



# critical media project

## Topic Overview: Race and Ethnicity

### have you ever wondered...

...why most of the main characters in movies and television shows are white?

...why non-white groups are often cast in certain roles such as the maid, the gangster, the "model minority," the supportive best friend, the terrorist?

...why certain products like cars or phones are marketed differently to specific racial or ethnic groups

...why certain races and ethnicities are portrayed more often as lower class individuals in mainstream American media?

### key concepts

- Race and ethnicity are not only physical attributes of people, but also ways of seeing and understanding the world.
- Media plays an influential role in shaping how we think about and enact race in our everyday lives.
- In the United States and other Western contexts, whites have historically been associated with superiority and privilege; non-whites have historically been associated with inferiority and labeled the "Other".
- Our society has made progress in dealing with racial discrimination, but inequality and injustice remain, and the media is a key site where these ideas persist.

### keywords

race, ethnicity, ideology, dominant, subordinate, the Other, privilege, discrimination, prejudice, bias, microaggression, racism

### the big picture

Media creates meaning about race and ethnicity, and plays an important role in shaping the way we understand race and ethnicity as part of our identity, our history, our social institutions, and our everyday lives. Often used interchangeably, race is a way of classifying individuals and groups on the basis of physical characteristics,

particularly one's skin color. Ethnicity delineates one's place of origin or nationality, one's cultural background or ancestry, one's language and by extension, one's belief system.

Despite the concrete physical (and sometimes geographical) roots tied to specific racial and ethnic identities, it is important to understand that race and ethnicity are also ideologies, or ways of seeing and understanding the world around us. Race and ethnicity, are therefore imbued with meaning. They not only get used as descriptors, but also as markers of broader concepts and relationships. Race and ethnicity can mark you as belonging to a group or as an outsider, as different. These markers not only designate one's skin color or cultural background, but also function in a larger system and in relation to other racial and ethnic identities. In this system, certain groups have more power and privileges than others.

In order to understand the cultural meanings attributed to specific races and ethnicities, we must examine the historical origins of these systems and ideologies. Many of our Western or American ideas about race and ethnicity come from specific moments in history marked by colonialism, immigration and other tides that shifted populations and demographics. With such changes and the intermixing of different races and ethnicities, dominant groups rose to power and exerted influence over others by occupying and controlling the landscape, language, culture, and rituals. In these varied historical examples, the white group attained dominance, while the subordinate (non-white) groups were relegated to the social, political and economic margins. This means that the subordinate group historically has had very little or no power, and individuals in that group were often denied the rights and opportunities afforded to the dominant group. The dominant group holds social, political and economic power, and thereby determines who is worthy of sharing that power. Of course, there is also a long history of resistance among marginalized communities. For decades and centuries, ethnic minority communities have battled mightily to secure rights and opportunities that have often been systematically denied. This is a struggle that continues to this day in new and evolving forms.

This complicated history informs the way we understand race and the embedded meanings attached to dominant and subordinate categories:

dominant	subordinate
civilized	primitive
modern	backward
rational	irrational

order	chaos
center	margin
stability	violence
unmarked	marked
self	other
white	non-white
superior	inferior
majority	minority
citizen	illegal
insider	outsider

The chart further illustrates how the subordinate group is often seen and treated as different, foreign, lesser, or “Other.” Based on perceived inferiority, members of subordinate groups historically have been victims of discrimination, oppression, and racism. Racism can exist on two levels—interpersonal (between people) or institutional (embedded in institutions such as the government, law enforcement, education, religion, as well as media industries). In the United States, a long history of segregation impacted access to public services including education, transportation, even drinking fountains as well as private sector businesses such as hotels, restaurants and entertainment venues. Such discriminatory views also have impacted the voting rights, employment opportunities, access to housing, and wages of other non-white groups.

Discrimination is even further impacted when we consider the role of intersectionality. Intersectionality is a term coined by scholar Kimberle Crenshaw to explain how individual aspects of our identities (our gender, race, ethnicity, class, etc.) intersect and, in turn, can shape how we’re treated, what kind of education and jobs we get, where we live, what opportunities we’re afforded, and what kind of inequities we may face. What this means is that black women may be impacted by more discrimination than their male counterparts.

The chart above deliberately offers an overly simplistic binary. It does not mean that whites are superior to other races; rather it suggests that, in a Western context (North American and European), the characteristics associated with whiteness are historically and culturally valued above those associated with other races. We associate whiteness with civilization, progress, intellect and leadership. And, because we value these characteristics so highly as central to our way of life and our systems of government, we denigrate anything that might impede the advancement and evolution of these characteristics.

In the 1950s and 1960s, several landmark pieces of legislation and court decisions (particularly the Civil Rights Act, The Voting Rights Act, Brown vs. Board of Education) addressed segregation and discrimination in the United States; however, even with these major political and legal changes, the racist ideologies behind such discriminatory attitudes and policies persist. The question is: can we always see these racist ideologies, especially when they come up in our everyday lives and in the media we regularly view?

## **race & ethnicity in everyday life**

Can you remember the first time you understood someone to be different because of his or her race or ethnicity? Was there a time when race played a prominent role in your life (whether something happened to you directly, or you observed it happening to someone else)?

Depending on your skin color, ethnic background, where you grew up, what kind of people you've encountered, you will have your own experience and idea of what race and ethnicity mean.

For some, race and ethnicity can play a very prominent role in everyday life. You may have been called a name, been given a look, or treated differently than peers of a different race or ethnicity. You may have been the victim of assault or prejudice. You may have been stopped and searched by law enforcement when you were simply walking down the street. You may have had fewer opportunities to pursue educational or professional goals.

Race and ethnicity can also play a more subtle role in your everyday life, not overtly impacting your freedoms or opportunities. You may have felt isolated or alone, or been the only one of your race and ethnicity in the room. You may not see people who look like you prominently or accurately represented in media, in stories, in school curriculum. You may have been complimented on how articulate or professional you are or praised as a credit to your race. You may be admired for being "exotic" or people may assume you like certain music or food simply because of your race or ethnicity. These small, common everyday acts (whether intentional or unintentional) are often called "microaggressions."

In still other cases, you may not even think about your race or ethnicity except when checking a box on a survey. In this case, your race and ethnicity are essentially neutral

or invisible and you occupy a position of privilege. You are privileged because you hold a distinct advantage over others, even if you can't see it, won't see it, or have been taught not to see it. You may not see or relate to the hardship experienced by other races and ethnicities because they don't impact your daily life.

### why it all matters... food for thought

In 1964, Sidney Poitier was the first African-American to win an Academy Award for best actor. The win was a landmark moment not only because of the honor bestowed on him by his peers, but because Poitier was known to refuse the stereotypical roles typically offered to African American actors. Since the mid-1960s, we can certainly point to other non-white artists and media-makers that have received comparable success in film, television, and music:

Viola Davis. Will Smith. Beyonce. Denzel Washington. Lupita Nyong'o. Oprah Winfrey. Kerry Washington. Kendrick Lamar.

Sofia Veraga. Javier Bardem. America Ferrera. George Lopez. Jennifer Lopez. Penelope Cruz. Ricky Martin. Christina Aguilera

Sandra Oh. Daniel Dae Kim. Lucy Liu. Mindy Kailing. George Takei. Margaret Cho. Karen O.

We can also point to the blockbuster success of the superhero movie *Black Panther* which featured a mostly black cast and a black director.

It's worth questioning whether the success of these individuals denotes progress across the board for non-whites in American media. Even with these successes, there is still a notable dearth of non-white representation, especially in film and television. And beyond sheer numbers, there's the issue of quality. Do characters adhere to old stereotypes and conventions? Are they tokens (added to the cast as a mere gesture of diversity)? Or, are significant players in the stories being told and in the industry that creates them?

Given that many of the messages that we receive about race and ethnicity come to us through the media, it's important for us to ask questions about media representations. Such questioning, in turn, can help us think critically about the media (and the people and industries behind them). As you look through the media examples on this site, use them along with this overview as building blocks and avenues to dig deeper into the meaning of race and ethnicity...and ask questions.

When we think critically about race and ethnicity in the media, we might start by asking:

- How are different racial and ethnic groups represented in entertainment, advertising, news and social media?
- How are certain news stories covered or stories told based on the race and ethnicity of those involved?
- What specific images, words, and sounds contribute to our understanding of how a specific race or ethnicity is portrayed?
- Does the media make assumptions about what certain races do for work and for fun? Does it assume that certain races only live in particular neighborhoods, drive certain cars, or listen to a single type of music? Does it assume that certain races predominantly seek government aid or commit crimes? Does it assume certain races are more openly sexual or sexually aggressive?
- What impact do these representations and assumption have on the opportunities and possibilities for individuals of different races and ethnicities in their personal and professional lives? Do some groups experience social, political, and economic inequities more than others?

For more media representations of specific races and ethnicities, see the individual tabs on Black, White/Whiteness, Latino, Arab/Arab-American, Asian-Pacific Islander. These tabs narrow the broad issues covered in this overview, and can be used to productively and critically think about the ways race and ethnicity play out in the media.