

Race Conflict Theory

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the racial conflict approach to social theory, through definition and discussion of:

1. Race Conflict Theory
2. Ida Wells-Barnett
3. W.E.B. Du Bois

1. RACE CONFLICT THEORY

The **racial conflict theory** emphasizes inequality and conflict between racial and ethnic groups. In American society, for instance, racial conflict is a current issue. White people have historically had advantages over people of color—they've had higher incomes, more education, better health, and a longer life expectancy.

A scholar working within the race conflict approach might look at how wealth and privilege, on the one hand, and poverty and disadvantage, on the other, are handed down through generations. They would ask, "why does this conflict exist" and "how did it come to be this way"?

IN CONTEXT

Picture a white, wealthy family living in the suburbs. They have two ten-year-old children who attend a specialty private school that costs \$25,000 a year per child, or \$50,000 total per year. It would be a fair assumption that these kids will go to a good college, that they will get good jobs after college, and earn a decent income. Granted, extraneous things can happen, but all of these things appear to be predetermined at birth, by virtue of the wealth of their parents.

Now, picture a single black female, living in South Chicago, raising a daughter by herself. She constantly worries about her daughter dropping out of high school. Although the University of Chicago is six blocks away from their house, it is a world away for her child if she doesn't finish high school.

You can see how the wealth you inherit as a child dramatically affects your life chances. A scholar working within the race conflict approach would point out that these results happen because black people have systematically been discriminated against in this country for centuries, and we are

seeing the cumulative results of this every day.



BIG IDEA

The race conflict approach is a vastly important area of sociology that attracts some of the brightest minds in the discipline. Their work has shown how white prejudice hinders the life chances of people of color, which is the fundamental conflict in society according to the racial conflict approach.



TERM TO KNOW

Race Conflict Theory

An approach to sociology that emphasizes inequality and conflict between different racial groups.

2. IDA WELLS-BARNETT

Ida Wells-Barnett was one of the pioneering sociological scholars in the racial conflict approach.

Wells-Barnett was born of slave parents, but she became a free citizen with the Emancipation Proclamation. In her adult life, Wells-Barnett was a journalist, advocate and lecturer, speaking out against lynching in America. She argued that lynching was a practice white people used in an attempt to control black people and scare them out of competition. Wells-Barnett a skilled lecturer and orator, and she traveled internationally delivering lectures about the problem of lynching in the United States.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Ida Wells Barnett

An activist, journalist, and lecturer who spoke out against lynching.

3. W.E.B. DU BOIS

W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) is a well known figure in American history. Du Bois was the first person of color to receive a doctorate from Harvard. After he received his doctorate at Harvard, Du Bois founded the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory, which made an enormous contribution to our understanding of racial inequality. It was one of the first centers of its kind for sociological research.

Du Bois believed that it was not enough to simply learn about society's ills, but that you needed to act on them and change them. As such, he felt that the academic discipline of sociology, as it was institutionalized in universities, was too detached from the actual problems of minorities. Du Bois eventually left academia to devote his efforts towards activism.

One of Du Bois' lasting ideas was that of the double consciousness. Du Bois argued that black people constantly saw themselves with two sets of eyes: their own and the eyes of the white majority. It follows, then, that Du Bois was critical of successful black people who would overtly try to curry favor with whites and assimilate into white culture.

IN CONTEXT

Suppose you are a black man studying for your Ph.D. at a predominantly white and Asian American campus. You're tall, and you present an imposing figure. While you walk around campus, you whistle, because you feel that whistling puts the 'white' people at ease. You also preemptively cross to the opposite side of the street if you are passing somebody on the street late at night, so as not to unnerve them. Why would you feel the need to do this?

You develop those tactics because you are conscious of the fact that you are being perceived differently by white people than the way that you perceive yourself. This is your double consciousness at work--unfortunately, a sad example of the relevance of this concept in American society today.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

W.E.B. Du Bois

An outspoken critic of white privilege who founded the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about the **racial conflict theory**, which emphasizes inequality and conflict between different racial groups, as well as two prominent figures who contributed to developing this approach: **Ida Wells-Barnett** and **W. E. B. Du Bois**.

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



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