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Racial Experience as an Alternative Operationalization of Race

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Abstract

The study of human variation is central to both social and biomedical sciences; however, despite agreeing that variation is integral to the human experience, social and biomedical scientists diverge in how variation is theorized and operationalized. Race becomes especially problematic because it is a cultural concept that contains implicit and explicit understandings of how collective bodies differ. In this paper, we propose an operationalization of race that is attentive to both racial experience and human biological diversity—placing them within the same ontological sphere. Furthermore, we argue that this approach can more effectively advance antiracist pedagogy and politics.

We argue that human biological diversity does not have to be in opposition to constructivist notions of race. Rather, racial experience is emphasized as an embodied experience that is as real and as valid as biological variation. By focusing on both racial experience and biological diversity, it becomes more feasible to operationalize race and to more fruitfully inform

the pedagogy and politics of anti-racism. In such an operationalization, racial experience must be more broadly conceived, that is, it should not always equate to negative outcomes. With the recognition that racial experience has the potential to be something other than damaging, an antiracist anthropology can more effectively address issues pertaining to racial health disparities.

I. Race, “a social construct... just like every other cultural phenomena”

Those of us who have been teaching anthropology for a while are quite used to toeing the line, “race is a social construct, but has real social consequences.” When we reproduce this anthropological axiom, we aim to deconstruct a dangerous biological idea—an idea that has justified imperial projects and oppressive state ideologies (Andreasen, 2000; Armelagos & Goodman, 1998; Brace, 2005; Stoler, 2002). We acknowledge the anthropological tradition of anti-racism that led to our insistence of race as a social construct (Baker, 1998); indeed, historically, there has been political and pedagogical value to the notion that race is not real, but that racism has real social consequences. We think it is necessary, however, to critique our anthropological axiom for at least two reasons. First, current biocultural and neuroanthropological efforts necessitate new theoretical models of race that can more fully account for the complexity of race as an intersectional phenomena that is variously embodied (Gravlee, 2009; Mullings & Wali, 2001); and we (along with other anthropologists) contend that the notion of race as a social construct will not suffice (Hartigan, 2013). Second, the anthropology of race is inevitably entangled with our pedagogical efforts and political outlooks; and we think that the idea that race is not real but has real consequences has serious limitations of translating into effective pedagogical and political action. In this paper we will argue that the notion of race as a social construct is flawed and hampers our ability to fully understand, what we are calling, “racial experience.”

To be sure, race can be understood as a social construct, *but every cultural phenomena can be understood as a social construct*. Of course, the reason we identify race as a social construct is because we want to undo scientific notions of racism, which postulate race as biologically determined (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Therefore, the notion of race as a social

construct is, and has been since Franz Boas and W.E.B. Du Bois' time, part of a political pedagogy that responds to socially detrimental scientific notions of race. But this political pedagogy makes no purposeful commitment to understanding how race is experienced. In trying to undermine scientific racism, we have taken an ontological position that separates the socially real from the unreal. We believe this ontological position is mostly unintentional or without purposely trying to bridge the nature of biological and cultural phenomena. First, the idea that race is a social construct draws attention to race not being real in the way the public thinks it is, and the flip side of "race is not real" is that there is a reality to human biological diversity, a reality that is not properly conceptualized by scientific notions of race (Smedley, 1998). Secondly, when we place social constructs as not real, or at least not biologically real, we are making a distinction between biological reality and social reality. Thirdly, this distinction between biological reality and social reality is reinforced when we say, "race has real consequences." In other words, something that is not biologically real, can really affect us. We often point to evidence of these real consequences in residential segregation, educational opportunities, law enforcement discrimination, judicial discrimination, health care accessibility, and health disparities (Dressler, Oths, & Gravlee, 2005; Gravlee, 2009; Jones, 2000; Pager & Shepherd, 2008; Thomas & Clarke, 2013). To be sure, these real consequences are a form of experience, but we want to argue that they represent *some racial experiences* that are evidenced by the measurable outcomes of structural inequality and prejudice. These measurable (i.e., operationalized) concepts of structural inequality and prejudice constitute an abstraction of collective experiences that often obfuscate the very complexity of racial experiences. Conversely, there exist a good body of ethnographic work that has documented racial experiences (Goldstein, 2013; F. V. Harrison, 1995; Hill, 2008; Mullings, 2005; Roland, 2011;

Silverstein, 2005), but few of these ethnographies are theoretically compatible with the biocultural approaches that aim to measure the embodiment of race (in fact, some are theoretically incompatible). Here we offer ideas to bridge and synchronize these important bodies of work.

II. Race as Experience

We propose an approach to racial experience that we, along with our colleague Charles Hobbs, have called a “pragmatist anthropology of experience,” and by extension here, a pragmatist anthropology of racial experience (Hobbs & Torres Colón, 2015). A pragmatist anthropology undercuts the nature-culture divide by holding that all experience is cultural, and culture is a perfectly natural consequence of human evolution:

Culture . . . is one of the ways by which nature transacts business with itself. In any intelligent activity . . . each *part of the environment is modified with respect to the other part of the environment*. Accordingly, deliberation and intelligent management enter into the history of evolutionary development. That is to say that deliberation and intelligence are *themselves* an outcome of evolutionary development (Torres Colón & Hobbs, 2015, p. 150).

This pragmatist anthropological approach explicitly places sensory experience within an evolutionary framework, and it forces us to think about social reality and biological reality as ontologically contiguous.

Let us, then, restate our problematic axiom about race through a pragmatist anthropological prism: *racial experience is real and human biological diversity is real*.

Biological notions of race are, at best, poor biogeographical proxies for understanding human

biological variation and, at worst, dangerous ideas that justify social inequality. The focused response to the latter corners anthropologists into an anti-racist political pedagogy that equates racial experience with sociological inequality, and an important part of our argument here is that critical scholarship on race should be less reactive to racism and more attentive to the multiplicity of racial experiences. Let us briefly explore how we can first take advantage of existing work on race and embodiment.

The concept of racial embodiment has been useful for explaining racial health disparities. However, theoretical approaches to embodiment have varied significantly, with phenomenological (Fassin, 2011) and biocultural (Gravlee, 2009; Thayer & Kuzawa, 2011) approaches leading to unbridged conclusions regarding cultural formations and deleterious health outcomes, respectively. In addressing this gap, Mullings and Wali's propose the "Sojourner Syndrome," which explains the socio-cultural complexities of stress and reproductive health for African American women. This is a seminal proposal for a holistic understanding of embodiment. Equipped with rich ethnographic data, Mullings and Wali explore how stress from racism and structural inequality is mediated through various strategies of resistance. These strategies can also become a source of stress; nevertheless, the "Sojourner Syndrome" represents a strategy for fostering the reproduction and continuity of the black community" (Mullings & Wali, 2001, p. 164). Mullins and Wali's research lends biocultural credibility to the idea that counter-hegemonic resistance (Lazarus-Black & Hirsch, 1994) is not merely an unfortunate reproduction of dominant ideologies in order to resist such ideologies; instead, resistance can constitute a form of what Cristóbal Valencia Ramírez (2009) has called "active Marooning," which "is above all a sustained politics and concept of self-liberation characterized by the consolidation of an Afro-descendant identity and consciousness that leads to collective action."

In sum, the strategies and reproduction of racialized communities constitute a plethora of racial experiences, and we propose that embodiment of race materializes through all of these experiences. In other words, racial embodiment does not only materialize with negative health consequences.

We therefore suggest the following operationalization following a pragmatist anthropological approach: since all experience materializes as real, *embodiment occurs with every instance of sensed collective bodily distinction. This sensory experience extends from the cognitive to the non-cognitive and is always aesthetic at the point of collective bodily distinction.* Ethnographic research, particularly in the phenomenological tradition, has elucidated how race is experienced linguistically (Barrett, 2006; Urciuoli, 2013), sexually (Wade, 2009), maternally (Bridges, 2011), athletically (A. K. Harrison, 2013), indigenously (Anderson, 2009), politically (Ramírez, 2009) and culinarily (Slocum, 2008)—to name just a few. We insist that these racial experiences are not ontologically distinct from the experiences that result in health inequality. Our challenge moving forward is to take these experiences seriously and figure out how they fit within existing health research on embodiment.

Although outside the scope of this paper, we also want to briefly address the problem of word choice in the operationalization of race. We are aware that our definition of racial experience opens the possibility of denominating a host of socially sensed distinctions as “racial experience.” Perhaps the most obvious of these is gender, which could also be understood as sensed collective distinction. We are comfortable with this even if it means further refinement in the future, and we are especially comfortable with this when we consider that the most sophisticated theory of race comes from black feminist theory (Collins, 2015; Hill Collins, 2008), which articulates the intersection of race and gender as, in fact, not just an intersection,

but the only way in which racialization occurs. And although we do not fully articulate a critique here, we hold that arguments about the uniqueness of racism to the historical period of European colonization rely on ad hoc notions of race that do not lend themselves to cross-cultural comparisons (see Mullings, 2005 for a review of these historical approaches). We could use different language to talk about racial experience, for example, “embodiment of ethnicity,” “cultural embodiment,” or “gendered ethnic embodiments.” However, we want to propose “racial experience” because if we can re-conceptualize how race is experienced, then we will also have to reconsider how race is conceived in anti-racist efforts, particularly in the realms of education and politics.

III. Marronage and Racial Experience

Drawing on our own fieldwork in Accompong Town, a rural community in Jamaica as well as epidemiological literature on urban-rural distinctions in health from Jamaican communities, we contend that racial experience can positively mediate health outcomes (cf. Schulz et al., 2006). In Accompong Town, culturally shared ideas and practices tie inhabitants to their African ancestry and create a niche of support and sense of belonging that works against the detrimental effects of rural poverty and illness.

Accompong Town is located 33 miles (53.4km) south of Montego Bay, nested among the hills in southwest Jamaica known as Cockpit Country (K. Bilby, 1996; Carey, 1997). Most of the inhabitants of Accompong Town are descendants of Afro-Indigenous Caribbean people, known as Maroons, who sought refuge from the debasement of European colonization and enslavement (Carey, 1997; Madrilejo, Lombard, & Benn Torres, 2014). After the English wrested Jamaica from the Spanish, this Maroon community successfully waged a guerilla war against the British,

winning a peace treaty in 1739. While stipulations of the treaty required the presence of British representatives within the community, Accompong Town remained relatively homogenous with minimal influx from non-African peoples (K. M. Bilby, 2005).

Today, Accompong Town Maroons revere their African ancestry and their history as resistance fighters. This reverence is especially visible in their annual rituals celebrating their independence from the British, but Maroons have also embedded their ties to Africa in religious practices, food preparation, language, governance, and communal land ownership (DjeDje, 1998). Although many Maroons, along with other Jamaicans, struggle with the realities of rural poverty and often emigrate, Accompong Town remains a place of refuge for the thousands in the diaspora (Baldwin-Jones, 2011; Chang, 2007).

For rural communities much like Accompong Town, epidemiological survey data suggests that some rural populations report better health or higher quality of life than their urban counterparts. These reports of higher quality of life have been attributed to greater social support in rural communities (Asnani, Reid, Ali, Lipps, & Williams-Green, 2008; Bourne & Rhule, 2009). From a historical standpoint, economist, Richard Sheridan, makes the same assertion about improved health among pre-emancipation period Maroons relative to enslaved peoples residing on Jamaican plantations (Sheridan, 1985). However, Sheridan (1985) accounts for the better health outcomes as a result of reduced labor and greater access to nutritious foods. In the contemporary community, social support for Maroons is contingent on a safe physical and social space that is sensibly experienced as different from other parts of Jamaica. This space has emerged from a history of resistance, an attachment and knowledge of the land, and continuity with both African and indigenous Caribbean traditions (K. M. Bilby, 2005). It is important to understand that what we are calling “a safe physical and social space” here actually entails a rich

and historically complex sense of bodily Otherness, which is embedded in daily life. For example, our ethnographic research of youth culture in Accompong found that young women who openly denounced their marginalization within Maroon society and governance still embraced the civic task of organizing youth groups with the purpose of upholding Maroon identity. In these groups, young Maroons often make sense of the distinctions between Maroons and non-Maroons—engaging in a delicate balancing act of embracing the Jamaican nation while outlining the embodied differences of Maroons as the unconquered peoples of Jamaica.

This trend of higher self-reported quality of life is not unique to Jamaica. Spiegel and Yassi (2004) reported similar findings in Cuba, which they term the Cuban health paradox—where Cubans have experienced greater health despite a lack of wealth accumulation. Spiegel and Yassi (2004) conclude that, in addition to several other medical and non-medical determinants of health, social cohesion is an influential health determinant (Spiegel & Yassi, 2004). While we understand that social cohesion has differently emerged in Jamaica and Cuba, we find the relationship between health and social support worthy of attention. With regard to rural Jamaicans and by extension Maroons, social cohesion is a form of racial experience that is markedly different from other communities of recent African descent. As such, differences in health might be expected within and between African descended populations where nuances in racial experience could potentially explain the differences between populations. These types of positive embodiments must also be considered in order to more fully comprehend racial experience within the context of health and health disparities.

IV. Conclusion: Pedagogical and Political Implications

We conclude this paper with notes about the pedagogical and political implications of expanding our current empirical engagements with racial experience. Earlier we proposed a new axiom: *racial experience is real, human biological diversity is real*. Genetic anthropologists have an opportunity to creatively contribute to this pedagogical effort by preemptively providing students and the public the knowledge that is needed to fill the gap when scientific notions of race are dismantled. Moreover, unlike uncritical applications of race in biomedical contexts, with the operationalizing of race as experience, racial experience has the potential to become a practical device that can be incorporated into biocultural models of disease disparity—accounting for both the health detriment and the resistance of racialized minorities.

Biogeographical ancestry, for example, can be more purposely incorporated into biocultural models of embodied difference (Guo et al., 2014; Benn Torres & Kittles, 2007). At times, biogeographical ancestry can serve as historical evidence of maroonage or such processes, and provide a lens to examine how populations differently respond to environmental stressors. But teaching and pushing our students to develop such models only works if we conceptualize racial experience on the same ontological realm of evolution.

Finally, our proposed understanding of racial experience as real can more easily fit into the feedback loop between anthropological knowledge and folk theories of racism. Our proposed understanding of racial experience is not dismissive of folk theories of racial reality; instead, we strive to conceptually steer folk theories of race away from biological determinism towards socio-cultural contextualization. However, as part of an intelligentsia, we must be prepared for and perhaps even accommodate the political formations that emanate from racial experience. This could mean not bracketing racial politics in textbook chapters, conference panels, committees on diversity, or incident-based politics—such as, “fill-in-the-blank” latest racial

controversy in the news. On the other hand, politics based on racial experience are not an inevitable result. But the few examples from throughout the Americas where racialized minorities achieved some semblance of equality and autonomy usually involved an ideological acknowledgement that racialized groups had something in common with other poor folk—followed by a revolution—and even in such places racism remains socially embedded (Zurbano, 2013). Whatever the case, “race is a social construct” was a valiant attempt to move beyond the scientific racism that characterized anthropology, however, the metaphor did not and has not gone very far in the realpolitik of social equality.

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