

The Collective Canvas

Native Americans: History of Intergroup Relations

Mistakenly believing that he had landed in the East Indies, Christopher Columbus named the indigenous people "Indians" when he landed. It was an offensive blooper lumping Indians in name with people thousands of miles away. And that was just the beginning.

The history of intergroup relations between European colonists and Native Americans is a brutal one. European settlement of the Americas almost destroyed them with disease (For example, the army deliberately shipped blankets that were infected with smallpox to the Cherokee tribe, decimating their towns.) From the first Spanish colonists to the French, English, and Dutch who followed, European settlers took what land they wanted, expanding across the continent at will. Let's just put it this way: The "Louisiana Purchase" wasn't really much of a purchase. The dominant group (the settlers) conquered at will.

After the establishment of the United States government, discrimination against Native Americans was formalized by a series of laws:

- The Indian Removal Act of 1830 forced the relocation of any native tribes east of the Mississippi River to lands west of the river.
- The Indian Appropriation Acts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries funded further removals and declared that no Indian tribe could be recognized as an independent nation, tribe, or power. After this, the American government didn't have to make treaties, and could take what they wanted.
- The Dawes Act of 1887 *reversed* the policy of isolating American Indians on reservations, instead forcing them onto land shared with white settlers, thereby reducing their capacity for power as a group. Most tribes considered the earth a living thing; the concepts of land ownership and conquest didn't exist in American Indian society. It was difficult for them to fathom land laws, and even harder for them to protest.

The establishment of American Indian boarding schools in the late nineteenth century further eroded American Indian culture. Official schools, run by both Christian missionaries and the United States government (we're calling you out here, Uncle Sam), had the express purpose of "civilizing" American Indian children. They were assimilated into white society through forcing children, often through physical abuse, to cut their hair, speak English, and practice Christianity.

Native Americans: Current Status

The elimination of American Indian culture continued until the 1960s, when American Indians were able to participate in and benefit from the Civil Rights movement. The Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968 guaranteed Indian tribes most of the rights of the United States Bill of Rights, and new laws like the Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975 and the Education Assistance Act of the same year recognized tribal governments and gave them more power.

However, American Indians still suffer the effects of centuries of degradation. Long-term poverty, inadequate education, cultural dislocation, and high rates of unemployment contribute to American Indian populations falling to the bottom of the economic spectrum. And, much like most minority populations, they also have lower life expectancies than the white American majority.

African Americans: How and Why They Came

If American Indians are the only minority group who became subordinate through *conquest*, black Americans are the largest minority group in the United States whose ancestors didn't come here by *choice*.

A Dutch sea captain brought the first Africans to the Virginian colony of Jamestown in 1619. They were sold as **indentured servants**. For the next century, black and white indentured servants worked side by side. But the growing agricultural economy demanded greater and cheaper labor, and by 1705, Virginia passed the slave codes declaring that any foreign-born non-Christian could be a slave, and that slaves were considered "property."

The next 150 years saw the rise of American slavery, with African people being kidnapped from their own lands and shipped to the New World on the trans-Atlantic journey known as the Middle Passage. Once in the Americas, the black population grew until American-born black people outnumbered black Americans born in Africa.

But colonial (and later, American) slave codes formally declared that the child of a slave was also a slave, so the **slave class** was created. By 1869, the slave trade was internal in the United States and not just part of the globalized Middle Passage, with slaves being bought and sold across state lines like livestock.

African Americans: History of Intergroup Relations

In American history, there's probably no dominant-subordinate group relationship more visible—and horrible—than slavery. To justify their severely discriminatory behavior, slaveholders and their supporters had to view black people as innately inferior, and to spread that prejudice to others with both words and physical violence and execution.

In the history of intergroup relationships, it's an easy simplification that the North was "nice" to slaves and the South was where all the racism went down.

Not so fast, history.

While it's true that the institution of slavery was crucial to the Southern economy because production of cotton and tobacco depended on cheap labor, the North benefitted from the slave trade economy as well. However, the Northern economy had other things going for it besides the slave trade, so the North didn't take as hard a stance on enforcing slavery and restricting black rights. This, as well as a history of liberalism and political leniency in Northern cities, led to the North's acceptance of more basic civil rights for black Americans than the South and their Jim Crow laws.

The North's more dynamic and varied economy also explains why the North was less impacted economically after the Civil War, and why much of the South slipped into poverty. The faltering state of the Southern economy after the war worsened prejudice and racial discrimination, because black people were an easy scapegoat. For most of American history, the South enforced both *de facto* and *de jure* segregation. However, the North was still a hotspot for *de facto* segregation, with job opportunities, redlining housing and neighborhoods, and more.

A century later, the Civil Rights movement led boycotts, marches, sit-ins, and freedom rides—demonstrations by a subordinate group that would no longer willingly submit to domination. The major blow to America's formally institutionalized racism was the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Go America! This Civil Rights Act, which is still in effect today, banned discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Most social scientists, however, would argue that institutionalized, *de facto* racism persists.

African Americans: Current Status

Although government-sponsored, formalized *de jure* discrimination against African Americans has been outlawed, true equality does not yet exist. The National Urban League's *2015 Equality Index* reports that black Americans' overall equality level with white Americans is only at 72.2 percent—a staggering **27.8 percentage points lower** than their white counterparts.

Wait. Hold up.

Yes, you read that fact about the difference in equality levels. That statistic is so shocking we had to put it in bold.

The *Index*, which has been published since 2005, notes a marked disparity in the living conditions of black people and white people, especially in the areas of economics, health, education, and social justice. (Yikes. That's, like, *all the areas*.)

Although black people have made some public gains (like Beyoncé's crazy-staggering wealth and, oh yeah, Barack Obama's presidency), the echoes of centuries of disempowerment are still evident when we look at the statistics.

Asian Americans: How and Why They Came

- **Chinese Immigration:** Not that it's a race, but the *first* Asian immigrants to come to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century were Chinese, motivated to work in the American West to send money back to their families. Close your eyes and imagine the Wild West: cowboys, the Gold Rush, the Transcontinental Railroad, the Sierra Mountains...and thousands of way underpaid Chinese men laying rail tracks, mining, and doing other forms of grueling manual labor.
- **Japanese Immigration:** Japanese immigration began in the 1880s, right after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (yeah, that happened). Many Japanese immigrants came to Hawaii to participate in the sugar industry; others came to the mainland, especially to California. Unlike the Chinese, the Japanese government negotiated with the United States government so that Japanese men were able to bring their wives and families to the United States. Rather than more direct-from-Japan immigrants, second- and third-generation Japanese Americans sprung up much more quickly than their Chinese counterparts.
- **Vietnamese Immigration:** The most recent and large-scale Asian immigration came from Korea and Vietnam during the second half of the twentieth century. (Hmmm, there were wars in both of those countries. Coincidence?) While Korean immigration has been fairly gradual, Vietnamese immigration occurred primarily as political refuge, after the reestablishment of communism in the 1970s.

Asian Americans: History of Intergroup Relations

Chinese immigration came to an abrupt end with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, when the U.S. decided the best solution for their bad economy was to stop Chinese immigration. Chinese men didn't have the funds to return to China or to bring their families to America, so they remained physically and culturally segregated in the Chinatowns of large cities. It wasn't until after the Immigration and Nationality Act 1965 that Chinese immigration increased again and many Chinese families were reunited.

Wow.

Although Japanese Americans have deep, long-reaching roots in the U.S., their history hasn't always been that bright. The California Alien Land law of 1913 was aimed at keeping the Japanese from owning land, and then there was that whole expulsion thing with Japanese internment camps during World War II.

Asian Americans: Current Status

- Asian Americans have been subjected to their share of racial prejudice, despite the seemingly positive stereotype as the **model minority**—a truly mixed compliment suggesting a minority group has achieved assimilation and success, but doesn't really pose a threat to the majority. Not only is the label "model minority" a stereotype, it can result in unrealistic expectations, stigmatizing group members who don't meet these expectations. Stereotyping all Asians as smart and capable can also do harm when it leads to deficiencies in much-needed government, professional, and educational assistance.

Latin Americans: How and Why They Came

Mexican Americans form the largest Latin American subgroup, and they've also been here the longest. Mexican immigration began in the early 1900s; similarly to the Chinese immigration movement, Mexicans came to work in response to the need for cheap agricultural labor.

Mexican migration was often circular; workers would stay for a few years, and then go back to Mexico with more money. The circular migration was made easier due to Mexico's shared border with the U.S.

Cuban Americans are the second-largest Latin American subgroup and, like the Vietnamese, came largely for political reasons after Fidel Castro instituted communism.

Latin Americans: History of Intergroup Relations

During the 1900s, Mexican workers crossed the long boarder to work in American fields both legally and illegally. The U.S. showed a love/hate relationship with Mexican workers, instituting both the federal Bracero Program to provide protection to guest workers, and "Operation Wetback," which deported thousands of illegal Mexican workers...in the same year.

Oh, 1954, stop sending us such mixed signals!

Cuban Americans have fared better than other immigrant groups, perhaps because of their relative wealth and education level at the time of immigration. (Many wealthy Cubans fled communist Cuba so their money wouldn't be taken away.) Furthermore, because they were fleeing a communist country, and America loved to stick it to the communists, Cubans were given refuge status and offered protection and social services.

The Cuban Migration Agreement of 1995 limited Cuban immigration, leading many Cubans to try to immigrate illegally by boat. The U.S. government applies a "wet foot/dry foot" policy toward Cuban immigrants; Cubans who are intercepted while still at sea will be returned to Cuba, while those who reach the shore will be permitted to stay in the United States.

It's little quirks like that that make immigration so "fun" to research.

Latin Americans: Current Status

Mexican Americans, especially those who are here as undocumented immigrants, are at the center of a national debate about immigration. Three times as many Mexican immigrants enter the United States *undocumented* than legally. (This is because of lack of economic opportunity and funds to cross the border—not because of any desire on Mexican immigrants' behalf to purposefully "break the law.")

Mexican immigrants often have difficulty with economic and cultural assimilation, and not a small part of this is due to discrimination and access to mostly low-paying work. Cuban Americans often get "model minority status" since they initially immigrated due to politics rather than to seek work. As with Asian Americans, however, being a model minority can mask the challenges that minority groups face in U.S. society.

Arab Americans: Why They Came

The first Arab immigrants came to this country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, predominately Syrian, Lebanese, and Jordanian Christians looking to escape persecution and to make a better life. These early immigrants and their descendants represent almost half of the Arab American population today.

Arab immigration since 1965 has been steadily rising since immigration restrictions were lifted that year. Arabic immigrants post-1965 have tended to be Muslim and more highly educated, escaping political unrest and looking for better opportunities.

Arab Americans: History of Intergroup Relations

Relations between Arab Americans and the dominant majority have been marked by mistrust, misinformation, and deep-rooted stereotypes. Some say that the Arab-Israeli conflicts in the 1970s began the discrimination, since the U.S. has traditionally sided with Israel and many Middle Eastern countries don't recognize Israel as legit.

Disputes over Israeli issues have involved Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine, building mistrust into their American relations. The actions of extremists, like during the events of September 11th, have also led to prejudice, despite the fact that a few terrorists' actions certainly don't represent an entire people.

Arab Americans: Current Status

- Although the rate of hate crimes against Arab Americans has slowed, Arab Americans are still victims of racism and prejudice. Racial profiling has been a daily condition for Arab Americans since 9/11, particularly during air travel. Islamophobia (irrational fear or hatred against Muslims) doesn't show signs of getting better, even though the U.S.'s history of terrorism (think Timothy McVeigh or the Unabomber) has largely been perpetrated by white domestics.

White Ethnic Americans: Why They Came

White ethnic Western Europeans formed the second and third great waves of immigration, from the early 1800s to the mid-1900s. They joined a United States that was primarily made up of white Protestants from England. While most immigrants came searching for a better life, their experiences and conditions varied dramatically.

The first major influx of European immigrants came from Germany and Ireland, starting in the 1820s. Germans came for both economic opportunities and to escape political unrest. The liberal Germans who first came over had enough money to leave the coast and make their way inward, forming a German Midwest that still largely remains that way.

The Irish immigrants of the same time period were not as well off financially as the Germans, especially when they moved after the onset of the Irish Potato Famine of 1845. Financially limited, they stayed mainly in the cities of the East Coast, where they were employed as laborers and faced some serious discrimination. (Hey, even JFK was getting flack for being an Irish Catholic when he ran for president in the *1960s*.)

German and Irish immigration continued into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at which point the wave shifted to Southern and Eastern Europeans (people from Russia, Poland, Bulgaria, Austria-Hungary, and Italy). Political unrest, anti-Semitism, pogroms, land shortages, and crop failures drove them to seek better opportunities in the United States.

White Ethnic Americans: History of Intergroup Relations

In a broad sense, German immigrants were not victimized to the same degree as many of the other groups we discussed in this reading. While they may not have been welcome with open arms, they were able to settle in enclaves and establish roots. (Except during World War I and World War II, when anti-German sentiment led to frankfurters' names being changed to "hot dogs" to escape sounding German.)

Irish immigrants were more of an underclass than the Germans, for financial and religious reasons. The English had oppressed the Irish back in their homeland for years, cutting out their language, culture, and discriminating against Catholicism. Although the Irish had a larger population than the English, they were a subordinate group.

Much like a popular kid bullying a new girl when she hears gossip from the new girl's previous school, this English-Irish dynamic continued in America, where Anglo Americans saw Irish immigrants as a race apart: dirty, lacking ambition, and suitable only for the most menial jobs. Sound familiar? Yep, that's how Americans treated Jews, Italians, and many other minority populations. By necessity, Irish immigrants formed tight communities segregated from their Anglo neighbors.

The later wave of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe was also subject to intense discrimination and prejudice. The dominant group—which now included second- and third-generation Germans and Irish—saw Italian immigrants as the dregs of Europe, and they lived in segregated slums in Northeastern cities. They were paid less than other workers, and often took on dangerous work that other workers were reluctant to do. In some cases, Italians were even victims of lynching.

Jewish immigrants were legally discriminated from immigrating and owning land until a "Jew Bill" was passed in America in the 1800s. Even after that, Jews were subject to open discrimination—they were victims of hate crimes, redlined into mostly slums and ghettos, forced to work long hours in factories, negatively stereotyped in popular culture as menacing, and even kept out of colleges by "Jew quotas."

White Ethnic Americans: Current Status

- The 2008 U.S. Census shows that 16.5 percent of respondents reported being of German descent, making up the largest ethnic group in the country. You could probably assert that the Germans are totally assimilated into the dominant culture. There are now more Irish Americans in the United States than there are in Ireland, and despite tourists flocking to the saints' festivals in Little Italies, most Italian Americans have moved to the suburbs at the same rate as other white groups. And, although Jews only make up two percent of the American population, by and large they've found equal rights, acceptance, and success.

Health by Race and Ethnicity

Let's go out on a low note. It's pretty hard to miss the glaring racial disparity in the U.S.A. According our old pal, the Census Bureau:

- In 2008, the average life expectancy for white males was approximately five years longer than for black males (75.9 compared to 70.9).
- In 2007, the infant mortality rate for blacks was nearly twice that of whites (3.2 compared to 5.6 per 1,000 live births).
- Black people in the United States also have higher incidence of several other causes of mortality, from cancer to heart disease to diabetes.
- Other ethnic minorities, including Mexican Americans and American Indians, also have higher rates of these diseases and causes of mortality than whites.

Can we put our finger on the perpetual disparities in health among different ethnic groups? A lot of the answer lies in the level of health care that these groups receive: The *National Healthcare Disparities Report* shows that even *after* adjusting for insurance differences, racial and ethnic minority groups receive poorer quality of care and have less access to care than dominant groups.

It is important to remember that race, ethnicity, and economics are only part of the issue; research suggests that *education* also plays an important role. A 2003 study found that behavior-influenced diseases like lung cancer (from smoking), coronary artery disease (from poor eating and exercise habits), and AIDS initially were widespread across socioeconomically underserved groups—which are, most often in America, minority groups.

Once health education initiatives were upped and information was given out about behavior-influenced diseases, they decreased. So, go teachers!