

Race, Ethnicity and Migration



If 'race' is a discredited concept, how can we explain the persistence of racism in society? Refer to sociological theories in your answer.

According to most sociologists, 'race' is indeed a discredited concept if it is used to explain the behaviour of entire racial or ethnic groups. But the question pointedly asks why many people in wider society continue to see racial differences as significant whilst a minority use 'race' as a legitimisation for prejudice and discrimination. This question requires you to use sociological theories to explain why racism has proved so persistent.

As ever, you will need to start with a discussion of the key concept here, namely 'race' (pp. 632-3). It would be useful to provide a brief history of the origins of the concept and some examples of the ways in which it has been used. It is important to say something about its development in nineteenth-century scientific work. This 'race science' claimed to identify three racial groups: negroid (black), caucasian (white) and mongoloid (yellow). You should also refer to some examples of the way that 'race' has influenced societies more generally. The chapter introduction gives an account of the final days of the South African apartheid system, for example, which classified social groups along racial lines as part of the white minority population's system of domination. You could also discuss the racist ideology of the National Socialists in Germany and their attempts to eliminate Jewish populations across Europe.

To demonstrate the persistence of racism – as demanded by the question – you could then discuss some of the ongoing problems faced by some minority ethnic groups in modern societies, such as poor housing, disadvantage in labour markets, over-representation in the criminal justice system, and so on (pp. 648-52). The racist murder of Stephen Lawrence and the Police handling of this would make a particularly strong point here (pp. 640-1). It would also be very effective to discuss the differences between an old biological version of racism and the more recent culturally-based one (p. 639). Having established that racism persists, the rest of the essay now has to consider how this can be explained sociologically.

At this stage you will need to look at the chapter's outline of several theories, which starts on page 641 and includes theories of ethnocentrism, group closure and resource allocation. Ethnocentrism is the valorization of an insider group's culture and a corresponding fear of outsiders resulting in negative stereotyping. In a sense, ethnocentrism is the flip side of processes leading to the production of social solidarity. Group closure is a theory developed from the work of Max Weber. It refers to the ways in which social groups use certain exclusionary devices to erect boundaries around themselves which protect them from others. Arguably, the apartheid system was an instance of group closure exercised by the white minority against the black majority. Resource allocation is perhaps best viewed as an example of an exclusionary device aimed at ensuring that resources such as income, employment opportunities or food supplies, are available to powerful groups often at the expense of others.



In order to fully answer this question, you will need to select some examples of racism and race-based discrimination from the first part of the essay and explain these using one or more of the theories you introduce. As the chapter suggests, in truth, ethnocentrism, group closure and resource allocation are closely related and a more satisfactory explanation can be arrived at by combining the central elements from all three.