Navigating Race and Identity in America: The Role of Psychology in Racial Interactions

Course Overview:

How have social institutions and historical factors led to the belief systems and stereotypes that shape how race is experienced in American society, and how do these belief systems affect the way individuals within racial groups come to view and define themselves?

This course will serve as an introduction to how people’s psychology—how they think, feel, and act—shapes their experience of race and identity in America. After a brief discussion about the structural and systemic origins of the racial status quo, we will examine the way that individuals navigate the social and racial landscape of modern-day America. Complementing courses that take sociological approaches to race in America, this course will focus on how individuals’ perceptions and thoughts about the world affect how they interpret and respond to social situations.

For example, the course will address:

• how stereotypes about one’s race or identity can cause individuals to feel threatened, and can undermine health, feelings of belonging, and academic performance
• how an individual’s concerns about the thoughts and beliefs of others can radically affect identity formation, particularly during adolescence
• how individuals have to navigate multiple cultural identities, especially as minority group members contending with mainstream ideas that differ from their own
• how majority group members (e.g., Whites) view their role in racial systems, and how they deal with concerns about being or appearing prejudiced
• how interventions can use social psychological concepts to mitigate negative outcomes of racial inequality

We will then use our understanding of these concepts to examine and consider different racial situations throughout American society and to understand how individuals navigate and experience race and identity. Throughout the course, we will watch films, read literature, and analyze music and art that reflect the experience of race and identity.

Course Goals:

Conversations about race in America are fraught with conflict and misunderstandings because there is little understanding or knowledge of where racial systems of difference come from and how deeply they affect the individual. In this course, students will learn how ideas of race were formed through structural and social forces, and they will develop a way of thinking that will allow them to critically examine situations that require understanding and navigating race in America. Throughout, students will be asked to take the perspective of individuals across a range of racial interactions, in order to recognize and reflect on the psychological experiences the individuals involved in current, real-world events.

Specifically, by the end of this course:

• Students will have a basic understanding of many of the structural and social forces involved in the development and maintenance of systemic racial biases, stereotypes, and inequality.
• Students will be familiar with several psychological concepts and findings about how race and stereotypes affect both majority and minority group members, and will have a vocabulary with which to discuss race and racial interactions.

• Students will be able to consider and discuss cultural products (e.g., film, art, literature) that deal with topics related to race and identity.

• Students will be able to observe and note real-world, daily instances of racial interactions, and – using the toolkit of vocabulary and perspectives discussed in this course – be able to critically analyze the role of social and psychological forces at work in such interactions. Students will be able to organize and lead a class discussion about such an analysis.

Class Format:

Discussions and lectures:

This course will be primarily discussion-based. Generally, each week will involve a primary reading (e.g., a chapter from Doing Race) that introduces a number of general themes, and a few supplementary readings or cultural examples that relate to these themes. Class discussion will focus on connecting different concepts from the readings to these examples.

One focus of the course is understanding and applying research findings from psychology on race, stereotypes, and identity. However, since this is a CSRE course and students will likely come from multiple disciplines, I don’t expect students to know how to effectively read and critique psychology journal articles. Instead, for the first several weeks of the course, I will use a combination of lecture and discussion to summarize and explain some of the key findings from psychological research. However, I will provide citations to the articles for interested students.

Sections:

During section, I will provide students with tangible examples of how people experience race in America, specifically through the use of film, TV, plays, and music. Sections will ensure that every student has access to the films without having to rent them. We will discuss these films and other media both in section and during our class meetings.

Readings:

Students are expected to have finished the readings before coming to class. This will allow students to actively engage in lectures and discussions, contributing thoughts and questions that occurred to them during the readings. Each week will have required readings (which the students should do before class) and “summarized readings” (which students will not be required to read, but which I will summarize during lecture).

Grades:

Participation: 10% of final grade

Students are also expected to participate in class. Generally, they should engage in and contribute to the learning experience and dialogue of the course. Attendance is required and will be taken at each class meeting. However, since life happens, students can miss one lecture without any negative effects to their grade.

(Exceptionally Brief) Weekly Reading Quizzes: 20% of final grade

At the beginning of the first class meeting of each week, we will have a very brief (~5 min) quiz based on the main reading assigned for that week. This serves two purposes: First, research
shows that practice in retrieving learned information helps cement learning. Secondly, these quizzes will be a way to check-in to ensure students are understanding the high-level, key concepts, and to tell me where I may need to revisit or clarify confusing concepts. These should not be a stressful experience for students, and they will not be long, difficult, or tricky.

Weekly Reading Responses: 20% of final grade
A 1-page (max) response to the readings for the week will be due at the beginning of the second class meeting each week. This response can take a variety of forms – response to a particularly striking point from the readings, a connection between discussion and the readings, etc. This should be a short reflection on the material of the week, allowing the student to briefly synthesize and connect some course content. Like the quizzes, this should not be a source of stress or burden, but rather a brief way to reflect basic connection with the course material. We will use these reading responses as talking points throughout our class discussions.

Discussion Leading (Group Presentation): 20% of final grade
The last several weeks of the course (beginning in Week 7) will consist of identifying and analyzing specific current events and social issues involving race and identity in America. Students will be assigned to a group and will be responsible for leading the discussion in class for one day. I have provided suggested topics, readings, and films for these weeks, but students will have the opportunity to offer suggestions and changes if they have other interests or ideas. Students and I will work closely together – I will help them develop their ideas for leading a discussion and work with them on skills for how to effectively “teach” others about analyzing race.

Final Essay: 30% of final grade
Students will write a paper on the topic from their group discussion section. This paper will be completed individually, but can (and should) draw on the material from the student’s discussion section. The paper will be a maximum of 15 pages, but shorter papers are certainly welcome. The paper should connect the area of your group’s discussion section to the broader themes discussed in the course.

Class Schedule

I. A Broad Perspective of Race and Stereotypes

Week 1.1 – Introduction
Req. reading:

Week 1.2
Req. reading:

Week 1 Section
Film: Imitation of Life (1934)
Media: Clark & Clark Doll Study (videos)
At home: Bluest Eye (scenes from play); “Thieves in the Night” by Talib Kweli & Mos Def (song)

II. Stereotype and Identity Threat: Belonging, Performance, & Health

Week 2.1 – Stereotype Threat
Req. reading:
Steele. “In the Air Between Us: Stereotypes, identity, and achievement.” Doing Race, Ch.13
Steele (2011). *Whistling Vivaldi*. (selections)

**Summarized:**

**Week 2.2**

**Req. reading:**
Eberhardt. “Enduring Racial Associations: African Americans, crime, and animal imagery.” *Doing Race, Ch. 16*

**Summarized:**
Inzlicht & Kang (2010). “Stereotype Threat Spillover: How coping with threats to social identity affects aggression, eating, decision making, and attention.” *JPSP.*

**Week 2 Section**

**Film:** *Stand and Deliver* (1988)

**Media:** Nadia Lopez – Principal from “Humans of New York” (various clips)

**Week 3.1 – Stereotypes and Prejudice of Whites**

**Req. reading:**
McDermott. “Ways of Being White: Privelege, perceived stigma, and transcendence.” *Doing Race, Ch. 15*

**Summarized:**
Devine (1989). “Stereotypes and Prejudice: Their automatic and controlled components.” *JPSP.*

**Week 3.2**

**Req. reading:**

**Week 3 Section**

**Film:** *White Like Me* (2013)

**Week 4.1 – Interventions**

**Req. reading:**

**Summarized:**
Cohen, Steele, & Ross (1999). “The mentor’s dilemma: Providing critical feedback across the racial divide.” *PSPB.*

**Week 4.2**

Potential holiday in quarter

**Week 4 Section**

**Discussion:** Television programs reducing prejudice (e.g., Graves (1999). “TV and Prejudice Reduction: When does TV as a vicarious experience make a difference?” *Journ. Soc. Issues*; relevant popular press articles)

**III. “Getting Under the Skin”: Defining Identities in a Racial World**

**Week 5.1 – Identity Formation and Adolescence**

**Req. reading:**
Florida Frenz (2013). “Autistic teen: How I navigate the so-called "nightmare" of high school.”

**Summarized:**
Yeager, et al (2014). “Breaking the cycle of mistrust: Wise interventions to provide critical feedback across the racial divide.” *JEP.*

**Week 5.2**
Req. reading:

Week 5 Section
Film: Do the Right Thing (1989)
Week 6.1 – Immigrant Culture
Req. reading:

Week 6.2
Req. reading:
Jhumpa Lahiri (1999). Interpreter of Maladies. (selected readings)

Week 6 Section
Film: The Namesake (2006)

IV. Analyzing Racial Situations in America (suggested topics)
Week 7.1 – Race and Housing
Req. reading:
Camarillo. “Going Back to Compton: Real estate, racial politics, and Black-Brown relations.” Doing Race, Ch. 10

Week 7.2
Req. reading:
e.g., “Argument over SF Soccer Field and Gentrification”, NPR (Dec. 2014)

Week 7 Section
Film: Dreams of a City: Creating East Palo Alto (1992)
Week 8.1 – Race in Entertainment, Arts, and Sports
Req. reading:
Morgan & Fischer. “Hiphop and Race: Blackness, language, and creativity.” Doing Race, Ch. 19

Week 8.2
Req. reading:
“Kenny Smith's open letter to Charles Barkley about Ferguson.” USA Today (Dec. 2014)

Week 8 Section
Film: Broke (ESPN “30 for 30”, 2012)
Week 9.1 – The American Legal System, Prison, & Police Brutality
Req. reading:

Week 9.2
Req. reading:
Alexander (2010). The New Jim Crow. (selected readings); Charles Blow: At Yale, the Police Detained My Son. NYTimes (Jan. 2015).

Week 9 Section
Film: Rand University (ESPN “30 for 30”, 2014)
At home: “Little Rodney” by Brother Ali (song)
“Don’t Shoot” by the Game (song)

Week 10.1 – Representation in the Media: The Case of Native American Identity
Req. reading:
Fryberg & Watts. “We’re Honoring You, Dude: Myths, mascots, and American Indians.” Doing Race, Ch. 17.

Week 10.2
Req. reading:

Week 10 Section