

Language, Thought, and Identity

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Professor Eviatar Zerubavel, SAS - Sociology

TTH 2:15-3:35P

Hickman Hall Rm 206

Douglass Campus

Will Count Towards SAS-Sociology Major

Will Count Towards SAS-Sociology Minor

Why is President Obama is considered a black man whose mother was white rather than a white man whose father was black? Why does adding a slice of cheese turn a plain “hamburger” into a “cheeseburger” whereas adding some ketchup does not turn it into a “ketchupburger”? Why is the term working mom far more widely used than the nominally equivalent term working dad? And why do we have a term such as openly gay yet no term such as openly straight?

These are the kind of questions we will address in this course, which is designed to help students gain a better understanding of the way we construct and maintain social identities (“male,” “Muslim,” “adult,” “American,” “conservative,” “Asian,” “gay,” “vegetarian,” “Southerner,” “feminist”), and of the role played by the act of “othering” in that process. We will thus examine how we come to (a) define what is “normal,” (b) set our cognitive “defaults,” and (c) establish what we habitually come to take for granted. We will draw on various disciplines (sociology, anthropology, linguistics, history, cultural studies, literary criticism, and disability studies) to examine the way we construct our social identities. In so doing, we will be able to better understand why terms such as homoerotic and non-whites are used much more widely than their nominally equivalent counterparts heteroerotic and non-blacks, as well as the cultural nuances underlying such concepts as white-collar crime, non-Western, standard English, and “Black Lives Matter.”

EVIATAR ZERUBAVEL is Board of Governors and Distinguished Professor of Sociology. He is the author of eleven books and has written about a wide variety of topics ranging from maps, calendars, and flexibility to race, perception, and memory. His last three books explored the social organization of silence and denial, the social construction of genealogical relatedness, and the social foundations of relevance and irrelevance. He is currently writing a book on taken-for-grantedness and “normality.”