

Race Again: Making it Concrete for Consideration

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VEXTATION

With each of my passing years in the academy, race has become more cemented as the cornerstone of my vexations, both personal and professional. Race as a form of social capital or as an enhancer or inhibitor of social capital are issues many do not wish to contemplate. Throughout my years in the academy, my ascribed and self-attributed membership in the African American collective has been a factor in both my inclusion and exclusion in circles of influence populated by dominant and non-dominant groups. The level of capital (e.g. insider information, the advocacy of gatekeepers, the support of power brokers) to which I have been privy has also been influenced by race, especially as it relates to my allegiance to issues traditionally a concern to African Americans as a group. Over my career, as I moved from a less critical to a more critical view of culture which now encompasses the race factor, my social capital and that of others in relation to my own has changed. Now, I frequently ponder the following: How do you interrogate—in the context of the educative process—the role of a construct that almost instinctively induces silence, awkwardness, or hostility? How do you couch or cast it so that it seeks the same critical responses elicited by other factors in education worthy of investigation? These questions are the foundations of my vexation.

VENTURE

To interrogate race while constructively channeling the emotions associated with race so the critical responses replete in the discussions of other phenomena can surface, it's important to make race concrete and tangible via lived experiences. I have ventured to do this first in a doctoral course and hope, in the near future, to do it in a book.

In spring 2009, I had the immense pleasure to design and teach a doctoral course on the schooling versus the education of African American students in pre-K thru 12 public schools. Shujaa's (1994) notion of schooling was used:

[Schooling] is a process *intended* to perpetuate and maintain the society's existing power relations and the institutional structures that support those arrangements...[W]hen multiple cultural orientations exist within one nation-state, it is the leadership among the adherents to the politically dominant cultural orientation that exercise the most influence on the 'concepts, values and skills' that schools transmit.

In contrast to schooling, education is the process that validates and nurtures the cultural identity of a group (Shujaa, 1994) while simultaneously helping members of the group to become a full participant and owner in all life aspects (e.g., intellectual, cultural, political, spiritual, economic, educational, social) of the community (Murrell, 2002). Like many individuals and collectives with whom I attempt to discuss race in education, the graduate students enrolled in the course lacked an understanding of the historical conditions underlying the contemporary ones (schooling rather than education) of African Americans in the U.S. educational system. They viewed the contemporary in a vacuum that began and ended with their life histories and perspectives. Instead of catering to the question of "Why African Americans are not doing better in the schools?" which is the query often addressed by default in equity initiatives, I implicitly addressed a slightly different question: "Considering the historical and contemporary circumstances surrounding African American education in the United States why **should** the state of African American education be any better than it currently is?"

To help the doctoral students understand the powerful and direct connection between the historical and the contemporary, at the very beginning of the class before the distribution of the syllabus I asked the students to anonymously complete a "Personal History" table (see Table 1).

Table 1. Personal History Table

	Great Grandparents	Grand-parents	Parents	You	Your children, if any
Describe any and all assets (home, land, businesses, estate inheritances, etc.)					
Describe highest educational level and institutional affiliations of that education (note highest level possible at that time in history)					
Describe any other notable accomplishments (e.g., election to political offices, partner in law firm)					

I compiled the information for the class as a group and posed questions for the doctoral students to help them uncover patterns. Not surprisingly, the general status of families was maintained from one generation to the next; any drastic changes in status were anomalies and from a statistical perspective were discussed as extremes from the norm. I posed questions for students to ponder factors that enabled the maintenance of their family statuses and, in the case of the anomalies, possible factors that lead to the disruption of the pattern. In a general discussion the doctoral students discerned the balances between individual and structural factors.

Individual factors are those that are related to the individual (e.g., agency) and are cited often in discussions of inequities. Structures (e.g., over-and under-representation of groups in decision-making capacities involving resource distribution) are the conscious and unconscious procedures and protocols that through their symbiotic relationship with human, material, and symbolic resources enable the reproduction of the status quo (Sewell, 1992). Structures are cited less often and are mostly ignored in discussions of inequities. An imbalance favoring individual factors often leads to the protection and perpetuation of the status quo and an imbalance emphasizing structural factors reduces individuals to disempowered victims. The “Personal History” activity primed the students for learning about the interplay between individual and structural factors in the schooling and education of African American students as we chronicled the schooling and education of African Americans from the colonial period to the present — but it did not help them disentangle the relationship and distinctiveness of race and culture.

Race and culture are often used interchangeably in conversations about race and in dialogues around culture. The normative approach associated with a dominant group in a society undergirds this loose employment of race and culture. For example, in the United States, European Americans are the dominant group in terms of number, representation and control of human, material, and symbolic resources, etc. Consequently, European Americans are considered the norm, the default by which non-dominant groups are compared and contrasted. As the norm, European Americans are often viewed neither as a race nor as a collective with a distinctive culture. In my work, I treat race and culture as distinct entities that overlap in some domains. In the doctoral course I continued to refine the articulation of this distinction (see Figure 1).

Race is a human construction that employs biological markers, genotype and phenotype, in service of socio-political aims. **Figure 1. Distinctiveness and relatedness of race and culture.**

There are common ways in which race materializes by way of life experiences for non-dominant groups in a racially stratified society but there are also materializations that are distinctive to specific groups. For example, in the United States, a nation-state in which racial distinctions among European-, Native- and African Americans are a part of its foundation, being Native or African American has consequences whether membership is observable as a physical manifestation (e.g., phenotype of dark skin) or not (e.g. physical features of European Americans but self-classify as part of non-dominant group or have relatives that are visibly positioned within non-dominant group) that differ from the consequences of being a racial immigrant like Japanese Americans. Consider the manifestation of race in terms of expectations in science. The stereotypes surrounding Native and African Americans in science are deficit in nature, i.e., can't do science, whereas the stereotypes of Japanese Americans are not. Although the materialization of race differs in the nature of stereotypes, common among the non-dominant groups was the existence of stereotypes.

I define culture as a dynamic repertoire of practices that are developed through an individual's prolonged immersion in cultural communities which consist of a coordinated group of people who share traditions and understandings that span generations (Rogoff & Guitierrez, 2003, Rogoff, 2003). It also encompasses a set of tacit, deep structures that go beyond consciousness; these tacit, deep structures are difficult and slow to alter (Boykin, 1994; Lee 2002). As denoted in Figure 1, race and culture are connected through the socio-political and culture is influenced by race through community ecology. For example, in the U.S. public life is legally desegregated but de facto segregation is common. Of the U.S. public schools that are identified as enrolling 75% or more of non-White students, 4% of European Americans versus 32% of Black Americans and 34% of Hispanic Americans attended these schools in 2002-2003. With regards to private life in the US, segregation, as denoted by residential neighborhoods, is an accepted norm.

In my future venture of writing a book, I intend to continue pursuing the questions that underlie my vexation and will extend the ventures started in the doctoral course. I hope to make race concrete in the domain of educational policy as it pertains to goals of education, the teaching of academic content, and the contexts in which education occurs by proposing mental tools to facilitate the comprehension of the role race plays.

FACILITATIVE PONDERINGS: FROM VEXATION TO VENTURE

To facilitate my crossover from vexation to venture, conversations around the following would be instrumental: (1) For those who perceive race and culture as the same, what everyday examples illustrate their interchangeability? (2) What conditions must exist before race can be treated as another phenomena worthy of critical examination? (3) Is it possible to consider race detached from racism?

