

What is Ethnic Studies?

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Ethnic Studies is the critical and interdisciplinary (holistic and intersectional) study of race, ethnicity, and indigeneity. With a focus on the experiences, voices, and perspectives of people of color within the United States. Since its emergence, the discipline has focused on race and racism as moving targets that mutate over time, and intersect with other modalities of power and systems of oppression (gender, sexuality, class, religion, citizenship status, etc.). The discipline centers four historically defined racialized core groups: African/Black Americans, Native/Indigenous Americans, Latinx/a/o Americans, and Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders.

Though interdisciplinary, Ethnic Studies has its own epistemologies, separate from other disciplines that may also cover race and ethnicity within their field. Ethnic Studies does draw from Anthropology, Sociology, History, English, Art history, Communications, and Political Science; however, at its nucleus, Ethnic Studies is explicit in its aim to decenter whiteness and white narratives on the American experience, by centering scholarship and experiences that redefines the lives of people of color from their own perspectives. It is not about studying people through a eurocentric gaze, but about people of color determining themselves as the subject of study.

Ethnic Studies is the only academic field that explicitly focuses on racial formation, race relations and ethnic identity in the U.S. in a way that re-humanizes the four racialized groups. It forces us to look at a history of power and white supremacy, and gives us a toolkit to analyze, critique, challenge and disrupt the many forms of racism that exist today. In addition, Ethnic Studies examines various forms of institutional violence, including: Land conquest, settler colonialism, U.S. imperialism, systemic sexual violence, racial genocide, chattel slavery, gendered militarization, state-sanctioned police violence, state sanctioned judicial violence, legalized discrimination (apartheid and segregation), White supremacy, and the internalized logics of gender/racial domination and assimilation.

Ethnic Studies is also taught from an intersectional lens, meaning that race and ethnicity are not siloed, but are examined in relation to an axes of power and identity: Sex, gender, age, religion, immigration status, tribal citizenship, language, class, national origin, sovereignty, and/or ability.

At its core, Ethnic Studies is a project of resistance, agency, liberation, decolonization, self-determination, and group affirmation for communities of color. It is a call to action, to

recognize, acknowledge, and close equity gaps for the four historically defined racialized core groups. It is concerned with fostering critical antiracist thinking among non-students of color by presenting non-hegemonic perspectives. It is about addressing generational trauma related to colonization through reflexive and collective healing, dreaming and creating anew. It is a strength based discipline, counter to deficit frameworks and instruction. Ethnic Studies operates holistically from a mental, physical, and spiritually centered place of well-beingness.

Despite historically being undervalued, underfunded, challenged, intentionally falsified, and co-opted, the discipline of Ethnic studies is finally being recognized by many across the state of California as a core component for holistically developing our students and fighting against racism in U.S. society.