

Race and Ethnicity in the US

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover race and ethnicity in American society, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Social Construction of Race
2. Native Americans
3. WASPs and White Ethnic Americans
4. African Americans
5. Asian Americans
6. Hispanic Americans
7. Arab Americans.

1. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE

There are various racial and ethnic categories in American society. In studying these categories, it is important to note the **social construction of race** and ethnicity. People of different racial categories act in their respective manners because people give racial categories meaning socially. The social histories of racial categories impact how these categories are **socially constructed**--the way they exist in society today and the meanings that people attach to them. These categories are in no way "natural," they represent meanings given by society.



TERM TO KNOW

Social Construction of Race

The notion that our ideas of race and our conceptual racial categories are created through social interaction, rather than being "natural" propensities.

2. NATIVE AMERICANS

Native Americans can trace their ancestry to the original Precolumbian inhabitants of North America. When the settlers got to America, Native American people were systematically deceived and controlled. Their land was stolen and they were slowly pushed westward.



LEARN MORE

Look at a map of Native American ownership and control of land through American history. You will see that the eastern seaboard has essentially disappeared from Native American control.

Native Americans were slowly pushed westwards until they existed only in small pockets, where they were confined on reservations after their land was stolen. In an effort to completely break their culture, they underwent a practice of forced assimilation, whereby Native American children were taken and sent to boarding schools where they were forced to become Americanized. This has resulted in identity crisis and conflict in Native American populations, which lingers today as a deep-seated, profound sense of injustice.



TERM TO KNOW

Native Americans

Americans who trace their ancestry to the inhabitants of North and Central America prior to the arrival of Europeans.

3. WASPS AND WHITE ETHNIC AMERICANS

Many of the first settlers in America, the people originally interacting with the Native Americans, were WASPs, or **white Anglo-Saxon Protestants**. WASPs, definitionally, are white Americans with primarily English ancestry and Protestant cultural heritage. When they arrived in America, they were imbued with Max Weber's Protestant work ethic, so they worked hard and successfully established colonies.

WASPs are found in all class levels, from low-class to high-class. They fought hard to establish their cultural traditions as the dominant majority in society, and succeeded in this. Their dominance lasted up until about 1950.

IN CONTEXT

In the 19th century, WASPs in American society didn't like the waves of other **white ethnic Americans** who immigrated from other, ostensibly 'lower,' groups of Europeans like Germans, Italian, Polish, and Irish.

The immigration of ethnic groups into the United States in the 19th century occurred in successive waves. These were people searching for the American dream that they'd heard so much about back home. They wanted to escape home, for a variety of reasons, and come to America. When they got here, they were treated better than other ethnic groups because of their lighter skin, but they were discriminated against by the WASPs because they were seen as crude, less civilized, and more vulgar.



DID YOU KNOW

In some cases, the WASPs made an effort to subjugate other white ethnic groups. The movie, *Gangs of New York*, details the development of Manhattan in the mid 19th century when different waves of immigration helped to shape New York City. These other white ethnic groups were shut out of labor markets in an effort to keep power in the hands of American whites. WASPs used slogans like "Don't Hire Immigrants" and "We Only Hire Americans."



TERMS TO KNOW

White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs)

Americans who trace their ancestry to primarily English ancestors and have a Protestant cultural heritage.

White Ethnic Americans

Americans who trace their ancestry to disadvantaged, white European groups.

4. AFRICAN AMERICANS

African Americans are Americans who can trace their ancestry to Africa. Slavery and the slave trade brought the first waves of African Americans to this country. They were denied citizenship and forced to work in horrible conditions in sweatshops and in fields producing crops. African Americans have been systematically discriminated against and shut out of labor markets, even after the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation ostensibly and lawfully freed the slaves. After the Civil War, sustained bigotry and entrenched prejudice continued to prevent African Americans from getting jobs in labor markets.



THINK ABOUT IT

If whites control the markets and the jobs, who do you suppose gets hired? For centuries, whites only hired whites, for the most part, in an effort to keep African Americans oppressed, especially in the south. This was a repeated practice in capitalism, in which whites controlled the labor markets and asserted their power that way, preventing the African Americans from getting ahead in society.

The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s made strong inroads against the dominant white culture, which has greatly improved the standing of African Americans in American society. However, though great strides have been made, historical vestiges of labor market exclusion and slavery have left African Americans earning lower wages and occupying fewer positions of power in American society, even today.



TERM TO KNOW

African Americans

Americans who trace their ancestry to Africa.

5. ASIAN AMERICANS

Asian Americans are Americans who can trace their ancestry to Asia. Huge cultural diversity characterizes this group: there are Japanese Americans, Chinese immigrants, and Korean immigrants. More recently, the United States has welcomed Filipino, Vietnamese, Hmong, and Southeast Asian immigrants of all kinds.



DID YOU KNOW

One third of Asian Americans live in California.

The Chinese were some of the first Asian Americans to arrive here, coming with the Gold Rush in the mid 19th century. They were willing to take low status jobs that whites didn't want, so today Chinese immigrants in American society have experienced upward social mobility. Japanese immigrants, on the other hand, faced a

crisis during World War II, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. This caused hostility towards Japanese Americans living in American society, and prompted President Roosevelt to enact legislation that relocated as many as 120,000 Japanese immigrants to an inland reservation.



TERM TO KNOW

Asian Americans

Americans who trace their ancestry to Asia.

6. HISPANIC AMERICANS

Hispanic Americans are Americans who can trace their ancestry to Spanish-speaking countries and descent. Currently, this is the largest wave of immigration occurring in American society, with Hispanic Americans forming the largest ethnic group existing in American society. Most Hispanic Americans live in the southwest United States. Given that they are the largest wave of immigrants occurring right now, they are often vilified and singled out in political discourse as the culprits taking ‘American’ jobs.

IN CONTEXT

Arizona recently passed a law that allows law enforcement agents to stop anyone that they deem to be suspicious and ask for identification and proof of citizenship.

This is a highly controversial law because law enforcement agents are fallible people, with their own potential biases, opinions, and stereotypes. This law allows them to indiscriminately stop Hispanic immigrants and ask them if they have citizenship.



TERM TO KNOW

Hispanic Americans (Latinos)

Americans who trace their ancestry to Spanish speaking Latin American countries.

7. ARAB AMERICANS

Arab Americans are Americans who can trace their ancestry to the Middle East. Recently, Arab Americans, especially Muslims, have faced wrongful vilification after 9/11. Americans have expressed hostility and shown negative attitudes towards Arab Americans in response to the 9/11 terrorist attack, even though this wrongfully applies blanket generalizations to entire groups of people who are not responsible for the attacks of 9/11. Nonetheless, they have faced vilification in American society because of this.



BIG IDEA

Each of these ethnic categories in American society have histories and socially constructed meanings that affect their treatment and place in society today.



TERM TO KNOW

Arab Americans

Americans who trace their ancestry to the Middle East.



SUMMARY

Today you learned a historical overview of various racial and ethnic categories in American society, and how each of them is socially constructed (**social construction of race**). You learned about the cultural and social history, and construction of identity, of **Native Americans**, **WASPs**, **white ethnic Americans**, **African Americans**, **Asian Americans**, **Hispanic Americans** and **Arab Americans**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

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Arab Americans

Americans who trace their ancestry to the Middle East.

Asian Americans

Americans who trace their ancestry to Asia.

Hispanic Americans (Latinos)

Americans who trace their ancestry to Spanish speaking Latin American countries.

Native Americans

Americans who trace their ancestry to the inhabitants of North and Central America prior to the arrival of Europeans.

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