

Understanding W.E.B. Du Bois' Concept of Double Consciousness

Double consciousness is a concept that Du Bois first explores in 1903 publication, "The Souls of Black Folk". Double consciousness describes the individual sensation of feeling as though your identity is divided into several parts, making it difficult or impossible to have one unified identity. Du Bois spoke of this within the context of race relations in the United States. He asserted that since American blacks have lived in a society that has historically repressed and devalued them that it has become difficult for them to unify their black identity with their American identity (Edles and Appelrouth 351-352). Double consciousness forces blacks to not only see themselves from their own unique perspective, but to also view themselves as they might be perceived by the outside (read: white) world. This is what Du Bois spoke of in the above passage when he talked about "the sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (351).

As a result, blacks can suffer from a damaged self-image shaped by the perceptions and treatment of white people. Black life in turn can easily become shaped by stereotypes perpetuated by mainstream culture.

According to Du Bois the prejudices of white people elicit "self-questioning, self-disparagement, and lowering of ideals" among black people (Edles and Appelrouth 354). The internalization of anti-black sentiment from the outside world thus begins to shape the black American experience. Through the concept double consciousness DuBois becomes better able to explore the social problems he studied in his earlier work "The Philadelphia Negro".

Double consciousness also creates an element of conflict within the black American, as they struggle (often unsuccessfully) to reconcile their identity as a black person and as an American citizen.

DuBois cites the example of the black artisan in "The Souls of Black Folk". Conflicted between producing goods that reflect his unique perspective and life experience and goods that are marketable and acceptable to a broader population he is engaged in a battle of double aims (Edles and Appelrouth, 352). By working to create what is the best expression of himself he will be deemed unsuccessful and by creating what makes him

successful he fails to express himself and in some ways may appear to be rejecting his true self. This example exemplifies the black struggle to unite the different components of their identity.

Double consciousness is still very relevant to contemporary society. While many people would like to argue that we live in a post-racial society, there are still many inequalities based upon race that make it difficult for black Americans to reconcile their identities as blacks and as Americans. Our media sells us images of black men as athletes, rappers or criminals and as a result white America perceives black men as such and young black males see these limited paths as their only options for advancement. This is just one illustration of how the media, which is largely dominated by white executives, continues to assume the role of shaping the perceptions that blacks have of themselves (and that whites have of blacks).