Dubois & Race Conflict: Crash Course Sociology #7

Crash Course: Sociology
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Nicole: Two bachelors degrees, PhD from Harvard University, two-year fellowship to study in Berlin. Professor of Sociology and History at two different universities, author of countless books. Activist and co-founder of a key civil rights organization. Editor and co-founder of a magazine, and a poet to boot. Pretty good resume, yeah? What if I make it a bit more impressive? That PhD from Harvard? First Harvard PhD granted to an African American. The civil rights organization? The NAACP. That magazine? The Crisis, the longest-running black publication in the United States, in print since 1910. This resume belongs to William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, whom you might know better as W.E.B. Du Bois. He was one of the earliest American sociologists as well as one of the first proponents of race-conflict theory, and his studies of the lives of African Americans during the Jim Crow era of American history and the oppression they faced are the cornerstones of how sociologists study race.

(Intro)

W.E.B. Du Bois was born in a small town in Massachusetts in 1868. 1868, that's five years after the Emancipation Proclamation, three years after the end of the American Civil War, and the same year that the 14th Amendment was passed. At this time, race was considered a biological construct. Slavery, and the later Jim Crow laws, laws in the South that enforced racial segregation, were framed as natural consequences of the supposed natural inferiority of blacks to whites. We, of course, now know that this was not just wrong, but deeply harmful, and more than that, the idea that race itself is a purely biological immutable quality is also understood today as being simply untrue.

Instead, race is thought of as a socially constructed category of people who share biological traits that society has deemed important. Yes, human beings vary a lot in how we look, our skin color, our facial features, our body shapes, our hair texture, but those visual markers only become a race when members of society decide that specific markers constitute a specific racial group. This is why the concept of race often changes across cultures and times. For example, when Du Bois was alive, Irish and Italian Americans weren't considered white either. But today, try telling some Boston Southie guy or an Italian grandma from Pittsburgh that they're not white. See what they say.

Did something change about Irish and Italian Americans biologically? Of course not. It's how society saw them that changed, and it's that last bit, what race a person is seen as and how they're treated as a result, that ends up being a huge determinant of a person's social outcome. Du Bois began to consider his race as a part of his identity when he moved to the South to go to college and then spent several years in Europe. He saw how differently black people were treated in different places and was disillusioned about how Americans treated him based on his skin color. He can describe this disillusionment much better than I can: "One ever feels his twoness," he wrote, "An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings. Two warring id."

This quote reveals a really critical underlying thread in much of Du Bois' work: the idea of double-consciousness. Du Bois argued that there are two competing identities as a black American. Seeing one's self as an American and seeing one's-self as a black person while living in white-centric America. Living as a member of a non-dominant race, he said, creates a fracture in your sense of identity within that society. These feelings are what fueled Du Bois' work, which focused on the disparities and conflicts between people of different races, what we now call race-conflict theory.

Today, questions of race and identity are questioned by sociologists who work on racial identity theory, which looks at how individuals come to identify as a certain race. Du Bois didn't only research racial identity, though. He also looked at the everyday lives of black and white Americans and wrote extensively about how and why their lives differed so drastically in post-slavery America. Let's go to the Thought Bubble to look at one of Du Bois' early studies of these disparities.

In 1896, the University of Pennsylvania hired Du Bois to do a survey on black communities in Philadelphia. His work eventually become the Philadelphia Negro, the first published study of the living conditions of African-Americans. Du Bois went knocking on doors, asking people questions about themselves and their families, and there were an awful lot of doors. All told, Du Bois collected data on 9, 675 African-Americans. He focused on one specific ward of Philly, the 7th ward, a historically Black neighborhood that attracted families of all classes, from doctors and teachers to the poor and destitute. He sat in thousands of parlors, asking questions about age, gender, education, literacy, occupations, earnings, crime, and documented the ways in which African-Americans differed from Philly's white residents.

For example, the Black population turned out to be much younger than the white population, and had a higher proportion of women. It also had lower literacy rates, higher rates of poverty and crime, and a higher concentration of workers in the service industry than in manufacturing or trade. Mortality rates were higher, as was the frequency of illness. But here's what made Du Bois' report especially unique: He concluded that much of the dysfunction within Black communities came from inferior access to things like education and more lucrative jobs.

The reason that the Black population had higher rates of death and illness, he said, was because of all occupational hazards and poverty and less access to healthcare. It's hard to express just how radical Du Bois' conclusions were at the time. The problems in Black communities were not due to racial inferiority, Du Bois argued, but to racial prejudice, and that was completely different from how many Americans thought at the time. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So race doesn't exist in a vacuum. It doesn't just imbue you with certain essential qualities. Instead, race matters because of the power that society gives it. For another example, let's stick with Philly and use the labor unions there in the 1890s. Because of prejudice against Black workers and beliefs about their abilities and morals, trade labors and unions didn't allow Black workers to join, and because they couldn't join unions, many Black workers couldn't get manufacturing or trade work, which paid much better than service work, and because they couldn't get these jobs, Black communities had more men out of work, higher rates of poverty, and more criminal behavior, which then allowed the white workers in unions to justify their decision to not allow Black workers into their union.

The prevailing beliefs about race and racism ultimately reinforced themselves. This is what's now known as racial formation theory, a theory formalized by modern sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant. Racial formation refers to the process through which social, political, and economic forces influence how a society defines racial categories and how those racial categories, in turn, end up shaping those forces. Omi and Winant argue that the concept of race came about as a tool to justify and maintain the economic and political power held by those of European descent.

Another modern look at these issues can be seen in the work of sociologist William Julius Wilson. He explores why Black and white Americans tend to have such different outcomes in terms of income, education, and more, and he argues that class, not race, is the determining factor for many Black Americans, but the reasons

that these class gaps exist to begin with come from the structural disadvantages that date back to Du Bois' time.

Du Bois continued to research the ways in which prejudice, segregation, and lack of access to education and jobs were holding back African Americans. A strong advocate of education and of challenging Jim Crow laws, he clashed with another leading Black intellectual of the time, Booker T. Washington, who advocated compromise with the predominantly white political system.

Over time, Du Bois grew frustrated with the limits of scholarship in affecting change, so he turned to direct activism and political writing. In 1909, he co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or the NAACP, and was the editor and intellectual driving force behind its magazine, The Crisis.

The NAACP fought against lynching, segregation of schools, voting disenfranchisement, and much more. It used journalism as one of its most powerful tools, publishing the records of thousands of lynchings over a 30 year period and it used lawsuits targeting voter disenfranchisement and school segregation in decade long court battles, and after Du Bois' time, it went on to become part of many of the landmark moments in the fight for civil rights, including the Brown v. Board of Education case, the Montgomery Bus Buycott, and the March on Washington.

Modern sociologists continue Du Bois' work on racial politics, asking the question, how is race intertwined with political power and the institutional structures within a society? Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, for example, argues that we now have what he calls "racism without racists." What he means is explicitly racist views have become less socially acceptable, so fewer people are willing to say that they don't think Black and white Americans should have equal rights, but as Bonilla-Silva points out, that doesn't mean racism is a thing of the past.

Instead, he says structural racism, the kind that's entrenched in political and legal structures, still holds back the progress of racial minorities. Take, for example, the fact that the median wealth of white Americans is 13 times higher than the wealth of Black Americans. Now, you could look at that say, "Well, Black people just aren't as good at saving as white people, after all, it's not like there's anything legally preventing them from making or saving more money," but that completely ignores the ways in which wealth builds up over generations.

Past generations of Black Americans were unable to build wealth, because they had far less access to higher incomes, banking services, and housing. These ideas about how the structures of power interact with race may have their origins in Du Bois' work, but they continue today, and so do the studies of racial resistance.

Researchers of racial resistance ask, how do different racial groups challenge and change the structures of power? Sometimes racial resistance is easy to say in society, think the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s or Black Lives Matter today. But sociologists can also look at more subtle forms of resistance, too, like resistance against racial ideas and stereotypes. For example, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has written about the different relationships that Black and white women had with marriage and staying home to raise a family.

In the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s, one of its key issues was the exclusion of women from the workforce. Entering the workforce was seen as a form of resistance, but Black women have, for most of American history, been forced to work or needed to work to help support their families. For them, Collins argues, joining the work force is not resistance. Instead, staying at home to care for their families can be an act of resistance against society's expectations for Black women.

All of these modern fields of study within race-conflict theory: racial identity, racial formation, racial politics, and racial resistance, they all have their origins in the work of one sociologist: W.E.B. Du Bois.

Today, we talked about W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the founders of sociological thought and the founder of race-conflict theory. We talked about race and how our understanding of how we define race has changed over time. We talked about Du Bois' idea of double consciousness and how it relates to the modern-day field of racial identity. We introduced the idea of racial formation and used Du Bois' survey of African Americans in Philadelphia to look at how economic, political, and social structures effect how we perceive different races, and vice versa, and finally, we looked at the activist side of Du Bois' life, as co-founder of the NAACP and editor of The Crisis, and discussed how modern day sociologists study racial politics and racial resistance.

Next time, we'll take a look at some of the sociologists who are at the forefront of a different type of conflict theory: gender conflict theory.

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