SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES IN RACIAL IDENTITY FORMATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINO/A ACTIVISTS

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the social-psychological processes of racial identity formation. As a result of an analysis of the autobiographies of African American and Latino/a activists, a distinct trajectory in the development of racial identity around three sources of racial knowledge is proposed: (1) kinship networks; (2) hegemonic influences; and (3) direct experience. These findings suggest a fluid, complex process of racial identity formation contrary to assumptions that racial formation is fixed, static and formulaic.

REFLEXIVE STATEMENT

As an African-American student in the late 1980s, I became interested in Black radical political resistance movements while enrolled at Oakland University. Black college students across the nation were engaged in acts of resistance, demanding that their institutions recruit and retain African-American students and faculty members and create culturally sensitive academic departments and research programs. In search of my own activist identity, I was introduced to Angela Davis's autobiography. Through her life story, I became interested in how activists describe their formative experiences as contributing to their desire to challenge racist, sexist, and classist social structures. I also became interested in how people make decisions to participate in acts of resistance against oppression and, in some cases, join liberatory organizations. I use the grounded-theory methodological approach to study these questions because it privileges the voices of the activists and allows them to speak on their own behalf.
Social scientists who study race have identified a number of theories that describe how individuals begin to relate to and understand their social location and the implications of that location for their identities and opportunities. Often called racial identity formation, this awareness of racial identity is the "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (Omi and Winant 1994:55). Everybody, according to theories of racial formation, "learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification . . . often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation" (Omi and Winant 1994:60). As the process through which individuals are divided into racial categories, racial formation suggests that race becomes meaningful "as a descriptor of group or individual identity, social issues, and experience" (Winant 1998:756).

Psychology, with its emphasis on mental processes and the emotional and behavioral characteristics of individuals, offers an understanding of the psychological processes involved in racial formation. Representative of these psychological theories is Cross's (1995) theory of Nigrescence or the "psychology of becoming Black" (p. 94). His emphasis is on the transformation of the psychological development of the individual through particular kinds of situations so that individuals begin to see themselves more positively. Cross (1995) suggests that there is a metamorphosis or a set of developmental stages through which African Americans who experience self-hate progress as they move from "self-hating to a self-healing and culturally affirming self-concept" (Cross 1995:96). As a result of their progression through these stages, individuals experience an "emergent or new identity" (p. 96). This new identity takes its influences from the socio-historical environment and serves as the source that stimulates a psychological self-transformation.

The discipline of sociology focuses on structural aspects of the process of racial formation. Two representative structural theories of racial formation are Omi and Winant's (1994) and Bonilla-Silva's (2001) theories of racialized social systems. Omi and Winant (1994) argue that conceptual definitions of racial categories become institutionalized and influence conceptions of race. The process of racial formation, then, is created ideologically and is implemented by racial etiquette, "a set of interpretive codes and racial meanings which operate in the interactions of daily life" (Omi & Winant 1994:62). They assert that this racialization process becomes second nature as a result of its focus on "learning of combinations of rules for racial classification and of their own racial identity" (1994:62).

Bonilla-Silva's (2001) theory of racialized social systems also addresses the structural conditions of race and racism. He suggests, "after a society becomes racialized, racialization develops a life of its own" (p. 45). His emphasis is on
how race influences social relations, thereby becoming an influential “criterion for vertical hierarchy in society” (2001:45). Racialized social systems, defined as “societies in which economic, political, social and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races” (2001:37), are historically contextual, hegemonic, hierarchically patterned, and autonomous.

Psychological explanations of racial identity formation, with their emphasis on individual and subjective realities, and sociological approaches, which concentrate on structural and objective aspects, both fall short in explaining how individuals make sense of their racialized experiences. In particular, they fail to explain what propels individuals to participate in movements designed to ameliorate conditions of injustice concerning race. Neither approach alone can explain the dynamic interplay among historical situations, collective ideological interpretations, and individual explanations. Both objective structures and individual subjective feelings must be considered to understand the complex process of racial formation. In this essay, I posit an approach that combines the strengths of each discipline into a single analysis. By using the autobiographies of African American and Latino/a activists, I provide a socio-psychological analysis of movement participants’ interpretations of the cultural messages and racialized experiences that were crucial in the development of their racial identities. Their life stories show both the influences of stages of individual psychological development and ideological frameworks that provide the structural influences that contribute to the creation of their racial identities.

**Method**

Streets: Fighting for Latino/a Rights with the Young Lords (2003); and four narratives from Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios (2001), written by members of the Latina Feminist Group. These narratives are "comprehensive autobiographies," which, according to Berg (2004), "spans the life of the individual from his or her earliest recall to the time of the writing of the work and includes descriptions of life experiences, personal insights, and anecdotal reminiscences" (p. 221). Through the activists' recollection of events recorded in their autobiographies, significant events in their lives are interpreted as social, ideological or psychological determinants that led to their participation in organizations for social justice.

Admittedly, use of autobiographies as data requires caution. Autobiographers often have their own agendas; in terms of self-presentation, political activists are often influenced by their political ideology at the time of writing. In addition, autobiographies must be analyzed in light of research on memory, understanding that retrospective recollections are not always accurate. What the authors present may not provide an accurate picture of an event, a situation, or even their own perspectives at the time. Despite these shortcomings, life stories do provide important information on authors' reflection of the significant personal and social events that led to their racial identities and social activism. The kinds of messages they received and the ways they chose to interpret those messages—reflections contained in the autobiographies—provide valuable information regarding their rationalization of their racialized experiences.

A brief highlight of the lives of each of the activists-autobiographers provides a sense of the rich data they provide for this study. Angela Davis earned a doctorate in philosophy and was active in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); the Black Panther Party (BPP) of Northern California; and, for a short period, in Newton's BPP for Self-Defense. She later joined the American Communist Party. Elaine Brown began her activism as a member of the Black Congress, worked for the Black Congress newspaper Harambee, and served as deputy minister of information, chairperson and minister of defense, and party chief of the BPP. She ran unsuccessfully for political office and was a delegate to the California Democratic convention in 1976. Assata Shakur was an activist in the student rights movement, especially active in the Oceanhill/Brownsville community uprising for public control of schools. She became a member of the BPP and later joined the Black Liberation Army (BLA). Arrested and convicted of charges stemming from an incident on the New Jersey turnpike that left a state trooper and a fellow BLA member dead, she escaped from prison in 1979 and now lives in Cuba, where she was granted political asylum.

Huey Newton co-founded the BPP and served in various leadership positions in the organization when he was not incarcerated as a political prisoner. Bobby
Seale, also a co-founder of the BPP, was a part of the Chicago 8 following the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. William Lee Brent became chief of security of the BPP. Arrested following a shoot-out with the San Francisco police, Brent hijacked an airplane to avoid charges and, like Shakur, is currently living in exile in Cuba.

The activists who represent the Latino/a Civil Rights struggle participated in a variety of organizations, but their work was typically related to anti-poverty campaigns, migrant workers, and labor unions. Antonia Pantoja, born in Puerto Rico, earned a doctorate in social work and, after immigrating to the United States, founded several organizations designed to encourage youth leadership and academic excellence in the Puerto Rican community. One is Aspira, the name of which is taken from the Spanish verb *aspirer*, which means to aspire, an organization that aims to empower community through youth development. Miguel “Mickey” Melendez, a Puerto Rican descendent born in the United States, was a co-founder of the Young Lords, an organization that was modeled after the BPP that focused on issues of poverty. Maria Elena Lucas, a Mexican-American farm worker and union organizer, was active in the Farm Labor Organizing Committee and the United Farm Workers.

Members of the Latina Feminist Group, composed of Caridad Souza, Liza Fiol-Matta, Celia Alvarez, and Luz del Alba Acevedo, "reflect the Latina experience" (p. 6). They were all employed by or otherwise engaged in the academy, where they "spontaneously began to weave testimonios, stories of our lives, to reveal our own complex identities as Latinas" (p. 1). While identifying the act of writing as a way to document both their individual and collective experiences as Latinas, they were involved in several organizations and movements for liberation. They "participated in various movements that denounce social injustice, including civil rights, anti-war, labor human rights, progressive Cuban American politics, Puerto Rican Independence, Chicano political autonomy, Native American sovereignty, and Central American solidarity" (p. 3).

Using textual analysis consistent with grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), I analyzed the activists’ autobiographies, concentrating on their descriptions of social and psychological determinants of their racial identity development. Because the grounded-theory method focuses on theory generation rather than theory verification, I did not undertake the research task with hypotheses in mind that were to be either verified or rejected. Rather, I focused on the systematic view of data to develop propositions or hypotheses about the development of racial identity. Because my interest in this study was discovering how the activists identify social and psychological determinants of racial identity, I coded my data by identifying passages in the autobiographies where the authors explicitly mentioned race. I then compared and contrasted
these passages in an inductive process, sorting them into major variables relevant to the process of racial identity formation.

**FINDINGS**

For both the African American and Latino/a activists, two variables emerged as important to the process of racial identity formation: sources of knowledge about race; and attribution of cause for a problem in which race was central. Sources of knowledge are the locations from which individuals receive messages about race. These sources of knowledge are collective and community-based influences and thus represent the social dynamic. By *attribution*, I mean “causal interpretations that persons give to events in their environment” (Crittenden 1983:425). In other words, attribution is the writer’s identification of the source of difficulty or the defect in the situation to which he or she responds. The cause identified is either individual or structural, so this variable can be either psychological or social.

For the activists, source of knowledge is critical in the process of racial identity formation. The three sources of racial knowledge that emerged from the data are kinship networks, hegemonic influences, and direct experience. Attribution and emotion appear to be dependent on source of knowledge and therefore are of secondary importance in racial identity formation. Because source of knowledge emerged as key in the description of the process of racial formation by the activists, my analysis is organized around the kinds of knowledge identified by the activists.

**Kinship Network as a Source of Knowledge**

As a source of knowledge, the kinship network and civil society consists of family, friends, and the intra-racial group of the African American and Latino/a communities respectively. Largely responsible for providing messages for individuals to explain their early experiences of race, the kinship network helps individuals understand their social conditions. Civil society, a concept developed by Hegel, states that between the state and the individual, civil society serves as an extension of familial relations and bridges social institutions to the individual. Through the mechanism of civil society, “the wants of the individual are supplied by each individual’s pursuit of his own particular interest” (Acton, 2006: 409). The kinship network and its larger social networks of civil society provided messages that were largely reinforcing to the positive self-development of the autobiographers and instilled resources for resistance against the racist system. In cases where the social structure and its institutions were disparaging
or destructive, the messages of the kinship network often provided guidance by which the individual was encouraged to seek alternate routes for survival and success. The messages about race from the kinship network taught that racial identity lay in individual qualities.

The authors reported several cases in which the importance of individual resistance was conveyed to them through storytelling or recreated tales. Often featuring a family member as the protagonist, these stories recounted how individuals had been protected from the aggression of white authorities by their resolution and strength. For example, Shakur described an encounter between her grandmother and a white truck driver who, “in an arrogant tone of voice, ordered my grandmother to open the gate so that he could turn his car around” (p. 27). In an attempt to convince her to change her mind when she refused, the truck driver said, “‘Come on now, auntie, I got a mammy in my house,’ to which she replied, ‘I don’t care if you’ve got a hundred mammies in your house. . . . I want you off of my property now! Right now’ (p. 27)! Because of her defiance, he was unable to turn around and forced to back up for more than a quarter of a mile. This experience instilled a sense of respect for her grandmother’s acts of resistance, to which Shakur credited her own strength.

Newton described how his father’s resistance involved acceptance of a label. Through his father’s stories, Newton argued that the moniker of “crazy” was one that provided a sense of protection for the family: no one was willing to engage the family in conflict because of his father’s assumed refusal to adhere to contemporary racial social norms. While Newton described these stories as entertaining, he also saw them as means by which the family resolved hostile and racist situations.

While not always positive, kinship networks taught significant lessons about the importance and value of struggle, dignity, and self-respect. Shakur described several instances where her mother and grandmother refused to adhere to the submissive position expected of Blacks. In one situation, her mother was able to purchase tickets to an amusement park that Blacks were not allowed to enter by telling the park managers that she was from a “Spanish country and that if he didn’t let us in she would call the embassy and the United Nations” (p. 28). In other instances, Shakur was told by her kinship network, “You show those white people that you are just as good as they are” (p. 36).

Other members of the kinship network for the African American activists were the teachers in the pre-integration period. Shakur mentioned the commitment that was evident by her Black teachers. She said, “the teachers took more of an interest in our lives because they lived in our world, in the same neighborhoods. . . . they tried to protect us as much as they could” (p. 29). Davis also remembered a teacher who was fired because he refused to allow a white administrator to refer to him by his first name. Not only did she respect this
teacher for demonstrating resistance, but she also recalled feeling “appalled” that the Black community stood by in virtual silence (p. 94).

The messages received from kinship networks featured the activists’ individual capabilities and unique qualities. Often, in these situations, kinship networks suggested positive messages with regard to the individual and, in some cases, negative messages referencing the racial collective. One form such messages took for the African Americans, particularly in their childhoods, was a comparison between the activists themselves and other African Americans. This comparison occurred in the form of a command to associate only with particular groups of African Americans, distinguishing between the qualities they were told they had that others did not.

Shakur, for example, whose economic status as a child was middle class, recalled her grandparents telling her to play with “decent children” and not to associate with “alley rats” (p. 21), positing an economic distinction between those who were considered more well off in contrast to those who were poor and working class. For others, distinctions were made not on the basis of economics but appearance. Brown noted how her mother reinforced the idea that she was “better” than the other Black children in her neighborhood: “She would always tell me how beautiful I was, ‘the most beautiful girl in the world.’ I was not like the other colored girls in our neighborhood, she told me. They had skin that was too dark and facial features that were too African and hair that was not ‘good’ like mine” (p. 21).

Fiol-Matta received messages distinguishing her from others of her race not from her parents but from the parents of her friends. “It was painfully obvious that some of my schoolmates’ parents accepted me into their households because I did not seem Puerto Rican to them—I did not ‘look Puerto Rican,’ I did not speak English “like a Puerto Rican” (p. 195). She elaborated:

I recall seething with anger and frustration whenever someone uttered the inevitable “you don’t look Puerto Rican,” knowing that they really did not want to know about me or my culture or my history. They needed to think I didn’t “look Puerto Rican”—so they could justify their children’s friendship with one of “them.” (p. 195)

For some of the activists, the comparison with others resulted in negative messages about their role. One example of a family interaction that produced such a negative message came from Lopez who was compared to a cousin in terms of her skin color:

In another instance an uncle picked up my arm in front of other family members and compared it with one of my fair-skinned cousin’s. His words were “like salt and pepper”—a phrase I would hear again as my high school friends compared my
sister Fran and me. This was an ignorant message that objectified us both. (p. 75)

Pantoja also received such messages of distinction from a family member; in this case a maternal aunt:

When she came to the house, she would tease me by saying that I didn’t belong in the family. She would say, “We found you in the garbage can where a madama put you. We picked you up and brought you in to the house.” Madama was a derogatory name for an English-speaking black woman from the islands. She would say, “If you look at yourself, you do not look like anyone here.” . . . I was scared by the fact that I did not seem to look like them. They were all dark. I was light. I would wonder why I would think, “Maybe I do not belong here. I am different.” (p. 17)

Not all families had conversations about the significance of race and skin complexion. The absence of such a discussion for Souza communicated powerful negative messages about her racial identity:

The denial and silence about race in my family confused me; made me feel like maybe there was something terribly wrong with me. But I could never quite put my finger on what. The fact that I was so light-skinned confused me even further. In contrast to my mother’s family, my father’s spiritual practices celebrated Africanness and singled me out as the heir to his spiritual legacy. Yet the message from my mother’s family was quite clear: my father’s offspring, not quite white, not entirely black, would always be suspect, always be less than (p. 116).

These examples of kinship network as a source of knowledge featured explanations of racial identity rooted in individuality and uniqueness. Even though these comparisons seem negative on the surface because they separate and divide individuals from one another, the positive messages had a positive intent: to make children feel confident about their capacities. The negative messages, in contrast, functioned as a recommendation or warning that the young person had some “work” to do to overcome the dysfunctional and less-than-ideal racial identity.

The focus on individual qualities and capabilities featured in messages about race from family members does not mean that racial identity was constructed apart from an awareness of collectivity. In some cases, the activists themselves chose to affiliate with those against whom they were compared, embracing a collective perspective. Davis, for example, expressed her realization of class distinctions between herself and her classmates, along with her sense of social
responsibility for those of lower classes. She said, "I had a definite advantage: my parents would see to it that I attended college, and would help me survive until I could make it on my own. This was not something that could be said for the vast majority of my schoolmates" (p. 93). Instead of accepting this as a reality, in an act of resistance, she often stole money from the bag of coins her father brought back from the service station nightly. "The next day I gave the money to my hungry friends... I would just have to suffer the knowledge that I had stolen my father's money" (p. 89).

Melendez offered another example of kinship networks and civil society that included a sense of solidarity with his peers in college:

On campus I felt self-conscious, but I knew I had to get through this academic plunge somehow. Black and Latino students were an obvious minority; we were for sure a new sight in the student lounge and cafeteria. We stuck together and didn't give a shit. We knew we had as much right to be there as anyone else, and we were just beginning to understand our rights and stand up for them (p. 70).

The connection of the activists' experiences to solidarity with those who are oppressed is illustrated as well by Pantoja. Her participation in a committee for racial justice helped her understand her own experiences with race and compelled her to identify with other people of color:

I had never fully understood the term racism until I went to work for Dr. Horne... I learned about the history of blatant and open destruction of black people in the United States, where the lynching of black men was not punished by the legal institutions of the states. These were facts that I had never known... I fully realized and understood that I was a black woman and that in Puerto Rico, being black was a lesser condition than being white, that although racism was not practiced in the same manner as in the United States it was nonetheless practiced effectively (p. 86).

Sometimes, the activists' identification with other people of color was not reinforced by their peers. For example, Lucas described the frustration she experienced when she began to apply her new understanding of race in her life. Not only did her peers not share this understanding, they also often engaged in oppressive practices with other minority groups. While U.S. immigration officers were engaged in a raid of undocumented workers, she ran up to the van where the officers were loading up several Latino workers. She sought empathy from an African American immigration officer:

Then I saw a Black immigration guy, and I didn't know what to do. I felt so terrible. So I went up to the black guy and said,
“Hey brother, have compassion. Your people were slaves once. Can’t you do something?” He just looked at me real strange, and his fist got real, real tight on the van (p. 219).

Kinship networks and their own racial communities were important sources of knowledge about race for the activists. They turned messages that constructed race as an individual construct into a collective one that featured either their solidarity with others or their distance from those who did not share their perception of solidarity. Kinship influences, then, serve as a mechanism by which social actors begin to examine their relation to the social structure with other people of color. They receive information regarding their racial formation that teaches them how to interpret their race and to see it as positive or, in a few instances, as ambiguous.

Many of the social activists, including Newton and Shakur, expressed positive emotions when discussing racial experiences that featured the kinship network as a source of knowledge. As they described their interpretations of these experiences, they often described a desire for survival, dignity, pride, connectedness, self-worth, stability, and friendship as emotions they felt. For example, while Newton described his father’s resistance as a means to maintain dignity and pride, these emotions were transferred to him and his brothers merely in the recounting of these liberatory moments. As Newton explained, “I heard these stories and others like them over and over again until in a way his experiences became my own” (p. 32).

Kinship messages that featured some act of struggle often were used to generate positive emotions. In situations where activists resisted or refused to accept negative messages, they identified resistance as a way to preserve dignity. One of Newton’s moments of resistance in the classroom yielded respect from his classmates. Preparing to return to class from recess, Newton was removing sand from his shoes when his teacher accused him of delaying his return to class. As punishment, she “slapped me across the ear with a book” (p. 21). Newton’s response was to throw his shoes at her as an act of defiance:

I received a great deal of respect from the other children for that act; they backed me for resisting unjust authority. In our working- and lower-class community we valued the person who successfully bucked authority. Group prestige and acceptance were won through defiance and physical strength, and both of them led to racial and class conflict between the authorities and the students (p. 21).

Positive emotions, then, were experienced as the activists responded to the constructions of race received from kinship messages.
HEGEMONIC INFLUENCES AS A SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE

Hegemonic influences as a source of knowledge regarding racial identity and racial formation are those that come from outside of the Black or Latino/a communities. Hegemonic influences are racist messages from mainstream institutions and sources such as educators and police officers. These messages are attributed to structural—as opposed to individual—explanations, and the emotions that are associated with them are largely negative.

The educational environment provides most of the examples of hegemonic factors as sources of knowledge. When the African American activists discussed attending racially segregated schools with Black teachers, they considered the teachers to be extensions of the Black community who helped to contribute to a positive racial identity. The activists provided many more examples, however, where they encountered white educators in racially integrated schools who harbored racist attitudes and attempted to impart a negative racial identity to the Black children. In most of these cases, the activists explained their experiences as part of a racialized and classed social structure that benefited from the oppression of Black and working-class people.

Newton provided an example of such a hegemonic source of knowledge in his description of his experiences with reading. The racial messages that he described while reading stories such as “Sleeping Beauty,” “Little Black Sambo,” and “Briar Rabbit” were largely structural and negative: “Our image of ourselves was defined for us by textbooks and teachers” (p. 20). He explained that not only did he individually identify with the negative representations of Blackness as demonstrated in the stories, but also saw these stories as impacting the racial identity of other Black students in his classes. Brent’s description of his educational experiences largely agreed with Newton’s, but instead of books, he described interactions with a specific teacher. He recalled that the teacher “despised her black-skinned, nappy-headed charges and never missed a chance to belittle and humiliate us” (p. 22). Brent noted how this educational experience was related to the larger structural conditions of African Americans when he explained “school was only a dress rehearsal for the roles we would play as we grew up in a world where poverty, physical abuse, and senseless violence prevailed” (p. 23).

Pantoja also described a challenge to her racial self-concept as a result of interactions with the educational system. She said,

I was challenged by fellow-students, who minutes before had greeted me at the door and then turned on me in a class to say, “oh, your parents don’t work. You got a scholarship to come here from downtown, but our parents pay tuition. All you people do is throw garbage out the window” (p. 33).
Similarly, Lucas described the influences of fellow classmates on her perception of herself. She surmised that her differential treatment was based on race as well as on class:

"Usually, when I went to school, I'd have to beg around for a pencil and paper, and I'd get embarrassed 'cause everybody gave me a dirty look. . . She didn't even try to teach me. . . School was so hard being put in the back of the classroom all the time. It could have been because I was poorly dressed . . . I felt like I was a loner. I'd stay to myself. I wasn't part of anything. That's the only reason I could think of why I was put in the back of the room" (p. 85).

For Acevedo, an encounter with the hegemonic influence of the educational system did not come until college. One of her thesis advisors challenged how she chose to self-identify:

"A week into my arrival on the "mainland" race had become the strongest defining feature of my identity . . . [I] defined myself as a black woman and one of them wasted no time in replying, "no you are not! You are a Puerto Rican." At that moment I felt that I was required to make an impossible choice between race and ethnicity, as if they could not coalesce in a defining self" (p. 145).

She thus was forced to see her own race as she never had before—as something over which she had no control and that could be defined by others in ways different from how she had perceived race within her community. Hegemonic influences, then, contributed to the development of many of the activists' racial identities. Their encounters with teachers and the educational system forced them to realize the differences between themselves and others and evoked negative emotions.

Souza encountered such messages from the superintendent of the building in which she lived. When she informed the superintendent of the tenement building where she and her family resided that a bedroom window was broken, he suggested that she was responsible.

"When he suggested that "windows just don't fall out by themselves," I responded with "So what? You think I got up on a chair and knocked it out myself?" He said, very seriously, "Yeah." I was so shocked I was speechless. I knew right then and there that no matter what I said, no matter the truth, he would believe I purposely broke that window. It was my first hint that we were thought of as less than human" (p. 118).

In this example, Souza connected her race with the desirable value of honesty. Because the superintendent failed to believe her, the message she received was that because she was Puerto Rican, she would not be perceived as truthful.
Encounters with members of law enforcement are another example of institutional representatives of the hegemony for the activists. Brent described a situation in which he and some friends went to a picnic in a park that was designated as “white” by segregationist laws. They were attacked by a group of white neighborhood boys who began shooting at them with rifles. An altercation ensued, and Brent and his friends were arrested and charged “with everything from trespassing to unprovoked assault” (p. 42). The whites were released without charge and were asked to testify against Brent and his friends, who were eventually convicted. Brent’s message from this incident is illustrated in a comment he credited to his cousin, “Always remember the laws are made to protect white folks, not niggers” (p. 42). Through this experience, his sense of racial identity was based on the idea that Blackness insinuated guilt and “only heightened my resentment of authority and laws in general” (p. 42).

Travel introduced several of the activists to hegemonic messages about race because it took them outside of their kinship networks and homogeneous communities. As a result of a vacation in Tampa, Florida where he discovered that African Americans were allowed to use public facilities only on Thursdays, Melendez felt anger and humiliation as a result of hegemonic messages about race.

This was obviously a situation that went far beyond skin color, and although I was too young to comprehend all the implications, I suddenly felt the type of humiliation and dishonor blacks had been subjected to from the first day they arrived in North America... My feelings went beyond anger, though. I began to wonder what role skin color, place of birth, gender, and language played in all of our lives. (p. 51)

Pantoja encountered a similar message when an African-American porter referred to her and her traveling companions derogatorily:

When our train was announced, we approached the gate where there was a mob of people boarding. A black porter called out, “Niggers in the back.” Here was the problem again. It became evident that Negroes had a negative position. We did not know why they used the word “Nigger.” It was confusing that the people sending Negroes to the back were Negroes themselves. (p. 55)

At this point, she realized the racial slur was being used to describe her but was confused because the person using that slur was Black.

Pantoja provided an example of an experience in which the racial identity she had constructed in Puerto Rico was questioned when she arrived in the Southern part of the United States. For the first time, she heard a derogatory term used toward African Americans directed at her and her travel companions: “We lost
our identity... The man said to the woman, 'They are foreigners.' She answered angrily, 'They are niggers'... The message came through that we were not going to be served' (p. 54).

The emotions associated with hegemonic influences of racial formation varied. Under those situations where the activists either acquiesced or accepted the opinions of those in positions of authority, they described negative feelings such as anger, shame, confusion, and disengagement. Brent's reflection of the social role of education is representative. He saw "the underlying goal was not to educate us so that we'd be able to compete in society. It was to instill fear and obedience to authority. To make us understand our place in the world and accept it without question" (p. 22). Newton described his attendance in a remedial class, which he referred to as the "dumb class," as generating a feeling of being "constantly uncomfortable and ashamed of being Black." He suggested that Blacks who struggle for success through education often get "nowhere" (p. 42).

For Davis, resistance was a way to maintain dignity. After hearing about the Black families who were integrating a previously all-White neighborhood, resistance for her and a few friends was a way to defend our egos. Our weapon was the word. We would gather on my front lawn, wait for a car of white people to pass by and shout the worst epithets for white people we knew... Then we would laugh hysterically at the startled expressions on their faces. I hid this pastime from my parents. They could not know how important it was for me, and for all of us who had just discovered racism, to find ways of maintaining our dignity (p. 80).

Activists' descriptions of hegemonic racial messages suggest that those messages are designed to degrade Black or Latino/a people and adversely impact the development of racial identity. These largely negative experiences require that the activists negotiate a racialized structure and their own place in it. The cognitive and emotional state of confusion and embarrassment serve as a source of information for them. It viscerally suggests to them that something is not how they thought it was and that they need to reconsider previous beliefs. The attempt to make sense of the negative messages regarding racial identity produces dissonance for the activists. In turn, this dissonance prompts consideration and consciousness raising about past conceptions of race.

**DIRECT EXPERIENCE AS A SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE**

A third source of knowledge about racial identity for the activists is direct experience. Instead of a message that is given to them by their communities or the dominant culture, this source of knowledge involves the individuals' own
experiences with racial incidents. With direct experience as a source of knowledge, they are not just being told stories that model appropriate action by their families, and they did not receive cultural messages of negative stereotyping about their race in general. Instead, they themselves were confronted with a racial situation that involved them and required them to decide how to respond. How they choose to respond becomes, of course, a source of knowledge for them for future such encounters.

Direct experience as a source of knowledge takes place both in the moment of an encounter and in the reflection on the encounter after the fact. More importantly, it involves a dynamic interplay between the two other sources of knowledge identified by activist—kinship networks and hegemonic messages. In these situations, individuals bring with them the knowledge they have gained about race from these two sources. One is largely positive, where the cause of the racial unease is seen largely as individual and spawns positive emotions—messages from friends and family. The other is largely negative—hegemonic factors in which the explanation for the race-related problem is seen largely as structural and generates largely negative emotions in response. At the moment of a racialized experience, individuals must choose which message to privilege as they respond. They stand poised between the two sources of knowledge and are able to choose whether to align with one or the other or to create a response that synthesizes the two. Racial identity formation, then, with this step, becomes a process of choice in response to the sources of knowledge about race to which they previously have been exposed.

Two examples illustrate direct experience and the role it plays in the activists' racial formation. Melendez's exposure to segregation in public facilities on a trip to Tampa gave him his first real opportunity to choose the sources of knowledge he would privilege and how to respond:

Sure, I noticed differences in people's skin color, language, ethnicity, and religion. I hadn't known there were policies like this which could divide us and provoke serious confrontations. Wouldn't the African-Americans be angry? I asked myself. They were being discriminated against in the very place they were born (p. 50).

In another example of messages about race through direct experience, Lucas found that she was "colored" when her family moved to the North for employment. "It was awful. I didn't understand why I was told to go where the blacks were supposed to go. There were "colored only' and "whites only" signs all over... We were supposed to do what blacks did, but at first I didn't even know who blacks were" (p. 77). Moments like these required that the activists make an interpretive choice about how to conceptualize their racial identity.
The data from these autobiographies do not suggest a clear pattern in terms of the attributions of the explanations for the incidents in which the activists were directly involved. While there are some instances in which activists attribute the cause of a racial experience to individuals, there are an equal number of instances where the activists see structure as responsible for the situation.

These autobiographies contain many structural attributions as explanations of the cause of racial experiences. Brown provided an example when she described a situation in which a classmate, an African-American student, had been overlooked in the award ceremony during commencement:

When she was passed over for the awards . . . I became perturbed . . . I started to become angry, watching white girls in white dresses get out of their seats; watching white girls in the front row . . . accept their prizes with boring little speeches; watching white girls sit down . . . [I]t was an outrageous display of racial prejudice—a concept, a reality that was so profound it was not missed even by me, who wanted to be white (p. 65).

This situation reveals the ambiguity of causal attributions the activists felt in response to racial knowledge they derived from direct experience. They were willing to locate aspects of racial identity in structural causes but, at the same time, clung to psychological desires that contradicted those analyses—the desire to be White, for example.

In contrast, Scale described a situation of individual attribution where he identified responsibility for his behavior while recognizing his resentment of white privilege. While waiting in line, he was bumped by “another white boy” (p. 81). He hit the man, providing first a structural explanation but, upon further analysis, an individual explanation. “I felt rotten, knowing I had really hit that boy for nothing . . . I had to face the fact that somehow it was wrong for me to beat on the white boy just because I felt like it” (p. 81). Scale chose here not to see the man who had bumped him as a generalized White enemy who represented a racial social structure.

Another example of individual attribution occurred when Scale practiced avoidance as resistance. “I had quit my job because an old white worker made reference to me as being the ‘only nigger’ and me trying to know too damn much. Instead of letting myself get worked up to a desire to kick his ass, I calmly terminated my employment there, believing that there were plenty more jobs where that one came from” (p. 111). In this case, Scale chose to attribute the racial comments to a misguided individual and focused on his own abilities that would allow him to find another job.
The emotions that accompanied these racial incidents were varied, just as were the causal explanations the activists provided. Those who experienced positive emotions often did so when they observed or participated in practices of collective struggle or independent resistance. Davis described positive emotions while listening to Malcolm X, for example. She said, "I was fascinated by his description of the way black people had internalized the racial inferiority thrust upon us by a White supremacist society." She was "mesmerized" by his willingness to speak directly to a mostly White crowd and to place at their feet a strong sense of responsibility for the social conditions of African Americans (p. 126). Brent likewise described positive emotions felt when he encountered the BPP. "The audacity of these young blacks excited me and stirred emotions I thought had died years ago. I was proud that they had armed themselves and faced the enemy on his own ground" (p. 87).

At other times, the activists felt and expressed negative emotions. Davis provided such an example as a result of a series of racialized events that were occurring in her hometown while she was studying in New York. On the one hand, her emotions were mostly connected to the sense of not being active in the struggle. For example, she stated, "although I was involved in the movement... I felt cheated: precisely at the moment I had decided to leave the South, a movement was mushrooming at home" (p. 112). She described her desire to withdraw from school to join the liberation struggle, but her parents attempted to convince her that she should stay and complete her final year of studies. The result was frustration. "I was too distressed and frustrated to keep my mind on my school work" (p. 112). Newton's expression of negative emotions was largely connected to the structural conditions he experienced. He said, "we were getting back at the people who made us feel small and insignificant at a time when we needed to feel important and hopeful. We struck out at those who trampled our dreams" (p. 28).

These findings suggest that there is variance in terms of the attributions of cause for racialized experiences and the activists' emotional response to them. The activists made choices from among those offered them by the two primary sources of knowledge on which they had to draw—kinship and hegemonic factors. They tended not to follow exclusively either the lead of the kinship networks or the hegemonic messages in deciding how to act. Attributions of cause were both individual and structural, suggesting the activists created attributions that were different from those in the messages they received. This is not a surprising response given that these individuals were beginning to see that structural explanations cannot always be applied to individual behaviors. It also undoubtedly reflects their desire to feel pride in their race and to act to proclaim that pride and the remnants of desire they felt earlier to be White and to fit into the White hegemony. In choosing both positive and negative emotions, the
activists were choosing from the largely positive emotions generated in messages about race from the kinship networks and from the largely negative emotions generated by the hegemonic influences.

**CONCLUSION**

The process of racial identity formation demonstrated by the autobiographies of African American and Latino/a activists suggests a clear trajectory in the development of racial identity. For both groups of activists, the source of knowledge figured prominently in their development of a racialized identity, with the three primary sources kinship networks, hegemonic influences, and direct experience. Kinship networks presented racial information that was largely positive and reinforcing and contributed to positive racial identity for the autobiographers. Hegemonic influences were largely negative and often had an adverse impact on the autobiographers' racial development. Direct experience as a source of knowledge involves a response to a personal experience of a racialized situation in which they must choose which source of information to privilege as they decide how to interpret and respond.

The findings about racial identity formation derived from my analysis of activists' autobiographies suggest a fluid, complex process of racial formation, contrary to assumptions that suggest that racial formation is fixed, static, and formulaic. They suggest the need to reconceptualize racial formation as a process that involves a variety of sources of information received regarding race and the interpretations of the social actors involved about how to apply the information gained from those sources. Because racial formation is a process, individuals and groups employ various routes to recognition of their racialized identity; the experience is not the same for all racial groups or for all individuals within one racial group.

My findings further suggest that to describe the process of racialization without including both social structural and psychological factors that contribute to individuals' understanding of their racial identity is difficult. I argue that individuals draw on both kinds of factors to develop their racial identities. Social structure has a tremendous impact on the development of racialized identities as evidenced in the autobiographies. The data show that race was important in their early lives because of the structural conditions in which they live. Furthermore, race was used by internal (kinship) and external (hegemonic) sources to inform their lives about their individual identity development and their social location.

Psychological factors also contribute to racial formation, enacted particularly through the element of choice. My findings suggest that choice plays a greater role in the formation of racial identity than has previously been understood or demonstrated. Choice influences how activists make use of messages they are
given to create identity and the cause they cite for racialized experiences, if any. When they are directly involved in experiences where race is featured, their choices multiply. The activists must choose which source of information to privilege, whether to synthesize those messages, or whether to create a response not modeled by either choice. Ultimately, they make one choice—how to act in such situations.

Finally, my findings suggest that attribution plays a greater role in the process of racial formation than has been previously theorized. The activists begin the process of racial formation by attributing their racialized experiences to individuals. Later, they transfer their attribution to structure as responsible for their racial oppression.

Clearly, racial identity formation is a complex process. I have begun to identify in this essay, some of the sources of that complexity. As a social and psychological process that varies significantly across race, more attention to the elements that affect the process is needed. I hope that my effort here encourages others to contribute to an understanding of a key process that affects individuals’ lives in important ways.

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