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"Design your own life!" Thoughts on ethnicity, race, and parenting biracial children

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Abstract

In an increasingly multicultural society interracial families and their biracial or multiracial children are defying stagnant socially constructed concepts of *race* and racial categorization. In this paper, I present a narrative based on three ninety-minute in-depth phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2006) focused on one participant's life history and how he understands and makes meaning of his role as the parent of biracial children. Informed by a hermeneutic framework, the narrative presents a story of how the participant has come to understand himself and his children racially, ethnically, and culturally through his own intra- and interpersonal development. Parenting his children emerges as a strong influence on his process of de-constructing the concept of *race* and co-constructing new meanings for it. The narrative illustrates how, while honoring themselves and their communities, this person and his family dismantle some of the most ubiquitous ideas of our society concerning the construct of *race*.

Introduction

Questions and answers about the social construction of *race* often lead to a complex and deep understanding of what supports and restricts us, as human beings, in relation to our authentic experience. Learning about *race* is also learning about how we think, how we identify

ourselves, how others identify us, and how this may be either supportive or limiting in our processes of becoming. Thus, though the following is one narrative, a profile or case study, of one individual as he reflects on his life as a person in an interracial marriage, a father of biracial children, and a member of a multiracial world, this narrative connects us all to our collective struggle with understanding *race*.

Methodology

The words or profile below are the result of three ninety-minute in-depth phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2006) on the experience of parenting biracial children. The first interview focused on the participant's life history, the second interview centered on the experience of parenting his biracial children, and the third interview provided the space for the participant to reflect on the meaning of his experience (Seidman, 2006).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed multiple times. In order to present this data as a profile, it was necessary to condense and edit volumes of spoken word into text (Seidman, 2006). This process is an integral part of the analysis, and, as Seidman (2006) points out, facilitates a co-construction of the narrative in which the crafted profile emerges out of the participant's voice while reflecting a self-narrative of the researcher.

The following words are the participant's own, and as the researcher my attempt was to convey the participant's own meaning (Thompson, 1978) while understanding that my participation in the process facilitated a co-construction of the narrative. As the writer of the crafted profile I added punctuation, deleted repetitions and edited the draft in a manner that would transform verbal speech into written text (Gluck & Patai, 1991; Seidman, 2006). I chose

salient passages and arranged them in a chronological narrative. At times, in order to create such a narrative, I had to re-arrange the original sequence of narration as the participant did not speak to me in a strictly chronological flow; rather, he went forward and backward in time in his narration. Moreover, the first two paragraphs of the profile (separated by the rest of the profile by asterisks) are out of sequence. These were taken out of context and placed at the beginning of the profile to convey a recurrent theme in the narrative as an introduction to the narrative. Italicized words or phrases indicate the speaker's emphasis. The profile was read, reviewed, and edited by the participant in order to ensure that the narrative was representative of his experience and story. Following Jay's story, I write my own reflection on the experience of interviewing Jay and co-constructing this narrative.

Jay's Profile—"*I feel like myself. I am who I am.*"

I have always lived interracially. In my own personal experiences, I can truly say that I have always lived interracially. My family is all African American, with all the rich traditions of the African American experience, particularly in the South, but also the North. I have always had both. I have had the full range of experiences, the full range.

I feel like myself. I am who I am and I can swing both ways. You know what I mean? I am comfortable with all black folk or among white folk. I feel how a transsexual might feel. I am not a woman. I am not a man. I am what I am, and I can enjoy being a woman, and I can enjoy being a man. I'm not a *this* or a *that*. Now, I am a black man, and I know that because I am reminded of that every time I look in the mirror and every time I go out and so forth. This is my primary identity, a Black American, an African American, who feels comfortable in a lot of different venues.

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My parents moved to New York when they had their three kids. That is where I initially grew up, on the lower side of the Bronx, from the time I was one to the time I was thirteen, in the 50's. The neighborhood was very integrated . . . It was where the Black migration came to out of the South...There were lots of Irish, Jews; the Puerto Ricans were moving in. Blacks, all mixed in. In my one tenement we had Irish, Italian, Black. We all played together. . . My best friend was Jewish. We went to school together, we played together, we fought against each other; we fought together. That is the kind of neighborhood I grew up in. It was very, very seriously integrated, a truly integrated neighborhood.

My father drove a cab and my mother was a seamstress. She was an artist; she sewed costumes for the ballet. She was such an excellent seamstress, but she wouldn't leave her home to work, because it was important for her to be home so she could watch her kids. So she did alterations for people, particularly Jewish women, who were beginning to have some affluence so they could pay for that kind of service. They couldn't buy stuff off the rack, so they would come to her and she would make it from scratch. She wouldn't charge them a lot of money, and they just loved her. I mean these Jewish women *just* loved her like a sister. So we were all always around different people.

Then my grandparents died and there was this home, the ancestral home, where my father grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. My parents, in spite of the fact that they had immigrated, were Southerners. That experience in New York was not in their formative years. Their formative years were in the segregated South where they still sort of had ties. They were used to these communities where people knew each other and knew who 'your folks were.' They didn't have

to guess around. In New York it was all a great big mix like ‘You don’t know who these folks are?’ You see it was very parochial in that way. So for them this was a great opportunity to move to Atlanta. Their daughters were coming out and approaching dating and marriage age. My sisters could go to Spellman College. I could go to Morehouse.

So, my oldest sister, who had been going to City College in New York, transferred over to Spellman. My little sister and I went to Booker T. Washington High School, the biggest and oldest high school in Atlanta where Martin Luther King went to school, where my father went to school. So this was very good for my parents. This was like returning home.

For us kids it was like *shock*. . . We had visited our grandparents every summer, so every time we went down there we had to figure out how to be good “niggers”. . . sitting in the back of the bus and you know . . . all those things. But, in the end, we were going to leave at the end of summer and go back to New York. But now, here we are living there, going to a segregated school. It scared the shit out of me because I had never been in that . . . I remember my first day of school and it was a huge group of black folk, . . . they had a football rally--and down there in the South football is big stuff--and the band was going, and they were walking and carrying on . . . I had never seen anything like that in my life! You see, I had never been around so many black folk only.

But, it didn’t take us long to integrate into it, accept it, and--most important--*understand* it. There were some very special things about it. I remember J. P. Read, my algebra teacher. I hated algebra. I hated the whole thing. She would give me hell. She said ‘boy, you listen. I went to school with your father . . . don’t you give me nonsense here. You aren’t even doing your

homework!’ The principal was a good friend of my father’s; they had gone to school together. So there was this sense of community, a different sense of community.

When I graduated I was offered a scholarship to Morehouse. I turned it down to go into the service. People thought I was insane to do that; back then, the way you lifted yourself out was to go to one of the traditional black colleges and get a traditional education. From there you would go off and get some sort of professional career. I really never wanted that. I wasn’t interested. I wanted a technical education and I had had it with the segregated South. . . I didn’t want any part of that. . . My sisters were being sent to marry black men, black Morehouse men, and they fell right into it . . . even though all their experiences had been even more interracial than mine. Today, to this day, my oldest sister is married to a Morehouse man who became a surgeon, and they are well integrated into the Black community to a point where it is like she never had any white friends.

I left the South because I couldn’t reconcile the fact that I was artificially isolated from the whole race of people, who previously, when I was in New York, were my friends. I just couldn’t stand that kind of artificial separation. That is why I left the segregated South. But--I tell you, though, I just went to visit my sister there and we went to church and I was there amongst all these folks, black folks, and you just have to feel what it feels like to be there—the energy, the music and song, *the unity*. . . I miss that.

In the service, I got a good technical education. Technology was just exploding in the 60s in terms of computers and other things. Most of the guys I knew went into the FAA, Federal Aviation Administration, to repair huge radars or they went into emerging technologies at IBM and big companies. I didn’t want to work in the big ones, and I found this really small company

in this little town. . . I had a wonderful career in Massachusetts. I started out as a technician trainee and when I left I was an executive for the corporate program and Senior Vice President of Operations in the lab. When I started we had 600 employees worldwide; that was small. After thirty years I was with them we had 140,000 employees. It was a real white organization. I think I was the second black guy in there, but I loved these people. They were so friendly and engaging. So much of how I conceptualize problems and solutions, came out of working there designing, creating, real innovative stuff.

Cindy and I met in 1969 in her theater group, which was basically an interracial theater group in response to the march in Selma, Alabama. A lot of people from Boston went down to that march and there was this older woman, a retired professor at Tufts University, who thought she could make a contribution to this great social movement going on, meaning the Civil Rights Movement. She had this ideal in her mind called “The People’s Theater.” The theater was a way for working people to express their lives into art. It was based right into communities of working people where they were the actors, the directors, the performers, and, sometimes, the writers. But our idea was not only for the theater for the working people: we made it an interracial theater. Because theater was pretty much along racial lines back then; if you had a black part, you got a black actor. You didn’t cast with a blind eye to ethnicity and race. She, the founder, said “we are going to bump up the theater like that, and it will be our contribution to this great social revolution.”

I joined that theater group. I learned Shakespeare. I did Shakespeare. I was Orsino, the Duke, in *Twelfth Night*. We showed how theater can transcend the common human experience. It can transcend race and class and so forth, so you get to the common aspirations of the human

experience. *Twelfth Night* is a comedy of errors. There are these twins, who get separated at birth. They were not identical, but they looked like each other. We played it like he wrote it, but one was black and one was white. It was a very powerful thing to show.

So Cindy was in theater all her life. She spotted me and I spotted her, and. . .that was that. I wanted to know what she was all about. Within three months we were married. I was a very happy man. . .Thirty-six years. . .

Our parents, that was interesting! . . . I was somewhat disappointed by my mother's advice. It wasn't advice, really, it was a hope. This was before I had met Cindy; she said "I just hope you marry a black woman. There is so few good black men out there. . . the white woman will take our best," you know how that goes. But you know, she saw these very successful black men and white women, and it just hurt her to see that. It was a personal hurt on her part. . . But, she never exercised animosity when Cindy and I married. She embraced Cindy. Cindy would have never known that she had ever had that conversation. She embraced her with all the love that she could. She was very loving. You see, that's what happens when you get to know someone. Like those little Jewish women, they just loved her because they could see the love in her heart for humanity. It was the sort of thing that she worshipped.

So that was one of the first things that consciously gave me pause in terms of my identity when I married Cindy. It was the first thing, but otherwise, I always follow my heart. I am going to follow my brain, and I am not going to let all this other stuff interfere with my decisions. It is not important. It is not important to the basic fundamental things of love. Love: love for what you want to do, love for where you want to be, love for the person you love. Those things, you

can't let those other things—because she is not white, or he is not this, or this community is not this or that—You have to follow what you love first and then work on those things.

The other part of that was Cindy's mother. She was just completely discombobulated that she would marry a black man. . . Her parents were on the West Coast. Her mother cried all the way across the continent . . .for several reasons. Cindy is her only daughter. She thought she would marry over there [near her parents], and she would have a wedding there for all her friends. We had a very small wedding here. So that was part of it, but to marry a black man just. . .it blew her mind because. . .her own mother was a racist and her Cindy's mother knew that. Cindy's grandmother was dead at that time, but her mother was just struggling with this notion that Cindy would marry a black man. The other thing was that her mother was concerned about was that our children being multiracial wouldn't be accepted by the black community or the white community. . . She thought they wouldn't be accepted anywhere.

But it was fine. It was fine in the end. It came to a point where she now has more love and respect for me than she does for her own two sons. They struggled with being “successful.” She sees me as a success in terms of the way I raise my kids, and the way we live our lives—we design our lives—and did what we had to do.

Family was always our focus. . .After we had the two biological kids, we adopted two children. . . and the criteria was that they were older kids and that they were Black, because they are “harder to adopt” So we adopted two children that were 7 to 9 at the time. They came from the state. . .before that from a dysfunctional family. My oldest adopted son . . .had been in foster care for only two years. He still had memories of his birth family, but my younger daughter did not. . .It was a real challenge in our lives; it really changed the whole dynamic of the family.

When kids have been through abuse and foster care. . .hmm. . . Our son, tragically, was killed in a fight. Our daughter has gone through a lot. . .we are now raising her children, our grandchildren. That is another challenge but . . . it is very important. Now, after we adopted them, then we had another son biologically. I was 45 at the time; now we are in our 60s and we have a house full of kids. We didn't plan it, but it turns out that it was a very important thing especially for Cindy.

I have been thinking about parenting, of course, in a larger context, too, because of the particular situation we are having in fostering care for our two grandchildren. So parenting, I have realized,. . .there is no place where you can learn parenting.. .It is only partially a derivative learning, it is an experiential learning thing. I remember someone saying that she had children when she was young and that they grew up together. . .There is a partnership and a relationship in which there is a good 'give and take'. . .there is an element of that goodness, as I say, in the partnering of this parenting where the parent is learning how to parent as the child learns how to grow. . . I think much much more of that "to be a good parent" really does require the kind of reflection that you are asking me to do now. "What works for your child today?" "What are the circumstances today?" And, most important, "What are you trying to achieve for the future?" Parenting is about anticipating your child's needs in the future to help your child prepare for the future. . . challenging them to make some decisions that you could easily make for them but don't so that *they* can make the decisions. . . kids need guidance and support . . .still recognizing that kids have to grow up themselves. Growing up can be a lonely process. No one can do it for you. . .

Yes, I wondered how my children would negotiate their lives being multiracial. I knew that there would be trials, things that they were going to be challenged by like hate. But it is a whole thing, a complex and most wonderful thing. Cindy tells me that the things she loves about me the most are also the things she can't stand. You know what I mean? Adversity is part of life. . .I say that to grow up you need 'Diversity,' 'Adversity,' and 'University,' and by university I mean learning, not college. . . Anyway, I always had the notion of "multiracial." Being multiracial is the future of this country. . .

Remember when I made that comment about when I first got married to Cindy? Her mother was concerned that the children would not be accepted by either side, racially speaking? Well, it has been *absolutely* the opposite. They are *more* prepared to deal with this world than most kids who have been isolated, if you will, in their ethnicity. I am sure that they feel it is very rich, you know... whether you are Jewish or African American from a primarily African American community or whatever... I am sure it is very rich for them to grow up in a mono-racial environment, but I think multiracial kids who are *really* raised in multiracial kind of situations are much more prepared to deal, and much more accepted, and able to move in different areas, both psychologically and . . . in many other areas. So I think it is positive.

I am proud that they have really been independent thinkers on their own. They have figured out what box they are in and they have managed to, in some cases, break out of that box or stay in it as need be. But they have figured out...they are figuring out the world. They are figuring out who they are and where they are going. Charlene is the only exception because of all of the problems that she has had to face in the world. . . But for my three biological kids, they have figured out who they are in the world. Who they are racially, intellectually, culturally,

socially. . . They just have figured it out. They have figured out that they don't need to be white. They don't need to be black. They can be themselves and they can find friends and find community and *invent* community.

Of course they went through this tremendous "who am I?", and they became really difficult people to live with and deal with. I don't know if this is good or bad but we never had a traditional rebellion with our kids. They went through some tough times, but it wasn't...it wasn't superficial. They had to figure out some things for themselves. And they did it their own way. They don't have to look to be accepted by someone in the community or by the community itself. They *invent* their own community so they are accepted on their own...their own social construct. Jill is an internationalist. We sent her to India, and in college she studied Russian. Now she is married to an Italian and travels all over the world with her job at the State Department. My sons invent themselves in other ways.

So that is what I mean about being 'in a box,' my son has found his own box. He is able to figure out "oh, I am here." A lot of people can't do that. There are a lot of folks, grown up people that can't figure out where they are in this world, what box they live in, what works and what doesn't. A lot of people just accept how they think they should live as a *this* or a *that*, in this or that community. . . He *builds* his own community, and he is confident because he knows his community that he invented and designed.

The fundamental thing is raising a child, not raising an interracial child. That is the fundamental thing. . . When you raise your children you can raise interracial, multiracial, multi-sexual, you name it...The fundamental thing is understanding the bond between and the responsibility between a child and the person raising him. It is important, that relationship, the

love, the respect, the discipline, the learning, the feeling of security. All of those things you have to give to a child. That is what is fundamental. And, it will transcend any, any issues, that the child might have. . .Whether they be black or white or multiracial or interracial or bisexual or homosexual, the fundamental issue is building that level of love, self confidence, discipline, respect, and the ability to know where you are in the world. And, the most important thing, which I am only know beginning to realize is to teach them to be *designers*. . .

“Design your own life!” *Design*. That is where I see the failings of our educational systems right up through Ph.D.s: we don’t teach people how to be designers. We can teach people to design, fundamentally, to design their own lives. They will be successful, and we will be successful parents.

Parenting is important whether you do it directly or indirectly. Yeah, it is great and it helps you to know yourself and a multiracial environment just gives you more opportunities to learn more things. It may complicate, but it may also expand. It does also expand the opportunities to learn and give value to your life, so it is not a burden to be a multiracial parent. Like anything else, it is more complicated than good or bad. . .

My experience being in a multiracial family, sort of reinforced what I had already believed. You know, when I used to work at my company, they couldn’t figure us out. They had all sorts of first impressions about me and the children. They used to ask “is Cindy black?” They couldn’t quite figure it out; so being multiracial and a multiracial family meant people couldn’t easily see *it*. People always want to try and label you and say “that is what you are”, easy...you know?. . .And it wasn’t easy for people to do that with us. They really didn’t know where we came from, what our experience was. They just couldn’t figure us out. They couldn’t label us. It

was always nice not to be able to be easily labeled by people. You know what I mean? They want to be able to put you in that thing, in that category, and they couldn't do that with us, particularly with my family. *They had to get to know us.* They had to get to know us. That was nice.

The kids love us and our family. My son, every time he had a girlfriend the first thing he would do was to bring her to our family. We would have dinner or something and see how we responded to her, and how she responded to us. And that was, for him, the test of whether this was a woman or a girl that he wanted to invest his time and energy with. If they didn't appreciate us as a family, then he felt that they were somewhat limited in their view of the world. . . That was really very nice. Adrian used to say that his biggest asset was this family, in terms of getting a woman interested, . . . to bring her to the family and see what a rich family and rich environment we had. . . Isn't that amazing?

Now the negative side is that I felt that we weren't strongly connected to either strong cultural roots. The strength of the black culture and the black church in the South, the Baptists, is just oh so powerful, and our family never had that. We never had the kind of strong cultural connection. . . I mean it is a small negative, but it is a negative, that we don't have. . . unifying things that are culture-based through religion. What is great about us is we have a really broad range of interests and likes and so forth in music, but nothing so intensely in-depth that we can say that this is our family. You know these families that play classical music together or play instruments? They sing together and do ethnic traditions together. . . Our family doesn't have that kind of unity. . . that strong bond of ethnicity and culture. We are very exposed, and we appreciate all of our different tastes. I try. . . anyway. . . I mean you can't have everything. You can't have

your cake and eat it too. The fact is that we don't have this as part of our family. . .Our strong traditions are traditions we made up for our family. . .We have a lot to do with other people as our community, and I think that has really been a strong. Yeah...we create, we create our own traditions. . .We invent and we design.

Reflections

Listening involves making some connections. Story telling about the human experience will allow us to relate to one another regardless of the story if it involves deep human emotions. Working hard to hear his meaning, I learned that Jay feels his experience as a parent of biracial children in a multiracial family with complexity and some conflict. Jay described the nuances and dissonance of feeling connected culturally and in one's identity with a cultural group while wanting to experience the richness and complexity of human diversity and commonality. This complexity is not often easily accessible to us as readers or "consumers" of media as both our diversity and our common human experience have been misrepresented and trivialized. When Jay told me that he feels most comfortable with African American men while expressing a deep desire to be in community with "the whole human race" of people, I understood this complexity as one that is often misrepresented. When he told me that he misses the deep cultural connection of the Black church and all of its traditions, while maintaining a family tradition in which these "ethnic traditions" are not present, I see the complexity of his chosen multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural experience. His experiences, his thinking and feeling, are contextualized in a U.S. society that does not function multi-culturally, a society in which, especially in the context of Black/White dynamic relationships, "belonging" means "picking a side," participating in

binary understandings of race, ethnicity and culture and “giving something up” in order to “gain something new.”

A major theme that emerges in Jay’s profile is that of “designing” and “creating” identity, family, tradition, and community. Yet, the beauty and profundity of meaning that is inherent in this designing should not obfuscate what he feels is left behind in order to commit to this way of being. I learned about this dissonance only after careful reading. When Jay spoke of the experience in the Black church, the song, dance, the rhythm of speech, the feeling of unity and common understanding, I thought of an almost palpable feeling of “home” and sense of place. Yet, this feeling of being home does not negate the richness of other feelings he experiences in an environment that is culturally diverse. It is more complex than the binary that is typically presented for discussion.

In the present, Jay moves ahead creating new ways of understanding *race* and ethnicity while experiencing some of the barriers and limitations of the ubiquitous simplistic discourses our society supports. His children and grandchildren have and will continue to construct new identities, new meanings of *race* and ethnicity, and new communities for themselves. Parenting them has allowed and will continue to allow Jay to dismantle, design, and co-construct new understanding.

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