



ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

Lessons in Racial Identity and Kinship

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"Jessie" had been home visiting her parents during a break in the semester in which she was enrolled in my Race and Ethnicity course when, during a car ride, her mother revealed in passing that Jessie's father's father was Jewish. During this same car ride Jessie sensed her mother's reluctance to

for others. I ask students under what circumstances they came to realize their racial/ethnic identity, and whether and how it has changed over time. Prior to this, we read Hegel's description of the dialectic (including the portion from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* on the "Lord/Bondsman" relationship) and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, a challenging, complicated and provocative text.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

discuss Jessie's father's ancestry. This was the first that Jessie, a 20-year-old woman, had heard of her father's Jewish paternity. Jessie had thought of herself as a white, WASP-y New Englander—in her own words, she played lacrosse, was in a sorority. But this new knowledge and the circumstances of its revelation changed the way she thought about herself as white.

Another student, "Elena," wrote about growing up in New York City in a predominantly Dominican neighborhood. Elena described her mother's insistence that Elena was not black but was Dominican, and that their habit of speaking Spanish together was evidence of this. For Elena and for her mother, their linguistic capacity and their racial identity were composite. Elena wrote about her struggles with specific affinity groups in college because of what she described as her complex heritage.

Yet another student, "James," described the active racism of his white grandparents, and in particular how his grandfather often made disparaging comments about the supposed moral and habitual deficiencies of members of various racial and ethnic minority groups, African Americans in particular. James also recounted how these racial invectives were usually meant to be "instructive," that is, instructing James about what constituted "good behavior." In this sense, then, James described how he was learning what his grandparents conceived of as the obligations and responsibilities of being white.

These stories were recounted by students for the culminating assignment in the Race and Ethnicity course that I have taught at my university since 2004. The assignment (inspired by an article by Matthew Richard in the October 2003 *AN*) asks students to "reflect on and relate in writing [their] understanding of [their] own racial or ethnic identity," with the goal being to explicitly and directly engage students in an issue that seems self-evident for some and invisible

Inspiring Critical Inquiry

The class itself, which I have taught five times, is a sophomore-level introductory course and, as there are no prerequisites, it draws students from across the college. We discuss human biodiversity, past and present (my four-field training has served me well), and how "race" and "ethnicity" are cultural constructs that have changed over time. We also compare cultural racial taxonomies and racial discourses in the US with those in the UK and in India, so that students may see the diversity of historically contingent, context specific interpretations of race that exist.

A main focus of the course is cultural identity, also my primary research area. I selected the examples above because they were among the ones from which I have learned new things about identity formation. The pedagogical value of the assignment is that it reveals to students that their identities are cultural forms and practices linked to many others. It also reveals to students that they have racial identities, whether they like it or not and whether they are frequently or intermittently aware of or impacted by those identities. In the process of researching and writing the final assignment, they often acknowledge the implicit and explicit racism in their own families. They see and come to appreciate the epistemological range of anthropology, and how it can help us engage with the biological, historical, linguistic and cultural factors that are manifest in concepts of race. And they realize that the "self" can be a site of critical ethnographic analysis.

Most of the students in my class, and at this liberal-arts college, self-identify as white Americans and, in a recurring theme, they remark that they grew up in nearly "all-white" towns (many in the Midwest) where "race wasn't really an issue." In response I comment that if their towns were really "all-white," it would seem that race was their very organizing principle—hardly "not an issue." I ask them, how did your town

get that way? How does it stay that way? Such a discussion allows us in class to examine the nature of racial segregation in current residence patterns in many parts of the US. This discourse of race being an issue only in the presence of a theorized racial other is due in part to my focus on the dialectic and issues of contrast and difference. But part of this is also due to critically engaging with the conception that the nature of whiteness is self-evident, normative or even apart from race, and addressing the forms (and differentials) of power expressed through that.

Kinship and Intimacy

After five semesters and over one hundred final essays, the pattern that stands out more than any other is the importance of kinship. Rather than coming from the "media" or from popular culture (alone), students described their formative moments in racial identity as embedded deep within kinship relations. For many, their racial identities and their kinship identities, obligations and sentiments of intimacy are inextricably bound up with one another (cf, Hirschfeld 1997).

One illustrative narrative was from a white student, "Troy," who wrote of growing up in a predominantly white suburb of a fairly large city in Ohio. He wrote of an instance of sitting in the back seat of a car as a young boy as his mother drove through a certain part of the "inner-city." Troy remembers hearing the door "click" locked, and he remembers looking out of the window and seeing on the street people who he would now describe as African American. This moment of Peircean Secondness, this "click," was an index that some condition had changed, and as indexical signs do, it tied together two distinct social discourses. He now associated some implicit threat, and more significantly maternal concern and care, with the presence of black people. In this instance, racial prejudice and parental concern were composite, and he learned the former while learning of the latter.

This, then, is part of the challenge revealed by my students' narratives: for them, race and racism are tied up with kinship identity and obligations, inextricable from the intimacy of some of the most important and lasting relationships in their lives. Researchers have long known that racial and ethnic affinity groups can serve or act as "fictive kin groups," but this assignment goes a step further. Efforts to understand racial identity cannot simply (analytically) isolate race as a discrete category, and efforts to confront and combat racism cannot simply extract racist sentiments from the complex text of people's lives, as though racism were an unattached thread. However, my students' theorized narratives reveal the dissonance and disturbances in their own family experiences with race, which indicate possible axes and opportunities for social change.

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