

## Book Review

Eller, J. D. (2015). *Culture and diversity in the United States: So many ways to be American*. New York: Routledge.

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Eller provides the quintessential text for analysis and comprehension of the evolving question of what it means to be “American.” He provides research, data, and discussion about the history and contemporary effects of the social construction of culture and diversity in America. Eller gives his audience an overview of American society’s technique of pigeonholing all citizens into distinct categories and maintains that constructs of diversity are dynamic and continually evolving, much as the United States of America has evolved since its inception.

With each progressing chapter, the reader is taken into areas that are often not fully discussed in academic circles let alone everyday dialogue. Eller de-escalates controversies about sex/gender, race, age, and (dis)abilities by utilizing material from many varied sources. The book’s sources are as diverse as the topic of diversity, providing material for the reader to digest and draw conclusions. Drawing from psychology, sociology, history, legal and population studies, as well as from contemporary literature, Eller tastefully explains the invention and evolution of the constructs of diversity and culture and how those constructs at any given time in America’s history have impacted its citizens. Chapter 3, “*Race and Racial Thinking*,” provides a discussion of slavery, which is particularly interesting. Beginning with the historical practice of enslaving Africans, followed by an in depth discussion of the various periods in American history when laws were made and changed by Anglo Americans about the practice of slavery,

Eller reveals how various means were created to continue inequality in the United States after the Civil Rights Movement. Creation of mechanisms to assure inequality between races have created issues regarding access to goods and services and institutions important to the economic well-being of minorities.

Two chapters are devoted to sex and gender. Chapter 6 discusses the constructs of male and female, while Chapter 7 views sex and gender “beyond the gender binary” (p. 137). These chapters remind us that sex and gender are socially constructed and extremely complicated issues. After completing these chapters, the reader is totally disabled from attempting to categorize sex and gender issues. Eller makes it clear that sexuality is a complex mix of emotions, physical attractions, behaviors, and practices, which cannot be dictated by societal norms. He maintains that “because it is not obvious what a man or a woman is in America it is a source of both stress and freedom” (p. 136). Eller contends “diversity is the nature of America” (p. 4), and that the concept of “variety within and between populations is the rule” and prevails over the concept of social deviance (p. 2).

Each chapter of this text provides a variety of statistical data presented in various forms, such as graphs, narration, and maps, and provides vignettes focused on the chapter topic. These elements enhance each chapter’s material and provide the reader with tools to guide individual research into the topic at hand. A critical thinking question

is also added at the end of each chapter, which enhances the vignette and provides an opportunity to utilize the material in a practical manner.

Issues of age, health, (dis)abilities, ethnicity, class, religion, and language are all explored in an in-depth, enlightening manner, highlighting the history of each construct and historical, as well as contemporary, implications. The intersectionalities of each area are discussed at length without being confusing. Quite the contrary, the material is practically written and organized, which will assist any student in untangling concepts, which are often difficult to grasp. Eller proposes an alternative to categorization, offering “compositional modeling” as a solution to identifying people in narrow constructs such as man, woman, black, white, gay, lesbian, or straight. Instead, he discusses that we are a multitude of characteristics possible in the human race, making it impossible for human beings to be categorized in a mutually exclusive manner.

Of particular interest was Eller’s mention of “master status” (p. 5) as a mechanism to define who we are in the context of race, age, gender, ethnicity, or any of the multitude of ascribed and achieved status constructs that serve to make up the action of evaluating people against social norms. I began considering my “master status” and realized that it is usually the achieved status of teacher. However,

I am generationally ingrained in the Appalachian culture and consider myself to be ethnically Appalachian. As far as a recommendation for Eller with regard to the discussion of culture and diversity, I would have liked to have seen at least one mention of Appalachians with regard to class, culture, or ethnicity. With that said, I congratulate Eller for opening the chapter on ethnicity with the “Declaration of Independence” written by the Lakota Sioux Nation to the United States government in 2007, which sites numerous treaty violations experienced by the Lakota from the United States government (p. 63). He covers many ethnicities, once again beginning with historical references and inferences to contemporary life, always showing the intersectional implications of various aspects of culture with ethnicity and other aspects of diversity.

Overall, this book contains a wealth of material, and I will definitely make it a must-read for my social work students. It is an excellent academic text with the flavor of a novel, which will help students to read and digest the material for practical use. It is a must for those who are teaching courses on culture and diversity or for any course with related sections. In this day and age, all professions should incorporate this text in their disciplines to enhance understanding of one another and of the ever evolving description of an American.