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## Race as Cultural Construction, Race as Social Reality *Mothering for Contradictions and Ambiguities*

*Anthropologists generally conceive of race as a cultural construction. The American Anthropological Association's policy statement on race asserts that, "it has become clear that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups." For most people in North America, however, race is a very real entity that rests on perceived biological or genetic differences between groups of people. As such, it is said to exist outside of culture. Similarly, the concept of race is socially real in North American society, as it has tangible—and devastating—social, historical, and economic consequences. In this article, we examine the strategies that anthropologist mothers, including ourselves, employ to teach our children about both the "fictions" and "facts" of race. How do we sensitize our children to the culturally constructed nature of race? And how do we create an awareness of the fact that only certain biological and genetic variables are culturally selected to demarcate "races" and that biological and genetic variation is as great within human groups (or "races") as it is between them? More fundamentally, how do we do this while simultaneously instilling in our children an appreciation of the pervasiveness of "race" in society, an understanding of the myriad ways in which "race" continues to be used to justify and perpetuate social inequalities, and an appreciation for diversity?*

Race is ever-present in North American society. Most assume that it is a natural, biological category that clearly distinguishes groups of people. However, race is neither clear nor natural. The discipline of Anthropology teaches us that human populations cannot be divided into clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups. Nevertheless, race is a very "real" social category. In this article we examine the contradictions and ambiguities of race in North America as they relate to mothering practices. More specifically, we examine how women trained in a discipline that problematizes race, namely Anthropology, negoti-

ate everyday realities and experiences of race as they mother and teach their children about cultural diversity and human variation. In our research, we found that race socialization is an important part of motherwork. We examine the deliberate steps mothers take to model the behaviors they want their children to adopt; construct environments that foster an appreciation for diversity; and give children tools to respond to racism, prejudice, and privilege. We also consider how mothering about race intersects with such key social categories as gender, age, and class.

Anthropologist mothers are often explicit in their attempts to socialize their children regarding race. Because they see race as culturally constructed, it is not presented as an essential or natural category. Just as it has been important to de-essentialize mothering and motherhood, anthropologists point us toward a critical understanding of race. The lessons learned from the mothers we spoke with can be applied broadly beyond the disciplinary boundaries of academic anthropology, and are valid for all mothers working to comprehend constructions of race in diverse and increasingly global environments.

*My five-year-old son Louis and I were driving the twenty miles to the school where I work when we passed a house that had a play teepee in the backyard.*

*"Mom, Indians live there," Louis instructed me, pointing to the teepee.*

*"Well, honey," I wanted to let him down gently, "I don't think anyone actually lives in that teepee."*

*"Yes they do, Mom. You just don't know that family of Indians."*

*"It looks more like a play teepee to me," I replied.*

*Louis was silent for a few minutes then perked up again: "We're going to see Indians at your work today, aren't we Mom?" He knows that kids from the reservation attend the school where I work, and he's driven through the reservation on several occasions.*

*"It's quite possible, yes, a lot of Indians go to my school."*

*On the way home, Louis asked me whether we'd seen any Indians that day. Before I could open my mouth, he answered the question for himself: "I didn't see any Indians, that's for sure."*

*Knowing that he had, in fact, seen Native Americans, that he had actually spoken with a couple of people who were Native American, I was a little perplexed and not quite sure how to respond. My mind raced immediately to the media images of Native Americans I recalled from my own childhood: the shirtless young men riding bareback on horses, their long braids flapping in the wind; the painted and feathered warriors flexing their bow strings; the quiet, submissive women, backs slightly bowed from the weight of the children on their backs. "My God," I thought to myself, "what's he been watching when he goes to the neighbour's house?"*

*Instead, I told Louis that it's not always possible to tell Indians apart from*

other people, that it's not always how people look that determines whether or not they're Indian. I told him that it's as much how people act, what they say and believe, think and feel that makes them Indian. Hopefully, I thought to myself, I can begin to plant some important seeds here about the cultural construction of race.

"But Mom," he almost interrupted me, "if you can't tell who the Indians are by looking at them, how do they know who gets to live in that special place ... what's it called ... that special place where the Indians live?"

"You mean the reservation?"

"Yeah, the reservation. How do they decide who gets to live there?"

I wanted to tell him that living on the reservation has not always been as "special" as he seems to think it is, that it's not always been a choice or a privilege, but as we're almost home—and his five-year-old brain already seems to be working overtime—I decided to save that conversation for another day. (Cynthia)

In the second grade, my son Bobby and his classmates were instructed to write down clues as to their identity for parents to try to guess during the school's annual Open House night. My son wrote, "I have Brown skin. I am African and I like sundaes. Who am I?" In writing "Brown skin" and "African," my son chose "race" and "ethnicity" as key characteristics of his identity.

This year, however, when Bobby completed the same assignment, the primary clue he wrote down was, "I like writing in cursive," thereby shifting the focus of his identity from race to abilities. Nonetheless, race remains a salient social category for both of us.

Later that same year, while watching television together one evening, Bobby said, "Mama, the man on the TV said that the police don't care that Black people are dying. That is not very nice, but lucky for me I'm half Black and half White."

Finally, just three weeks ago as we were driving home one evening, I was listening to the daily news on National Public Radio. In response to a story regarding racism, I made a noise of disgust.

"What?" Bobby asked.

I told him that some people hate others just because they look different, trying to explain their racist actions in simple terms an eight-year-old would understand.

"Just because they look different?" he asked.

"Yeah, pretty much," I responded.

"Well that's just crazy!" he said. "I mean, my family, you, me, my dad, my cousins, we all look different from each other and we love each other. Everybody looks different from each other, don't they know that? Are they stupid?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes, they are stupid," I replied. (Susan)

The above vignettes provide glimpses into our own experiences of mothering on race. We are both mothers who struggle with how to best raise our pre-adolescent boys in contemporary North American society, particularly when it comes to issues of race and racism. Although we are both white, our mothering experiences differ significantly—one of us is the single mother of a bi-racial Euro-American/African boy living in a small city that is somewhat diverse ethnically, while the other resides with her Euro-American male partner and son in a rural community that is overwhelmingly white. Despite these differences, we agree that race is of great consequence in North American society. We know that it produces tangible and devastating social and economic consequences and has brought about concrete divisions between groups of people, divisions that consistently privilege some groups over others. We both ardently hope that our sons will grow up conscious of and concerned about the realities of race in North America.

We are also anthropologists who define mothering and motherhood as cultural phenomena in our own academic pursuits as well as in our mothering practices. Feminist anthropologists and other social scientists have made great strides in demonstrating that motherhood is a not a “natural” category and that it varies cross-culturally. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) asserts in her ethnographic account of women in a Brazilian shantytown, for instance, “[m]other love is anything *other* than natural and instead represents a matrix of images, meanings, sentiments, and practices that are everywhere socially and culturally produced” (341). And in her in-depth examination of the role of motherhood in human evolution, Sarah Hrdy (1999) similarly points out that while mothering is often assumed to be a natural role determined by biological processes, in humans it has developed in social contexts and human mothers have always been embedded in networks of other relationships at the same time that they perform their mothering duties and activities.

While feminist anthropologists have highlighted cross-cultural, historical, and evolutionary differences in mothering and motherhood, other feminist writers have also taught us that these roles and activities are always constructed through race. Key in this regard is the work of Patricia Hill Collins (1994) who critiques feminist theories of mothering for failing to fully consider how it interacts with conceptions of race. As she purports: “Motherhood occurs in specific historical situations framed by interlocking structures of race, class, and gender. . . . Racial domination and economic exploitation profoundly shape the mothering context, not only for racial ethnic women in the United States, but for all women” (45). Other researchers also alert us to the ways in which mothering and motherhood are “racialized” (O’Reilly, 1996; see also Birns and Hay, 1988).

As anthropologists, we think these critical insights about the racialized and culturally constructed nature of mothering and motherhood can be enhanced by also considering the ways in which “race” itself is culturally constructed. In this regard, anthropologists have a fairly distinctive perspec-

tive on race. While we recognize race as an important category, we consider it to be a category of very special type—one that is culturally constructed, arbitrary, and in certain respects a fiction. Unlike most people, anthropologists do not perceive of race as an entity that rests on biological differences between groups or as something that exists outside of culture. As the American Anthropological Association (1998) writes in its official statement, race is “a worldview, a body of prejudgments that distorts our ideas about human differences and group behavior. Racial beliefs constitute myths about the diversity in the human species and about the abilities and behavior of people homogenized into ‘racial’ categories.” Introductory anthropology textbooks similarly define race as an “ethnic group *assumed* to have a biological basis” (Kottak, 2002: 706, emphasis ours) and as “a culturally assigned category” (Ember and Ember, 2000: 393).

In much of the literature on mothering, race, and child socialization practices, race is assumed to be a natural category, and something that is considered primarily by non-whites or parents of biracial children. So, while the existing literature recognizes motherhood as culturally constructed and demonstrates the intersection of race and mothering, few writers significantly challenge the “naturalness” of race. Drawing on anthropological theory, we define race not as a natural category based in biological variation, but as a socio-cultural construct that becomes “real as lived experience” (Goodman, 2005). Thus, we see a need to further expand our understandings of race and mothering as intersecting categories that are *both* culturally constructed.

### **Research and considerations**

With these thoughts in mind, we decided to interview other anthropologist mothers about the strategies they employ to teach their children about the culturally constructed nature of race. In open-ended interviews with a dozen anthropologist mothers, all of whom identify as white, we focused on the following questions: How do anthropologist mothers create an awareness of the fact that only certain biological variables are selected to create “races” and that genetic variation is greater within groups than between them? How do they do this while instilling an appreciation of the pervasiveness of “race,” and an understanding of the myriad ways race is used to justify and perpetuate social inequalities? Or as one of our interviewees stated, how do we “walk the walk” when it comes to applying anthropological perspectives on race to our own lives?

In this paper we focus on three primary issues that emerged in our discussions. First, we address how mothers model the behaviors they want their children to adopt. Second, we explore how mothers construct environments that help children value cultural differences while also preparing them to deal with social inequalities based on perceived racial differences. Third, we consider the intersections of mothering and race with other key social categories. We argue that mothering and teaching about race cannot be isolated from such

groupings as gender, ethnicity, class, residence, and age.

Before looking at these primary issues, two points from our interviews should be noted. First, all the mothers interviewed hold to conceptions of race as culturally constructed. As one mother stated: "I've taught physical anthropology, so I know that there's as much variation within each race as there is between so-called 'races.' I understand that race is a cultural concept and I also get that it's a real thing that people use to judge people by." Secondly, it is important to note that some informants were explicit in the lessons they imparted to their children regarding race. These mothers actively created situations in which their children would be confronted with difference and were more likely to discuss privilege. Other mothers were more reactive, waiting for their children to pose questions about race or responding to particular situations as they arose.<sup>1</sup> For example, one mother explained,

*I don't think I do much to teach them [my children] explicitly about race, it is more reactive. Like we were in the store and my boy saw a man with very dark skin and he said, 'Mom, look he is soooo dark.' I explained that people from closer to the equator have darker skin. I teach them that we are all the same, just with different physical features. (Rachel)*

These differing approaches appeared to be stylistic differences among individual mothers and did not appear to correlate with the age, racial or ethnic identities of their children.

### **Modeling ideas about race and reactions to racism**

All of the mothers we interviewed expressed a concern with modeling the behaviors and attitudes they hope to instill in their children. "I modeled the behaviors I wanted my boys to follow," one mother asserted. "I didn't want my kids to unconsciously internalize negative beliefs or attitudes. I didn't want them to see everyone as the same. I tried to teach difference as a positive." For several mothers, language has been an essential component of such modeling. On this point, one mother stated the following: "I purposefully never used certain identifiers. I wanted [my children] to see that everyone was a person, not just some label." For other mothers, language has been important with regard to the racial categories they use to describe their own children. Some mothers of biracial children problematize racial categorization. For example, one mother refused to impose a single racial label on her son, pointing out to him and to school administrators that, "none of the boxes or choices fit him."

Several mothers also reported that modeling came in the form of intentional involvement in social justice and anti-racism work. One mother was actively involved in the diversity committee in her children's school, asserting that her children "saw me working on the issue. There is Mom coming to school every week for these meetings, they knew it was important to me." Two

other mothers mentioned taking their young children with them to meetings of anti-racism groups, and how important it has been for them to have their children see them working to create social justice.

### **Constructing environments**

Constructing environments for children, the second key theme from our interviews, takes several forms. All mothers indicated that they work to create environments that expose their children to various cultures and ethnic groups, thus hoping to foster in them an appreciation of cultural differences. Several mothers intentionally chose school settings or neighborhoods where their children would learn or live together with children from different backgrounds. “In some ways,” one recalled, “I didn’t make [teaching about race] explicit early on with my kids about quote-un-quote questions of race because their everyday experience would have been a multiracial experience...we purposely chose to live where we lived ... so that every day and every institution that they had a relationship to was in fact multiracial.”

Other mothers talked about creating relationships with people from different “racial” and ethnic backgrounds and about incorporating things into their children’s lives—food, toys, books, travel, languages—that will help them identify with their own cultural backgrounds and better understand others. As a mother of a biracial son of African and Euro-American origins put it: “I make a very conscious effort to make sure that he has all kinds of different examples; in his toys, the books we read, movies, the art work in our home. While it may not happen every day, we eat African food, listen to African music, he has African clothes to wear, and I try to speak to him in Swahili as much as I can.”

Several mothers also talked about the importance of constructing environments to give their children the tools to respond to racial prejudices and inequalities in U.S. culture. On the one hand, mothers of biracial children find it essential to create environments that foster a sense of self-worth and prepare their children to face racial injustice. A mother of biracial African-American/Norwegian-American children, for instance, felt certain that her children will one day face situations in which their peers in their predominantly white community will see them primarily as black and as existing outside of the white norm. Her husband, who is African American, experienced this and remembers the shock of realizing that people in his white community saw him differently.<sup>2</sup> “So part of that,” she explained, “is just preparing children of colour so that the pain isn’t as bad.”

Mothers of white children were more likely to focus on creating environments that taught their children to respect everyone, regardless of ethnic or racial background. Amanda Lewis (2004) argues, “[i]n a racialized social system, all actors are *racialized*, including whites. Because all social actors are racialized, at some level they must live and perform and ‘do’ race” (626). But not all mothers were conscious of teaching “whiteness” as a normative category

or a source of privilege in the same way that mothers of bi-racial children were. This may be due to the fact that, as John Hartigan (1997) points out, “the unmarked and normative position of whites is maintained by positioning ‘race’ as a category of difference. ‘Racial’ and ‘race’ are typically used to characterize difference and deviance from social norms” (496-497). These mothers took what is often referred to as a “colour blind” approach, stressing sameness and unity over difference and variation.

### **Teaching about race as it intersects with other social categories**

The third key theme to emerge from our interviews concerns the intersection of mothering about race with other salient social categories. Teaching about race is complicated by such other factors as gender, class, ethnicity, age, and geography, to mention only a few.

With regard to gender, for example, the mother of two boys declared, “Boys are different.” She pointed to the language and competitive interaction style her sons developed. “At about eight to ten years of age, they got the vocabulary of race, they became more aware of it [racial stereotyping], they picked it up at school.” Her son told her that “men talk to each other differently in all-male environments, and that kind of language [i.e., derogatory] is used all the time.”

One mother felt that for her children, white kids living in a multiracial, working class neighborhood, class is a more salient aspect of their identity and life circumstances than is whiteness. “I taught my kids how to get arrested right away,” she recalled, “just like everybody else’s kids [in the neighbourhood] ... if [the police] stopped somebody, they stopped you. They didn’t care if you were white.” She also noted that being white did not make a difference with regard to health care and other services, “because there was no access to resources that being white gave you ... cause you didn’t live in a neighborhood that had more access.” For a second mother, a white mother of biracial children living in a largely white, middle class suburban area, class protects them from some of the disadvantages faced by other children of colour.

Nearly all of the mothers strongly believed that age plays a critical role in what and how they teach their children about race. One mother concentrated more on explicit teaching about race when her children were young, focusing her instruction on genetics and on “how there are no real differences between races.” As her children have aged, discussions about race have focused more on stereotypes about various racial groups in the dominant culture and possible prejudices that they, as biracial youth, will experience in their lives.

Another mother recalled that as her boys got older,

*we could talk about more subtle aspects. I remember this time I was in the video store with Joe and there was an African-American man at the counter. The person behind the counter was requiring all kinds of forms of identification, just because he was not white. There were a bunch of people*



*in line waiting. I asked him after we left if he saw what was going on; how the man was treated differently. (Karen)*

Categories of race are also complicated by those surrounding ethnicity. In part, this complication reflects a conflation of race and ethnicity that often exists in American culture more generally (see, e.g., Coard and Sellers, 2005; O'Donoghue, 2005; Hughes and Johnson, 2001). In this regard, two informants with biracial African-American/Euro-American children noted that their children are often viewed in terms of their perceived race—black—and that they have had to work to teach their children that their ethnicity is in fact more complex. One stated, “I have had to work hard to make [my children] feel that they are equally as Norwegian American as their white-haired blue-eyed cousins.” Similarly, the second mother explained that her son “mainly identifies as African or Tanzanian, which makes me happy and gives him a sense of pride, but I remind him that he has a German-American heritage too. So,” she jokingly added, “he has to eat *and* like his sauerkraut.”

Where people reside—cities or suburbs, small towns or rural areas, various regions of the U.S.—also influences teaching about race. One mother explained that when her children were young, the family moved around a lot. Her children, who are biracial, were treated very differently and, consequently, asked different questions about race and ethnicity depending on the part of the country in which they were living. In much the same way, mothers in urban, multiracial contexts often find that issues of race arise naturally in their children's daily lives, whereas those residing in largely white suburban and rural areas report that they need to be more proactive in teaching about race, particularly when it comes to deconstructing notions of whiteness as the norm.

### **Further pursuits and practices**

Our interviews revealed a host of related issues for further exploration, both on the professional level as researchers pursuing the mutual cultural construction of motherhood and race, and on the more personal level, as mothers wanting to raise our boys to appreciate race as both cultural construction and social reality. As researchers, firstly, we wonder whether anthropologist mothers approach talking about race with their children differently or to a different degree than others. Relatedly, how are our findings influenced by the fact that we are both white anthropologists who spoke only with anthropologist mothers who were also white? Do anthropologist mothers of colour—or from other countries, for that matter—approach mothering about race in different ways? What about anthropologist fathers? Does the paucity of literature on racial and ethnic socialization by fathers in general reflect the fact that this task, like so many other tasks, falls primarily on the mothers? And what of the children themselves: are they incorporating the messages their mothers try to instill in them about race or, as one mother worried, “is this just one more thing that we [mothers] are going to be blamed for screwing up?”

It is clear from our research that race is anything but natural, stable, or unproblematic, and that teaching our children about race and racism is a fundamental and complex part of motherwork. Thus our charge to more consciously and effectively teach our children about the cultural construction *and* the social realities of race becomes ever more urgent. Will we know exactly how to do this? Will we succeed? We can only try. As Zora Neale Hurston (1969), one of the mothers of Anthropology, relays about her own childhood in *Dust Tracks on a Road*: “Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to ‘jump at de sun.’ We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground” (cited in Boyd, 2003: 27).

<sup>1</sup>Hughes and Chen (1999) find a similar distinction between “reactive” and “proactive” approaches to teaching children about race in their research with African American parents.

<sup>2</sup>In their study of racial socialization, Hughes and Johnson (2001) found that “parental background characteristics and discrimination experiences were important determinants of the frequency of Preparation for Bias” (1992).

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