assimilation (developing a sense of national identity, e.g., identifying as an American, rather than as an Asian American), attitude receptational assimilation (absence of prejudiced thoughts among dominant and minority group members), behavioral receptational assimilation (absence of discrimination, e.g., lower wages for minorities would not exist), and finally civic assimilation (absence of value and power conflicts).

Assimilation is said to allow a society to maintain its equilibrium (a goal of the functionalist perspective) if all members of society, regardless of their racial or ethnic identity, adopt one dominant culture. This is often characterized as a voluntary process. Critics argue that this perspective assumes that social integration is a shared goal and that members of the minority group are willing to assume the dominant group's identity and culture, assuming that the dominant culture is the one and only preferred culture (Myers 2005). The perspective also assumes that assimilation is the same experience for all ethnic groups, ignoring the historical legacy of slavery and racial discrimination in our society.

Assimilation is not the only means to achieve racial-ethnic stability. Other countries maintain pluralism, where each ethnic or racial group maintains its own culture (cultural pluralism) or a separate set of social structures and institutions (structural pluralism). Switzerland, which has a number of different nationalities and religions, is an example of a pluralistic society. The country, also referred to as the Swiss Confederation, has four official languages—German, French, Italian, and Romansh. Relationships between each ethnic group are described for the most part as harmonious because each of the ethnically diverse parts joined the confederation voluntarily seeking protection (Farley 2005). In his examination of pluralism in the United States, Min Zhou notes, "As America becomes increasingly multiethnic, and as ethnic Americans become integral in our society, it becomes more and more evident that there is no contradiction between an ethnic identity and an American identity" (2004:153).

**Conflict Perspective**

According to sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois (1996), perhaps it is wrong "to speak of race at all as a concept, rather than as a group of contradictory forces, facts and tendencies." The problem of the twentieth century, wrote Du Bois, is "the color line."

Conflict theorists focus on how the dynamics of racial and ethnic relations divides groups while maintaining a dominant group. The dominant group may be defined according to racial or ethnic categories, but can also be defined according to social class. Instead of relationships based on consensus (or assimilation), relationships are based on power, force, and coercion. Ethnocentrism and racism maintain the status quo by dividing individuals along racial and ethnic lines (Myers 2005).

Drawing upon Marx’s class analysis, Du Bois was one of the first theorists to observe the connection between racism and capitalist-class oppression in the United States and throughout the world. He noted the link between racist ideas and actions to maintain a Eurocentric system of domination (Feagin and Batur 2004). Du Bois wrote,

> Throughout the world today organized groups of men by monopoly of economic and physical power, legal enactment and intellectual training are limiting with great determination and unflagging zeal the development of other groups; and that the concentration particularly on economic power today puts the majority of mankind into a slavery to the rest. (1996:532)

Though most theorists from this perspective see conflict as emanating from one dominant group, conflict may also be mutual. Edna Bonacich (1972) offers a theory of ethnic antagonism, encompassing all levels of mutual intergroup conflict. She argues that this ethnic antagonism
emerges from a labor market, split along ethnic and class lines. To be split, the labor market must include at least two groups of workers whose price of labor differs for the same work. Conflict develops between three classes: businesses or employers, higher paid labor, and cheaper labor. Bonacich explains that as businesses attempt to maintain a cheap workforce (not caring about who does the work as long as it gets done), higher paid workers attempt to maintain their prime labor position (resisting the threat of lower wage laborers), and cheaper laborers attempt to advance their position (threatening higher paid workers). Higher paid workers may use exclusionary practices (attempting to prevent the importation of cheaper non-native labor) or caste arrangements (excluding some groups from certain types of work) to maintain their advantage in the labor market. According to Bonacich, the presence of a cheaper labor group threatens the jobs of higher paid workers and the standard for wages in all jobs. Under these conditions, laborers remain in conflict with each other, and the interests of capitalist business owners are maintained.

**Feminist Perspective**

Feminist theory has attempted to account for and focus on the experiences of women and other marginalized groups in society. Feminist theory intersects with multiculturalism through the analysis of multiple systems of oppression, not just gender, but including categories of race, class, sexual orientation, nation of origin, language, culture, and ethnicity. Emerging from this is Patricia Hill Collins’ Black feminist theory. Black feminists identify the value of a theoretical perspective that addresses the simultaneity of race, class, and gender oppression.

Black feminist scholars note that the misguided application of traditional feminist perspectives of “the family,” “patriarchy,” and “reproduction” to understand the experience of Black women’s lives. Black women do not lead parallel lives, but rather different lives. British scholar Hazel Carby (1985:390) argues that because Black women are subject to simultaneous oppression based on class, race, and patriarchy, the application of traditional (White) feminist perspectives are not appropriate and are actually misleading to comprehend their true experience. She argues that White feminist theory has to recognize “White women stand in a power relation as oppressors of Black women” (p. 390).

As an example, Carby analyzes an article on women in Third World manufacturing. Carby highlights how the photographs accompanying the article are of “anonymous Black women.” She observes, “This anonymity and the tendency to generalize into meaningless, the oppression of an amorphous category called ‘Third World Women,’ are symptomatic of the ways in which the specificity of our experiences and oppression are subsumed under inapplicable concepts and theories” (p. 394).

**Interactionist Perspective**

Sociologists believe that race is a social construct. We learn about racial and ethnic categories of White, Black, Latino, Asian, Native American, and immigrant through our social interaction. The meaning and values for these and other categories are provided by our social institutions, families, and friends (Ore 2003). As much as I and other social scientists inform our students about the unsubstantiated use of the term race, for most students, race is real. The term is loaded with social, cultural, and political baggage, making deconstructing it difficult to accomplish.

Social scientists have noted how people are raced, how race itself is not a category but a practice. Howard McGary (1999:83) defines practice as “a commonly accepted course of action that may be over time habitual in nature; a course of action that specifies certain forms of behavior as permissible and others impermissible, with rewards and penalties assigned accordingly.” In this way, racial categories and identities serve as intersections of social beliefs, perceptions, and activities that are reinforced by enduring systems of rewards and penalties (Shuford 2001).
The practice of being raced includes with it the bestowing of power and privilege and what is granted to one group may be denied to another. For example, Madonna and Angelina Jolie were honored (in some circles) for their adoption of children from Cambodia, Ethiopia, and Malawi, spotlighting their adoptions as examples of international goodwill and charity. Yet, as Matthew Jacobsen (1998) asks, why can White women have Black children but Black women cannot adopt White children? The interactionist perspective reminds us that racial designations may be fictitious, but their consequences are real. A summary of all theoretical perspectives is provided in Table 3.2.

The consequences of racial and ethnic inequalities include income and wealth disparities. "Race is so associated with class in the United States that it might not be direct discrimination, but it still matters indirectly," says sociologist Dalton Conley (Ohlemacher 2006:6). Data reported by the U.S. Census reveal that Black households had the lowest median income in the 2005, $30,858, which was 61 percent of the median income for non-Hispanic White households, $50,784. The median income for Hispanic households was $35,967, 71 percent of the median for non-Hispanic White households. American Indians and Alaska Natives had a median income of $33,627 (based on a three-year estimate). Asian households had the highest median income, $61,094, 120 percent of the median for non-Hispanic White households (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Lee 2006).