

Professor Ortiz

Latinos/as in the United States

## THEORIES OF RACISM AND ASSIMILATION

**Myrdal's Cycle:** Myrdal said that racism creates a moral dilemma in the hearts and minds of Americans. This was because Racism is in direct conflict with the American Creed. Life, liberty, pursuit of happiness; equality before the law; liberty and justice for all; equal opportunities -- racism goes against those ideals. We say we value laws based on fairness and rationality, yet there is little rational, and nothing fair about racism.

So how did we get here? He said racism was a cycle, and it started with the majority group seeing minorities as inferior. They're viewed as less than, less intelligent, less trustworthy, less meaningful to society. Then, because they are viewed as inferior, they are then treated differently in society. They are segregated from the majority group; the majority groups would not develop friendships or intimate relationships with them.

This would reinforce the idea that these people are different and inferior to the majority group. The minority group would then get unequal access to resources such education and job opportunities through policies. Because this group is seen as inferior and inherently different from the majority group, denying them the full range of access to resources is justified. Finally, the minority group will have lower standings on social indicators. So they are less educated, have less wealth; they may live in "bad" neighborhoods with higher crime rates. They may be less healthy than the majority group.

Well, then, now the majority group sees them as less than, and it seems justified because look at how sick or uneducated they are; they don't value the things we value, look at how they live in those dirty crime-ridden neighborhoods. The cycle thus continues.

In general, you might not see much wrong with this explanation. But try to think of some critiques! One of the reasons it's critiqued is because, well, what if you can't change people's minds? Since the way people see minority groups is the key to this cycle, it would require interventions there.

But how long does it take to change people's minds? How do you socialize a society to not see people as inferior, whether biologically or socially? Universities and corporations try their hand, with efforts at multiculturalism and diversity. Teaching us that we all might have different life experiences, but deep down, those differences do not mean we are inherently unequal.... But, that doesn't necessarily address unequal resources, and it doesn't necessarily work. And that's where another scholar comes into play.

**Cox's Critiques of Myrdal:** Cox was a die-hard conflict theorist, and he said Myrdal had the cycle all wrong. (And that's actually putting it nicely; he and Myrdal debated for years in publications about who was wrong).

Cox said it doesn't matter if you see me as an inferior; that doesn't stop me from living my life. But, if you are able to stop me from getting a job because of my race... well that's the major problem. He said we don't need to be seen as equals, but we need to be treated as equals. So the cycle for Cox starts **at minorities being given less resources.**

Not being given full citizenship rights despite being born here; not being allowed to read or to vote; not being allowed to attend college, or access loans from the bank to start a business or buy a home, being harassed when you move into a white neighborhood --- being seen as equal to whites doesn't suddenly make these things better. He said this was because racism was not about how people see other people-- it's how they restrict their access to resources to lower competition.

This debate rages on today, and you'll even see it play out when people talk about why they do or do not support Black Lives Matter. These ideas about gentle, small changes aimed at changing people's hearts and a more assertive push for resource allocation is a big wedge between groups who both claim to care about equality.

**Systemic Racism Theory:** Others believe that while racism is shaped by economic exploitation, the reality goes much deeper. In fact, colonization, slavery, genocide, segregationist policy, racist media images could be said to be distinct forms of racial violence, which combined, form the foundation of our society. Racism, then, is not some disease that's infected a previously healthy host.

Rather, they say there has never been a point in our country's history when racial oppression has not shaped every facet of our society's institutional practices. Legal matters, such as immigration quotas and citizenship; media representations in film and print that tell us how to think about each other; familial practices that teach how about who we are in relation to others -- racism has shaped each these institutions.

They say that racism does involve individual prejudices, hateful attitudes and feelings of superiority, but that alone doesn't describe the widespread and pervasive issues that can't be explained by the mere beliefs of everyday people. They said racism also involves practices and policies that result in subordination and inequality on the basis of race.

This is important because of our tendency is just focus on the individual level, what people do or think. Doing so allows those who benefit from racism, even unknowingly, to absolve themselves from any responsibility because they don't hate anyone. They might even claim to not see race at all.

So while other theories may be focused on those individual thoughts, or the ways discriminatory actions are linked to capitalism-- thinking about racism as systemic focuses our attention to the dynamics of multiple institutions, functioning together, to produce an outcome of domination. For example the public education system relies on funding from cities, which were formed and maintained through discriminatory lending practices, which exist in states with occupational segregation and discrimination, which makes it such that some groups are likely to remain employed in certain sectors of the economy. Yet the news media spreads messages about hard work and meritocracy, that is, the idea that those who reach success are true hustlers. The media and politicians can then spread messages that we are inherently different from one another culturally and that people of color are being unfairly benefited at the expense of white American's success. This is a systemic process, not merely just about how individuals think or feel about someone else.

Not all sociologists who study race and ethnicity do so using racism as their major lens. Assimilation is also major concern for sociologists who are interested in how different racial/ethnic groups experience life in the US.

The task for many sociologists is trying to understand and explain, and try to predict, what will happen to society and various groups as they enter in the US.

Sociologists who used theories of racism tend to focus on patterns of exclusion, so segregation, secession, expulsion, extermination, genocide and ethnic cleansing. Other scholars look at trends of racial ethnic incorporation.

1. Assimilation (generally, one group is forced to, or voluntarily, adapts/gives up aspects of their culture to fit into a dominant culture)
2. Integration (individuals incorporated on an equal basis)
3. Fusion or creolization (two different cultures fuse to form a new one)
4. Pluralism (people allowed to maintain some vestige of cultural traditions but participate in broader common civic culture).

In general, the US tends to position itself as a pluralist society, but most research shows that in fact assimilation is the general model of how new groups are incorporated into the mainstream.

**Robert Park** was a sociologist in Chicago during the great migration boom, where the city was incorporating Black people moving from the south, as well Puerto Ricans and Jewish people. He and his colleagues sought to explain how these groups would become a part of the city. While he acknowledged that there were differences between groups, he wasn't rushing at the opportunity to say these differences were also inequalities, and this is crucial for this theory. He said that the process of inclusion for any group into US society took 4 steps, which he called the race relations cycle.

First, there needed to be contact between the groups, and that contact could be peaceful or violent. Next, there would be competition or conflict over scarce or valuable resources. Next, some accommodation would be met. Meaning, there would be some arrangement worked out whereby conflict stalled. And this always ended always in assimilation, the subordinate group is always absorbed by dominant group. Over time, their initial differences are pretty much indistinguishable.

He thus defined assimilation as: a process of interpenetration in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups. By sharing their experience and history, they are incorporated with the host group in a common cultural life. And Park said this was an active decision of the groups involved.

**Gordon** critiqued Park because he said Park didn't deal well with groups that were viewed as racially distinct from Europeans, and that had been in the US for generations but were not fully assimilated.

So Gordon examined the same groups: African Americans, Jews and Puerto Ricans. And he considered the variety of initial encounters with the US (African Americans were by and large brought over involuntarily through slavery; Puerto Ricans were incorporated in the US as a colony; and Jews have come over generally as refugees and voluntarily).

He said the nature of the contact is actually quite relevant in what happens when they arrive. He also questioned the idea of total assimilation. He asked: might it look different from one generation to the next? Or across groups?

So he argued that we have to problematize assimilation and he came up with **7 types/stages**. He said it's not a zero-sum game, it can happen in varied ways and change across generations.

1. Cultural assimilation means the new group has changed their cultural patterns (including religious beliefs and observance, diet, attire, and core values). This is typically the first form to occur when groups come into contact. While it can be a one way process, where the new group becomes like the established group, this is more often a two-way process – where the new group selects certain practices that they see are useful among the majority group, and where the majority group adopts cultural practices if the new group which it finds appealing.

2. Then there is Structural assimilation, which means they've taken on large-scale relationships with the dominant group, so they've entered fully into the societal network of groups (such as cliques and clubs) and institutions, like churches and the military (your reading goes over the role of churches). Levels of home ownership and levels of education are some ways this type of assimilation is measured.

3. Marital: they have intermarried and had children with the main group.

4. Identificational assimilation means they have developed a sense of peoplehood, or identity with the main group.

5. Attitude receptional assimilation means they have reached a point where they encounter no prejudice attitudes

6. Behavior Receptional means they have reached a point where they encounter no discrimination

7. Finally there is civic assimilation, where there is no conflict over values and power between the groups.

For Gordon, when all 7 occurred for a group, that was total assimilation; but that doesn't always happen. Also, he doesn't say there is a specific order, though he does find that cultural assimilation usually occurs first, and that once structural assimilation occurs, it is more likely that some of the other types might follow, though it's not guaranteed.

For example, if structural assimilation occurs, the groups will be spending time together. Children will play together, later they form cliques in adolescence. Perhaps they join the same fraternities and sororities later on. If the parents belong to the same country club and invite each other to dinner, it would be reasonable to assume these children might marry each other after sustained contact.

Gordon says community leaders, both religious and nationality-based are aware of this potential, which is why they try to confine members in their primary ethnic/racial group from youth clubs to adult clubs and communal institutions. They want to keep people safely in their ethnic fold. He also says if martial assimilation occurs, then those children would develop identificational assimilation. And perhaps, he said, prejudice and discrimination would become less relevant as people stopped seeing each other as different and developed more an in-group feeling.

We do have evidence that as a panethnic group, there is cultural, structural and martial assimilation. Language is widely considered the most important aspect of assimilation if immigrant groups are to succeed outside of their ethnic enclave in the new country. So living outside of Hartford CT, Miami, El Paso -- this requires knowledge beyond Spanish. But, and this is where we return to the myths of the Latino threat, Latinos in particular on average tend to see the value of both Spanish and English. Data from the Census and other

national, longitudinal studies confirm that about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of foreign-born Latinx who come here speak only Spanish, with  $\frac{1}{4}$  being bilingual. Among that second generation, so their children, about half are bilingual during childhood, but almost none remain only knowing Spanish by adulthood. And third generation –  $\frac{3}{4}$  only know English. Among foreign born Latinos who are the first generation here, they also have this longing for their children and grandchildren to be bi-lingual, to be able to excel at English but also be able to communicate with family in Spanish. We also know that second and third generation Latinx people who were not taught Spanish feel this deep regret.

Another aspect of culture that is theorized to be the least likely to change is religion. We know that Latinx people are overwhelmingly Catholic, while Protestantism is the predominant religion in American society. National surveys find that this conversion takes place quite slowly, but it does occur, jumping from 15% of protestant Latinx in the first gen, to 30% by the third generation.

Levels of higher education are still lower for Latinx, but more and more and at least graduating high school. So 48% of the first generation typically have not graduated high school, compared to the 2nd gen, with 23% not graduating high school--- whereas by the fourth generation, only 17% have not graduated high school. Household income is another indicator of structural assimilation, but this does not show steady improvement across generations.

The 4th generation is likely to have similar incomes to the second generation, despite being more educated. More specifically, 34% of the 4th generation have household incomes less than \$35,000, while 36% of the second gen have household incomes of less than \$35k. When it comes into inter-ethnic relationships, most Latinx people will report that their close friends are other Latinos. Second generation and beyond, *and especially those living in more urban and diverse areas*, have regular contact with other groups at work, in school, the gym, and at social events. Latinx people in rural areas are more likely to report that long-term residents of the area are not friendly, and live in more highly segregated areas where coworkers are more likely to be other Latinos.

As for marital assimilation, 13% of the first generation are married to a non-Latinx person, whereas 49% of the fourth generation is. Most of those unions are white, which for some, helps facilitate that integration process because the spouse helps them access white family, friends, and their institutions (they go to church together, the PTA, etc). Often, having the white spouse will help other whites be more welcoming and less skeptical than if they walked in by themselves. This, again, does not mean loss of their own culture

though. Noche Buena for example, the big Christmas Eve party, remains a really important ritual, including for those married to non-Latinos.

When we get to the other forms, we seem some issues. Evidence of identificational assimilation is mixed and messy. On the one hand, the multiracial children of those unions are more likely to have access to that identity, and we know first generation Latinx are very hopeful and optimistic about becoming American. But subsequent generations feel way more cynical. This is because the last three types of assimilation make identifying as “American” incredibly difficult. The third generation is particularly aware of the barriers to opportunities and obstacles outside of their control.

Gordon makes two qualifications of this theory, which the experiences of Latinx groups provide evidence for. First, he says that if the group is segregated (either forcefully or voluntary) it will be difficult to assimilate and it will be very slow. Second, groups that experience extreme discrimination, especially in the form of education and occupational opportunities will also find it difficult to assimilate.

Gordon also found that there are three competing versions of assimilation:

1. Melting pot -- all groups assimilated into a pre-existing American culture, and what American culture looks like changes over time. Everyone's differences “melt” down so that those differences are indistinguishable.

2. Cultural pluralism -- groups come into country and are allowed to maintain some version of cultural practices while participating in shared civic culture. This would be more like a salad, each piece somewhat distinct, but still joining together.

3. Anglo-conformity -- dominant culture of US is a really an Anglo-Protestant one, and everyone is expected to assimilate into that ideal. Scholars of racism who trace the social mobility of European immigrants who were able to become white argue this is indeed the reality of the country.