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IDENTITY AND RACIALIZATION

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Introduction

For students and scholars of sociology, the terms "identity" and "racialization" are well-recognized. Perhaps paradoxically, their widespread recognition is nearly matched by the diversity of definitions, uses, and traditions surrounding each term. For instance, Stephen Small (1994: 33) contends that racialization has been used as a "process, a concept, a theory, a framework and a paradigm," while Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000: 1) maintain that identity "tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity)."

While such complexity tempts us to engage in a thorough review of the scholarly discourse surrounding each concept to sort out the definitional wheat from the chaff, this chapter is not the space for that endeavor. Rather, we seek to examine these terms jointly to advance new insights and fresh areas of concern for future scholarship at this nexus. To this end, we engage in a threefold examination of both "identity" and "racialization" and their relations within sociological and interactionist traditions.

In the first section, we will examine how both terms have been employed in cooperative tandem and settle on a workable definition. Next, we will consider the major analytic power and pathos of how each term is used in relation to studies of social interaction and race and racial inequality and efforts to combat racial oppression. Last, we will provide some new considerations for how to theorize identity and racialization. We argue that racial identity – as a fundamental boundary of inclusion and exclusion – should not be analytically divorced from other dimensions of racialization, particularly racialized ideologies, institutions, interests, and (perhaps most importantly for readers of this chapter), interactions. By viewing identities as one aspect of a larger racialization process, we foreclose on a more precise interactionist understanding of the concept of "race."

Concepts and combination: when "identity" met "racialization"

In this section, we examine how the terms "identity" and "racialization" developed, settle on a workable definition for each, and examine how both have been employed in cooperative tandem.

The term "identity" derives from the Latin *identitās* and *ident*(*idem*), meaning to repeat, literally again and again (*idem et idem*). In varied domains, the immobile quality of identity was emphasized: from mathematics and the quality of an "identity function" that always returns the same value [$f(x) = x$] to music, whereby distinct and unique pitches within a harmonic series are labeled an "identity." As the term entered academe via philosophy, it meant "sameness" or whatever qualities inherent to the object make it definable and recognizable to itself or another thing (to be "identical"). Identity took on the connotation of a fixed state of being that remained static under varying conditions. As fields like psychology took up the concept, the notion of an internal, consistent aspect of the "self" was emphasized, particularly through the framework of Freudian notions of "ego." However, as the social sciences developed in the twentieth century, both psychology and sociology advanced variations of identity. Not surprisingly, psychology theorized variations existing within the person, such as Erik Erikson's (1968) three-part identity concept in which people had "ego identity" (the self), "personal identity" (individual characteristics), and "social identity" (the social roles one plays), whereby sociology understood identity as variations in relational understandings, such as Charles Horton Cooley's (1902) notion of the "looking-glass self" in which we first imagine how we appear to others, then imagine others' judgment of our appearance, and then judge ourselves based on others' judgements.[3]

Sociology further refined the concept. For instance, George Herbert Mead (1934) saw identity as both a bounded and structured sense of self (the "me") alongside a fluid and agentic process (the "I").[4] This latter conception became foundational to symbolic interactionism. As Peter L. Callero (2003: 119) explains:

> For symbolic interactionists, the self is first and foremost a reflexive process of social interaction. The reflexive process refers to the uniquely human capacity to become an object to one's self, to be both subject and object. Reflexivity is not a biological given but rather emerges from the social experience.

As the symbolic interactionist paradigm evolved, sociologists tended to theorize identity within the context of immediate situations, such as in the work of Erving Goffman (1959) and Herbert Blumer (1969) or in terms of shifts in structural conditions, seen in notable works such as *The Organization Man* (Whyte, 1956), *One Dimensional Man* (Marcuse, 1964), *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al., 1985), and *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000). Merging these interactionist and structuralist perspectives, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966: 173) write that "identity is formed through a social process. Once crystalized, it is maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relations. The social processes involved in both the formation and the maintenance of identity are shaped by the social structure."

In the wake of the civil rights movement, "identity studies have been relocated to the site of the collective, with gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, and class forming the 'holy trinity' of the discursive field" (Cerulo, 1997: 386). "Interactionist approaches to identity," as Judith Howard (2000: 371) writes, now

> vary in their emphasis on the structure of identity, on the one hand, and the processes and interactions through which identities are constructed, on the other. The more structural approach relies on the concept of role identities, the characters a person develops as an occupant of particular social positions, explicitly linking social structures to persons. . . . . The second approach emphasizes the processes of identity construction and negotiation. Negotiations about who people are are fundamental to developing mutual definitions of situations; these negotiations entail self-presentation or impression management.

Hence, identities are today best understood as strategic social constructions, created in interaction, that fundamentally demarcate lines of (un)belonging. We thus view identity as "constructed through, not outside, difference. . . . . Identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render 'outside', abjected" (Hall, [1996] 201: 1–4).

In shifting tack to racialization, there have been many debates over the concept. In what is likely the authoritative text on the subject, Karim Murji and John Solomos (2005: 2) argue, "There is the feeling that the mere use of the term racialization has become a rather glib tag. . . . Because and in spite of its wide uses, a mini-backlash against the idea of racialization is noticeable." Much of the debate centers on how to conceptualize "race" itself. Some see race as merely a descriptor of a bounded social, if not biological, group (e.g., Wallman, 1978). For others, race is a moving target, varying across time and space. In this latter perspective, "race" is less noun than verb (cf. Powell, 1997; Mills, 2017); race is not a stand-in for a class of people but is more a designation for an action whereby anything can become *raced*. Hence, the use of the suffix "-ation" (denoting action) as applied to race (*racialization*) emphasizes the processual dynamics of "race" in the service of power. That is, things are racialized to rationalize hierarchy, inequality, and/or domination of one raced group over another.

Notions of power lay, implicitly, at the heart of racialization theories. As Garcia (2003: 285) notes, if "race" is something that someone has then "racialization is something that is done to a group, by some social agent, at a certain time, for a given period, in and through various processes, and relative to a particular social context." Here, we highlight the contingency of race-making and see racialization as "the processes by which racial meanings are attached to particular issues – often treated as social problems – and with the manner in which race appears to be a, or often the, key fact in the ways they are defined and understood" (Murji and Solomos, 2005: 3).

While Jorge L. A. Garcia (2003) emphasizes that people can become racialized, often against their interests, groups and individual people can also self-racialize. And while a great deal of the literature examines the racialization of groups, objects, or places, Adam Hochman (2018: 6) points out:

> Racialization happens on the individual level, for instance. The processual nature of racialization highlights not only the historically contingent production of racialized groups, but also the developmental and context-dependent production of racialized individuals. . . . An individual is racialized when they are understood to be a member of a "race". . . . Individual racialization is dependent on time and place. . . . Just as groups self-racialize, individuals self-racialize. How one is racialized is not necessarily stable over one's lifetime and depends in part on how one self-racializes.

While racialization applies to a range of phenomena, the lion's share of the literature centers on how racial identity, either individually or collectively, is formed. The contemporary understanding of these two concepts – racialization and identity – dovetail well with one another.

Power and pathos: what these terms (don't) give us

The marriage of racialization and identity has provided greater understanding for how, and with what effects, people make claims to particular kinds of experiences and conditions. Simultaneously, limitations have been flagged. In this section, we consider the major analytic power and pathos of each approach in relation to efforts to understand social interaction and challenge racial oppression.

Taking, for example, the scholarly literature on white racial identity, we bear witness to an evolving understanding of how racialization and identity formation take place and with what results. In an excellent review of the knowledge in this area, France Winddance Twine and Charles Gallagher (2008) identify three distinct "waves." In the first, whiteness was understood to operate "as the normative cultural center that is for many whites an invisible identity" (Twine and Gallagher, 2008: 6). Early philosophy and race science of the day came to emphasize whiteness as non-racial, the normal, the *de facto* archetype for humanity (Haney López, 2006; Mills, 1997). Perhaps best articulated in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), W. E. B. Du Bois outlines how the hierarchical distribution of material and symbolic privileges across racial categories gave rise to the adoption of a white identity based in invisible payments, what the historian David Roediger (1991) – based on Du Bois's analysis provided next – would call the "wages of whiteness":

> While all instruments of group control – police, courts, government appropriations and the like – were in the hands of whites, no power was left in Negro hands. . . . It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, *while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage* [our emphasis]. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white.
>
> *(Du Bois, 1935: 700–701)*

White identity, from the perspective of many whites, was an unspoken bargain. Especially during the apex of European migration to the United States between 1880 and 1920, a successful claim to white identity granted the first significant foothold for upward social mobility. In "The Invisible Whiteness of Being" Derald W. Sue (2006: 15) remarks that

> Whiteness is a default standard; the background of the figure-ground analogy from which all other groups of color are compared, contrasted, and made visible. From this color standard, racial/ethnic minorities are evaluated, judged, and often found to be lacking, inferior, deviant, or abnormal.

The privileges of white identity lay in not being marked as a person of color and, over subsequent generations, became normalized and somewhat invisible to its bearers.

In the second wave, scholars began to focus on the conditions and "institutions that created, reproduced and normalized" (Twine and Gallagher, 2008: 11) white identity. For instance, the legal scholar Cheryl Harris (1993) emphasized how the courts approached white identity as a form of "property" to be policed, guarded, and regulated. Toni Morrison (1992) emphasized how literary conventions in both practice and professional societies, such as the MLA (Modern Language Association), often situated white identity as the implicit perspective of the observer. Morrison thus labored to tell stories about whiteness from the vantage point of people of color, which itself was a transformative and disruptive act: "My project is to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served" (1992: 90–91).

And in the latest and third wave, scholars have begun to emphasize how white identity is "defined, deployed, performed, policed and reinvented . . . with a particular focus on emerging empirical accounts of how whiteness is deployed and the discursive strategies used to maintain and destabilize white identity" (Twine and Gallagher, 2008: 5–6). In this body of work, scholars emphasize how white identity is still rendered invisible to some whites (Lipsitz, 1998; Frankenberg, 1993), how white identity is an increasingly contested category of belonging (Doane and

Bonilla-Silva, 1993) or being framed as "victimized" (Hughey, 2014), and how whites adopt "color-blindness" as a crucial aspect of a moral racial identity amidst racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva, 2012). Here, the heterogeneity of white identities is emphasized. For instance, Doug Hartmann et al. (2009) examined three specific propositions relating to white identity: (1) the invisibility of white identity, (2) the understanding (or lack thereof) of racial privileges afforded to white identity, and (3) color-blindness as a crucial aspect of one's white identity. They found that

> white Americans are less aware of privilege than individuals from racial minority groups and consistently adopt color-blind, individualist ideologies. However, we also find that whites are both more connected to white identity and culture as well as more aware of the advantages of their race than many theoretical discussions suggest. . . . 15 percent of white Americans exhibit what we call "categorical whiteness," a consistent and uniform adherence to the theoretical tenets that are the focus of this body of theory.
> *(Hartmann et al., 2009: 403)*

Akin to Hartmann et al. (2009), Matthew W. Hughey (2010, 2012) found that an ideal white racial identity ("hegemonic whiteness") can be found across an array of locales and settings. Based on Du Bois's (1920: 29) contention that whites are "bound to their own binding," Hughey argued that there is a dominant racial meaning of whiteness that organizes disparate white racial identity projects, even as dissimilar as white supremacists and white antiracists. Hence, whites "are fastened to the dominant expectations of white racial identity and are in search of idealized forms of that identity; thus the double entendre of *White Bound* as a sense of *attachment and trajectory* [emphasis in original]" (Hughey, 2012: 6).

Yet, there are also limitations in the deployment of "racial identity." Consider the words of Fred Davis (1991: 105):

> Identity . . . is a concept that neither imprisons (as does much in sociology) nor detaches (as does much in philosophy and psychology) persons from their social and symbolic universes, [so] it has over the years retained a generic force that few concepts in our field have.

In the former, a significant trend in the sociological literature tends to engage in a cataloging of identity formation processes rather than articulating the mechanisms of power and domination. However, in the latter conceptualization of racial identity, other fields (and their meeting ground in "cultural studies") have been critiqued for their overly general take that identity is little more than the result of domination and power. As Karen Cerulo (1997: 401) writes:

> Within the past two decades, the humanist or cultural studies approach to identity has dominated the field. To be sure, sociologists of identity cannot afford to ignore these works, for they provide a rich and thorough treatment of the symbols, rituals, and world views that constitute identity. At the same time, the sociologist must consider this literature with some care. At present, the cultural studies position appears somewhat trapped in a singular conclusion that locates the constructed nature of culture in the sole service of power. Further, such works frequently frame social action as a process that is fully culturally constituted.

This Janus-faced framing of racial identity largely circulates within the social constructionist paradigm.

There is a breadth of work to admire within the social constructionist model. Varied levels of attention exist: from the micro, personal identity to the macro, collective identity. However, the insights produced by these levels of analysis are often disconnected from one another. For instance, collective identity scholars have done well to explore how holding multiple identity affiliations simultaneously then qualitatively change the nature of both human experience and how a singular aspect of identity is understood and felt. Work under the rubric of "intersectionality" has been particularly astute in articulating how identities are more than additive but are multiplicative and co-constitutive (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 1990).

However, scholars working in the collective identity tradition often ignore micro-level studies whereby the social-psychological processes, everyday social practices, and symbolic tools with which identity is made, performed, and received in specific contexts is often absent. So also, work focusing on micro levels of social interaction would do well to try to aggregate, and thereby translate, the common denominators of varied identity formation experiences to the macro level. Such work portends vast returns for collective identity scholarship.

Furthermore, if identities are, as Howard (2000: 371) wrote, "strategic social constructions created through interaction, with social and material consequences," which requires the articulation of "specific interactive mechanisms through which identities are produced," then more work is needed to specify these mechanisms. As Robert C. Merton professed in *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1968: 43), part of the goal of sociology is to identify how mechanisms "come into being, so that we can also explain why the mechanisms do not operate effectively or fail to emerge at all in some social systems." For instance, in a discussion of the scholarship on "color-blind racism," Hughey et al. (2015: 1350–1351) emphasize that we must take more seriously the place of identity formation and social interactions as crucial mechanisms in the reproduction of the racialized social order:

> If we infer causality, then the theory seems to fit an array of data. . . . But that arrangement is not enough. While color-blind racism might appear to walk hand in hand with the racialized social structure, we have not yet reached closure on empirically delineating how or why color-blind racism might (or might not) direct human action and order. . . . Lack of answers to these questions necessarily gestures toward the importance of specifying the precise mechanisms that operate. . . . [It is essential to] examine the relation of ontology via identity and interactional expectations to color-blind racism, interrogating how claims to being – that is, how the expectations and accountabilities of membership in particular racial identities – exert structural force on those that claim particular racial identities.

Another limitation within much of the extant scholarship on racial identity is inconsistent operationalization. Scholars routinely define racial identities in terms of either people's internal self-identification, "a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common heritage with a particular racial group" (Helms, 1993: 3), or as the product of external racial categorization, especially by institutional actors or, in other words, "racial classification" (Hochschild and Weaver, 2007). Despite significant contributions from studies using these approaches, such conceptions of racialized identity evade a more holistic examination of the interplay between identification and ascription in the context of racial oppression. Indeed, racial identities are not simply imposed upon individuals by others or selected by individuals without any social influence. They are, rather, "simultaneously shaped by ideological/discursive contexts and the ways in which social actors deploy various forms of discourse for communicative and social ends" (Rosino and Hughey, 2017: 250).

The true challenge thus lies in understanding racialization and identity as not just social processes but, more specifically, as mutually constituted through power relations, dynamics of conflict, exclusion, domination, systems of representation, and everyday social interactions (see Hall, 1997; Omi and Winant, 2014; Rosino, 2017). As Amanda E. Lewis (2003: 300) writes,

> The moment of identification is also a moment of inclusion or exclusion in which an understanding is not merely formed but in many cases subtly or explicitly acted on. These moments of inclusion or exclusion can take form in how one is treated in a particular context . . . or in concrete material processes of who gets access to what kind of resources.

In bringing all these elements of racialization and identity together, and detecting potential areas for growth and synthesis, we hope to advance both sociological understandings and practical efforts at producing a more racially just society.

The reticule of "race": more than identity

In this section, we provide some considerations for how to theorize identity and racialization. As an academic endeavor, sociology attempts to provide an answer to the question of *action* and *order*: why do people do specific things (action), and why do they do those things in a specific, observed form (order) by specifying the operations of phenomena external to the individual? But if we consider the concept of race (or "racial identity" – often conflated with "race" – which is generally conceived as a part of the self) in this equation, then our investigations can quickly become jumbled if we do not delineate the precise parameters of "race" and how the concept *relates* to identity without suffering *reduction* to it.

First, let us consider the "effect of race" on dependent variables. In the sociological enterprise, we often observe vast and entrenched racial disparities – from wealth and education attainment to mortality rates and health outcomes. If we treat race as a static concept, then qualities within the varied categories of race would drive those outcomes. This now borders on biological determinism and racial essentialism, which are "two powerful belief systems that haunt both the popular imagination and stalk the scientific landscape: the notions of 'biological determinism' (that race is genetically inherited) and 'racial essentialism' (that group-based biology maps to basic social behaviors)" (Byrd and Hughey, 2015: 8). Race is not a biological reality. It has neither essentialist reality nor determinist capability (Byrd and Hughey, 2015; Hughey and Byrd, 2015). Yet, race remains an agreed-upon "social construction" with a lived reality. That is, race is a "social fact" that holds materially real consequences (Bonilla-Silva, 1999), or, simply put, "race is a biological fiction with a social function" (Hughey, 2017: 27).

If we recall our earlier re-conceptualization of race not so much as a static entity or noun but as a process of verb, then we immediately jettison the need to understand "race" as possessive of qualities or traits that cause these disparities.[5] Rather, when we view these inequalities, we are not observing an "effect of race" but a process of social domination "through race." With this perspective in mind, we keep in mind that race is always in the process of assignment. Thus, when we see "race," we are witnessing a snapshot of *racialization*, the process of ascribing racial meanings to a relationship, social practice, or group often in the context of racial oppression (Omi and Winant, 2014: 36–42).

Some scholars see racialization driven by dominant ideologies, while others view these as the outcome of institutional dynamics, and still others understand racial inequality as the result of the pursuit of particular interests. While none of these perspectives are wrong, they are incomplete.

When we observe a specific racial outcome (often attributed to the "effect of race"), we are actually witnessing a multidimensional process of social domination. Hence, to understand the multidimensional activity of domination as "race," we must interrogate how "race" operates across not just the dimension of identity but also ideologies, institutions, interests, and, importantly for this chapter, interactions (Hughey, 2015). This claim calls for clarification.

First, racialized identities are formed in relation to *ideologies*. As Lewis (2004: 623) notes, racial ideologies "enable people to understand and to accept their positions within a stratified society." Identification with the narratives, discourses, and categories within a given racial ideology

> provides a perspective from which they can view racialized social issues. When people form racialized identities in this way, they connect their stance on that issue to certain understandings of the meaning of racial categories and the characteristics of the people occupying those categories.
>
> *(Rosino and Hughey, 2018: 878)*

Second, both racialization and identities are shaped by *institutions*. Throughout U.S. history, for instance, from changes in the organization and structure of the census to struggles over citizenship, classifications and definitions pertaining to racial identities (e.g., whether someone is categorized as "white" or "black" and why) have often been legitimated by the state (Omi and Winant, 2014; Haney López, 2006; Rosino, 2016). The state's use of physical force and authority place greater weight behind the racial classifications that people employ to develop a sense of racial self. As Michael L. Rosino (2016: 943) writes, for racial classifications to shape social relations from above, "political subjects must not only fear the threat of violence but also see the discourses and categories of dominant groups as legitimate."

Next, we can see the role of *interests* in the social processes of racialization and identity formation. Contestations about the existence, meaning, and peopling of racial identities have often reflected the interests of those with power (Haney López, 2006). We can also see the role of oppressed groups' struggles for social recognition and material equality as essential forces that take place through practices of self-definition (see Collins, 1990) and alter macro-level racial discourses and classifications (Omi and Winant, 2014).

Fourth, identities are racialized in the flow of *interactions*. There exists a racialized interaction order wherein people engage in the "racialization of social space . . . alongside the racialization of bodies" (Rosino, 2017: 172). As Du Bois (1920: 148) pointed out, "we do not really associate with each other, we associate with our ideas of each other, and few people have either the ability or courage to question their own ideas." In other words, day-to-day interactions are the spaces in which people simultaneously act on their impressions of the racial identity of others and the related sense of (un)belonging, (de)humanization, and prestige or stigma.

Conclusion

We have laid out how the concepts of "identity" and "racialization" have rather contested definitions and hold varied disciplinary baggage. First, we examined how both terms have been employed in cooperative tandem and advanced a workable definition for each. We then considered the major analytic power and pathos of each approach in relation to efforts to understand social interaction and challenge racial oppression. Third, we attempted to provide some new considerations for how to theorize identity and racialization. In particular, we attempted to synthesize the sociological and interactionist definitions to advance a holistic approach that is weighty with new insights.

Overall, racial identity formation – as a process of making boundaries to include and exclude – should not be analytically divorced from other dimensions of racialization, particularly racialized ideologies, institutions, interests, and interactions. The examination of "identities" must be undertaken as only one aspect of a larger racialization process and with an eye toward possibilities for social transformation and liberation from racial oppression. By viewing identities as one aspect of a larger racialization process, we advance a more-precise interactionist understanding of the concept of "race."

Future research should further examine the racialized interaction order (Rosino, 2017) by extrapolating linkages between processes of racial oppression, the maintenance and transformation of racialized boundaries and meanings, and the interplay of structure and agency in everyday social interactions (e.g., Megjhi, 2018; Currington, 2020; Papadantonakis, 2020). Endeavors in this vein should both describe these dynamics and reveal ways to alter them. Drawing from emergent understandings of these linkages and their implications, praxis-oriented work is needed to provide insights useful for challenging racial oppression. The production of theoretical, empirical, and practical knowledge about the relationship between racialization and identity in the context of social interactions and translation between these types of knowledge remain critical goals of sociological inquiry.

Notes

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2 Assistant Professor of Sociology, Molloy College, 1000 Hempstead Avenue, Kellenberg Hall (Room 312) Rockville Centre, NY 11571–5002, USA.
3 Cooley (1902: 152) wrote, "A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal element: imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification."
4 Mead (1934: 134) understood the "I" as "a means of reflexiveness – the turning-back of the experience of the individual upon himself – that the whole social process is thus brought into the experience of the individuals involved in it."
5 This conceptualization is now more common. For example, Charles Mills (2017: 4) defined race in the following way: "Instead of seeing race biologically, and as part of a natural hierarchy, one reconceptualizes it so it refers to one's structural location in a racialized social system, thereby generating a successor concept. People are 'raced' according to particular rules – we shift from a noun to a verb, from a pre-existing 'natural' state to an active social process – and these ascribed racial identities then tendentially shape their moral standing, civic status, social world, and life chances." Also, Hughey (2012: 12) wrote that "Race is not a static event but a process of patterned events that demonstrate a larger cultural system that continually reracializes certain objects, habits, rituals, words, and people." See also, Powell (1997).

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