Social construction of racial and ethnic identity among African American and White adolescents

Susan A. O’Neill
and
Celina M. Chatman

University of Michigan
This research is supported in part by NICHD Grant #R01 HD33437 awarded to Jacquelynne S. Eccles and Arnold J. Sameroff and in part by a grant from W.T. Grant awarded to Jacquelynne S. Eccles. The original data collection was supported by funding from the MacArthur Research Network on Successful Adolescent Development in High Risk Settings, chaired by Richard Jessor. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the following people to this project (listed alphabetically): Elaine Belansky, Diane Early, Jacque Eccles, Kari Fraser, Katie Jodl, Ariel Kalil, Linda Kuhn, Karen Macarthy, Steve Peck, Rob Roeser, Arnold Sameroff, Sherri Steele, Cynthia Winston, and Carol Wong.
Overview

- What is an identity meaning system?
- How can we examine an identity meaning system?
- How can identity meaning systems be used to study adolescent racial and ethnic identity?
What is the meaning of racial/ethnic identity?

The meaning of race and ethnicity derive from the social structures within which individuals live during the course of their development (Omi & Winant, 1994).

Racial/ethnic identities are historically and culturally relative, and are dependent on the particular social, economic, and political structures prevailing at a particular time (Widicombe & Wooffitt, 1995).

Problems in providing a definition - need to move beyond questions about the nature of identity as something that a person has (or does not have) in terms of particular features or characteristics.
Social representations of knowledge about the self

How is knowledge about the self socially negotiated?

How do these negotiated understandings sustain or exclude certain actions in relation to opportunities and barriers, enablements and constraints?
Social representations of knowledge about the self

Conceptual categories and frameworks acquired during development provide a ‘lens’ for making sense of ‘who we are’ in relation to others.

Identities are organized around collective resources so that the voices of others are embedded internally in our modes of representing.

An individual’s sense of identity is viewed as a social process that is fluid, changeable, and constructed through social interaction (Potter & Wetherall, 1987).
Any image of the self is inextricably dependent on the language used in everyday life to make sense of our own and others’ actions.

This ‘language culture’ consists of a number of discourses (e.g., societal messages or ways of talking about or representing race/ethnicity).

Not all discourses are equal - some are more available than others.

It is through language that certain things or people are categorized together or separated out as different, and through language that value is attributed or denied.
Components of an identity meaning system

We refer to the complex social constructions and representations of identity as ‘meaning systems’.

1) **Interpretative repertoires** - ways of talking about objects and events in the world, the ‘building blocks’ of conversation that form a patchwork that is flexibly and creatively put together to produce a particular meaning or form of understanding.

2) **Ideological dilemmas** - the concepts, values, and beliefs of society that shape not only what we think, but also what we see as the two sides (or many sides) of an argument or issue.

3) **Subject positions** - the ‘locations’ individuals place themselves in relation to different or opposing ideologies.
### Analysis of identity meaning systems

**Example:** What does it mean to you to be African American?

**Respondent:** “I just see myself as a person. I don’t look at people as a race. I look at people as individuals.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpretative repertoire</th>
<th>People should be viewed as individuals rather than members of a particular race</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ideological dilemma</td>
<td>Individualism versus collectivism</td>
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The study
(Maryland Adolescent Development in Context)

- 16 African American adolescents (F=11, M=5) and 8 White adolescents (F=4, M=4)
- 11th grade
- Individual, semi-structured interviews in respondents’ homes
- Interviewers matched respondents in race and sex
- Interviews included questions about the meaning and salience of the race/ethnicity, gender and spirituality, and feelings of pride, experiences of discrimination, and issues of public and private regard for African Americans
- Verbatim transcriptions - interviewers’ questions and comments taken into account during analysis
Leon
Subject Position
Outsider

Affective Response
APPROACH ANXIETY
Fear Anger
Upset Helpless
Cautious

Nervous
Weird Strange
Silly Stupid

Resolution
RELATIONSHIPS BASED ON SIMILARITY
Only relate to white males in my situation
Same experiences

VICTIM
Dilemma
ESTRANGED

Black Majority Neighborhood & School
White Majority Society

Bullying
Adapted somehow
Acted differently
Parts of personality changed
to be able to deal with it
It was a necessity

Conflict avoidance
Try not to be offensive racially
Careful what you say
Say the right thing
Politically correct

Adaptation necessity

Looked down upon
Easy target
Make fun of you
Tear you apart
Stomp on you

Politically better off
Whites are the majority

Majority privilege
Belonging to a group
Association between members
Familiarity

Group identification
Cultural awareness
Pride for ancestors

‘White’ pride
Really don’t know how to act
Start acting weird
It’s painfully obvious

Social inadequacy
Sometimes I even just stay away
Don’t like too many white people

Rejection avoidance
I hear a lot of people make excuses of they can’t do this, they can’t do that ‘cuz their black and because their male.

I just see myself as a person. I don’t look at people as a race. I look at people as individuals.

I try very hard not to think of myself like that [African American]. I wouldn’t say it’s not important but it’s just not important for me to dwell on it.

I feel everyone has the same opportunity. I feel everybody’s equal today. Everything that can happen to me as a teenager or as a black teenager can happen to anybody else.

There’s no time that I’ve just felt real proud, but I don’t feel not proud. It’s nothing to go shootin’ off the mouth about or anything.

Depending on what you have or don’t have that’s the way you gonna act. It causes them to act in certain ways.

If they do somethin’, it’s individually done to them - it’s not if they do somethin’ everybody in their race is like that.

Your decision making. How you carry yourself. People make their own decisions.
African Americans

More black people at my school than white people or other people. You sort of feel like separated. Separate group at school. I don’t think we have as much. Only had our freedom for about a century. Just started off being able to make it to the top. Being able to become rich. A ‘fearless struggler’ and still need help. Disadvantaged race.

Physical differences. Look different. Sound different. Different type of hair. More black people at my school than white people or other people. You sort of feel like separated. Separate group at school.

Social differences. Black families different from white families. Loud and gossipy, party a lot, act different in church - more loose or freer than whites. Differences and consequences of ‘acting white’. There’s certain scholarships for black people you can’t get if your white or different race. I have no problems with it because I need the money. I don’t have a lot of white friends. [White people] are more secret - hide and don’t admit problems in the family. Social differences.

Differences and consequences of ‘acting white’. Have more money and stuff. Think they’re better than you. Don’t use a lot of slang. Listen to different music - dress different. You’ll be dogged [if you ‘act white’].

Equivocal views on affirmative action. There are places where there are no black people - this little white girl ain’t never seen a black person because she was lookin’ at me real funny and she’s kind of scared of me. People would stop and stare at us because of racist problems and because of kids ‘acting ghetto’.

Moral dilemma. RACISM & DISCRIMINATION IS MORALLY WRONG. Denial of any personal experience of racism. I’ve never had any racial conflicts. Nobody’s ever hurt me or anything. Mutually agreed. Racial/ethnic and social separation. Most people want to hang with their own. Blacks [that ‘act white’] chose to hang with more white people, [they] separate themselves, live around white people. Social differences. I don’t hang with people from different racial backgrounds.

Subject position. I’m Black.

Colette

Moral justifications. Denial of any personal experience of racism. I’ve never had any racial conflicts. Nobody’s ever hurt me or anything. Mutually agreed. Racial/ethnic and social separation. Most people want to hang with their own. Blacks [that ‘act white’] chose to hang with more white people, [they] separate themselves, live around white people.

Resolution. There are places where there are no black people - this little white girl ain’t never seen a black person because she was lookin’ at me real funny and she’s kind of scared of me. People would stop and stare at us because of racist problems and because of kids ‘acting ghetto’.

White Americans

Separation.

Differences.

Whites see Blacks differently.

Group isolation.

Excludes other races.

Equivocal views on affirmative action.

Colette

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I don’t have a lot of white friends. [White people] are more secret - hide and don’t admit problems in the family. Social differences. I don’t hang with people from different racial backgrounds.

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Equivocal views on affirmative action.
Discursive psychology is both a theory and method for examining the meaning systems that individuals’ construct within a particular social context (the research interview).

In this context, issues of race/ethnicity were made salient by asking questions that required respondents to present their points of view and subject experiences of their race/ethnicity.

The differing constructions of identity are seen as alternative and equally valid versions of reality.

The findings are generalizable as shared knowledge (i.e., representative of a range of ways that identity can be talked about in our society), which others are likely to use.
Evaluating the study

- Conventional evaluation criteria (e.g., reliability, validity, replicability) are challenged by the assumptions underpinning qualitative research - it is necessary for researchers to explain and justify the criteria being used to judge the quality of the research.

- Qualitative research findings are viewed as situated, contingent, reflexive.

- Focus on inconsistency and diversity

- Use of individual and team analysis (researchers from similar and different racial/ethnic backgrounds)

- Detailed consideration of alternative interpretations and discussion of biases and experiences that influence different interpretations.
**Conclusion**

- Suggestion that discursive analyses that are intended to empower can actually end up ‘locking’ oppressed groups within different restrictive discourses (Willig, 1999).

- **Critical analysis aims to:**
  1. Produce acknowledgement of a problem
  2. Legitimize what was previously denied or negatively valued
  3. Encourage demystification
  4. Create possibilities for new spaces, positions and positive identities

- **It does this by:**
  1. Unravelling negative associations
  2. Discovering how ‘locking’ occurs within different restrictive discourses
  3. Challenging the ‘deficit discourse’ associated with negative positionings
  4. Offering voice to adolescents who may have been previously unheard