

Topic Page: [Discrimination](#)

Definition: **Discrimination (sociology)** from *The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*

The practice of distinguishing between individuals or groups based on prejudicial determinations.

Discrimination also refers to exclusion, rejection, and negative treatment related to bigotry. To discriminate is to treat people unfairly or differently by reason of characteristics, stereotypes, and biases. Discrimination is to participate in, or be subjected to, selective treatment. Laws vary by jurisdiction. But it is commonly illegal to discriminate or treat people differently based on certain attributes, including race, disability, ethnicity, gender, age, and sexual orientation.

See also

Civil Rights, Stereotype (psychology)

Summary Article: **Discrimination**

From *Encyclopedia of Social Problems*

Discrimination is one of the most studied social phenomena within the social sciences because of its serious social, political, economic, psychological, and physical consequences and implications. It is the action of distinguishing and categorizing individuals in a society based on perceived cultural, social, or physical characteristics and subsequently preventing certain categories or groups of people equitable access to social, economic, and political resources.

As with all social constructions, the role of perception is central to the understanding of discrimination, as discriminatory practices differ according to the circumstances in which they occur. For example, in the 19th- and early 20th-century United States, Italian and Irish Americans and immigrants were actively discriminated against. Justification for these discriminatory practices rested in commonly accepted stereotypical perceptions that Irish and Italians were lazy, drunk, dirty members of a budding criminal class and unable and perhaps unwilling to assimilate into U.S. culture.

Yet, in the 21st-century United States, discrimination against these two groups based on such stereotypical perceptions of their ethnicity is almost nonexistent. While the status of Irish and Italian Americans has improved, perhaps because of their assimilation into mainstream U.S. society, others have taken their place. For example, in the post-9/11 climate, most Americans justify the racial profiling of Arab Americans as serving homeland security purposes. Many Americans agree with the existence of “no-fly” lists that actively discriminate against those suspected as terrorists, and they regard the fact that the vast majority are of Arab descent and not affiliated in any way with terrorist organizations as a necessary inconvenience, even if such a list is clearly discriminatory. In fact, after the attacks of 9/11, reported incidences of discrimination and hate crimes against Muslims in the United States increased to such a degree that the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice placed a priority on the prosecution of bias crimes and acts of discrimination against perceived Muslims, including Sikhs and persons of Arab and South Asian descent. And although the status of Irish Americans has significantly improved, prejudicial attitudes toward people of Irish descent in the United Kingdom are still widespread, suggesting once more that discrimination should be understood in specific historical, cultural, economic, and political contexts.

In the United States and other racially and ethnically diverse societies, race and ethnicity are often at

the root of discrimination. A partial explanation is the visibility of racial phenotype, but in the United States, another factor is the fact that the nation's social structures and institutions are still experiencing the lingering effects of such racially discriminatory practices as slavery and segregation. Thus, in historically racialized societies like the United States or South Africa, discrimination is an inherent part of their social existence. Discrimination, however, is not only rooted in racial prejudice but in a wide range of social prejudices such as homophobia, sexism, ageism, disability discrimination, and religious intolerance.

The key to understanding the social function of discrimination is marginalization. Although anyone can become a victim of discriminatory practices, ultimately the essence of discrimination lies in power and privilege. Socially marginalized groups in society tend to be the most likely targets of discriminatory practices. This characteristic, with its roots in the perpetuation of power and privilege, makes discrimination of particular relevance to the study of social problems. For instance, historical examination of antidiscrimination laws can provide an analytical framework to examine why and how certain groups in society are disadvantaged and what groups set out to benefit from this marginalization.

The Problem of Power and Privilege

Whereas discrimination is often grounded in political ideology (e.g., religious or sexual discrimination) or opportunity (e.g., scarcity of jobs), in all instances its underlying principle is power, especially the perpetuation of power. Examinations of the roles of power and privilege are essential to the understanding of the social function of discrimination. Only those with social or economic power, the socially dominant groups, have the ability to actively discriminate in ways that prevent individuals or groups of people access to social, economic, or political resources.

Discrimination occurs on two levels: institutional and individual. On the institutional level, discriminatory practices are embedded in the social structures of a society, whereas on the individual level, discrimination takes place during direct interactions among individuals or groups. Unlike individual discrimination, which tends to be overt, intentional, and direct, institutional discrimination is often covert and unintentional, and this invisibility makes it much harder to detect. Standardized testing in schools, for example, may exclude certain historically marginalized groups from succeeding in academic settings. Although the government may not have intentionally established testing standards that are culturally or class biased, in practice these standards tend to have a disproportionate negative effect on ethnic minority students. Furthermore, institutional discrimination often has a generational or cyclical impact on certain ethnic minority groups and therefore its consequences are as severe, if not more so, than for those suffering individual discrimination.

Social scientists often employ the power/privilege framework to provide theoretical explanations of the role of discrimination in society. Three sociological perspectives—structural-functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interaction—examine this social phenomenon. Conflict sociology, grounded in Marxist thought, suggests that society is in a constant class struggle for scarce resources. Those controlling economic, political, and cultural resources safeguard their economic and social privilege through discriminatory practices that establish and perpetuate inequality. Elites thus reproduce their own advantages and privileges by limiting the distribution of resources and supporting the dominant value system.

Social classes conflict with each other as they vie for power and economic, social, and political

resources. Elites shape societal beliefs to make their unequal privilege appear legitimate and fair, thereby constructing a false consciousness to perpetuate their hegemony. This unquestioned acceptance serves to perpetuate racial or gender privileges in a society. Similarly, the false consciousness inhibits many in the lower classes from questioning the fairness of the economic system and their social status in society. Conflict theorists would argue that inequality is an inevitable consequence of class conflict, due to the economic exploitation built into the social system.

Unlike conflict theorists, sociologists who adhere to the structural-functionalist theoretical approach do not see inequality or discrimination as an unnatural state of society. Functionalists view society as an organism in which all of its elements (social institutions) serve to maintain its stability and thus work toward survival of the society. Although discrimination may be deplorable and has certain dysfunctions, these theorists suggest that it does serve an important social function. For instance, supporters of assimilation theories may believe that marginalization occurs because of certain groups' failure to conform to the normative (cultural) standards and values in a society, a failure that contributes to a lack of social cohesion and, in its most extreme form, to anomie—a state of normlessness. Discrimination, in this case, forces these marginalized groups to conform to the socially accepted standards, morals, and values and thus fosters social (cultural) cohesion. Functionalists may also argue that in a capitalist society, discrimination maintains economic stability by creating and maintaining a cheap manual labor force. Unlike conflict theorists, who argue that, because inequality is built into the social system, only a complete restructuring of society can rid it of social and economic inequality, functionalists are more optimistic. They would point to ethnic groups, such as the Irish, Italians, Japanese, or Korean Americans, who overcame their historical social marginalization through hard work and cultural assimilation. They generally maintain, for example, that if society determines that racial discrimination is no longer socially functional, then the norms regarding its existence will be reevaluated.

Functionalist and conflict theories are structural concepts used to explain the purpose of discrimination by examining its roots in social institutions and structures. However, a micro-level analysis can also serve as a theoretical perspective. Symbolic interaction theorists, for example, focus on the role interpersonal communication plays in the construction of stereotypes and social prejudices. They see society as constantly created and re-created through interactions and subsequent negotiation of meaning. They may, for instance, argue that sexual identities are not biologically constructed but rather learned behaviors or “performances.” Thus, from a related perspective, labeling theory, discrimination does not occur because of attributes inherent to marginalized groups but because of dominant groups' reactions to these perceived attributes. Power inequality, therefore, rests in a dominant group's ability to label certain perceived behaviors as deviant and to enforce and perpetuate such labeling through social control and legal enforcement (e.g., implementation of anti-sodomy statutes or anti-miscegenation laws). Symbolic interactionists would thus maintain that discrimination, in this instance, is a socially constructed practice rooted in interaction and perception rather than biological determinism.

Types of Discrimination

In U.S. history, many racial and ethnic groups have been victims of racial discrimination, particularly those “visibly” or racially identifiable. As discussed earlier, discriminatory practices can either express themselves individually (e.g., through hate crimes or the lynching of African Americans during the 19th and 20th centuries) or in an institutionalized way (e.g., by subsequently failing to prosecute those responsible for these lynchings). Other examples of institutionalized discrimination include the enactment of laws barring Native Americans from owning land (1898 Curtis Act), the

disenfranchisement of African Americans from voting (until the enactment of the 1965 Voting Rights Act), the barring of Chinese from entering the country (1882 Chinese Exclusion Act), or the classification of Japanese Americans as enemy aliens allowing for their subsequent internment during World War II (under Executive Order 9066). Of course, the United States does not stand alone in its history of legal and social discriminatory practices against ethnically marginalized groups. Other examples include Germany's treatment of Jewish Europeans, culminating in the Holocaust; South Africa's system of apartheid; the treatment of Muslim citizens during the war in the former Republic of Yugoslavia; the Turkish genocide of Armenians between 1915 and 1917; and the current genocide in the Darfur region in Sudan.

Furthermore, in most countries discrimination based on sexual orientation is still socially acceptable and in some cases legalized. Whereas the Netherlands, Canada, Belgium, and Spain recognize same-sex marriage, same-sex intercourse carries the death penalty in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Mauritania, Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia. Also, in the United States, until 2003 when the Supreme Court ruled that *Bowers v. Hardwick* of 1986 unfairly criminalized "same-sex sodomy," 13 states had prohibited lesbians and gay men from engaging in sexual activities. Same-sex couples, however, still are unable to marry legally in most places, and private schools may deny admission to lesbian or gay students if their same-sex lifestyle conflicts with the school's religious convictions. While many nations have some form of institutionalized discrimination, many countries have recognized and negated discrimination by adopting legislation banning discrimination in employment, housing, and education, as well as legislation on hate crimes.

In the United States, several federal laws prohibit discrimination in employment. For example, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in companies consisting of 15 or more employees. Also, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 protects men and women who perform equal work in the same work establishment from sex-based wage discrimination. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 protects individuals who are 40 years of age or older from workplace discrimination, and Titles I and V of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibit discrimination in employment against qualified disabled individuals in the private sector and in state and local governments. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) oversees and coordinates federal equal employment opportunity regulations, practices, and policies and enforces these laws.

Despite some fluctuations, the number of sex-based discrimination charges between 1992 and 2005 remained relatively stable. In 1992, the EEOC received 21,796 sex-based discrimination complaints as compared with more than 25,000 in 1994, 2001, and 2002, and 23,094 in 2005. Last, whereas federal laws still fail to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans-gender employees from workplace discrimination, many states offer anti-discrimination protections that are often more expansive than those offered under federal law. Seventeen states and the District of Columbia, for example, have laws protecting gay and lesbian employees from discrimination in privately owned companies.

In the United States and many European countries, significant strides have been made to protect historically marginalized groups against discriminatory practices. However, despite these advances, much work remains, as reflected by the still prevalent gender gap in wage earnings, the increase of hate crimes against Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11, continuing debates surrounding the legality of same-sex marriage in the United States, and the religiously, racially, and ethnically charged armed and political conflicts that continue around the world. Discrimination, especially struggles over power and

privilege, remains a relevant field of study in the (global) social sciences.

See also

Affirmative Action; American Dream; Apartheid; Ethnic Cleansing; False Consciousness; Gender Bias; Gender Gap; Genocide; Hate Crimes; Hate Groups; Hate Speech; Homophobia; Inequality; Jim Crow; Minority Group; Multiculturalism; Native Americans, Cultural Degradation; Nativism; White Supremacy

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De Jong, M. J., & Jong, M. J. (2008). Discrimination. In V. N. Parrillo, *Encyclopedia of social problems*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/discrimination>

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De Jong, Marc JW, and Marc JW de Jong. "Discrimination." *Encyclopedia of Social Problems*, Vincent N. Parrillo, Sage Publications, 1st edition, 2008. *Credo Reference*, <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/discrimination>. Accessed 14 Nov. 2019.