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Introduction

Diana T. Slaughter-Defoe

University of Pennsylvania, Constance E. Clayton Professor Emerita in Urban Education, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa., USA

Abstract

We know human biological diversity is occasioned by culture and ethnicity, not by race. There is as much or more variability within identified racial groups as there is between the ‘racial’ groups initially identified as humans entered the 20th century over 100 years ago. However, we also know that race, racial stratification, and racism continue today as enduring macro-societal variables in the lives of children, their families, and peers. Emphasizing the personal-social construction of race, scholars today prefer to study how children become racialized, inclusive of the contributions of political processes to the accompanying psychological development. Thus, racialization is construed as a situated process. Some scholars use the term ‘colorism’ to refer to various social practices used to racially stratify people informally. By definition, such stratification dictates individual cultural capital and resource allocation. This volume is partly designed to present and interrogate the research that some members of the Interdisciplinary Program in Human Development (ISHD) have conducted at the University of Pennsylvania, but more importantly, and by example, to stimulate theory and research on the topic of race and colorism by bringing together previously dispersed literature in a reader-friendly volume that highlights studies with promising concepts and methods.

Significance of the Concept of ‘Race’ to Developmental Inquiry

In the 21st century, scientists now know and acknowledge that the concept of race has no biogenetic basis [Cohen, 1998; Fisher, Jackson & Villarruel, 1998; Paabo, 2001; Segall, 1999]. Human biological diversity is occasioned by culture and ethnicity, not by race. There is as much or more variability within identified racial groups as there is between the ‘racial’ groups initially identified as humans entered the 20th century over 100 years ago. Further, this variability reaches deep into the previously thought homogeneous racial groups.

However, despite wishful thinking [e.g., Wilson, 1978], we know that race, racial stratification, and racism continue today as enduring macro-societal variables in the lives of children, their families, and peers. The legacy is particularly strong in cultures and nations (e.g., United States of America, South Africa) that have historically used race as an important, long-term principle of cultural and social organization [Franklin, 1968; Franklin, 1976; Franklin & Higginbotham, 2011; Gossett, 1970]. In such environments, children learn from caregivers and significant others how to cope with hostile racial environments [Chestang,
1972], while continuing to develop fully and to experience living normal and rich lives. The challenges of this paradox are now briefly discussed.

Historically, both the US and South Africa have experienced organized resistance to racism [American Psychological Association, 2004; Arsenault, 2006; Howard, 1970; King, 1969; Levander, 2006; Smiley, 2006], specifically, to the use of race as a major legal organizing societal principle (apartheid). Today, therefore, legal evidence of racial discrimination has been minimized, and even largely eliminated [Franklin, 1976]. However, the residue of earlier racial stratification endures [Bonilla-Silva & Lewis; Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Loury, 2002] and therefore, racial socialization is considered integral to the lives of all children in these cultures [Boykin & Toms, 1985; Clark & Klein, 2004; Hughes, Rodriguez, Smith, Johnson, Stevenson & Spicer, 2006; McAdoo, 2007; Ritterhouse, 2006; Slaughter & Johnson, 1988; Woodson, 1933].

Skin color/tone, or the presence of melanin, has been the most consistently used indicator of racial status in the US (for example, hair texture, linguistic surface features, evidence of prior racial blood lines have also been used) [Clark & Clark, 1939, 1940, 1947; Clark & Klein, 2004; Hunter, 2005; Porter, 1971]. Preschool-aged children first learn to reliably distinguish Black from White skin (racial awareness), and later to project or display certain attitudes toward the identified skin color or other race-related phenotypes. The racial attitudes are thought learned initially from family members [Goodman, 1952].

**Colorism and Racial Stratification in the 21st Century**

According to a very diverse body of scholars who study the impact of racial/color stratification for educational and occupational concerns, both in the US and abroad, skin color matters in this 21st century [Appiah & Gutmann, 1996; Bonilla-Silva & Lewis, 1999; Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Conchas, 2006; Cross, 1991; Dee, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Herring, Keith & Horton, 2004; Hilliard III, 2001; Hunter, 2005; Lee & Slaughter-Defoe, 2004; McLoyd, 2006; Nagda, Tropp & Paluck, 2006; Ogbu, 2003; Pollock, 2004; Spencer, 2006a, b; Watkins, 2001]. Issues raised by children’s skin color and race and addressed by members of the Black Caucus of the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD), continue to be addressed by the profession today [Slaughter-Defoe, Garrett & Harrison, 2006]. Indeed, a special issue devoted to race, ethnicity and culture in child development was published in a 2006 volume of *Child Development*, the premier journal in this field [Quintana, Aboud, Chao, Contreras-Grau, Cross & Hudley, 2006]. Also, as Tatum observed [1992, 1997], it continues to be difficult to talk about race or racism in schools and classrooms, and strong evidence of racial in-group preferential attitudes and behavior, particularly in the middle school years and beyond, endure [Nagda, Tropp & Paluck, 2006], as do parental and extended African-American family members’ attempts to buffer their children from racism [McHale, Crouter, Kim, Burton, Davis & Dotterer, 2006]. Recent research suggests that all of this is made more complex by the predilections of children and youth to choose their own multiracial paths [Hitlin, Brown & Elder, 2006], and by the situated quality of racial designations and relations.

Emphasis on Black and White skin color as a symbol of racial identity in the 20th century has led to some contemporary confusion about African-American designation and identity in this 21st century. Not all persons who are in possession of darker skin and considered Black are Black American natives whose ancestors experienced racial injustice in America that extends back to the time prior to President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. Further, biracial persons may or may not be able to claim this distinction. For example, President
Barack Obama [1995] cannot make this claim, but former US Congressman Harold Ford, Jr. of Memphis, who is light-skinned enough to appear biracial, can. Increased immigration to the US of darker-skinned peoples is likely to further confound distinctions between the children of more recent Black or darker-skinned immigrants, and those who can claim to be the children of Black or darker-skinned natives [Massey, Mooney, Charles & Torres, 2007]. Obviously, intergenerational transmission of ideas and attitudes regarding race and racism differ for these two broad cultural groups.

Colorism, focusing as it does on darker-skinned, non-White people of color, is thought by some to be a ‘disease’ created by global racism. In this ‘affliction’ usually the lighter, closer to white, the skin’s color, the better, more highly valued, the wearer of the skin. Scholars like Bonilla-Silva believe that the waning of racial boundaries generated by apartheid policies is leading to heightened discrimination based on skin color. Therefore, not race, but its most enduring proxy, skin color within race, continues to pose the challenges originally described many years ago by Warner, Junker and Adams [1941].

Unlike Warner and colleagues, however, colorism theorists believe the phenomenon is an outgrowth of racism. Emphasizing the personal-social construction of race, these scholars prefer to study how children become racialized, and the contributions of political processes to the accompanying psychological development. Thus, racialization is construed as a situated process – the developing child is perceived as light or dark-skinned according to the immediate cultural or political environment in which s/he participates – a very light-skinned biracial child, for example, may simultaneously be the favored child in a family home environment, but a truly undervalued Black child in a desegregated suburban classroom.

To summarize, the concept ‘colorism’ references the various social practices used to filter and allocate people into different racial locations in the racial order, that is, social practices used to racially stratify people informally. By definition, such stratification dictates cultural capital and resource allocation.

Revisiting ‘Race’ in Current Developmental Research

In 2009, Professors Deborah Johnson, Margaret Beale Spencer, and I published a brief overview of existing knowledge about race and children's development in an encyclopedic compendium entitled The Child, edited by Richard Shweder and colleagues [Slaughter-Defoe, Johnson & Spencer, 2009]. Our entry was reinforced by an extensive bibliographic search and review that could not be published in that venue. Our search also revealed that the literature on this topic was quite dispersed, and therefore, that possibly both theory and empirical research in this area could be advanced by being brought together in a reader-friendly volume that highlights studies with promising concepts and methods. The new empirical studies presented in this volume take cognizance of the earliest research in race and child development, but advance its contemporary implications, given our current understanding of both development and social cognition.

The first report presented by Ms. Erin Bogan focuses on review of the developmental trajectories of racial stereotypes of Black and White children, examining the recent empirical research from the perspective of theorizing associated with experimental studies of stereotyped-threat [Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997, 2004]. The second study, conducted by Dr. Valerie Adams, addresses the theoretical and empirical role of media images in influencing the race-related images Black children come to have of themselves. The third study, conducted by Dr. Traci English-Clarke, draws upon the PVEST theoretical model [Spencer, 2006a,
b) in considering the significance of racial messages and stories for how children think of themselves as academically competent in mathematics, a field identified by activist educator Robert Moses [2001] as a gatekeeper to higher education. All studies by the primary authors were conducted at the University of Pennsylvania immediately prior to 2010, with the support and mentoring of secondary authors and collaborators.

The primary authors were influenced by the philosophy, methods, and practical orientation of the Interdisciplinary Studies in Human Development Program (ISHD) where this editor was a standing faculty member for 13.5 years through June 2011. The program emphasizes phenomenological development in context, inclusive of macro-societal and policy-relevant contexts, as well as the more traditional micro-systemic and evaluative contexts. The interdisciplinary nature of the studies in chapters I–III occasioned the editor’s intent of obtaining commentary to each of them from primarily senior and established scholars across different academic disciplines and fields, including subsfields within the disciplines.

The article by Professor Nsamenang, an established scholar in the subfield of cultural psychology, demonstrates how far-reaching conceptions of race-related behavior can be even for the positive development of Black African children, who enjoy majority status in their own countries and continent. Instead of commentaries by established and publically recognized scholars in the broad fields of race and social psychological development as in the other chapters, commentaries for this informative concluding chapter are provided by two current doctoral students in ISHD.

Finally, the editor’s Epilogue, or concluding, chapter points to ideas not fully developed by authors, and also highlights shared thematic content between sections.

Du Bois [1903] predicted race would be the problem of the 20th century, but research and commentary in this volume indicate that race and color endure as problems of the 21st century. For persons interested in race and children’s development, this compendium of efforts to address the cultural/racial contexts of 21st century children and youth are both troubling and promising to the field of human development.

References


Dr. Diana T. Slaughter-Defoe (PhD 1968, University of Chicago) received her doctorate from the Committee on Human Development in developmental and clinical psychology, and is presently the Constance E. Clayton Professor Emerita in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests have included culture, primary education, and home-school relations facilitating in-school academic achievement. Since retirement, she has also edited: Black Educational Choice: Assessing the Private and Public Alternatives to K-12 Public Schools [Praeger, 2011] with colleagues, and Messages for Educational Leadership: The Constance E. Clayton Lectures, 1998–2007 [Peter Lang Publishers, 2012]. She is presently writing a memoir about her career that spanned 40-plus years in academia and higher education.