

Unit 7 – Gender, Race & Ethnicity

Podcast text

Hello and welcome to the podcast for Unit 7 of Sociology 1101. Today, we will be discussing issues of gender, race and ethnicity. As we saw in the last unit, social categories like class can have a big impact on people's lives – allowing some people to accumulate privileges, while others face systemic disadvantages. Gender, race and ethnicity can have similar effects. Our own society has come a long way in recent years to try to minimize these effects. Discriminating on the basis of someone's gender or race is no longer acceptable in Canada. But this doesn't mean that it doesn't happen. As we saw in an earlier unit, sociological research has shown that people with non-English sounding names have a harder time getting job interviews and landing employment. Clearly, problems of inequality still exist.

If inequalities do exist between men and women, or according to racial or ethnic categories, the task of the sociologist is to try to understand (1) where these inequalities come from, and (2) what are their consequences? Let's start with a discussion of race and ethnicity. Today, most people recognize that some people are treated differently based on their appearance, notably their skin colour. Technically, though, the idea of "race" is problematic. When scientists mapped the human genome, for example, they found almost no genetic differences across racial categories: 99.8% of any person's genetic code is identical to every other human being. Of the 0.2% that does vary, 90% of that variance can be found in any given population, while only 10% of that variability occurs across groups that we call "races". As the scientists of the Human Genome Project put it: "The residents of any random village in the world, whether in Scotland or Tanzania, hold 90% of the genetic variability that humanity has to offer." This discovery from 2001 *proved* that there is no scientific basis for the term "race".

From a sociological perspective, however, race does exist. While race may be *scientifically* false, it is *socially* real. It is real because people think it is real, because they act as though it is real, and because it has real consequences. This is called a **social constructionist** perspective, and it is one that sociologists frequently use to investigate these kind of phenomena. For example, the world was round during the Middle Ages, just as it is now. But that didn't matter so long as people behaved as though it wasn't. In popular culture and in elite circles, most people in Europe behaved as though the Earth was a flat space and there was nothing beyond the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. It was scientifically false but socially real. Put another way, a particular idea about the Earth was **constructed** out of certain assumptions and behaviours and **socially shared** so that it became widespread.

The idea that humanity can be divided into different races and ethnic groups is something that we ourselves have created. Yes, it sometimes has to do with physical appearance, but this is more fluid than most people realize. If we go back in time, we see plenty of examples of how arbitrary this can be. For example, prior to the 17th century, the British frequently described the Irish as being “black people”. Why did they do this? People of Irish decent are clearly not “black” in the way we use the term today. In fact, the British were referring to the tendency of *some* Irish people to have very dark hair. Similarly, when British sailors first came to China in 1637, the Chinese referred to them not as White people, but rather as “the red people”. Apparently the tendency of fair-skinned people to blush red made more of an impression on the Chinese than the colour of their skin. What this tells us is that even physical markers can be interpreted very differently, and should be considered as social constructions rather than immutable facts.

The same arguments can be applied to gender. As we discussed in the unit on socialization, there is a difference between sex and gender. Sex refers to a person’s reproductive equipment, while gender is something that is learned. Gender, as such, is a social construction that varies across time and across cultures. Today, most Canadians agree that men and women are equally capable, but this wasn’t always the case. Women used to be banned from voting, owning property, or entering certain professions like medicine. This had nothing to do with reproduction, and everything to do with socially constructed assumptions that men were superior to women.

Anthropologists have long noticed that women tend to have more equitable status in pre-agricultural societies, particularly those that rely on hunting and gathering. This has led to some interesting theories of why and how the social construction of gender has changed over the years. In hunting and gathering societies, men typically do the hunting, and see successful hunts as validation of their manhood. But hunting is less important to the group than one would think. Studies have shown that even the most successful hunting societies only get about 20% of their calories from meat. The other 80% comes from plants, seeds and nuts that are typically harvested by women. This in fact gives women a great deal of clout. Given the importance of these calories, women in hunter-gatherer societies play a big role in the economy, as they control the chief commodity, which is food.

Historically speaking, a big change happens when hunter-gatherer societies turn to agriculture. Agriculture means working the land. Working the land is extraordinarily difficult, and people either had to do it by hand, or by using large animals such as oxen. Men tend to have more physical strength, so the transition to growing rather than gathering food enhanced their role. As men became dominant in food production, they also became more dominant in the economy and trade. As societies became larger, these advantages became paths to political power. The

exclusion of women therefore became the basis for assuming that they were incapable in these realms. It is very interesting to note that many supposedly “primitive” cultures, including many Aboriginal societies in North America, did not go down this road. These groups had female as well as male leaders, and some trace their lineage through the mother’s side rather than the father’s. This is called **matrilinearity**, and it exists only in societies where women play a central political and economic role.

So what role do gender, race and ethnicity play in Canada? Our country is one of the world’s most progressive nations in terms of trying to eliminate discrimination on these grounds. On the one hand, we’ve been very successful. Canada has multicultural policies that are considered a model by much of the world. In contrast to the United States, where new immigrants are expected to assimilate and become “Americans” on their arrival (this is the metaphor of the melting pot, where all varieties are melted into one), Canada prefers the metaphor of the multicultural mosaic. A mosaic is a portrait made up of tiny coloured tiles. Here, the idea is that people retain their differences but that, as a whole, we make up something larger. In a recent United Nations survey, only 4% of Canadians said they would not want a person of a different race as a next-door neighbour – the lowest score of any nation. Women have also entered the labour force in a big way in Canada. While women used to be barred from most universities, today 57% of all university students are female. This is a remarkable turnaround.

On the other hand, problems still exist. Women, no matter how educated, still make less money in the labour force than men. So do visible minorities and new immigrants, by a wide margin. This raises interesting questions about sexism and racism. One of the great victories of the past few decades has been to make **explicit and personal forms of** sexism and racism unacceptable. Sexist and racist jokes, for instance, used to be commonplace and frequently over-heard in public. What has proven more stubborn are **systemic or institutional forms** of sexism and racism. An example of systemic racism is Canada’s practice of recognizing professional credentials from some places (like Europe) but not others (like India). A doctor trained in South Africa can practice here, but a doctor trained in neighbouring Botswana cannot. That says something. Small rules and practices like this contribute to the real income gap that exists today. Dealing with systemic forms of sexism and racism are the next challenge for tolerant societies like Canada to truly tackle these problems of inequality.