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Negative Scripts, Racism, and Its Effects on Black Identity Construction

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Abstract

It has been over a century since W.E.B. Du Bois described the double consciousness that Black Americans endure as they are forced to measure their souls ‘by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’. More than one hundred years later, Black Americans continue to face the negative scripts of racism that devalue their humanity, all 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 racist 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. Du Bois predicted this when he outlined the color line which would shape the identities of individuals in the 20th century. This ideology shows that racial distinctions contribute to the development of personal and cultural scripts that are color experienced restrictions and diminished life chances and opportunities. Du Bois 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 in this oppression, society forced blacks to constantly be aware of their inferior status while simultaneously experiencing their self-worth and value.

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 a well-defined approach that allows for the discovery of emerging themes to interpret the data. I began by creating broad themes that led to the identification of emergent themes and then narrowed my attention to the specific themes within them.

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 depictions of their group that did not capture to every Black person but influenced the way others viewed them.

Participants understood that the dominant cultural scripts formed within 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 acknowledged that this goal may 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 strategies on how to navigate American society as a Black child.

Internalized Racism

Racial socialization is important to the identity construction process as these scripts become the foundation for managing 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 internalization. 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. Informants were frustrated with the way the media portrayed Black Americans and when they saw someone who looked like them they immediately internalized racism and change the image of their race. This awareness impacts the identity construction process.

Feelings of Isolation

Participants also disclosed 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 color. 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

On occasion 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 race and their peers (Tatum 74). 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. However, what this stage begins to part where the internalized negative stereotypes of their group and redefine their sense of self in response to the affirmation of their racial group identity (Tatum 74). 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 a connection to their community that offered all these protective factors.

According to Tatum one of the primary catalysts to internalized racism is parenting strategies. My research showed that there were not replacing negative cultural scripts of being Black with positive ones. For my informants, their race is tied to 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 associated impacts of parenting strategies. The participants did not engage in these parenting strategies and informants believed that parental strategies were not used and it was not until college, when they discovered their blackness on their own. 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 contributed to the internalization of race. The informal interaction specifically the idea of feeling isolated. Participants felt isolated from other blacks in their communities because they were middle-class. They alicious and called them “junk” because they had the opportunity to attend better schools and had access to more resources. This isolated them from other blacks in their community and made them feel unwanted.

References


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