2.7: Alternatives to Binary Systems

Through all these examples, we hope to show that binary ways of understanding human differences are insufficient for understanding the complexities of human culture. Binary ways of thinking assume that there are only two categories of gender, race, and class identities among others, and that these two categories are complete opposites. Just as men are defined as “not women” in a binary system, straight people are defined as “not gay,” white people are defined as “not Black,” and middle-class people are defined as “not poor.” Oppositional, binary thinking works strategically such that the dominant groups in society are associated with more valued traits, while the subordinate groups, defined as their opposites, are always associated with less valued traits. Thus, the poles in a binary system define each other and only make sense in the presence of their opposites. Masculinity only has meaning as the opposite of femininity. In reality, identities and lives are complex and multi-faceted. For one, all categories of identity are more richly expressed and understood as matrices of difference. More than that, all of us have multiple aspects of identity that we experience simultaneously and that are mutually constitutive. Our experience of gender is always shaped by our race, class, and other identities. Our experience of race is particular to our gender, class, and other identities as well. This is why taking an intersectional approach to understanding identity gives us a more complex understanding of social reality. Each of our social locations is impacted by the intersection of several facets of identity in a way that should give us pause when we encounter blanket statements like “all men are ______” or “all Latinas are _____” or “all lesbians are____.” The social world is complex, and rather than reducing human difference to simple binaries, we must embrace the world as it is and acknowledge the complexity.