

Seventh Edition

The Meaning of DIFFERENCE

American Constructions of Race and Ethnicity,
Sex and Gender, Social Class,
Sexuality, and Disability



Karen E. Rosenblum | Toni-Michelle C. Travis

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A Text/Reader

Seventh Edition

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THE MEANING OF DIFFERENCE: AMERICAN CONSTRUCTIONS OF RACE AND ETHNICITY, SEX AND GENDER, SOCIAL CLASS, SEXUALITY, AND DISABILITY, SEVENTH EDITION

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PREFACE

The Meaning of Difference is an effort to understand how difference is constructed in contemporary American culture: How do categories of people come to be seen as “different”? How does being different affect people’s lives? What does difference mean at the level of the individual, social institution, or society? What difference does “difference” make? What is *shared* across the most significant categories of difference in America—race, sex/gender, sexual orientation, social class, and disability? What can be learned from their commonalities? That *The Meaning of Difference* is now in its seventh edition makes us hopeful that this comparative approach can be useful in understanding American conceptions and constructions of difference.

ORGANIZATION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Meaning of Difference is divided into four sections. Each section includes an opening Framework Essay and a set of readings, with the Framework Essay providing the conceptual structure by which to understand the readings. Thus, the Framework Essays are not simply introductions to the readings; they are the “text” portion of this text/reader.

The first section’s Framework Essay and readings describe how categories of difference are *created*; the second considers the *experience* of difference; the third examines the *meanings* that are assigned to difference, focusing especially on education, ideology, law, and public policy; and the fourth describes what people can do to *challenge and change these constructions* of difference.

Each of the readings included in the volume has been selected by virtue of its applicability to multiple categories of difference. For example, F. James Davis’s conclusions about the construction of race (Reading 2) could be applied to a

discussion of sexual identity or disability. How much of “x” does it take to locate someone as gay or straight, disabled or nondisabled, Middle-Eastern or American? Carola Suárez-Orozco’s discussion of identity formation in a globalized world (Reading 21) can be applied toward an understanding of racial identity formation and even to the formation of identities tied to sexuality. Similarly, Michael Oliver’s rendering of an alternative Survey of Disabled Adults (Reading 18)—which parallels Martin Rochlin’s classic Heterosexual Questionnaire (Reading 17)—serves as an example of the insights that can be gained by a change of perspective. In all, our aim has been to select readings that help identify both what is unique and what is shared across our experiences of difference.

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES

Five features make *The Meaning of Difference* distinctive:

- First, it offers a conceptual framework by which to understand the commonalities among these categories of difference. This encompassing conceptual approach makes *The Meaning of Difference* unique.
- Second, no other book provides an accessible and historically grounded discussion of the Supreme Court decisions critical to the structuring of these categorical differences.
- Third, *The Meaning of Difference* has been designed with an eye toward the pedagogic difficulties that often accompany this subject matter. In our experience, when the topics of race, sex and gender, social class, sexual orientation, and disability are treated *simultaneously*, as they are here, no one group can be easily cast as victim or victimizer.
- Fourth, no other volume includes a detailed discussion and set of readings on how to challenge and change the constructions of difference.
- Finally, *The Meaning of Difference* is the first book of its kind to incorporate disability as a master status functioning in ways analogous to the operation of race and ethnicity, sex and gender, sexual orientation, and social class.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE SEVENTH EDITION

This edition includes twenty-seven new readings, one new personal account, and, in Reading 37, a discussion of two important new Supreme Court Cases: *U.S. v. Windsor* (2013), which established federal recognition of the rights of married same-sex couples and *Schuette v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action, Integration and Immigration Rights and Fight for Equality By Any Means Necessary (BAMN)* (2013), in which the Court upheld an amendment to the Michigan state constitution banning affirmative action in public employment, education, or contracting.

New to this volume are several readings that focus on education as a key site for the construction of difference and inequality. Paul Gorski considers how the myth of the culture of poverty affects teachers; Tracy Poon Tambascia, Jonathan Wang, Breanne Tchong, and Viet T. Bui reflect on the impact of the model minority

myth on undocumented immigrant Asian American university students; Tanya McNeill details the promotion of heterosexual monogamy in the policies of public schools; Peter Sacks describes the processes by which, over the last thirty years, American higher education has come to exclude poor and working-class students; and Christine Sleeter places the emergence of the idea of learning disability in the context of the educational reforms of the 1960s and 1970s. In combination with John Larew's timeless article on legacy admissions at elite universities and coverage of several Supreme Court cases about affirmative action in higher education, we believe the volume now allows faculty the opportunity for concentrated focus on education should they choose that.

Several readings new to this edition focus on the dramatic increase of economic inequality in the United States and the still-unfolding outcomes of the Great Recession. In "The Great Divergence," Timothy Noah describes the nature and extent of U.S. inequality; in "Wealth Stripping," James Carr details the effect of predatory "alternative" lending such as pay-day and auto-title loans; in "Rethinking American Poverty," Mark Rank considers the structural factors that shape relatively high rates of American poverty; and in "(Re)Creating a World in Seven Days," Emily Askew analyzes the messages about social class and disability embedded in ABC's hit television show *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*.

In addition to the inclusion of new readings, we have, as always, concentrated on updating the Framework Essays, as these are the "text" portion of this text/reader. We aim for essays that offer a conceptual structure for thinking about (and teaching) this material, but in this edition in particular we thought of the essays as a place in which to grapple with how, increasingly, American constructions of difference appear to be *both* fluid and stable.

To highlight some of the changes in this edition, the first framework essay now considers the effects of our 21st century mapping of the human genome—an accomplishment that many predicted would be the death knell of the idea of race. What we see instead is that race is surprisingly resilient in both popular opinion and science, albeit now framed and profitably marketed as "geographic ancestry." In contrast to this persistence, however, the essay also examines the ways that ideas about race have broadened, especially as revealed by the use of multi-racial self-identifications. As discussed in this essay, increased breadth and fluidity also appears to characterize gender and sexuality categorizations, for example in the increased visibility and acceptance of those who identify as transgender and the emergence of bisexuality as a viable scientific and self-identification category.

In this edition, the second Framework Essay gives special attention to the idea of intersectionality, that is, the *interaction* of stigmatized statuses. Long a topic in women's studies scholarship, we have tried to make this complicated idea more accessible to students while also showing the practical consequences of acknowledging, or failing to acknowledge, intersectionality. Updates to the third Framework Essay have included the topics of intermarriage and residential segregation. The readings in the third section—focused on education, ideology, law, and public policy—are now organized into the master-status subsections used throughout the book.

Several readings from the previous edition have been retained not only because of their wide popularity among students and faculty, but also because they are classics in the field. Included in this category are F. James Davis's "Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition"; Ruth Frankenberg's "Whiteness as an 'Unmarked' Cultural Category"; Michael Oliver's "Disability Definitions"; Sally French's "Can You See the Rainbow?"; John Hockenberry's "Public Transit"; C. J. Pascoe's "Dude You're a Fag"; and Malcolm Gladwell's "Blink in Black and White." We also believe several readings new to this edition will become classics: Cordelia Fine's "Delusions of Gender"; Lisa Diamond's "Sexual Fluidity"; Laurence Ralph's "What Wounds Enable"; David Haines's "Safe Haven in America?"; Amartya Sen's "The Many Faces of Gender Inequality"; and Eric Anderson's "Adolescent Masculinity in an Age of Decreased Homophobia" all have this potential.

SUPPLEMENTS

Instructor's Manual/Test Bank

An Instructor's Manual and Test Bank accompany this volume. In this edition, we have added a special section of advice on how to teach this material. Instructors can access this password-protected material on the website that accompanies the seventh edition of *The Meaning of Difference* at www.mhhe.com/rosenblum7e.

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SECTION I

CONSTRUCTING CATEGORIES OF DIFFERENCE



FRAMEWORK ESSAY

In this book we consider how *difference* is constructed in contemporary American society. We explore how categories of people are seen as significantly different from one another and how people's lives are affected by these conceptions of difference. The four sections of the book are organized around what we consider to be the key questions about difference: how it is constructed, how it is experienced by individuals, how meaning is attributed to difference, and how differences can be bridged.

We believe that race, sex, social class, sexuality, and disability are currently the primary axes of difference in American society—they are also what social scientists would call *master statuses*. In common usage, the term *status* means prestige or esteem. But for social scientists, the term *status* refers to positions in a social structure. In this sense, statuses are like empty slots (or positions) that individuals fill. The most obvious kinds of statuses are kinship, occupation, and age. At any time an individual occupies multiple statuses, including those of race, sex, social class, sexuality, and disability.

This latter set of statuses—the ones we focus on in this book—are significantly more powerful than most other social statuses. Social scientists refer to these as *master statuses* because they so profoundly affect a person's life: "in most or all social situations master status will overpower or dominate all other statuses. . . . Master status influences every other aspect of life, including personal identity."¹ These master statuses may be said to "frame" how people are seen by others—especially strangers—as well as how they see themselves and much of what they experience in the world.² This does not mean, however, that people always understand the impact of the master statuses or "frames" that they occupy. Indeed, much of this book is about recognizing that impact.

This text will explore similarities in the operation of these master statuses. Although there are certainly differences of history, experience, and impact, we believe that similar processes are at work when people "see" differences of color, sex and gender, social class, sexuality, and disability, and we believe that there are similarities in the consequences of these master statuses for individuals' lives. Nonetheless, there are risks in our focus on similarities across master statuses, not the least of which is the assumption that similarity is a better ground for social change than a recognition of difference.³ Thus, our focus on similarities across master statuses is literally only one side of the story.

Racism, sexism, homophobia, and diversity have been pervasive topics for discussion in American society for at least the last fifty years. Although the substance of these conversations has changed in many ways—for example, the term *diversity* once flagged the need for equal opportunity but now functions more as a marketing tool—the intensity around most of these topics persists. Many Americans have strong opinions on these subjects, and that is probably also the case for readers of this text. Two perspectives—essentialism and constructionism—are core to this book and should help you understand your own reaction to the material.

The Essentialist and Constructionist Perspectives

The difference between the *constructionist* and *essentialist* perspectives is illustrated in the tale of the three umpires, first apparently told by social psychologist Hadley Cantril:

Hadley Cantril relates the story of three baseball umpires discussing their profession. The first umpire said, “Some are balls and some are strikes, and I call them as they are.” The second replied, “Some’s balls and some’s strikes, and I call ’em as I sees ’em.” The third thought about it and said, “Some’s balls and some’s strikes, but they ain’t nothing ’till I calls ’em.”⁴

The first umpire in the story can be described as an essentialist. When he says, “I call them as they are,” he assumes that balls and strikes exist in the world regardless of his perception of them. For this umpire, balls and strikes are easily identified, and he is merely a neutral observer; he “regards knowledge as objective and independent of mind, and himself as the impartial reporter of things ‘as they are.’”⁵

Thus, the essentialist perspective presumes that items in a category all share some “essential” quality, their “ball-ness” or “strike-ness.” For essentialists, *race*, *sex*, *sexual orientation*, *disability*, and *social class* identify significant, empirically verifiable differences among people. From the essentialist perspective, each of these exists apart from any social processes; they are objective categories of real differences among people.

The second umpire is somewhat removed from pure essentialism. His statement, “I call ’em as I sees ’em,” conveys the belief that while an independent, objective reality exists, it is subject to interpretation. For him, the world contains balls and strikes, but individuals may have different perceptions about which is which.

The third umpire, who says “they ain’t nothing ’till I calls ’em,” is a constructionist. He operates from the belief that “conceptions such as ‘strikes’ and ‘balls’ have no meaning except that given them by the observer.”⁶ For this constructionist umpire, reality cannot be separated from the way a culture makes sense of it; strikes and balls do not exist until they are constructed through social processes. From this perspective, difference is created rather than intrinsic to a phenomenon. Social processes—such as those in political, legal, economic, scientific, and religious institutions—create differences, determine that some differences are more important than others, and assign particular meanings to those differences. From this perspective, the way a society defines difference among its members tells us more about that society than the people so classified. *The Meaning of Difference* operates from the constructionist perspective, since it examines how we have arrived at our race, sex, disability, sexuality, and social class categories.

Few of us have grown up as constructionists. More likely, we are essentialists who believe that master statuses such as race or sex entail clear-cut, unchanging, and in some way meaningful differences. Still, not everyone is an essentialist. Those who grew up in multiple racial or religious backgrounds are familiar with the ways in which identity is not clear-cut. They grow up understanding how

definitions of self vary with the context; how others try to define one as belonging in a particular category; and how, in many ways, one's very presence calls prevailing classification systems into question. For example, the experience Jelita McLeod describes in Reading 23 of being asked "What are you?" is a common experience for multiracial people. Such experiences make evident the social constructedness of racial identity.

Most of us are unlikely to be exclusively essentialist or constructionist. As authors of this book, although we take the constructionist perspective, we have still relied on essentialist terms we find problematic. The irony of questioning the idea of race but still talking about "blacks," "whites," and "Asians," or of rejecting a dualistic approach to sexual identity while still using the terms *gay* and *straight*, has not escaped us. Indeed, we have sometimes used the currently favored essentialist phrase *sexual orientation* over the more constructionist *sexual preference* because *sexual preference* is an unfamiliar phrase to many people.^a

Further, there is a serious risk that a text such as this falsely identifies people on the basis of *either* their sex, race, sexuality, disability, or social class, despite the fact that master statuses are not parts of a person that can be broken off from one another like the segments of a Tootsie Roll.⁷ All of us are always *simultaneously* all of our master statuses, an idea encompassed by the concept of *intersectionality* (a topic to which we will return in the Framework Essay for Section II). While the readings in this section may make it seem as if these were separable statuses, they are not. Indeed, even the concept of master status could mislead us into thinking that there could be only one dominating status in one's life.

Both constructionism and essentialism can be found in the social sciences. Indeed, social science research routinely operates from essentialist assumptions: when researchers report the sex, race, or ethnicity of their interviewees or experimental subjects they are treating these categories as "real," that is, as existing independent of the researchers' classifications. Both perspectives also are evident in social movements, and those movements sometimes shift from one perspective to the other over time. For example, some feminists and most of those opposed to feminism hold the essentialist belief that women and men are inherently different. The constructionist view that sexual identity is chosen dominated the gay rights movement of the 1970s,⁸ but today, the essentialist view that sexual identity is something one is born with appears to dominate. By contrast, some of those opposed to gay relationships now take the constructionist view that sexuality is chosen and could therefore be changed. In this case, language often signals which perspective is being used. For example, *sexual preference* conveys active, human decision making with the possibility of change (constructionism), while *sexual orientation* implies something fixed and inherent to a person (essentialism).

Americans are now about equally split between those who hold essentialist and constructionist views on homosexuality—40 percent of those who responded to a

^aThe term *sexual identity* seems now to be replacing *sexual orientation*. It could be used in either an essentialist or a constructionist way.

2012 Gallup Poll answered that being gay was something a person was born with, compared to 37 percent who said that being gay was the result of upbringing or other social factors. Thirty-five years ago those opinions were the reverse, with 56 percent saying sexuality was the result of upbringing or other environmental factors.⁹ This shift toward a more essentialist view of sexuality began in the late 1990s, when, as Roger Lancaster describes in Reading 16, the media focused on the biological (i.e., essentialist) research on the origin of homosexuality, much of which has now been discredited. Later in this chapter we will describe what appears to be another change in attitudes about sexuality, which is a turn toward a constructionist approach, at least among college students.

This example from journalist Darryl Rist shows the appeal that essentialist explanations might have for gay rights activists:

[Chris Yates's parents were] Pentecostal ministers who had tortured his adolescence with Christian cures for sexual perversity. Shock and aversion therapies under born-again doctors and gruesome exorcisms of sexual demons by spirit-filled preachers had culminated in a plan to have him castrated by a Mexican surgeon who touted the procedure as a way to make the boy, if not straight, at least sexless. Only then had the terrified son rebelled.

Then, in the summer of 1991, the journal *Science* reported anatomical differences between the brains of homosexual and heterosexual men. . . . The euphoric media—those great purveyors of cultural myths—drove the story wildly. Every major paper in the country headlined the discovery smack on the front page. . . . Like many others, I suspect, Chris Yates's family saw in this newly reported sexual science a way out of its wrenching impasse. After years of virtual silence between them and their son, Chris's parents drove several hundred miles to visit him and ask for reconciliation. Whatever faded guilt they might have felt for the family's faulty genes was nothing next to the reassurance that neither by a perverse upbringing nor by his own iniquity was Chris or the family culpable for his urges and actions. "We could never have condoned this if you could do something to change it. But when we finally understood that you were *born* that way, we knew we'd been wrong. We had to ask your forgiveness."¹⁰

Understandably, those who are discriminated against would find essentialist orientations appealing, just as the expansiveness of constructionist approaches would be appealing in more tolerant eras. Still, either perspective can be used to justify discrimination, since people can be persecuted for the choices they make as well as for their genetic inheritance. As Lisa Diamond concludes in Reading 15, on a topic as politicized as sexuality, there are no "safe" scientific findings—any finding can be used for just about any purpose.

Our inclusion here of disability as a social construction may generate an intense reaction—many will want to argue that disability is about real physical, sensory, or cognitive differences, not social constructs. However, two factors are at work here. One involves *impairment*, that is, "the physical, cognitive, emotional or sensory condition within the person as diagnosed by medical professionals."¹¹ The second is "the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers."¹² This latter dimension, called *disability*, has been the emphasis of what is called the "social model" of disability, which contends that disability is created

by social, political, and environmental obstacles—that is, that social processes such as discrimination or lack of access to corrective technologies turn impairments into disabilities.¹³ This form of discrimination is sometimes called *ableism*. In the historic words of Britain’s Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS), one of the first disability liberation groups in the world and the first run by disabled people themselves:¹⁴

It is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairment by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society.¹⁵

That perspective is reflected in the 2007 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which reads in part:

[D]isability should be seen as the result of the interaction between a person and his or her environment. Disability is not something that resides in the individual as the result of some impairment. . . . Disability resides in the society, not in the person. [For example,] in a society where corrective lenses are available for someone with extreme myopia (nearsightedness), this person would *not* be considered to have a disability, however someone *with the same condition* in a society where corrective lenses were not available would be considered to have a disability, especially if the level of vision prevented the person from performing tasks expected of this person. . . .¹⁶

For example, John Hockenberry (Reading 34) describes how mass transit systems that are inaccessible to wheelchair users “disable” them by making it difficult or impossible to work, attend school, or be involved in social activities. Beyond architectural, educational, and occupational barriers, disability is also constructed through cultural stereotypes and everyday interactions in which difference is defined as undesirable. We once heard a student with spina bifida tell a story addressing this point: In her first day at elementary school, other students kept asking what was “wrong” with her. As she put it, she had always known she was different, but she hadn’t thought she was “wrong.”

Not only can disability be understood as the result of disabling environments and cultural stereotypes, the categories of impairment and disability are also themselves socially constructed through medical and legal processes. “[I]llness, disease, and disability are not ‘givens’ in nature . . . but rather *socially constructed* categories that emerge from the interpretive activities of people acting together in social situations.”¹⁷ Learning disabilities are an example of this process.

Before the late 1800s when observers began to write about “word blindness,” learning disability (whatever its name) did not exist, although the human variation to which it ambiguously refers did—sort of! People who today might be known as learning disabled may have formerly been known as “slow,” “retarded,” or “odd.” But mostly they would not have been known as unusual at all. The learning difficulties experienced today by learning disabled youth have not been experienced by most youth throughout history. For example, most youth have not been asked to learn to read. Thus, they could not experience any reading difficulties, the most common learning disability. As we have expected youth to learn to read and have tried to teach them to do so, many youth have experienced difficulty. However, until the mid-1960s we typically did not understand those difficulties as the consequences of a learning disability.¹⁸

The social model of disability first emerged out of the disabled people’s movement in the 1970s in opposition to the “medical model,” which approached disability as a matter of individual deficiencies or defects, rather than societal responses. From the perspective of the medical model, individuals have problems that need to be treated by medical specialists; from that of the social model, individual problems are the result of social structures that need to be changed. Thus, for adherents of the social model, the important questions are about civil rights such as equal access. The survey questions posed by Mike Oliver in Reading 18 show how the world is perceived differently from these two perspectives. Still, as Laurence Ralph describes in Reading 19, the social model of disability becomes less relevant when we consider the numbers of young black and Hispanic men disabled by gun violence (second to car accidents, gunshot wounds are the most common source of disability in urban areas). Ralph describes the case of a group of Chicago ex-gang members, now paralyzed by spinal cord injuries from gunshots. Although the social model would argue that society has disabled these young men, the men themselves operate from the medical model—in their mission to save teenagers from a similar fate, they focus on the defects of their bodies.

Why have we spent so much time describing the essentialist and constructionist perspectives? Discussions about race, sex, disability, sexual identity, and social class generate great intensity, partly because they involve the clash of essentialist and constructionist assumptions. Essentialists are likely to view categories of people as “essentially” different in some important way; constructionists are likely to see these differences as socially created and arbitrary. An essentialist asks what causes people to be different; a constructionist asks about the origin and consequence of the categorization system itself. While arguments about the nature and cause of racism, sexism, homophobia, and poverty are disputes about power and justice, from the perspectives of essentialism and constructionism they are also disputes about the meaning of differences in color, sexuality, and social class.

In all of this, the constructionist approach has one clear advantage. From that perspective, one understands that all this talk has a profound significance. Such talk is not simply *about* difference; it is itself the *creation* of difference. In the sections that follow, we examine how categories of people are named, dichotomized, and stigmatized—all toward the construction of difference.

Naming

Difference is constructed first by naming categories of people. Therefore, constructionists pay special attention to the names people use to refer to themselves and others—the times at which new names are asserted, the negotiations that surround the use of particular names, and those occasions when people are grouped together or separated out.

Asserting a Name Both individuals and categories of people face similar issues in the assertion of a name. A change of name involves, to some extent, the claim of a new identity. For example, one of our colleagues no longer wanted to be called

by her nickname because it had come to seem childish to her, so she asked people to use her “real” name instead. It took a few times to remind people that this was her new name, and with most that was adequate. One colleague, however, argued that he could not adapt to the new name; she would just have to tolerate his continued use of the nickname. This was a small but public battle about who had the power to name whom. Did she have the power to enforce her own naming, or did he have the power to name her despite her wishes? Eventually, she prevailed.

A more disquieting example was a young woman who wanted to keep her maiden name after she married. Her fiancé agreed with her decision, recognizing that he would be reluctant to give up his name were the tables turned. When his mother heard of this possibility, however, she was outraged. In her mind, a rejection of her family’s name was a rejection of her family. She urged her son to reconsider getting married.

Thus, asserting a name can create social conflict. On both a personal and societal level, naming can involve the claim of a particular identity and the rejection of others’ power to impose a name. For example, is one Native American, American Indian, or Sioux; African American or black; girl or woman; Asian, Asian American, Korean, or Korean American; gay or homosexual; Chicano, Mexican American, Mexican, Latino/a, or Hispanic? For instance,

[j]ust who is Hispanic? The answer depends on whom you ask.

The label was actually coined in the mid-1970s by federal bureaucrats working under President Richard M. Nixon. They came up with it in response to concerns that the government was wrongly applying “Chicano” to people who were not of Mexican descent, and otherwise misidentifying and underserving segments of the population by generally classifying those with ancestral ties to the Spanish cultural diaspora as either Chicano, Cuban, or Puerto Rican.

Nearly three decades later, the debate continues to surround the term Hispanic and its definition. Although mainly applied to people from Latin American countries with linguistic and cultural ties to Spain, it also is used by the U.S. government to refer to Spaniards themselves, as well as people from Portuguese-speaking Brazil.¹⁹

Comedian Carlos Mencia (a Honduran-born American) captures this confusion in a story about talking to college students twenty years ago, but its substance applies just as easily today: “I said ‘Latinos,’ and they said, ‘We’re not Latin!’ And then I said ‘Chicano,’ and they said, ‘We’re not of Mexican descent.’ So I said ‘I don’t know what to say—Hispanic? And they said, ‘There’s no such country as Hispania!’”²⁰ As of 2011, 33 percent of Hispanic/Latinos preferred *Hispanic*, 14 percent preferred *Latino*, but 53 percent had no preference.²¹

Deciding what name to use for a category of people is not easy. It is unlikely that all members of the category use the same name; the name members use for one another may not be acceptable for outsiders to use; nor is it always advisable to ask what name a person prefers. We once saw an old friend become quite angry when asked whether he preferred the term *black* or *African American*. “Either one is fine with me,” he replied, “I know what I am.” To him, the question meant that he was being seen as a member of a category, not as an individual.

Because naming may involve a redefinition of self, an assertion of power, and a rejection of others’ ability to impose an identity, social change movements often claim a new name, while opponents may express opposition by continuing to use

the old name. For example, in the 1960s *black* emerged in opposition to *Negro* as the Black Power movement sought to distinguish itself from the Martin Luther King–led moderate wing of the civil rights movement. The term *Negro* had itself been put forward by influential leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington as a rejection of the term *colored* that had dominated the mid- to late 19th century: “[D]espite its association with racial epithets, ‘Negro’ was defined to stand for a new way of thinking about Blacks.”²² Similarly, in 1988, Ramona H. Edelin, president of the National Urban Coalition, proposed that *African American* be substituted for *black*. Now both terms are used about equally.^b Among blacks who have a preference, Gallup polls suggest a gradual trend toward the label “African American.” Still, “a clear majority of blacks say they don’t care which label is used”²³ and some still prefer the term *Negro*. “The immediate reason the word *Negro* is on the [2010] Census is simple enough: in the 2000 Census, more than 56,000 people wrote in *Negro* to describe their identity—even though it was already on the form. Some people, it seems, still strongly identify with the term, which used to be a perfectly polite designation,” but is now considered by many an insult.²⁴

Each of these name changes—from *Negro* to *black* to *African American*—was first promoted by activists as a way to demonstrate their commitment to a new social order. A similar theme is reflected in the history of the terms *Chicano* and *Chicanismo*. Although the origin of the terms is unclear, the principle was the same. As reporter Ruben Salazar wrote in the 1960s, “a Chicano is a Mexican-American with a non-Anglo image of himself.”²⁵ (*Anglo* is a colloquialism for *white* used in the southwestern and western United States.)

Similarly, the term *homosexual* was first coined in 1896 by a Hungarian physician hoping to decriminalize same-sex relations between men. It was incorporated into the medical and psychological literature of the time, which depicted nonprocreative sex as pathological. In the 1960s, activists rejected the pathological characterization along with the name associated with it, turning to the terms *gay*^c and *lesbian* rather than *homosexual* (and using *gay* to refer to men, or both men and women). Later, the 1990s group Queer Nation transformed what had been a common epithet into a slogan—“We’re here! We’re queer! Get used to it!”

Well, yes, “gay” is great. It has its place. . . . [But] using “queer” is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It’s a way of telling ourselves we don’t have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world. . . . Queer, unlike gay, doesn’t mean male. . . . Yeah, queer can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe’s hands and use against him.²⁶

^bThus, one can find Black Studies, Afro-American Studies, and African American Studies programs in universities across the country.

^cIn the 17th century, *gay* became associated with an addiction to social dissipation and loose morality, and was used to refer to female prostitutes (e.g., *gay girl*). The term was apparently first used in reference to homosexuality in 1925 in Australia. “It may have been both the connotations of femininity and those of immorality that led American homosexuals to adopt the title ‘gay’ with some self-irony in the 1920s. The slogan ‘Glad to Be Gay,’ adopted by both female and male homosexuals, and the naming of the Gay Liberation Front, which was born from the Stonewall resistance riots following police raids on homosexual bars in New York in 1969, bear witness to a greater self-confidence.”²⁷