Bryn Mawr College. She teaches history, social policy and social change. Her areas of research include ethics, professionalism, social justice and women's issues. She has published books on professionalism and activism and social work ethics.