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### Another Way to Understand Race, Gender, and Social Status

Our core course discussions have thus far revolved around ideas of race or ethnicity, gender or sexuality, and social class or professional status. However, it is also important to consider concepts that are indirectly involved in these issues of social concern. Although it is important to think about problems such as mass incarceration as explained by Alexander and internalized oppression as described by Osajima, when discussing issues of racism, we should also take into account the role of psychology in establishing the foundation for these issues.

When people talk about oppression it is most often in terms of race and social status. Alexander talks about how the War on Drugs is a racist construct that was created to target and incarcerate African Americans. Kimmel talks about men who say feminism has been blown out of proportion and has lost its original ideals of creating equality. Those who debate these issues may overlook the dynamics underneath the surface that **allowed** these issues to play out the way they have. For example, not many people have thought about *why* African Americans are being targeted. **They** place most of their attention on *how* they're being targeted. Similarly, few seem to consider why feminism was even needed in the first place. Something underneath the surface of society must be the reason there are so many concerns about gender inequality that some people felt the need to create a feminist movement. In other words, we must consider the psychological aspects that are ingrained in society, which influence people to create these issues of race, **gender**, and social status.

Regina Day Langhout's *Acts of Resistance: Student (In)visibility* covers issues of race and social status. In her article, she delineates the American education system and argues that instead of preparing students for a more conscientious society, it trains them to be silent and obey those in positions of authority. Langhout focuses on psychological dynamics that play out through racism and social status stereotypes in Woodson Elementary School, which is located in a traditionally African American and working-class/working-poor neighborhood. The main psychological theory introduced in this piece is "Resistance Theory" which is defined as "intentional acts of commission or omission that defy the wishes of others" (125). Langhout conducts an observational study of children at Woodson for several years and takes note of their interactions with faculty, their behaviors and how they are punished. She then interviews them on their experiences in school and concludes her study by saying "Children's identities, especially identities of boys of color, are threatened via control and discipline" (151).

The American education system strips its students of their identities and trains them to sit quietly, to not speak, and to be obedient. Furthermore, the system promotes stereotypical ideas that sit in the children's unconscious until they are old enough to turn these ideas into actions that create social problems. "In general, many middle-class white female teachers hold stereotypical views about 'poor' Woodson children and parents" (135). Stereotypes can be seen in teacher discipline because teachers hold negative views of their students that result in bias in classroom behavior management. Even the other children have noticed it: "Darwin sees that the African American boys in the gifted classroom who live in the surrounding neighborhood (and therefore are working class or working poor) are more likely than other children to be punished..." (139). The other students see the racial bias occurring in punishments in the classroom but most, if not all, don't fully understand *why* it's happening. Many of the teachers at

Woodson have made comments that promote these stereotypical views which are then intertwined into their classroom management tactics. As a result, these children who are exposed to oppression at a young age, grow up and continue to oppress others, because it is what they have been taught to do.

A major issue that relates to gender and sexuality is homophobia. Michael S. Kimmel discusses this issue in *Masculinity as Homophobia*, wherein he defines homophobia as “the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us, and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men” (104). Normally, homophobia is thought to be the fear of gay men and the fear that gay men will gain power in society and alter the definition of being a “real man”. However, that idea is still consistent with Kimmel’s definition of homophobia. A heterosexual man who is homophobic may show prejudice towards a homosexual man and try to attribute his behavior to being concerned about the gay man hitting on him, and this can be translated to mean that the heterosexual man is afraid of being okay with homosexuality as it may bring up fears about his own manliness. Kimmel defines the psychological foundation that allows social issues related to gender and sexuality to be more clearly understood. A man may not agree with sexist or homophobic ideas as an individual, but men as a whole are afraid of being shamed or emasculated. “Shame leads to silence – the silence that keeps people believing that we actually approve of the things that are done to women, to minorities, to gays and lesbians in our culture” (104). If a man hears another man make an inappropriate comment towards a gay man, he feels powerless to stop the homophobia for fear of his own masculinity being attacked. This, then, is part of why sexism, homophobia, and even racism exists in modern day society.

In her articles *Group Development in a High School Adjustment Seminar* and *Identity and Achievement: A Depth Psychology Approach to Student Development*, Nubra Elaine Floyd

attempts to tackle issues of student development through psychology. She focuses on ideas of group development, support systems, and community building in an effort to improve educational opportunities for youth, who are oppressed. In both of her studies, Floyd conducts group discussion in various sessions. As the sessions began, the participants exhibited irrational resistance to the designated work of the group. As the sessions continued, the participants began to focus on underlying conflicts by producing leaders or working in smaller groups within the groups. By the end of the study, the participants began to work together to promote community building and interacted in progressive discussions on how to improve the education system. Floyd's studies show how we can take psychological approaches to resolving social issues. Her studies show effective ways to deal with group behaviors instead of punishing individual misbehaviors.

When considering social prejudice, it is important to address the issue but it is equally important to consider the origins. The psychological approach is needed to pinpoint where prejudice is being ingrained in society, so we can begin to address it at the source. Issues of prejudice are being rooted in most people at a young age and thus prejudice is given the opportunity to manipulate and influence developing minds. When those minds mature, they have been trained to act in ways that can cause the difficult social problems that we are now needing to solve.

## Works Cited

- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New P, 2010. Print.
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- Langhout, Regina Day. "Acts of Resistance: Student (In)visibility." *Culture & Psychology* 11.2 (2005): 123-58. Print.
- Osajima, Keith. "Internalized Oppression and the Culture of Silence: Rethinking the Stereotype of the Quiet Asian-American Student." *Our Asian Inheritance* 6 (1995): 152-55. Seattle: Rational Island Publisher. Print.

Six members of our section self-nominated for the Oakes Core Essay Award and three of them submitted psychoanalytic papers. All three were reasonably successful with this more challenging approach to argument essay writing, but Jeje Kaur's paper entitled "Another way to understand race, gender, and social status" was selected as best representing the range of issues addressed in our class. Her straight forward discussion of psychoanalytic articles on group development by Nubra Floyd as well as Michael Kimmel's *Masculinity as Homophobia* and Regina Langhout's *Acts of Resistance: Student (In)visibility* is quite readable and enhanced by insights from personal experience.