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Kelly Y. Llaguno Velarde
Sacred Heart University

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Negative Scripts, Racism and Its Effects on Black Identity Construction

By: Kelly Llaguno Velarde
Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut



Abstract

It has been over a century since W.E.B. DuBois described the double consciousness experienced by African Americans who are forced to measure their souls "by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (DuBois, 1903). More than one hundred years later, Black Americans continue to face the negative scripts of racism that devalue their humanity, all the while facing the risk of internalizing the presumption of their racial inferiority. Based on ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with young Black adults between the ages of 18 and 21, this study focuses on the internalization of racism and how its impact on identity construction for young Black adults. Findings indicate that the young Black participants in this study did internalize racist scripts in early childhood, but were more adept at resisting negative racial messages in early adulthood. Parenting strategies could have contributed to the internalization of negative cultural scripts given that each respondent reported that their parents did little to shield them from internalizing presumptions of their racial inferiority. Instead, college served as a time when participants were able to develop and redefine their sense of worth and belonging into a more positive racial identity.

Background and History

The experience for non-whites in American history has been shaped by a number of boundaries. As a result, today we see how race and ethnicity continues to shape the identity of non-whites in America as they fight the oppression they experience on both personal and institutional levels. In 1903, W.E.B DuBois predicted this when he outlined the color line which he believed would shape the identities of individuals in the 20th century. This ideology shows that racial distinctions and racism would continue to exist as people of color experienced restrictions and diminished life chances and opportunities. DuBois believed that slavery had scarred the identities of blacks in America, which made them develop a double consciousness that has forced them to see themselves through the eyes of the oppressor. Since race is hyper visible, it forces blacks to constantly be aware of their inferior status while simultaneously experiencing their self-worth and value.

Beverly Tatum speaks on W.E.B Du Bois' double consciousness when she addresses the notion of what others see and what that means for an individual's identity. She says, "The parts of our identity that *do* capture our attention are those that other people notice, and that reflect back to us. The aspect of identity that is the target of others' attention, and subsequently of our own, often is that which sets us apart as exceptional or "other" in their eyes" (Tatum 21). Through this observation Tatum affirms that for Black Americans their race and their otherness is always reflected back at them.

It is important to point out that the racial minority experience in the US has been formatted by racism and its internalization. The purpose of this thesis is to look at how the experience of oppression has been internalized by Black Americans and as a result has shaped an individual's identity development.

Theory

Race is a complex and dynamic phenomenon with multiple layers. The visibility of race has formed the structure for racism that is a "system of advantage based on race" (7). This system of advantage leads into Naomi Zack's definition which defines racism as "the presumed inferiority of racial minorities and their underrepresentation in positions of wealth, power and prestige as well as the presumed superiority of whites and their over representation in position of wealth power and prestige" (Zack 42).

Based on the visible implications of race, prejudice emerges. Prejudice is seen as "preconceived judgements or opinions, usually based on limited information" (5). As these beliefs continue to circulate the everyday life of people they go into the level of discrimination that is the behavioral component of racism. That's when the beliefs and scripts of a particular group are internalized. When people of color are denied jobs, housing, societal rewards and opportunities we begin to see how racism exist not only on the individual level but also on the institutional one. This second component of racism has differential negative effects on people of color and differential positive effects on Whites. These theories build on the visible dimensions of race alone to include power specifically.

The visibility of race has implications for identity construction. Charles Horton Cooley used *The Looking Glass Self* to illustrate how interactions impact the development of an individual's identity. Cooley's theory claims that individuals see themselves as others see them which in turn helps them define themselves based on how others define them.

William Du Bois applies Cooley's theory of the *Looking Glass Self* in his concept of the double consciousness. Du Bois argued that the color lines of race and racism would continue to be important concepts to consider in order to understand social and economic status, political opportunity and everyday lived experiences. When others see an individual's race first, the individual prioritize their race in their identity construction and develops a double consciousness.

William Du Bois used the double consciousness to explain the division that has prevailed in American society. He believed that Blacks in America have constant awareness of their inferior status but also experience the feeling of self-worth and value. Through these interactions individuals begin to see themselves through the eyes of their oppressor which influences their behaviors and the negative images of their race. This experience has scarred the identities of many blacks and produced an alienated consciousness that continues to further divide people of different races. These experiences formatted through reflections have forced individuals to internalize racism and change the image of their race. This awareness impacts the identity construction process.

Methods

Participants

This study was based on 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with young Black adults between the ages of 18 and 21.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative approach, specifically face-to-face interviews that lasted 20-45 minutes. Each interview began with a number of close-ended demographic questions about the participants age, year of study, race, ethnicity, and social class. Participants were then asked a series of open-ended questions regarding their experiences in childhood and young adulthood.

Measures

The independent variable for this study was having black ancestry. Participants could be of different ethnicities but had to be Black Americans. The dependent variable was internalized racism that was affected by the dominant cultural scripts and parenting strategies. The dependent variables were class and ethnicity.

Procedure

To analyze this study, I used Grounded Theory. Grounded theory is the process of generating codes by looking for repetitive emerging themes to interpret the data. I began by creating broad themes that included "internalized racism", "feelings of isolation", "dominant culture scripts." Then I focused on naming the different dimensions of each theme. I analyzed the codes and finally interpreted them with regard to the studies of internalized racism and its effect on the identity construction process.

Results

Findings

A number of themes emerged repeatedly across the 10 interviewed participants including the impact of dominant cultural scripts, parenting strategies, internalized racism and feelings of isolation.

Impact of dominant cultural scripts

Informants were frustrated with the way the media portrayed Black Americans. They understood that stereotypes were over simplistic, over exaggerated, generalized depiction of their group that did not pertain to every Black person but influenced the way others viewed them.

Participants understood that the dominant cultural scripts formed barriers on individual and institutional levels as negative scripts organized their everyday lives and as a result they recognized that they had to work harder to achieve their goals. When asked what it meant to be Black in America all of the participants mentioned that they had to work harder to achieve anything in life.

Parenting strategies

Given the existence of these dominant cultural scripts, parents according to my informants, did not seem to replace negative cultural scripts of being black with positive ones. Parents taught their kids what they had to worry about but didn't highlight the positive aspects of their race and didn't teach them strategies on how to navigate American society as a Black child.

Internalized Racism

Racial socialization is important to the identity construction process as these symbols become meaningful in encouraging a positive racial identity. The parents of my informants did not use these strategies and based on these strategies there was potentially an impact of internalizing racism. Informants revealed that at a young age they felt ashamed of their race.

For my informant's college was a space that allowed them to learn more about their race and gave them the courage to proudly identify as Black. Through receiving more information, the internalization began to go away. In adolescence and early adulthood participants began to challenge those negative scripts and the way they understood race. Education become a tool to express themselves differently.

Feelings of Isolation

Participants also expressed that these experiences lead them to feel isolated from society and other Blacks in their community. Two different elements isolated them from others, one was their class and the other was their skin tone. Informants mentioned that being middle-class and having the opportunity to attend a private school isolated them from other blacks because others believed that through this privilege the informants could not relate to their struggle. Skin tone also became a recurring theme as participants believed that their skin tone played a role in how others viewed them.

Conclusions

Findings

Informants absolutely saw and felt those negative scripts and negative associations of their race around them. They saw it in the media and they saw them through the interactions that they had with people of their race and of other races. There was to an extend an internalization but it was in childhood not as much in young adulthood. Tatum speaks to this in her book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, and she says that having racial encounters in high school enables the process of what William Cross might call an "immersion experience" (Tatum 75).

Once in college a Black student is more likely to explore their racial identity because they feel a strong desire to surround themselves with symbols of their racial identity and "actively seek" opportunities to learn more about their history, their culture alongside same-race peers (76). In my research informants did mention that after learning more about their race and their roots, they were able to anchor their sense of Blackness.

Tatum also mentions that in this stage a person begins to unlearn the internalized negative stereotypes of their group and redefines their sense of self to a positive one that is based on the affirmation of their racial group identity (Tatum 76). After entering college participants began to recognize that stereotypes were generalizations of their group that didn't speak for all Black Americans. This understanding allowed them to challenge the negative scripts and the way they understood their race. College gave my participants the opportunity to find themselves and the connection to their community that offered all these protective factors.

According to Tatum one of the primary buffers to internalized racism is parenting strategies. My research showed that parents were not replacing negative cultural scripts of being Black with positive ones. For Black Americans, their race is tied into negative scripts that impact their identity constructions process. During the first stage of racial identity development Black children begin to take in the beliefs and values of the dominant white culture, "including the idea that it is better to be White" (Tatum 55). Through these observations black and white children begin to absorb stereotypes, omissions and distortions of White superiority forcing them to value the life represented by the dominant group more than the life of their own cultural group (Tatum 55). During this stage parents can be what Tatum calls "race-conscious" by encouraging a positive racial identity. Parents can do this by teaching their kids positive cultural images and messages about their race. This strategy will help reduce the negative associations of being Black. My participants parents did not engage in these parenting strategies and informants became vulnerable to internalized racism. They were left to unfold, redefine, and discover their blackness on their own. And even though we assume that race eclipses ethnicity in my findings I saw that ethnicity was still a powerful variable particularly affecting these parenting strategies. The parents were ethnic parents and weren't talking about race and racism because they weren't seeing their children as Black Americans they were seeing them as Haitian or Jamaican.

There were factors outside of family and the general negative scripts that continued to have a profound impact on the informants specifically the idea of feeling isolated. Participants felt isolated from other blacks in their communities because they were middle-class. They were often accused of being "boujie" because they had the opportunity to attend better schools and had access to more resources. This unintentionally separated them from other blacks in their community and made them feel unwanted.

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