

Esther Klingbiel
Culture, Ethnicity and Mental Health
Midterm, Prompt 1: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture

A. Although lay people often conflate race and ethnicity, psychological researchers have developed specific definitions of these two constructs. In your own words, provide a conceptual definition of the two constructs, including their theoretical significance for understanding the psychological functioning of racial/ethnic minority populations in the United States. Explain how the two constructs relate to each other.

Race is how people are grouped by skin color or other physical characteristics. It is a social construct with no biological or other factual basis, but is deeply ingrained in American society and identity. Specifically, European-American, or White people, are judged as the dominant and oppressive racial group, and are the sole benefitters of institutionalized racism in the United States. Conversely, members of other racial groups, such as African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos are considered “the minority” and numerous studies have consistently proven that people of color are more likely to be marginalized and excluded from many parts of society and their accompanying opportunities, which has a global effect on their mental health and well being. It has been consistently shown that Black people have significantly less educational opportunities than White people, and compared with higher poverty rates, African-Americans are more likely to fall into a pattern of crime and incarceration.¹

Proponents of the racial bias in the United States, either overtly or implicitly, place blame on people of color themselves for these outcomes by reinforcing racial stereotypes. This is partially because American culture places emphasis on the individual’s sole responsibility for his or her life outcomes. These people do not seek to recognize that various outcomes and lack of opportunities for people of color exist

¹ Markus, H. (2008). Pride, Prejudice, and Ambivalence: Toward a Unified Theory of Race and Ethnicity. *American Psychologist*, 63(8), 660

because of the power structure that racism affords members of the dominant racial group (Whites).

Because race is a social construct imposed on the individual, a member of a society that places worth and differential treatment on varying races is subject to associated stereotypes, outside oppression, and deficits in opportunity. This in turn, has varying effects on mental health and well being of the individual.

Although the terms “race” and “ethnicity” are often used interchangeably, ethnicity is defined differently than race. Ethnicity is described as how people define themselves in regards to their culture, beliefs, and social groups. In this sense, ethnicity differs from race because it is self-identifying, whereas race is an imposed characteristic by a dominant group. Identifying with an ethnicity can be a source of pride and afford a sense of belonging within the individual’s community, and thus positively affect mental health.

However, race and ethnicity are not static from each other. Most significantly, they are both conscious social relations. Hazel Markus writes, “Defining race and ethnicity highlights two critical features of both phenomena—other people create them, and they are not biologically based ‘things’ that people ‘have.’”² Both race and ethnicity make up indelible parts of an individual’s self-identity and therefore have effects on an individual’s well-being and mental health that affect them their entire lives. Markus argues that from the perspective of a psychological model of the self, the behaviors and practices associated with certain races and ethnicities should not be seen as failures to acclimate to the dominant society.³ Treating people from this point of view may have

² Ibid., 655

³ Ibid., 663

more beneficial outcomes for their mental health and clarity of self.

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Midterm, Prompt 2: Models of the Self

2. Models of the Self. Apply the concept of mutual constitution to explain how the preschool context socializes children into a specific model of the self. Draw on examples from the film, “Preschool in Three Cultures” to illustrate your points.

Preschool is the primary environment of socialization for children outside of family settings. Children at this age are rapidly learning social norms and associated behaviors—this includes interacting with other children of the same age and with teachers. Children are taught what actions constitute bad or acceptable behaviors and internalize these experiences. This in turn, prepares them how to appropriately act within the confines of their cultures. As children grow, these socializations ultimately inform what place they take in society as well as how others perceive them.

Repeated inculcations of preschool socializations ultimately affect how the individual contributes to, or takes away from, their society. This is what is known as mutual constitution at work. Markus and Kitayama explain mutual constitution:

“...people and their sociocultural worlds are not separate from one another. Instead they require each other and complete one another. In an ongoing cycle of mutual constitution, people are socioculturally shaped shapers of their environments; they make each other up...”¹

Put more simply, mutual constitution is the cycle where certain cultural constructions (for example, religious and political beliefs) affect an individual, wherefore the individual takes on certain activities that reinforce these constructions.

¹ Markus, H., & Kitayama, S. (2010). Cultures and Selves: A Cycle of Mutual Constitution. In *Perspectives on Psychological Science* (4th ed., Vol. 5, p. 421). Washington D.C.: Association for Psychological Science.

Most studies of mutual constitution discuss how individualistic and collectivistic types of societies affect this cycle. Individualistic cultures are mostly industrialized, Western societies, including the United States. In these types of cultures, as is in the name, place emphasis on the individual as the perpetrator of their own destinies and well-being. Social relations, in the broad context, are, in the words of Markus and Kitayama, “One type of sociality [that] assumes that social relations are formed on the basis of instrumental interests and goals of participating individuals.”² In this sense, social interactions in some contexts are seen through the lens of personal gain.

Failures and successes are often attributed to the individual’s characteristics, such as motivation and work ethic, rather than outside factors such as opportunity and luck. Dominance, leadership, aggressiveness (in some cases), and respect for authority are seen as valuable, desirable, and independent traits. These characteristics are reinforced through mutual constitution, beginning at the preschool level and continuing virtually throughout the rest of one’s schooling and career.

Collectivistic societies, by contrast, emphasize social harmony and the making of meaningful relationships. Many countries in Asia, such as Japan, are considered to be collectivistic. Traits such as agreeableness, empathy, and willingness to solve problems are seen as desirable and good contributors to the society or culture as a whole. When considering one’s self, members of collectivist societies tend to think about themselves and how they relate to other people, instead of focusing on unique, personal characteristics isolated from others.

In the documentary “Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited,” the beginnings of mutual constitution among young children in a collectivist society can be seen in the

² Ibid., 423

section on the preschool in Japan.³ Teachers would not intervene in squabbles among the children, a decision that seems foreign to many Westerners. When the documentarian asked the teacher why she didn't break up the fight, she explained that the children wouldn't be able to solve the problem on their own if she separated them. This is an example of mutual constitution. The children, left to fend for themselves, developed harmonious methods of dealing with differences, which ultimately would inform their relationships and perhaps the ways they would deal with their own children later in life. Later on in the film, we see that children apologize and take turns with each other, an example of the characteristics valued by collectivistic societies.

Another example of mutual constitution in a collectivistic society is a program in the Japanese preschool where preschoolers would take care of younger children. The purpose of this program, as was explained, was to teach the children empathy, another important facet of collectivist societies. As with letting children solve their own disagreements, children who are taught empathy will treat others how to be empathetic.

While we did not view the American preschool part of the documentary, anyone who grew up in the United States may remember or visualize how different American preschool is than Japanese preschool. Teachers would be quick to break up fights, teaching young children from an early age to respect authority. And many American adults would not think preschoolers could be trusted with younger children. Furthermore, in terms of play, more emphasis would probably be placed on individual projects and achievements, which is also a part of mutual constitution, just in an individualistic context.

³ Tobin, J., Hsueh, Y., & Karasawa, M. (Directors). (2009). *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited: Japan, China, and the United States* [Motion picture on DVD]. United States.

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- Markus, H., & Kitayama, S. (2010). Cultures and Selves: A Cycle of Mutual Constitution. In *Perspectives on Psychological Science* (4th ed., Vol. 5, pp. 420-430). Washington D.C.: Association for Psychological Science.
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Midterm, Prompt 3: Culture, Health, and Mental Health

Although mental disorders may be found in all societies across the globe, social and cultural factors have been shown to shape mental disorders in a variety of ways. Choose TWO of the following areas to discuss the role of social and cultural factors in mental health. Provide specific examples drawn from readings and class discussions to illustrate your points.

- A. Identification (how professionals and lay people draw boundaries between normal and abnormal bodies, experiences and behavior)
- B. Symptom expression (how distress is communicated to others)

A. The interpretation of some symptoms as indicators of mental illness depends on the culture of the individual who may be mentally ill. Western medicine, for example, has very static, scientific views of what constitutes specific mental illnesses and what does not. For example, claiming to hear the voice of God or other disembodied spirits is almost always considered to be a hallucination. This is because the basis for Western diagnosis of mental illness, at least in the case of schizophrenia, is biomedically and factually based and does not leave room for spiritual interpretations of experiences. In other cultures, however, where the belief in ancestral spirits or the presence of a spirit world is more prominent and ingrained in everyday life, claiming to hear and see God or other spirits is considered a legitimate declaration.

Discussed more globally, one may legitimately argue that mental illness is largely shaped by culture. Even in America, there are cultural exceptions for behaviors that would be considered mental illness if the context of culture and cultural setting were not taken into account. For example, speaking in tongues or having convulsions in church is seen as a normal, genuine spiritual experience where one's body is being controlled and manipulated by God. These behaviors are considered acceptable and normal because the

United States is a deeply Christian country, whose laws, ways of life, and countless other aspects of culture have been formed by Christian principles and the belief in God and pursuit of redemption.

Other cultures, as mentioned previously, have exceptions for specific behaviors as well. One specific case study worth mentioning is one American sociologist's study of schizophrenia in Zanzibar, a part of Tanzania in East Africa. Rather than believing that schizophrenia was due to chemical imbalances or genetics, explaining the behavior of schizophrenia due to spirit possession or other forces made much more sense to Zanzibari people.¹ This is not because, as an American would assume, the people of Zanzibar are less medically and scientifically developed. It is because belief in spirits makes up a huge part of life in Zanzibar culture, just as Christianity does in American culture.

Therefore, when assessing, diagnosing and determining the prognosis of a person's mental illness, psychologists from different cultures may diagnose illnesses differently and may prescribe different treatments. For example, in America, schizophrenia is often treated with institutionalization and/or a heavy course of anti-psychotic medications. People in Zanzibar, however, treat the disease completely differently because the disease's origins are considered to be completely different than the origins considered in American medicine. For example, one woman whose family member began suffering from schizophrenia created a homeopathic mixture of various plants that was believed to ward off spirits.²

¹ Watters, E. (2010). The Shifting Mask of Schizophrenia in Zanzibar. In *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche* (1st ed.). New York: Free Press.

² Ibid.

B. Much like mental illness identification, the expression of symptoms of mental illness may also be very heavily influenced by culture. These specific manifestations can be defined as “idioms of distress,” which are culturally significant ways of communicating suffering in a context-specific setting.

Take the expression of anorexic symptoms in the United States and China, for example. In the United States, anorexia is defined as rapid weight loss and consciously limited intake of food. Additionally, in order to be diagnosed as anorexic, one must express an explicit desire to be thin, and to place self-worth on thinness. Anorexia is one medium through which extremely rigid and obsessive personality types manifest themselves symptomatically. This idiom of distress can be appropriately regarded as a Western cultural phenomenon in origin. In present times, the idea that beauty is thinness has spread to other cultures through Western media, but a contrast to the idiom of distress of refusing to eat as an indicator of a different mental illness can be seen in a case study in China in the 1980s and 1990s.³

As Ethan Watters recounts, during this time period, anorexic-like symptoms were relatively rare in China. When they did present themselves, however, doctors were at a loss when explaining the cause of extreme weight-loss. This shows, in part, how damaging it can be to adopt Western psychology in non-Western settings, because Chinese doctors were not considering their own culture’s idioms of distress. Instead of claiming that they were too fat, ugly, or worthless because of their weight, Chinese anorexics seemed to be losing weight as a manifestation of extreme grief or depression.

³ Watters, E. (2010). The Rise of Anorexia in Hong Kong. In *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche* (1st ed.). New York: Free Press.

One patient claimed that she physically could not eat because it felt as if there was a blockage in her throat. Here we see another cultural-specific idiom of distress.

In Chinese culture, mental illness is more often experienced physically than in Western culture. Additionally, at this time, beauty standards in China had not been Westernized, and the idea that only thin women were beautiful had not yet been popularized. However, later on as Western media infiltrated China, cases of anorexia sharply rose. This is another example of the cultural relativity of symptom expression. Mentally ill patients display their distress as they would believe it to be culturally understood.

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Prompt 4: Racism

A. What is aversive racism and how does it affect interactions between people of color and non-Hispanic White individuals? Draw on readings and previous interactions that have occurred in the class to illustrate your points.

B. According to the U.S. Census, 2.3% of all African Americans are incarcerated, compared to 0.4% of whites and 0.7% of Hispanics. In other words, Black Americans are incarcerated at a rate that is five times higher than that of White Americans; Latino/as are incarcerated at a rate that is nearly two times higher. Imagine a conversation between a pair of individuals discussing possible reasons for these findings. Choose one of the following pairs and write a transcript of their conversation.

- A. A non-Hispanic White student in the *Reintegration* status [Helms, White Racial Identity Development model] and a Black student in the *Encounter* status [Cross's Theory of Nigrescence]

A. Aversive racism, also known as color-blind racism, is the contemporary form of racism in American society. It is defined as implicit, often unconscious displays of racism by White people towards people of color. As society has progressed from the pre-Civil Rights era of overt racism, this new type of racism is almost never explicitly expressed and is displayed through microaggressions, body language, and other subliminal modicums. A White person displaying aversive racism may not even be aware that they are being racist. This is in part because of the "color-blind" reaction to previous forms of racism in American culture. Overt racism is now seen as taboo and socially inappropriate. In reaction to the past, aversive racists often claim that they are "color-blind," the belief that skin color and race is a thing of the past and that all people, regardless of race, have equal opportunities in America.

This belief is inherently racist because American society is *not* racially just. Therefore, aversive racists sweep inequality under the rug by refusing to accept that is it

there. This further damages and oppresses people of color because the mistreatment and unequal experiences they have are seen as invisible or non-existent to Whites.

Aversive racism may limit social ties and interactions between White people and people of color. Studies have shown that aversive racists working with people of color in pairs or groups have poorer outcomes in productivity and problem solving. This is due in part to an aversive racist's body language and inherent racist assumptions about people of color. Pearson writes, "The negative feelings that aversive racists have toward Blacks typically do not reflect open antipathy, but rather consist of more avoidant reactions of discomfort, anxiety, or fear."¹ Specifically, this avoidant body language may be manifested in refusal to make eye contact and frequently blinking. Social ties and interactions may be limited by microaggressions as well (for example, a White person asking a person of color if it would be inappropriate to ask to touch another person of color's hair). Microaggressions are another form of racism because they are hidden and aversive in nature.

B. A. White Person: 2.3% isn't even that much. I mean it's not like right after you're arrested they throw you in prison forever. You have to have a trial, so I think that pretty much everyone who is found guilty deserves to be in prison. The numbers don't even matter. You don't have to be a specific skin color to be a bad person, you know?

POC: I don't know. I think we have to look past the numbers though. We should be asking *why* the Black incarceration rate is 5 times that of Whites. I think it goes beyond just crime.

White Person: I don't think so. Maybe there are 5 times as many Black people incarcerated because more Black people have committed crimes. Why would you arrest someone if they're not doing anything wrong, you know? I think it's stupid and a waste of money to do that.

¹ Pearson, A., Dovidio, J., & Gaertner, S. (2009). The Nature of Contemporary Prejudice: Insights from Aversive Racism. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 3, 3, 4.

POC: That's a question that's really hard to answer. There are some good cops out there but there are racist ones as well, as well as racism in court. Like my brother the other night got arrested for suspicious activity, but he was just walking home from the subway. I think there's some obvious racial motivation there. I don't think if he was White he would have been arrested. I felt so bad for him; it was really hard on him.

White Person: Well, did you consider that he might have actually looked suspicious?

POC: He was just walking down the street. How could that be seen as suspicious?

White Person: I don't know, maybe if he had his hoodie up and his hands in his pockets. It sucks that he got arrested but I think the cops definitely had a reason. Why would they go out of their way to arrest somebody for literally no reason?

POC: They didn't arrest him for no reason. They arrested him because he was Black.

White Person: Honestly I feel like sometimes you use the race card as an excuse for something. You really can't know because you weren't there, so there's really no point in talking about it. Maybe your brother was lying to you because he wanted to cover up something.

POC: My brother isn't a bad person. He's not involved in crime. I know that if he were White you wouldn't assume this stuff about him. I never really noticed it before but your comments about this stuff are really starting to bother me and upset me. I think we should take a break from hanging out with each other. I need some time to think.

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