Understanding Social Stratification: Race and Ethnicity With its more than six billion people, the world offers a fascinating variety of human shapes and colors. People see one another as black, white, red, yellow, and brown. Because of this, race is a complex and often misunderstood concept. Race is a reality in the sense that inherited physical characteristics distinguish one group from another (we really all do look differently). However, race is actually socially constructed. In fact, even biologists cannot agree on how many races there are, with some claiming as few as 2 races and others claiming as many as 2000. Often confused with ethnicity, race refers to inherited physical characteristics, while ethnicity refers to people who identify with one another on the basis of a common culture. A factor often associated with race is minority status and being a minority group. A minority group is not necessarily the numerical minority, but is defined as one singled out for unequal treatment by members of the dominant group. The dominant group is the group with the most power, greatest privileges, and highest social status. Both race and ethnicity can be a basis for unequal treatment. The extent of ethnic identification depends upon the relative size of the group, its power, broad physical characteristics, and the amount of discrimination. Prejudice refers to an attitude of prejudging others, usually negatively. Discrimination refers to an act of unfair treatment. Individual discrimination is the negative treatment of one person by another, while institutional discrimination is discrimination built into society's social institutions. Sociologists have studied race relations around the world and have found that relationships between racial/ethnic groups fall into one of six patterns: Genocide - The dominant group attempts to destroy the minority group. (as in Nazi Germany and Rwanda) Population Transfer - The dominant group forces the minority group to move. (as in Native Americans being forced to move to reservations) Internal Colonialism - The policy of economically exploiting minority groups. Minority groups are suppressed but are needed for labor (as in slavery in U.S. history) Segregation - The policy of keeping racial/ethnic groups apart. The dominant group structures social institutions so that they will have minimum contact with minority groups. (as in Jim Crow laws that established separate schools and other facilities for blacks and whites in the U.S.) Assimilation - The process by which a minority group is absorbed into the mainstream culture. In forced assimilation the minority group is forbidden by law to practice its own religion, language and customs. In permissible assimilation, the minority groups adopt the ways of the dominant culture gradually and in their own way. Multiculturalism - (also known as pluralism) A policy that permits or encourages ethnic difference. (as in Switzerland, which is made up of French, Italians, Germans and Romansch. All maintain their culture and language and participate cooperatively in the nation's economic and political affairs. So much that none can accurately be called a minority group.)