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Science and Magic: DNA and the Racial Narratives that Shape the Social Construction of Race in the USA

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This preliminary research explores the relationship between racial narratives that support the traditional social construction of ethnic identity and the sometimes-conflicting DNA data on ancestry. This work involves listening to the narratives of diverse individuals, DNA testing them, and then exploring the relationship between narratives and the DNA findings. Particular attention is given to the possibility for shifts in racial identity and narratives. This is the first attempt from a communication perspective to explore this unique relationship. First, the importance of narrative and its relevance to the social construction of racial identity is presented. Next, the method of inquiry is detailed. Then, findings are reported and, finally, discussion.

In American playwright Douglas Turner Ward's 1965 satire *A Day of Absence*, a black cast dresses in whiteface to portray a small southern town in which all of the black people have mysteriously disappeared for a day. In the midst of cars not getting washed, shoes not getting shined, and babies not getting nursed, the white mayor, who is trying to solve the puzzle, cannot locate his brother-in-law Woodfence. As the play unfolds, the audience slowly becomes aware that Woodfence is missing because, unbeknownst to anyone in town, Woodfence has been "passing" as white for many years.

In 1965, Douglas Turner Ward's satirical narrative of white black people and black white people was oddly prophetic in its racial juxtapositions now confirmed by new DNA data that reveal that the social construction of rigid racial divides is no more than a made-up system that, according to Lopez (1994), "is an ongoing, contradictory, self-reinforcing process subject to the macro forces of social and political struggle and the micro effects of daily decisions." It is not a biological construct.

Already in the field of Communication Studies (Carey, 2008) researchers are beginning to posit a new rhetoric of race based on the emergence of the racial narrative of Barack Obama that can extend to all of America and beyond. It is the goal of this preliminary research to explore the relationship between racial narrative that supports the traditional social construction of ethnic identity and the sometimes-conflicting DNA data on ancestry that pushes for a new narrative.

This work involves listening to the narratives of diverse individuals, DNA testing them, and then exploring the relationship between narratives and the DNA findings, particularly looking at shifts in racial identity and subsequent narratives as a result. This is the first attempt from a communication perspective to explore this unique relationship using the constant comparative method of grounded theory (Glaser & Straus, 1967). As such, the researcher's role at this juncture is to present the range of commentary and look toward future research to refine, narrow, or correct themes as data allow.

While this examination will ultimately challenge traditional views of race, terms such as African American, Asian, Latino and white will be used to refer to the ways that individuals identify themselves. In approaching our goal, first, the importance of narrative and its

relevance to the social construction of racial identity is presented. Next, the method of inquiry is detailed. Then, findings are reported followed by the discussion.

Narrative and the Social Construction of Racial Identity

In Fisher's (1987) discussion of narrative, he maintains that people are storytelling animals and that a good story holds to standards of both probability (it could have happened) and fidelity (it resonates). Of course, there are endless American stories. There is a story for every American and multiple stories for various instances. Yet, some stories fail while others succeed. The prevailing American "mainstream" cultural narrative has had tremendous traction, shored-up by laws and force, as it offers a simplistic explanation of race and race relations. To explore its impact, it is relevant to consider the genesis of the narrative, its impact on racial identity, and how it supports the social construction of race.

The "Mainstream" American Narrative

Rigid racial distinctions have been an integral part of the American caste imposed from its imperial beginnings (Strong, 1885). They allowed new Americans of European descent to declare manifest destiny and commit genocide against or legalize native people, enslave people of African descent and exploit Asian immigrants. While it is certainly true that poor Europeans were indentured and treated unfairly, an emergent white narrative allowed them greater ability to do their time, blend into the melting pot of American society (Zangwill, 1914), and take their place in the mainstream white world. For example, in the novel *How the Irish became White*, Ignatiev (1995) chronicles African American-Irish relations and how the Irish exploited their whiteness to secure their place in American culture.

The invention of the "white" narrative was so powerful that the narrative of a "mainstream American culture" supplanted all others, and all other narratives, when not silenced completely, were framed by that master narrative. The black experience was defined by slavery, the Native American by reservations, Wounded Knee, the Trail of Tears and the like, Latinos by bandits and outlaws, and Asians by railroads and concentration camps. Other independent self-defining stories were eclipsed.

Laws such as "one drop" and anti-immigration (Lwin, 2006) were enacted to support the narrative of white superiority and racial purity. This being the case, it is not surprising that as non-white individuals (despite all efforts) blended with Europeans and began to look "white" they often slipped unnoticed into the white community. They reworked their narratives and created other plausible, if false ones, to make a seamless transition that would allow them to simply pass into white society, expecting their colorful ancestry to disappear forever. Thus the master narrative remained secure despite an invisible genetic trace that contradicted it.

Human beings and DNA often have incompatible, even competing goals (Wells, 2006). DNA has only the agenda of taking itself forward. It is neutral on issues of race, rape, subterfuge or social convention. People, on the other hand, have a desire for a unified, utilitarian, and identity supporting narrative (Stone, 1989). Two people's lives can touch briefly for the most random, unacceptable, or dire of reasons and the DNA imprint defines all subsequent generations and is part of their very essence...forever. Our challenge here is to

explore the intersection of these two realities (biology and narrative, science and magic) and determine how this meeting can change the trajectory of our social construction of race.

The Human Genome Project, through advanced science, basic detective work and inference, began to unearth the genetic past by using DNA data to trace the migration of human beings from a common ancestral Eve across the globe. Of course, the first adjustment to the white narrative, given this information, is that all humans come from one Eve of Sub-Saharan African origin. So, in other words, we are all of African ancestry. We all have a drop of black blood. This realization, in itself, challenges the core American narrative.

The Impact of Narrative on Identity

While Fisher (1987) asserts that all human interaction is narrative, Stone (1989) states that *family* narratives are shaped over time to neatly maintain a sense of coherence, identity and esteem. She argues that narratives “give messages and instructions...offer blueprints and ideals...issue warnings and prohibitions” (p. 5). She adds that narratives offer a false sense of “blood lines,” that summon up in our minds “blood coursing down undiluted and unannoyed.” She later adds that they seem to be “pushing through our skin” (p. 39) often reading more like fairytale than genealogy. These sustaining tales likely serve different functions depending upon whether the individual is of majority or minority identification.

Various researchers have explored the difference between majority and minority identity development (Cass, 1979; Cross, 1995; Hardiman, 1994; Helms, 1990; Jackson & Hardiman, 1992; Kim, 1981; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Martin & Nakayama, 2000; Phinney, 1989; Pinderhughes, 1995; Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993; Ruiz, 1990; Sabnani, Ponterotto, & Borodovsky, 1991; Smith, 1991; Sue & Sue, 1999). The models vary, but in general suggest that for the majority individual development runs a course from unawareness of difference to, hopefully, a growing awareness of the unfair nature of privilege and structural injustice. Martin and Nakayama (2000) state that a majority person may never reach the final stage of identity development. Narratives certainly exist in society to support stalling of awareness on the part of majority individuals. Mainstream narratives of the “self made man” and of “pulling one’s self up by the bootstraps” are examples. For the majority individual, the narratives that sustain status quo, privilege, and position may be quite alluring at both the micro (personal and family) and the macro (social and structural) levels. Individuals who pass into this majority society may feel drawn to maintain it.

For the minority individual, identity development begins with unawareness of minority status, to attempts to try to fit in with the majority culture, through hostility toward the majority, and ultimately toward awareness that, despite social construction of inferiority and marginality, one is whole and worthy. Macro and micro narratives from “work twice as hard” to “we shall overcome” to “self determination” are available to flesh out these identities. Unlike the majority individual, however, the minority person is more likely to be forced by circumstance through most of the stages. For both majority and minority members, narrative provides the fill for the framework of racial identification that is the construction of race in America.

Social Construction of Race

Berger and Luckmann (1966) in their pivotal work on the social construction of reality tell us that through regular and ongoing interaction we routinize and institutionalize the world by, in effect, behaving as if it were so. A cultural narrative told and retold structures racial realities and filters down to narratives on every level including, of course, the social group, family and the personal. Family narratives may have a biological springboard but also may have total, partial, or no relationship to underlying physical data. Narrative exists in a world of its own with no necessary link to human biology. The resonance and social plausibility of a story is its own proof. Thus, the narrative, not the biology is the basis of the socially constructed racial identity. External verification aside, survival of the narrative becomes the verification.

One has only to look at the shift in numbers and types of racial categories in the national Census, e.g., 1790, 1990, and 2000 (Gibson & Jung, 2008), for evidence of the mutability of the social construction of race. In addition, over time, one could move from state to state to change racial classifications. For example, by shifting time and place the same person might be identified as black, octoroon or white. Obviously, as social contexts and interactions change, so do racial categories. Social activists have pushed back on segregationist racial constructions. In 1967, the *Loving v. State of Virginia* anti-miscegenation case made invalid laws against interracial marriage, which pushed forward the construction of a positive “mixed” race narrative and pushed back the stigma associated with both illegitimacy and demeaning racial labels like *molto*, *octoroon*, and *quadroon*. Recently, public figures like actress Carol Channing (2002) and writer Anatole Broyard (2008) were presented as individuals who had once “passed” as white and who are identified now as black or “mixed race.” And for the first time in the 2000 Census, a person could select more than one racial category.

This mixed race option is an interesting development because generations before were already of mixed ancestry but had no acknowledgement of that. As early as the 1940s estimates suggest that three fourths of self-identified African Americans and up to one fourth of self-identified whites have mixed African and European ancestry (Myrdal, 1944; Shriver et al., 2003; Stuckert, 1958, 1976; Yinger, 1985). Outmarriage among African Americans (often resulting in children of mixed ancestry) has been rising since the 1940s. (Perez & Hirschman, 2009; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1990). Estimates of outmarriage among Asians and Latinos range from 20 to 40 percent and date back long before the 2000 Census offered the multi-race option. Thus, what the “mixed race” person today really expresses is that he or she is a mixture of what were formerly identified, inaccurately, as discrete racial groups. Little to none of this categorization is biologically grounded.

The 1994 special edition of *Discovery Magazine* on the emerging science of race reports that while socially we define individuals in discrete categories, “human variation is the result of a seamless continuum of genetic change across space” (Shreeve, 1994) linked to a much broader concept of ancestry. Shreeve adds, “The race concept, on the other hand, lumps people into clearly delineated groups. This is a purely historical phenomenon.” Geneticist Richard Lewontin (1972) states there is greater variation within groups than across. Still, the average person will identify him or herself as of one race. Only 2.6 percent of respondents reported more than one race on the 2000 Census (Jones, 2005). Thus far, social construction

trumps genetics for the experience of race in America. The possibility that new genetic information will change this experience is at the core of this examination.

Analysis

The research method employed in this investigation is based on the constant comparative method of grounded theory (Glaser & Straus, 1967). In this formative study, 21 individuals were pre and post-interviewed on videotape. Pre-interviews lasted from 10 to 40 minutes and post-interviews lasted from 5 to 40 minutes. In the pre-interview participants were asked to share all they knew about their ethnic background, why they wanted to be DNA tested, what finding would surprise them, and with whom they would share results. Immediately following the pre-interview, subjects were given a painless cheek swab that was then sent to a DNA laboratory for analysis. Results took approximately ten weeks for return. Upon return of DNA analysis, the lead researcher revealed the results and post-interviewed participants. In the post interview participants were asked if they were surprised by the results, if they had any explanation for unexpected findings and with whom they would share the information. The lead investigator reviewed videotapes five to seven times each and noted themes that were mentioned several times across interviews or within the same interview.

Twelve of the participants identified as African American (one as biracial but African American), eight as white and one as Columbian (identifying as “Latino of European descent”). Three different DNA tests were used on the first four participants. The first two reporting formats were less than ideal. One reported ancestry as a long list of weighted nationalities (Polish, for example). The second identified a single haplogroup (a genetically identifiable set). The primary researcher finally located and settled on the third option, which identified subjects’ percentage of ancestry in four categories (European, Sub-Saharan African, East Asian, and Native American). In this first round of research, all usable data were included from all tests to access the widest range of information to guide future inquiry.

A liberal approach is taken in pulling out themes since one goal of the first round is to present an inclusive list of possibilities in exploring the relationships between the DNA and social construction. These areas will be more closely examined and refined in future rounds. While many ways of reporting data were considered, this report will present five themes in responses.

It is important to note that DNA findings are interpretive. Individual results are based on comparing DNA patterns to those of long-term indigenous people in various parts of the world. Findings are presented in ranges. Ranges are reported to be 98% accurate (DNA Print Manual). The percent at the center of the range is presented here.

Findings

African Americans have a European Narrative

It is not surprising that most African Americans report that they have European ancestry and, in fact, the DNA indicates that most do. Narratives of slavery and rape exist in many African American families as do narratives of African Americans secretly or openly in love relationships with whites. Virtually every black respondent had a specific story of white

relatives and ancestors, some absentee, some close, some known only as a photograph on a bookshelf. This was an example of narrative carrying information forward that appears (in all but one instance) to be at least based on reality. The range of European ancestry among those who identified as African American was from 5 to 20%. One participant identified as biracial, but a different test was used on this individual. Some African Americans were surprised by how *little* European ancestry they had. Skin color and other physical features were sometimes an indication of how much European ancestry a person had, but not always.

One African American participant returned results that indicated 100% Sub-Saharan African ancestry. The young woman reported that her relatives are from the Carolinas. When the interviewer mentioned the Gullah people of South Carolina who were often direct African decedents with little mixing with whites she was unfamiliar with the group and quite interested. She shared that some of her relatives from that area do speak in ways that seem very odd to her. She was interested in investigating that possibility. Another southern African American participant reacted with some anger and disappointment that 20% of her ancestry was European. Despite the fact that she has very light eyes, this information surprised her and she reported that her family does not talk about white ancestry very much. She did say that the next time she feels a white person acts like they are better than her she would share her DNA profile with them.

For many of the African American participants the test was important because they feel that their pasts have been destroyed and their narratives lost or disrupted. This is especially significant as many African Americans value an oral tradition that derives from their African heritage (Smitherman, 1977). As a result, virtually all were excited with whatever profile was returned. One participant repeated several times “this is a gift.”

Native American Narratives are Pervasive, Often Without DNA Verification

Every African American thought he or she might have Native American ancestry (as did many whites). Only two showed results consistent with this. Despite no DNA support, some had very detailed narratives of Native American ancestry with DNA results indicating no match. The researcher’s own family (not included in data reported here) had such an unsupported narrative.

Exploring the reason for this persistent, and often baseless narrative is important. Even though African Americans have been cast as the perpetual underclass, passed by other immigrant groups who climb the social ladder and make their place in American society, African Americans are also seen as the indigenous members of modern American society. Arriving at her shores with “an iron clad invitation,” having provided free labor against their will and creating the foundation for American prosperity, the African American narrative includes a special claim on the country. A Native American connection would seem to extend that claim, reinforcing a claim on the political entity of America with a claim on the very land. Further, it is an attractive narrative that Native Americans, the first group of ill-treated Americans, welcomed the second.

As many stories of Native American ancestors were told, the evidence was often of a relative with “beautiful thick long dark braids.” As most of the African American participants had some white ancestry and associated physical characteristics, it makes sense that European ancestry was likely the source. Apparently, people preferred a narrative that showed them as

proud Native Americans rather than a molested slave who covets a resemblance to the rapist. In discussing this contradiction with one (second round) participant, she explains, “we like the hair but not the heritage.” Similarly, whites who appear dark also seem to prefer a narrative that includes Native American ancestry rather than the African ancestry that is indicated far more often. Bad memories all around, apparently. The romanticization of the Native American narrative by both whites and blacks and its actual gap in the DNA profile seems like a suppressed memory of genocide committed against indigenous people. Paradoxically, a look at the “Native American” rich profiles of Latino participants (in this and subsequent rounds of testing) is a harsh reminder that the people who often carry narratives of “illegal” existed in this hemisphere long before other Americans superimposed borders and the interloper narrative on their stories.

Participants had No Narrative for an Asian DNA Profile

Four African Americans in this project received DNA profiles indicating some Asian ancestry. In no case was this ancestry accompanied by a family narrative. Instead, participants reacted with some variation of, “Where did that come from?” Raphael-Hernandez and Steen (2006) offer some insight. In their collection of articles on AfroAsian intersections, they present several places and times in which African Americans and various Asian groups had parallel experiences in this hemisphere. This intersection occurs especially during the early to mid-nineteenth century following the abolition of slavery and the replacement of black slaves with Asian immigrant workers (Chinese, South Asian, and others). The Asian immigrants were mostly men, often denied permanent American citizenship in the USA and/or Caribbean. While “racist narratives” often pit one group against the other (Prashad, 2006, p. xix), it is easy to imagine that their common work and marginalization resulted in relationships and offspring. As the Asian men returned to their countries of origin, surnames and narratives were lost, but, of course, not DNA. The researcher’s own African American grandfather, born at the turn of the last century, recalls in his earliest memory many local “Chinamen” with their long black ponytails in Mobile, Alabama.

Interestingly, the modern narrative of Asian Americans is that of the “model minority”: bright achievers with styles and values that fit neatly into the mainstream American culture. Not so 100 years ago. In fact, Lwin (2006) talks about American racial narratives and reports that in the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) case that extended segregation, the one dissenter, Justice John Marshall Harlan, who called for equality between whites and blacks excluded Chinese from the equation referring to them as “a race so different from our own” (p. 19). The Naturalization Act of 1870 restricted all immigration into the U.S. to only “white persons and persons of African descent.” For sure, when these strange and different people were considered undesirable, they inhabited a space closer to African Americans than to whites in this new society. Interestingly, despite a long and embedded American history, the narrative of Asians as perpetual foreigners continues to resonate in society and black and white Americans are surprised to find Asian DNA in an ancestry profile. An historical and sometimes parallel suffering of blacks and Asians has existed as does, apparently, a DNA link, but the separate constructions of race leave these two groups still miles apart in the minds of many.

Whites are Surprised to Find an African Profile

None of the whites participating in this research said that they suspected any African ancestry at all. The first white participant in this study wanted to be DNA tested because she hoped that she would have findings that indicated that she was of Eastern European descent, possibly Jewish, to “stick it to [her] racist parents.” She did not mention African origins. Another participant when asked in a pre-interview if any ancestry would be surprising, mentioned several European groups that would be unexpected. She later emailed the researcher and said that she had not even considered the possibility of Asian or African ancestry but that it really would be a surprise. The DNA test used on the first white participant did not include specific information on African ancestry. The second white participant has about 10% African ancestry. Of the eight whites who participated, only one white person came back as of 100% European ancestry. Five had African ancestry in the 5 to 10 % range. Because of the use of a different test on the final two, the ethnic profile information cannot be reported in a parallel manner.

Part of the absence of a “black narrative” may speak to the effectiveness of passing. It may also speak to the undesirability of being black by people who identify as white. For the five participants in the study, the response was basically, “I have no idea where that came from.” One participant questioned the veracity of the results.

It was difficult to capture on tape the attitudes of whites about the possibility of black heritage. For example, the African American interviewer was discussing the ancestry of a white participant who wanted to be tested because he is adopted. He said in the interview that his friends were teasing him that his dad might be “ah, Native American.” The interviewer suspects that they were teasing him that his dad might be black; especially since he later said that part of the teasing was that he heard his biological dad played basketball in high school. His DNA indicated about 7% Sub-Saharan African, quite similar to other whites participating in this project. One white participant “warned” another prior to her post interview “only one person has come back as all one ancestry.”

It is informative that a black narrative has not made its way into the general population at the level of individual white families. One African American participant did mention the narrative of the “nigger in the woodpile” as a southern white narrative. The very coarseness of the expression tells us that the narrative was not intended for public presentation. While the idea of passing resonates in our culture at large, the narrative does not easily transfer to the level of any particular white family. Rather, if it is part of a white family narrative at all, the narrative exists as a family secret. This study did not find participants who even report secrets in their families that might suggest relatives of African descent.

Given new DNA information, will new narratives emerge? Will these narratives change individuals’ self-perceptions or perceptions of race? Will these whites feel more related to their African American countrymen? Will they, as one white person asked, “be able to apply for scholarships?”

The Latina Narrative may be Different than that of Other Americans

The one Latina woman in the study had an ancestral profile that included all four groups. As Condon (1980) explains in his exploration of Mexican nationality, people in this part of

the world, despite cross-cultural strife and conflict, were more likely to mix with indigenous people than to completely eliminate them as in the USA (Ray, 2006). Interestingly, this participant expressed surprise that she had so much indigenous ancestry even though her family has been in Columbia “for as long as we know.” This may speak to marginalization in that part of the world toward indigenous groups. Also noteworthy is that while this participant identifies herself as European, her DNA profile was quite similar to an “African American” participant with a rich mix of European, African and Asian background.

Conclusion and Future Considerations

The findings of this project lead to the conclusion that we need a more complicated narrative regarding race in America. Raphael-Hernandez and Steen (2006) call specifically for moving beyond the “traditional black-white binary” (p. 2). In their examination of black-Asian encounters they suggest that more sophisticated work has the potential to, “disrupt the black/white binary that has so persistently characterized...” social construction of race in the academy and in society. We are challenged to stretch our imaginations toward a more inclusive view of ourselves as Americans and humans. We must begin to understand race in terms of a “polymorphous, multifaceted, multiply-raced” and evolving construction (p. 3).

Some of the hardest work probably has to be done by white people. Claiming black ancestry as Americans can allow whites to explore their racism on a very personal level. Whites whose ancestors once owned or otherwise had relations with black people now must own the slave as well as the slave owner as part of their own racial identity. Imagine, how the discussion of oppression changes if we all really feel that the oppressed are “my people”? Imagine how American society could change if the lofty ideals of American equality and tolerance were extended more evenly as we develop an American identity. On the other hand, African Americans have the challenge of defining themselves as larger than a narrow American experience. African Americans are challenged to break through an inadequate narrative that defines them only by their oppression. They too would not exist without the DNA of their European, Latino, and Asian kin.

It is noteworthy that at this time in American history a person like Barack Obama has captured the public imagination. We struggle with the narrative of President Obama as a black man or multiracial man or American. He has offered that he has relatives who “look like Margaret Thatcher” as well as “Bernie Mac” and a sister who is half Indonesian (Hardball, 2008). Is his narrative our narrative? Does his narrative call for a new American narrative? (Johnson, 2008).

The natural extension of these questions in terms of this ongoing research is to expand and diversify the pool and enlarge the sample size. Additional Asians, Latinos and others have already been invited to participate. It is exciting to anticipate their stories and profiles. In the longer term, examining the evolution of family narratives as participants share the information with other relatives and family members will be of interest. Ultimately, it is important to create a narrative that is rich and complex enough for all to share. It cannot belong to some for their privilege or others for their oppression. It has to help us find convergence and move beyond investment in fear and fraction to explore our common humanity.

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