

2 Race and Ethnicity and Causes of Inequality

It shouldn't be surprising to hear that people have different views on the causes of racial and ethnic inequality in the United States. A good source of information about these views is the General Social Survey, which, beginning in 1977, asked respondents about their views of four possible causes of white-black socioeconomic inequality in particular: discrimination, less inborn learning ability among blacks, lack of educational opportunity, and insufficient motivation and willpower. The most common response in 2012 was lack of willpower (50 percent), followed by lack of educational opportunity (42 percent), discrimination (35 percent), and, finally, inborn ability (10 percent). Thus, according to the survey, individuals' behaviors are mainly to blame (i.e., lack of willpower), though respondents still often recognized the multifaceted nature of inequality and the role of structural factors such as educational opportunities and discrimination. The proportion of people attributing racial differences to biology (one in ten) is fairly small, though not wholly insignificant, and has declined since 1977, when over one in four felt it was important.¹

Knowing something about people's beliefs of the root causes of racial inequality is not just academic. These beliefs are tied to people's view of what should be done about inequality. For example, people who believe

that discrimination is important are more likely to support race-based policies, such as affirmative action, to reduce inequality, while those who believe that individual will is most important are less likely to support such policies.² Other work also has shown that people's views about race are strongly associated with their support for welfare programs in particular. For example, researcher Martin Gilens has shown that the desire to cut spending for food stamps is associated with the old stereotype that blacks lack a strong work ethic.³

This chapter explores various theories on the root causes of racial and ethnic inequality in more detail, including human capital and social capital theories; cultural theories that emphasize differences in norms, values, and behaviors across groups; assimilation theory, which is most important for immigrant groups; and theories that emphasize the role of racism and discrimination by both individuals and social institutions. Some of the theories are complementary or have overlapping elements. For example, theories that highlight the importance of culture often acknowledge that racism in broader society has helped shaped cultural responses (such as oppositional behaviors) among individuals. Likewise, differences in human capital can be affected by racism and discrimination that generate unequal educational opportunities across groups. More generally, these theories will help provide a context for understanding the patterns and trends in inequality discussed in subsequent chapters. As we shall see, some theories are better at explaining inequality than others, and the explanatory power of theories varies across the groups being considered. But even before we discuss these theories, it is important to take a step back and explore the meaning of the terms *race* and *ethnicity* to come to a better understanding of the groups we are comparing.

WHAT IS RACE AND ETHNICITY?

When Tiger Woods burst onto the golfing scene, winning his first major championship, the Masters, at the age of twenty-one in 1997, he not only bested the competition but obliterated it with a record-breaking twelve-stroke victory. He generated considerable excitement and interest not only because of his youth and talent but also because he was one of the very few

nonwhite players in a very white sport. The final round of the broadcast of that win set a television ratings record for golf; the second highest ratings for the Masters occurred in 2001, when Tiger won the tournament for a second time.⁴

Because of the ambiguity of his background, different groups sought to claim Tiger as one of their own.⁵ As writer Ben Arogundade noted,

On Wednesday April 23rd, 1997, following his groundbreaking victory in the US Masters, sports celebrity Tiger Woods incurred the wrath of many African American traditionalists when he appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. During the broadcast, Winfrey asked the then 21-year-old golfer whether it bothered him to be called “African American.” Woods replied, “It does. . . . I’m just who I am, whoever you see in front of you.” . . . The golfing champion went on to state that as a child he’d invented the term, “Cablinasian” to describe his parents multi-ethnicity and nationality—a mix of half Asian (Chinese and Thai), one-quarter African American, one-eighth Native American and one-eighth Dutch. He’d adopted the term as a way of honouring his mother Kultida (of Thai, Chinese and Dutch ancestry) as well as respecting all aspects of his cultural and racial heritage. Woods disclosure riled many within the African American community because they saw him as the first black winner of the US Masters—a sports star who was one of their own, whose success in breaking down golf’s racial barriers was a source of racial pride for them. Woods, by declaring himself “unblack,” had stripped all that away.⁶

The underlying reason why Woods might be identified as black in the first place, given his very mixed heritage, is the traditional “one-drop rule” in the United States. This rule refers to the legal (for a time) designation of people with any black ancestry—that is, a person with even a single drop of black blood—as black. This rule was socially internalized by whites and blacks alike over time. The rule was historically used as a tool of subjugation. If a society was going to keep blacks and whites “separate but equal” as declared by the infamous Jim Crow laws in the segregated South and antimiscegenation laws (which barred interracial marriages) that at one point existed in thirty-eight states across the country, then rules were needed to determine who would fall on each side of the stark line dividing privilege from oppression.⁷

In the long wake of the civil rights movement, coupled with the tremendous increase in immigration, growing diversity, and rising rates of racial

intermarriage, the traditional black-white binary no longer seems to make as much sense in the United States today, especially among younger cohorts of Americans. The more varied hues and features that come with diversity have increased the ambiguity of many people's public (if not private) identity. In addition, those with mixed backgrounds often seek to acknowledge the different sides of their heritage. These pressures contributed to the change in the way the government asked about racial identity in the 2000 decennial census. Beginning in that year, respondents were instructed to choose as many of the races listed as they wished. While only 2.4 percent of respondents chose more than one race then, that number continues to grow (slowly), as 3.0 reported two or more races in 2012.⁸ These figures, however, don't include people who might identify as one of the race categories on the census form and Hispanic, since Hispanic origin is considered an ethnicity and not a race, according to these definitions.

Does this sound complicated? You wouldn't be alone in thinking so. The meaning of race and ethnicity has become rather muddled. Thus, I start with some formal definitions. *Race* has traditionally referred to groups that are biologically distinguishable by physical, mental, and genetic traits.⁹ Indeed, this notion remains widely held among the public.¹⁰ But most social scientists today do not believe that racial differences have a deep biological or genetic origin; rather, most differences (such as skin pigmentation) are superficial and can't come close to explaining broad social inequalities. Instead, most accept the notion that race is in large part *socially constructed*. As the historian Matthew Jacobson asks, "Why is it that in the United States a white woman can have black children but a black woman cannot have white children? Doesn't this bespeak a degree of arbitrariness in this business of affixing racial labels?"¹¹

The social construction of race is also evidenced by the fact that meaningful social distinctions between racial groups vary across time and place. As Jacobson further notes, "The American eye sees a certain person as black for instance, who Haitian or Brazilian eyes might see as white. Similarly, an earlier generation of Americans *saw* Celtic, Hebrew, Anglo-Saxon, or Mediterranean physiognomies where today we see only subtly varying shades of a mostly undifferentiated whiteness."¹² As the Irish immigrant population swelled in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, for example, there was a strong, negative reaction among many

nativists to the mostly low-skilled Catholic immigrants, and this was often cast in both religious and racial terms. Jacobson continues, “Negative assessments of Irishism or Celtism as a fixed set of inherited traits thus became linked at mid-century to a fixed set of observable physical characteristics, such as skin and hair color, facial type, and physique. The Irishman was ‘low-browed,’ ‘brutish,’ and even ‘simian’ in popular discourse.”¹³

Likewise, immigrant groups to the United States from southern and eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were initially viewed not only as religiously different but also as distinct races.¹⁴ These views on race were legitimized by scientists who developed theories of eugenics and the role of genes in explaining social and economic differences across broad population groups.¹⁵ The sociologist Mary Waters writes, “At the peak of immigration from southern and central Europe there was widespread discrimination and hostility against the newcomers by established Americans. Italians, Poles, Greeks, and Jews were called derogatory names, attacked by nativist mobs, and derided in the press. Inter-marriage across ethnic and religious lines was very uncommon. . . . The immigrants and their children were residentially segregated, occupationally specialized, and generally poor.”¹⁶ Assimilation occurred only gradually through the twentieth century as immigration slowed, the country’s attention turned to two world wars and a depression, and social and economic changes after World War II that facilitated the upward mobility of the descendants of these immigrants.¹⁷

While these immigrant groups were considered racially (and sometimes religiously) distinct, that does not mean that all immigrant groups were treated equally—or rather equally poorly—by the native population. Blacks in particular were often regarded with the most hostility and thus were relegated to the bottom of the racial pecking order. In fact, the groups that we consider white ethnics today attained the “privilege of whiteness” (of being part of the mainstream in-group) by, over time, successfully working hard to distinguish themselves from nonwhites and from African Americans in particular.¹⁸ For these reasons, social scientists today see race as representing social relations in a particular place and time.¹⁹ Racial distinctions are real and meaningful to the extent that people are treated differently and experience different kinds of life experiences and outcomes, as exemplified by the historical record in the United States.

As to the distinction between race and ethnicity, *ethnicity* refers to a group of people who are differentiated by *culture* rather than by perceived physical or genetic differences central to notions of race. Nevertheless, the terms *race* and *ethnicity* are often used interchangeably in public conversations today, especially given the growing diversity of the U.S. population, increasing intermarriage, and the changing meaning and importance of group differences. There is also some ambiguity about whether some groups, such as Hispanics or Middle Easterners, are distinct races or ethnicities, and this debate is far from settled.²⁰

Returning once again to the issue of official statistics on race and ethnicity, as noted earlier, the U.S. Census Bureau has collected data on race and ethnicity in a variety of ways over the years, in large part reflecting changing popular notions of social distinctions. It currently collects such information with two questions. The first question asks, "Is [this person] of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?" There is an option to answer "no" and additional "yes" options for people to indicate if they are Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban, in particular. There is also a write-in option, where respondents can identify other origins. The next question on the form asks, "What is [this person's] race?" There are answer options for white; black or African American; American Indian or Alaska Native; and a number of options for various Asian groups (such as Chinese, Filipino, and Asian Indian) and native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islander groups. People can also choose "some other race," as well as two or more races. When releasing data on race and ethnicity, the Census Bureau typically uses five race categories (white, black, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander), and one ethnicity (Hispanic origin). A number of respondents are confused by these questions, and wonder why Hispanic origin is asked separately.²¹ Some advocate using a single combined question that asks more simply about ethnic origins, with the view that "race" has little or no objective basis.²² Given the ambiguity in the use of these concepts, even among social scientists, I often use the terms *race* and *ethnicity* together or interchangeably.

Figures 1 and 2 provide information on trends in the racial and ethnic composition of the United States from 1970 projected until the year 2050 in two different ways. In figure 1, I use mutually exclusive and exhaustive

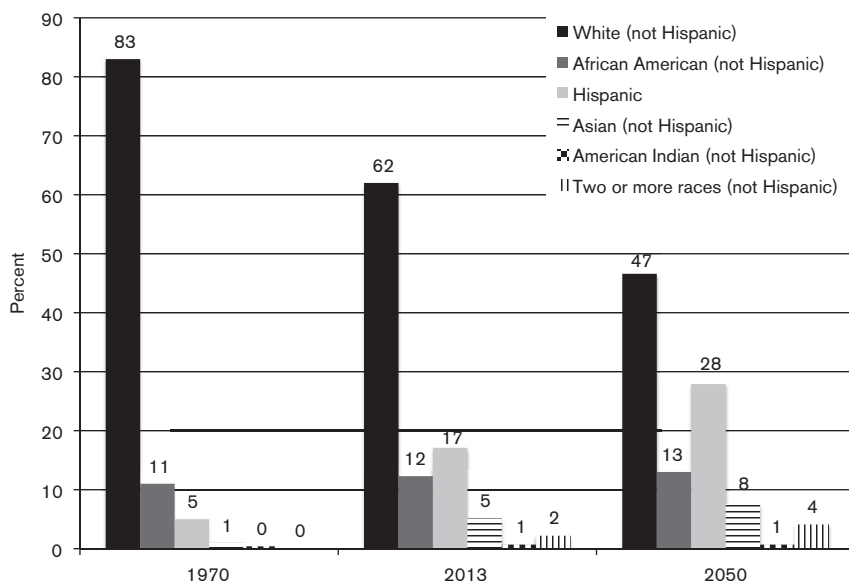


Figure 1. Racial and ethnic composition of the United States, using mutually exclusive groups, 1970–2050. *Sources:* Data for 1970 from Gibson and Jung 2002; data for 2013 from U.S. Census Bureau 2013a; projections for 2050 from U.S. Census Bureau 2012. *Note:* Percentages may not sum to one hundred in each year due to rounding.

racial and ethnic group categories, where each person is essentially assigned one and only one category, and all group percentages therefore sum to 100 percent. Figure 1 represents the way racial and ethnic data are most often shown in research publications and even in the newspaper, especially for whites. Here, a person is “white” if they marked white and no other race on the census questionnaire. They also responded that they were not Hispanic. The same applies for other racial groups, as described earlier. A person is considered Hispanic if they answered affirmatively to the Hispanic question, regardless of how they answered the subsequent race question. According to this classification system, non-Hispanic whites were 83 percent of the population in 1970, declining sharply to 62 percent in 2013, and this is projected to fall to 47 percent by the year 2050. (Due to the rounding of decimals, the sum of the percentages in 2013 and 2050 in figure 1 appear to equal 99 and 101, respectively, rather

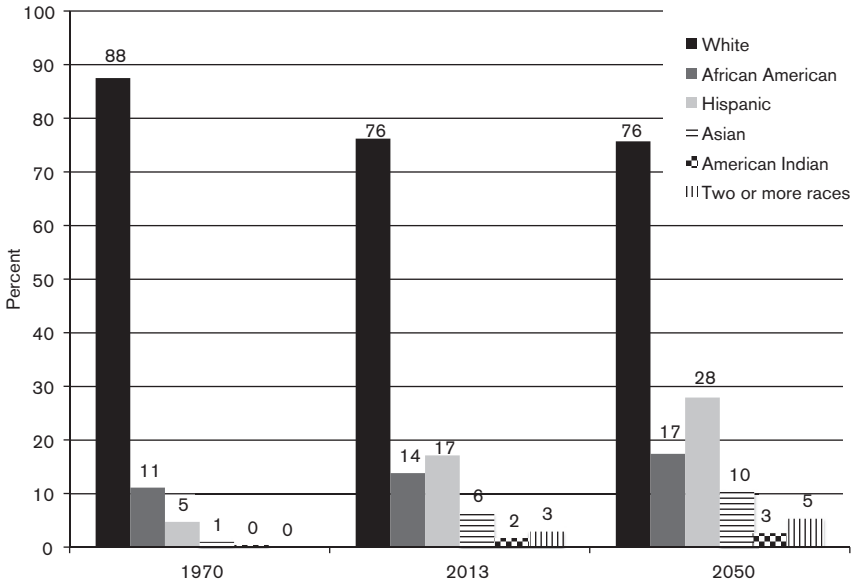


Figure 2. Racial and ethnic composition of the United States, where people can choose more than one group, 1970–2050. *Sources:* Data for 1970 from Gibson and Jung 2002; data for 2013 from U.S. Census Bureau 2013a; projections for 2050 from U.S. Census Bureau 2012. *Note:* Percentages sum to more than one hundred in each year.

than 100.) The proportion of the population that is black is increasing slightly, while the proportion that is Hispanic is rising rapidly, as is the Asian population. The population reporting two or more races is also growing, although it remains fairly small.

Figure 2 displays a trend with some similarities but a couple of striking differences. In this figure a person is counted as part of a group if they marked that group in the census form, regardless if they also marked another group as well. Here, a person can fall into more than one category: if they marked white and black, then they show up in both the white and black columns. Thus, the percentages can be interpreted as follows: in 1970, 88 percent of the U.S. population indicated that they were at least part white; this figure fell moderately to 76 percent in 2013, and is projected to stay at about 76 percent through 2050. The small decline in the

proportion reporting white in this figure, compared to the large decline in figure 1, is explained by the fact that a large proportion of Hispanics also report being white on the census form. Projections also rely on assumption about how people will identify in the future—*especially* people of mixed origin—and how the Census Bureau collects information on race and ethnicity.²³

If the past is any guide, it is probably wrong to assume that there will be no changes in how government surveys collect information on race and ethnicity in the coming decades. Historically, changes occurred with some frequency. The first census in 1790 essentially just collected information on whites and blacks. In the nineteenth century, inspired by the eugenics movement that was popular at the time, there was some experimentation with differentiating among blacks with categories such as “black” and “mulatto” (the latter referring to a black and white mix), and in 1890 even “quadroon” and “octoroon” (categories for one-fourth black and one-eighth black, respectively). The category for American Indian first appeared in the 1860 census, which was also the first year in which there was a category for Chinese. Mexican was an option in 1930, though it disappeared until the Hispanic origin question was introduced in 1970.²⁴ People were first able to choose more than one race beginning in the 2000 census. Even today research continues on whether we should further revise the race and ethnicity question, such as combining them into one that collects information on people’s “origins.”²⁵

It will be interesting to track the ways in which racial and ethnic categories will continue to evolve and change in the coming years, as I believe that such changes are inevitable. For this reason, the projections of the racial and ethnic composition of the United States shown in figures 1 and 2 should be taken with a grain of salt. On the one hand, some analysts make the reasonable argument that figure 2 overestimates the percentage of whites both today and in the future. Many Hispanics report being white only because they are asked to mark a racial category on the census form after answering the Hispanic question, even though they may not feel a strong connection to that group at all and might not be viewed by others as white.²⁶ On the other hand, the figures could overestimate the percentage of the population that will identify as Hispanic in the future. There is

a significant number of people of mixed Hispanic origins (for example, with some grandparents who are Hispanic and some who are non-Hispanic white) who do not identify as Hispanic in surveys and who may not be considered as such by others either.²⁷

As commentator Jamelle Bouie writes, one of the contentious controversies surrounding the shooting of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager, in Florida in 2012—a case that received international attention—was the identity of George Zimmerman, the person who claimed that he shot Trayvon in self-defense:

Yes, Trayvon Martin was black, but is Zimmerman white? For Martin's sympathizers, the answer was yes. For Zimmerman's, the answers ranged from "it doesn't matter" to he "is actually a Hispanic nonracist person who acted in self-defense." . . . It's hard to say history is repeating itself—the circumstances of the early 21st century are vastly different from those of the late 19th—but the current period does seem to rhyme with the past. Over the last 50 years of large-scale Latino and Asian immigration, we've seen waves of anti-immigrant hysteria (Proposition 187 in California and the minutemen along the Mexican border), attempts to keep high-achieving immigrants and their children out of elite institutions, and intermarriage leading to assimilation—one of the most famous comedians in the world, Louis C.K., is half-Mexican, but to most Americans, he's just a white guy. Which is to say that, before we begin to say anything about our majority-minority future, we have to consider the ways in which our existing social dynamics and racial boundaries will change in response to the demographic shift. Going forward, will white Hispanics see themselves as part of a different race—light-skinned but distinct from whites—or will they see themselves as another kind of white?²⁸

Finally, people's own racial and ethnic identities often change over time (and their responses might even vary depending on the place and reason the question is being asked on a given day). How people identify may not be random—it may be correlated with their socioeconomic background.²⁹ For example, people who have both Hispanic and non-Hispanic white ancestors and who no longer identify as Hispanic have, on average, higher levels of education than those who do identify as Hispanic.³⁰ This correlation can serve to bias our understanding of economic inequalities across racial and ethnic groups. This is an issue I return to in the coming chapters on the socioeconomic achievement of different groups.

THEORIES EXPLAINING RACIAL AND ETHNIC INEQUALITIES

In a column critical of black civil rights leaders Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, *Wall Street Journal* columnist Jason Riley argues, “What we have left today as civil-rights leaders are second- and third-tier types striving for relevance in an era when the biggest barrier to black progress is no longer white racism but black anti-social behavior and counterproductive attitudes toward work, school, marriage and so forth.”³¹ In a succinct manner Riley clearly articulates the view that culture matters: black disadvantage can be blamed on harmful attitudes and behaviors among blacks today.

In contrast, in an article that makes a case for racial reparations, writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, argues that not only have slavery, Jim Crow laws, and past discriminatory behavior contributed to black economic disadvantage, but so has present-day discrimination, such as in the housing market:

In 2010, the Justice Department filed a discrimination suit against Wells Fargo alleging that the bank had shunted blacks into predatory loans [loans with very high interest rates] regardless of their creditworthiness. This was not magic or coincidence or misfortune. It was racism reifying itself. According to *The New York Times*, affidavits found loan officers referring to their black customers as “mud people” and to their subprime products as “ghetto loans.”

“We just went right after them,” Beth Jacobson, a former Wells Fargo loan officer, told *The Times*. “Wells Fargo mortgage had an emerging-markets unit that specifically targeted black churches because it figured church leaders had a lot of influence and could convince congregants to take out subprime loans.”

In 2011, Bank of America agreed to pay \$355 million to settle charges of discrimination against its Countrywide unit. The following year, Wells Fargo settled its discrimination suit for more than \$175 million.³²

This indicates that discrimination is not dead. But is this an unusual instance? To what extent does discrimination explain overall patterns of inequality today?

The root causes of inequality among other groups are also frequently contested. Do low levels of education among Hispanics, for example,

reflect discrimination, poor quality of schools in Hispanic neighborhoods, or the fact that Hispanic immigrants typically come to the United States with low levels of education, and it takes at least a couple of generations for their progeny to catch up to the American mainstream? Conversely, what explains relatively high levels of education and income among Asian families? Does it again have something to do with the immigration process (Asian immigrants come with relatively high levels of education), with a culture that emphasizes hard work, or something else? In the following section I systematically review different theories typically used to explain patterns of racial and ethnic inequality today. Specifically, I discuss the role of human capital, social capital, culture, assimilation, and racism and discrimination in turn.

Human Capital Theory

Economists are fond of discussing the role of *human capital* in affecting people's economic well-being. Human capital refers to people's knowledge, skills, personality, and experiences that help them attain good jobs and move ahead in their careers. Most studies of human capital focus on the importance of educational attainment and on-the-job experience in determining one's earnings and future productivity. Indeed, the evidence is very strong that people who invest in their education can expect higher incomes. The median weekly earnings of people with less than a high school diploma in 2013 was \$472, far less than the median weekly earnings of people with a bachelor's degree (\$1,108) and less yet with someone with an advanced professional degree (\$1,714).³³

Educational attainment can affect earnings in a number of ways. For one, people learn a variety of skills in school, such as analytical thinking, writing acumen, computer programming, accounting, and so on. In addition, a degree provides a credential that acts as a screening device by sending a signal to employers that a person is productive, even in the absence of information about specific skills.³⁴ For example, a degree from Harvard University may signal that a person is smart and capable and thus highly employable.

Human capital may affect racial differentials in earnings and wealth if there are significant differences in educational attainment and work expe-

rience across different groups. While I carefully evaluate this argument by examining patterns and trends in education in detail in the coming chapters, suffice it to say here that there are some basic differences across groups in, for example, attending college. In 2013, 32 percent of people twenty-five years and older had completed four years or more of college in the United States. Among non-Hispanic whites, this figure was a little higher at 35 percent, while the corresponding percentages were 22 percent for blacks and 15 percent for Hispanics. In contrast, 53 percent of Asians had completed four years or more of college.³⁵ Thus, holding other factors equal, we would expect for earnings to be higher among whites, and especially Asians, than blacks and Hispanics. Likewise, there are significant differences in levels of unemployment across groups, and this affects work experience and earnings both in the current period and over one's lifetime. The average unemployment rate among men sixteen years and older in 2013 was 7.6 percent, with a low of 5.6 percent among Asians, 6.8 percent among whites, 8.8 percent among Hispanics, and a high of 14.2 percent among blacks.³⁶ High black incarceration rates (black men are eight times more likely to be incarcerated than white men) means that a higher proportion of young black men enter the labor force with a criminal record, which further dampens their employability.³⁷

Educational attainment is affected by other factors related to racial inequality. The quality of public schooling in different neighborhoods can affect the probability of one attending college later on. Schools in poor and minority neighborhoods often have inferior resources and fewer enrichment programs than schools in higher-income, mostly white, neighborhoods. High neighborhood poverty rates are strongly correlated with lower student test scores.³⁸ In addition, if people feel that their education won't pay off because of obstacles in the labor market (including discrimination), they may be less likely to make additional investments in their education. This can in turn further reinforce racial differences in socioeconomic achievement.

Social Capital Theory

Sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant define social capital as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or

a group by the virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.”³⁹ In other words, social capital refers to the resources people have due to their social networks. These networks can be used as vehicle for upward mobility. Many people, for example, find a job through word of mouth through friends and neighbors. If one has wealthy, well-connected neighbors, then one might have a leg up on finding a job than an otherwise similarly qualified person (in terms of skills and education) without such connections.

Racial differences in socioeconomic achievement, then, might not just reflect differences in human capital, but also differences in social capital. Economist Glenn Loury has argued that African Americans have less access to—or are often excluded from—useful social relationships, leading to lower levels of social capital often crucial to achieving economic success.⁴⁰ White men are undoubtedly overrepresented in the proverbial “old boys’ network” in many industries, such as finance, which might make it harder for minorities and women to make the connections to get a job, even if there is no intentional racial or gender bias.

High levels of black-white residential segregation both reflects and reinforces differences in social networks, and this could further contribute to black-white socioeconomic inequality. A significant proportion of Asians and Hispanics are immigrants or children of immigrants who live in or near ethnic communities. Immigrant and ethnic networks can help group members secure a job. But whether this leads to higher earnings over the long run could depend on the nature and quality of these networks and social contacts. For example, while employers in ethnic enclaves might provide jobs to new immigrants, they might also exploit these newcomers.⁴¹ Thus, one’s social networks can at times be harmful rather than helpful.

Cultural Theories

Sociologists typically define *culture* as the beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and other characteristics that are shared and accepted by a group of people. The connection between culture and racial inequality is hotly debated. Culture has sometimes been used to blame poor people and minorities for their own disadvantage. For example, some people believe that cultural val-

ues and lifestyles, such as a weak work ethic, childbearing outside of marriage, criminal behavior, and drug use inhibit upward mobility among some groups.⁴² Empirically, labor force participation rates are lower, and out-of-wedlock childbearing and crime and victimization are higher among African Americans than others, and these attributes are highly correlated with poverty and disadvantage.⁴³ Asians have the lowest levels of childbearing outside of marriage of any group, including whites.⁴⁴

Much of the sociological work examining the link between culture, race, and poverty comes from ethnographies that provide detailed portraits of how people live and why they behave the way they do. Elijah Anderson's *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, for example, describes how low-income African Americans navigate public spaces in poor neighborhoods and the importance of an individual's ability to command respect through the use of violence if necessary. Another example is Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas's book, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage* describes how poor women value and aspire to marriage but feel that stable and rewarding marriages are nearly unattainable. Instead, having children provides meaning to their lives, and it is something that they can do on their own.⁴⁵

The books often provide a structural context that help explain behavior that may seem unproductive and self-defeating to the eye of middle- and upper-class Americans. In the case of *Code of the Street*, the lack of economic opportunities in the inner city and discrimination against black youth mean that many young men adopt a form of masculinity that emphasizes verbal boasts, sexual prowess, and violence in the quest for pride and respect. In the case of *Promises I Can Keep*, the declining economic opportunities for less educated men (of all races)—a result of globalization, deindustrialization, and the disappearance of high-paying blue-collar jobs—means that there are fewer “marriageable” men who can help provide a stable basis for partnerships than in the past. This leads to greater rates of single parenthood, which has been linked to numerous negative outcomes, including higher poverty and lower levels of child well-being, as measured by school completion, and other social, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes.⁴⁶

Culture has also been invoked by some as a possible explanation for relatively high levels of educational attainment among Asian Americans.

The thinking here is that Asian Americans highly value education and its potential to foster upward mobility and communicate this to their children, who put more effort into their schoolwork than their white and other non-Asian peers.⁴⁷ These high levels of education translate into good jobs with high earnings. Asian American families likewise have particularly low levels of single parenthood and high levels of cohesiveness, and this also helps explain relatively low levels of Asian poverty.⁴⁸

A related concept is *cultural capital*, which has been defined in a variety of ways, such as possessing the knowledge of high-status culture or, a bit more broadly, as “widely shared, legitimate culture made up of high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, behaviors, and goods) used in direct or indirect social exclusion.”⁴⁹ The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that such capital helps perpetuate economic advantages across generations, as children with cultural capital might be better prepared to master academic material and communicate with teachers and other high-status adults who can potentially help them get ahead in life.⁵⁰ For example, there are certain expectations on how to act in most kinds of job interviews, such as shaking hands at the outset, providing some eye contact, and generally appearing open and friendly. The extent that white and minority students have different levels of cultural capital, then, could affect their levels of socioeconomic achievement.

Finally, while there has been excellent sociological work exploring the role of culture in shaping attitudes and behaviors and outcomes, we know much less about the exact *magnitude* of its impact on racial inequality. The concept of culture has a multitude of dimensions—it can refer to different kinds of attitudes and behaviors—and even attributing such attitudes and behaviors to culture alone, as opposed to, for example, structural conditions with which they can interact, is challenging and problematic. So the chapters ahead examine the possible role that culture plays in explaining group differences, though quantifying the magnitude of its effect is difficult.

Assimilation Theory

Assimilation refers to the reduction of differences between ethnic groups over time. Assimilation has traditionally thought to occur when immi-

grant groups adopt mainstream attitudes, culture, and educational and work experiences. Assimilation theorists today emphasize that assimilation need not be a one-way street, where minority members become more like majority group members. Rather, assimilation involves a general convergence of social, economic, and cultural patterns.⁵¹ The extent to which assimilation occurs affects racial and ethnic disparities.

Richard Alba and Victor Nee, in their discussion of assimilation theory, explain how assimilation is not necessarily a universal outcome for all groups. Moreover, assimilation is a lengthy process that typically spans generations:

To the extent that assimilation occurs, it proceeds incrementally as an inter-generational process, stemming both from individuals' purposive action and from the unintended consequences of their workaday decisions. In the case of immigrants and their descendants who may not intentionally seek to assimilate, the cumulative effect of pragmatic decisions aimed at successful adaptation can give rise to changes in behavior that nevertheless lead to eventual assimilation.⁵²

Descendants of European immigrants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have largely assimilated into U.S. society. Groups once viewed as outsiders now view themselves, and are viewed by others, as part of the American mainstream. But just because white immigrants of the previous wave of immigration assimilated does not mean that post-1965 immigrants will experience the same. Asians, black immigrants, and darker-skinned Hispanics are all "visible minorities," so they may not be able to blend into what is sometimes referred to as the white mainstream. Immigrants themselves also differ in their characteristics, and this can affect levels of achievement and the pace of assimilation. Asian immigrants, for example, tend to have higher levels of education on average than immigrants from Latin America, and this likely affects other important outcomes, such as their earnings and the quality of neighborhoods in which they live, and subsequently the outcomes of their children.

The chapters ahead examine the extent to which assimilation explains current patterns of racial and ethnic inequality. One of the key aspects of the theory is that it is important not just to look at the well-being of

immigrants themselves but rather how the next generations are faring. Thus, it is important to ask, Are the children of immigrants experiencing upward mobility? Are they less likely to live in ethnic enclaves than their parents? Are they more likely to intermarry with nongroup members? If so, then this is strong evidence that assimilation is occurring.

The Role of Racism and Discrimination

Perhaps the most invoked explanation for racial and ethnic inequality in the United States is racism and discrimination. In the context of today's sensibilities, the country has a very disturbing history of racial violence and oppression, including the annexation of land from American Indians, the institution of slavery and subsequent Jim Crow oppression against blacks, and the internment of more than a hundred thousand Japanese Americans in California and other western states during World War II, to name but a few.

The term *racism* refers to the linking of groups with alleged biological abilities and behaviors to assert the superiority of one racial group over another. Racism has taken on many forms over time and place. As discussed earlier, African Americans were typically thought of as inferior to whites in many respects through much of U.S. history. Jews were considered a degenerate and almost subhuman race in Nazi Germany, which made it easier to justify extinguishing them in Nazi-controlled countries during World War II. Likewise, the genocide of Tutsi by the Hutu majority in Rwanda in the 1990s was grounded in the legacy of Western colonialism, contemporary political conflict, and an inflammatory racist ideology that emphasized distinctions between the two groups.⁵³

Racism goes hand in hand with *prejudice*, which can be defined as an "attitudinal system of negative beliefs, feelings, and action-orientations regarding a certain group or groups of people."⁵⁴ *Discrimination* goes beyond attitudes and beliefs and into action. It is the differential and unequal treatment of other groups based on some usually observable trait such as race and ethnicity but also gender, sexual orientation, and religion, among other possible characteristics. One can hold many prejudices about the inferiority of other groups but might still refrain from discriminatory behavior. Discrimination itself can represent the actions of indi-

viduals or social institutions, such as in the form of Jim Crow laws that enforced segregation.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, one of the crowning achievements of the civil rights movement, prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The tools for enforcing the act were initially weak but were strengthened with the passage of additional legislation over time. While these laws have reduced the incidence of racial discrimination, this does not mean that prejudice and discrimination are relics of the past. We hear of plenty of news stories where people feel that they have been mistreated because of their race, and some of these cases end up in the courts, ranging from the settlement in 2013 of a \$160 million racial discrimination suit brought against Merrill Lynch by African Americans brokers to the nearly \$100 million settlement in 2014 of a lawsuit by 1,500 black and Hispanic applicants against the Fire Department of New York.

While overt racism is undoubtedly less common today than in the past, there is considerable debate about the extent to which it impedes the socioeconomic mobility of minority groups today. Some argue that nonracial factors, including those reviewed earlier, drive persisting social inequities. Others counter that whites in the United States often benefit from *color-blind privilege*. According to this theoretical perspective, we live in a society that celebrates a color-blind ideology: race is skin deep, people of all hues and backgrounds should be treated equally, and racism is an individual problem, in that discrimination is a product of the actions of misguided individuals.⁵⁵

The problem with color-blind ideology, according to this perspective, is that it masks deep-rooted racial inequalities. Thus, sociologist Charles Gallagher argues that “color blindness maintains white privilege by negating racial inequality. Embracing a post-race, color-blind perspective provides whites with a degree of psychological comfort by allowing them to imagine that being white or black or brown has no bearing on an individual’s or group’s relative place in the socioeconomic hierarchy.”⁵⁶ Entrenched racial inequality, however, comes in the form of persisting differences in wealth, which can affect whether someone attends college or purchases a house.⁵⁷ It is also reflected in the differential treatment of blacks by law enforcement and employers.⁵⁸ This perspective further

argues that whites often don't recognize these systemic inequalities and thus don't acknowledge the privileges they enjoy by the virtue of being white and blame the disadvantaged position of many minorities on their own poor choices and wayward values.

As Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres argue, one of the negative consequences of this colorblind ideology is that it "inhibit[s] racialized minorities from struggling against their marginalized status. . . . It gives those who have enjoyed little power in our society no mechanisms for understanding and challenging the systemic nature of their oppression. . . . The way race has been used both to distribute resources and to camouflage the unfairness in that distribution remains invisible. . . . And the political space, where groups come together to give voice to their collective experience and mobilize to engage in fundamental social change, vanishes."⁵⁹

Differing perceptions of systemic inequality drive many race-based controversies today. Was the shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman, mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, symptomatic of the stereotypes people have about the criminality of young black men? Similarly, were the 2014 riots in Ferguson, Missouri, after the shooting of an unarmed young black man, Michael Brown, by a white police officer a result of criminal profiling? Or was it an isolated instance of an officer shooting a not-so-innocent man (who had stolen a box of cigarillos from a convenience store earlier in the day) during an unfortunate confrontation? Were supporters of Michael Brown playing the "race card" in a situation that didn't have much to do about race per se, or was the incident and the subsequent mishandling of the situation (e.g., the body was left in the street for hours and the police provided very little information about the situation even as tensions rose in the following days) and the manhandling of protestors a manifestation of deep institutional racism that African Americans face every day? These are issues to which we return in the following chapters.

CONCLUSION

Through much of the twentieth century the stark black-white color line, perpetuated and reinforced by white racism, defined the American racial

landscape. But American society has changed in some important ways over the past few decades. The civil rights movement overturned the legal framework that supported the unequal treatment of blacks, and there has been a gradual change in racist attitudes against minorities. Multiethnic perspectives on racial and ethnic inequality have also risen in prominence in recent years, spurred by growing racial and ethnic diversity. So the question arises, what is the trajectory of the American color line? How are various groups faring, and what explains their advantage or disadvantage? Are we seeing the softening of racial lines altogether?

The coming chapters examine empirical patterns and trends in racial and ethnic inequality to shed light on the explanatory power of the theoretical perspectives described in this chapter. If we find, for example, that the relatively low median household income among Hispanic families is mainly a function of the immigration process—whereby new immigrants have low incomes, but by third generation we see growing parity with whites—then this suggests a softening of the color line between Hispanics and others. But if we see persistent Hispanic disadvantage across generations, this speaks to the intransigence of broad social divisions based on race and ethnicity that may not change for the foreseeable future. These are the issues to which we now turn, starting with an examination of black-white inequality.