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History of Racial Hierarchy and Race "Mixture"

Racial identifications are not individual markers but are developed in relation to collective identities within racialized societies and spaces, products of historical, political, and social struggles. This is particularly true within learning environments—something happens in schools, especially regarding how racial identities are formed and assigned in ways that affect schooling experiences.

I have brown skin and wavy hair. In my experiences as a student and teacher, I became accustomed to being asked, "What are you?" Often I am mistaken for being reserved despite my easy, sincere grin. My facial expression perhaps does not show what I have learned in my life: reluctant people endure; passionate people live. Whether it is the glint of happiness in my eyes or what I call using laughter to heal your soul, my past experience as a mixed-race person has been significantly different from my current outlook on life. I am at ease with my lived experiences, very willing to share, and I even encourage others to probe more deeply into my racialized experiences. Like many mixed-race people, I experienced an epiphany: disowning a need

to belong, disengaging from the structure of race has given me the confidence to critique race discourse and racialized spaces.

I identify as American Indian with mixed-race heritage. I am mixed-race black/white,[1] American Indian, and mixed-race Korean/Mongolian. My father is mixed-race black/white and American Indian, and my mother is mixed-race Korean/Mongolian. We are enrolled members of the Haliwa Saponi Tribe and descendants of the Eastern Band Cherokee Tribe. When I was growing up, my father taught me that I am a multiracial person, a descendant of two tribes, and American Indian.[2] Unfortunately, a person cannot be enrolled in more than one tribe. So, I can personally relate to the idea that monoraciality does not fit my multiracial and tribal identities or those of other multiracials in our so-called melting pot society.

However, countless numbers of times I have been raced in ways that have forced me to choose a group association. My own experiences illustrate how racial designation and group association play out in society, including in classroom learning environments. My siblings and I grew up in northeastern North Carolina in an American Indian community that also included mixed-race American Indians with black, American Indian, and white ancestry.[3] I attended a rural high school that contained mixed-race American Indians, monoracial blacks, monoracial American Indians, and monoracial white students. It was not unusual for mixed-race black/American Indian and monoracial blacks to create close group associations, which were exhibited through social interactions that occurred when sitting together in the cafeteria, classrooms, or in designated lounging areas around campus. However, mixed-race white/American Indian students, especially those who seemed phenotypically white, did not want to be associated with monoracial black students. Most mixed-race white/American Indian students chose to create group associations with monoracial white students. As a brown-complexioned multiracial person who identified as American Indian in this racially polarized environment, I was placed in a situation where I had to choose a group association to keep mixed-race black/American Indian and monoracial black students from viewing me as acting white. On the other hand, the mixed-raced white/American Indians and monoracial whites viewed my actions as acting black.

Because of my Korean and Mongolian ancestry, I was not perceived phenotypically as a true member of the black or American Indian groups. My Korean

and Mongolian aspects caused friction with the monoracial black and mixed-race black/American Indian groups with which I most commonly associated because it gave me an inroad to the white (or whiter) groups that they did not have. Because I did not acknowledge or challenge my advantage, I allowed myself to be used as an agent of racism. This happened in a number of ways. For instance, monoracial white and mixed-race American Indian groups asked me to sit with them in the cafeteria, but they did not invite monoracial blacks and mixed-race black/American Indians. And I accepted their invitation. As a consequence, the group with which I most associated viewed me as a race traitor, as a racial fraud. And I felt like one, too. I am ashamed that I actively participated in the disparagement of blacks, which is the most denigrated part of my own ancestry. A multiracial person with black ancestry who accepts not being identified as black in an effort to subvert white privilege (i.e., resisting racial categorization as a way of challenging the notion of race) can actually be reinforcing it, as was the case for me. The problem is how the context and meaning of being a race traitor or committing racial fraud arise out of and are bounded by the social and political descriptions of race. Both social and political constructs are then used as a justification for policing the accuracy of racial identification or political alliance. In most instances, being cast as a race traitor, or as an alleged racial fraud, is a constitutive feature of the dynamics of the informal school setting and is further developed in the formal schooling setting of the learning environment.[4] In other words, the daily routines of schools actively construct the racial hierarchy of the United States, with multiracial students playing a key role.

Since racial identity is a social and political construct, it acquires meaning in the context of a particular set of social relationships. In a tribal college setting, the identity politics of blood quantum often influences the multiracial experience of students (i.e., being an enrolled member of a state or federally recognized tribe, and recognized as a descendant based on phenotypic features). Allen (2006) explains, "As a social institution, public schooling should be understood as a site where the reproduction of (and resistance to) the white supremacist totality is played out" (10). The mixed-race student's choice of a racial identity in both an informal and formal learning environment is made for practical purposes. As such, students' racial identity choices are based on how they perceive themselves or how they wish others to perceive them.

The identity choice of multiracial students is shaped by the dominant culture of society. Their identity choices are far from being open and free. Rather, as evidenced through my life experience, these choices are constrained by the structural organization of the racialized social system. This contradicts "commonsense" notions of multiracial identity, including the idea that multiracial people can freely pick and choose from their various racial ancestries to construct a nondeterministic self-representation. The evidence for using a structural approach to thinking about multiraciality exists everywhere. For example, it is common knowledge that home situations, school environments, and images from the mass media strongly influence our youth. Unfortunately, the negative stereotypes and poor treatment of blacks and others deemed blackened often influence identity choice for multiracials because they see that there is an advantage to being identified as nonblack. In addition, the curriculum of public schools is structured to cast white or lighter-skinned people as superior and darker-skinned people as inferior.

For this reason, a New Mexico tribal college provided a rich environment for my study of racial identity. In this setting, Spanish/white identity was an option for lighter-skinned mixed-race people, but darker-skinned persons were forced into a Mexican/mestiza/o identity. These dynamics influenced "Indianness."[5] Since the traditional identity of New Mexican people has been understood as mixed raced (Spanish and American Indian ancestry), it was important to examine how heritage, self-perceptions, and social institutions construct the making of Indianness. The role of heritage in a student's sense of identity in learning environments is affected by both overt and hidden school curricula as well as by macro and micro social processes.

My research was a continuation of efforts to understand my personal experiences with my own multiracial American Indian identity. The key difference between my research and my personal quest for understanding was that instead of unveiling answers to my personal questions about schooling experiences, I was seeking ways to help multiracial students understand and interpret how schools, society, and communities influence the identities of mixed-race people. My positioning in this research was as a multiracial American Indian scholar and educator. As a scholar, I was interested in researching identity as a quasi-selective choice in which one is not only raced *but also acts racially*. In other words, mixed-race students are not simply

passive victims of racial categorization; they are active agents who have the option to conform to or resist the racial order. So, while the racial situation of mixed-race students is highly structural, there still exists some element of choice, or agency, which can be expressed in the way that mixed-race students see themselves in relation to other raced groups. As an educator, I was interested in how mixed-race students at a tribal college that focuses on the contemporary and traditional expressions of American Indian/Indigenous people understand their racial identity choices and how political institutions assist multiracial students through their racialized schooling experiences. It is important for educators to understand the ways their actions can contribute to how schools often reinforce and reproduce inequality and power differences (Alfred 2004; Allen 2006; Mihesuah 2004). To meet these goals, my research offers experiential information situated within a theoretical framework that scholars and educators can use to think critically about multiraciality in classrooms.

Researching the Role of Schools and Mixed-Race Identity Choices

The rate of interracial marriages has increased drastically over the last few decades: by almost 300 percent since 1970 (Cruz 2001; Williams 2006). Although the mixed-raced population is growing and multiracialism is fast becoming a popular racial issue (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002), the overall percentage of the total population that identifies as multiracial remains low. The 2000 US census found that only 2.4 percent of the population identified as multiracial (US Census Bureau 2000). Nevertheless, that percentage is approximately 7 million people, a population larger than that of most major US cities. Nearly half are under age twenty-five, suggesting that this percentage will rise as the current population ages ("Multiracials: Population" 2002).

Through an inescapable web of images and language, society labels multiracial students to the point that they come to internalize and use these labels themselves. Racial categorization operates at the level of perception. We learn to "see" race and assign people into racial groups. Multiracial people are sized up, or "racially measured," as people try to decipher where they fit within the existing racial categories and hierarchy.[6] "What are you?" is a question most multiracial people have been asked.

However, not all multiracials experience racial measurement in the same way. For example, a dark or brown mixed-race person of black heritage is more often racially measured as being monoracial (i.e., "just black") than "other" or lighter-skinned mixed-race people. This is in large part the legacy of the one-drop rule that existed during slavery. Despite a person with black phenotypic features identifying as mixed race, racial measures have historically read black heritage as fixed and clear-cut, making a rather multiracial group (US blacks) appear largely monoracial. Even within groups, such as with Latinos, black Latinos experience a lower social status than do those of lighter skin color and/or different heritages. This anti-blackness, which sees black as being inferior and less desirable than nonblack, pervades much of the political discourse surrounding multiracialism. For example, President Barack Obama is biracial (the son of a black Kenyan father and a white US mother). Yet, the media monoracially labels him as black. Seemingly aware of how multiracial politics can detract from the situations of all racial groups, President Obama has stated that mixed-race people ought to "avoid focusing so narrowly on their own experiences that they become detached from larger struggles of racism and inequality" (DaCosta 2007, 182).

Since any label other than white relegates them to a lower status, it is not surprising that many multiracial students feel pressured to choose an identity with a higher status in order to feel socially and personally accepted. However, some resist the temptation to identify as close to white as possible and instead choose to identify with the most oppressed side of their racial ancestry. Such is the case with many multiracial individuals with black heritage who refer to themselves as "black" as opposed to "multiracial." To them, embracing a black identity is an important vehicle for self-empowerment, whereas multiracial suggests a type of identity maneuver to gain heightened status. In other words, the "choice" of a racial identity is also a political choice for mixed-race people. They can choose between complicity with or resistance against the larger white supremacist structure that offers more privilege to those seen as less dark.

Since the actions of multiracials have important consequences for their own and other groups, approaches to multiracialism are inherently political, not merely a matter of personal preference. Multiracialism is political because there are competing racial agendas representing different ideological camps, all of them fighting to have their agenda shape normative thinking on

multiracialism and, by extension, race and racism. However, current every-day thinking on multiracialism does not seem to grasp the fuller meaning of multiracial politics as it manifests itself in a hierarchical racial system like that in the United States. In other words, the politics of multiracialism affects not only those who are multiracial but also everyone else.

The continuation of racial segregation within society among mixed-race people will depend on how they perceive themselves in relation to others. This becomes problematic as groups attempt to be "a little less black and therefore a little less subordinate" (Makalani 2001, 84). Not all folks have this kind of choice; some cannot pass as anything but black. But, in a different context, these experiences create a platform for examining the ways mixed-race students resist or actively participate in maintaining structured racial hierarchies. The outcome is mixed-race students acting as agents to reinforce racial hierarchies. Also, the lived aspect of racial identity choice in schools creates shifting contexts for measuring and/or understanding the effects of such experiences.

Schools provide an important environment since they have typically addressed the importance of race—if they address it at all—from a monoracial perspective. For example, schools use racial information about their students to track achievement. The problem arises when schools racially measure mixed-race students and assign them into a monolithic multiracial typology, as if students' differences in skin tone and phenotype do not matter. In our alleged "color-blind" era, paying attention to the realities of the color line would be frowned upon, even deemed "racist." The color-blind ideological approach proclaims that we should not notice differences among multiracial people. Yet, in the everyday realities of race, whites tend to be more accepting of those who appear whiter. The result is a racial hierarchy that ranges from light to dark and corresponds to material outcomes. Blumer (1958) and Bonilla-Silva (1996) explain that racial hierarchy is premised on the notion that race is a material symbol (i.e., light-skinned multiracials positioning themselves within a racial hierarchy above darker-skinned multiracials) based on the conception of one's own racial group defined by the prejudiced images and conceptions of the dominant racial group and positioned in relation to other racial groups. To further explain this point, "One should keep clearly in mind that people necessarily come to identify themselves as belonging to a racial group [e.g., a mixed-race group]; such identification

is not spontaneous or inevitable but a result of experience" (Blumer 1958, 3). And, by assisting in the construction of a middle buffer group (light- or medium-skinned multiracials) above a lower-status racialized group (blacks and darker-skinned Latinos) (Bonilla-Silva 2003), schools provide a competitive environment for students to either avoid being labeled racially or to choose a racial label that best matches their desired personal interests.

In addition to providing students with meaningful educational opportunities, schools also serve as entities where identities are cultivated and enacted (Lewis 2005; Lopez 2003; Mihesuah 2004). This study examines how schools influence the identity choices of mixed-race students. In addition, it explores the ways in which students represent their identity choices and lived experiences through the lens of a racialized social hierarchy.

The Process of Discovery

Due to the heightened popularity of multiracial issues, it was important in my study to think beyond the current politically naive discourse on multiracials and consider how these individuals will not only resist racism but also redefine racial hierarchies. I wanted to study the racial identity choices and lived experiences of mixed-race students with American Indian heritage who attended a tribal college in New Mexico to help contextualize students' representations of their racial identity choices in light of the influences of societal and community factors. In other words, I wanted to explore beyond a dehumanizing multiracial-as-victim approach and instead see students as active racial agents who could conform to and/or resist a racist system based upon a complex racial hierarchy. There is a lack of educational literature representing mixed-race individuals, especially those of mixed race with American Indian heritage, as people who use their choice of identity politically and socially to their own individual advantage. Also, it is important to explore where phenotypically black mixed-race people fit into racial identity classification schemes. Using a combination of interviews and group sessions, I examined the ways in which college students identified their race and how that identity changed over time or across context. This was accomplished by getting to know students' beliefs, biographies, and significant racial events in their lives, especially those events that occurred within the confines of institutions.

In addition, there is limited literature on race issues in tribal colleges, in particular on how to educate students, administrators, and educators regarding mixed-race students. Data is absent on how institutions influence the beliefs and social views of mixed-race students. For students of mixed descent, questions of blood quantum and stereotypical notions of American Indian phenotypes or surnames are compounded by how mixed-race Indianness is defined (Cramer 2005; Garroutte 2003; Mihesuah 2004). Also, skin color—and the experience of a particular skin color—plays a major role in determining membership in school peer groups (Tatum 1997). Another problem is that if there are no antiracist administrators, educators, or student learning objectives within a school, then mixed-race students are left to figure out the answers themselves. Often the result is an intensely negative set of race relations that goes unexamined. Since the significant distinctions of race and phenotype are socially constructed and subjected to social measures, it is thus important for institutions, administrators, and educators to acknowledge their definitions of racial identity in daily schooling interaction. When these definitions are negative and harmful, they reinforce the context of group membership status (inferior or superior intellect, behaviors, perception of oneself, etc.).

Another issue is the lack of research conducted on the influence of socially practiced racial classification schemes on the experiences of mixed-race students' identity choice. Although I have taught a number of mixed-race students, it was my own experience as a multiracial educator who identifies as American Indian living in New Mexico that guided me to analyze mixed-race issues in learning environments. In addition, as I had done as a high school student, a number of the mixed-race students I taught in New Mexico had acculturated to the dominant ideology of a racial hierarchy that denigrated blacks as the most inferior race. I began to wonder why administrators and other educators had not been trained to recognize the issues of mixed-race students, not to mention the problem of a predominant racial ideology that supports a hierarchical arrangement of various racial groups. To address the issues outlined above, I conducted research to see if this pattern persists in a tribal college in the same region. It was also an opportunity to intervene in this problematic view of race.

This research challenges us to think about what it means to identify as mixed race while paying attention to historical and contextual influences. It

also forces us to address which mixed-race individuals are always cast into monoracial identities, which others expand the borders of whiteness, and which are given a waiting status or serve as a buffer group into white membership (Bonilla-Silva 2003).

The findings of this study will contribute to an understanding of the racial identity influences on mixed-race college students with American Indian heritage in both formal and informal school settings. This information will assist with decolonizing curricula to become antiracist and developing critically needed teacher education programs. Also, it is intended to provide future educators with a theoretical connection between the influence of the US racial hierarchy in school settings and the creation of conflictual environments that shape the identity choices of mixed-race students. Also, the expectations of this study are to assist multiracial students in understanding the consequences of their identity choices, beliefs, and actions for members of other racial groups and the role schools and society play in racial identity formation.

Grounded in the premise that racial identity choice is an individual enactment with structural implications, this study sought to explore the formal and informal schooling experiences that influence the racial identity choices of mixed-race college students. Therefore, the research questions addressed in this study are as follows: How do the formal and informal schooling contexts shape the identity choices of multiracial students? How do the identity choices of multiracial students conform to and/or resist the racialized social system of the United States?

Notes

1. The term *black* is purposely used instead of *African American* to depict the historical notions of a racial classification scheme.

2. I will alternate between the terms *multiracial* and *mixed-race* depending on the situation I am explaining or describing. I will use *mixed-race* more often because the students I interviewed use *mixed* to refer to their racial identities.

3. The term *white* is used instead of *Anglo* or *European* because it is race-focused and commonly used by the students I interviewed.

4. An informal school setting is comprised of the social aspects of relationships and peer influences. A formal school setting refers to the curriculum, administrators, policies, educators, and power structures, and the means by which they affect the identity choices of mixed-race students.

5. Regarding Indianness, it should be noted that "looking Indian" can be of greater importance than one's biological or legal status.

6. For example, the mixed-race perspective in this study raises questions about how race is measured in society as a lived experience. Through a historical formation of race, decisions are made about a person based on phenotypic attributes as a racial measure. As a result, mixed-race people are conveniently racially categorized, which in turn often influences or shapes expectations and behaviors of them as racially measured people.