RACIAL ENCULTURATION AND LIVED EXPERIENCE: REFLECTIONS ON RACE AT HOME AND ABROAD

Kimberly Eison Simmons, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Anthropology and
African American Studies
University of South Carolina
Columbia, SC 29208

Introduction

It is often in the context of living and working abroad that our taken-for-granted assumptions about race and ethnicity are challenged. Though uncomfortable, such moments offer a real opportunity to critically reflect on the socially constructed nature of race as lived experience.

US Students in the Dominican Republic

When I directed a study abroad program in Santiago, Dominican Republic, between 2000 and 2004, I had the unique opportunity to work with a diverse group of students from the US. During orientation, I would facilitate an exercise where students had to examine their own racial, ethnic, gender, class and national identities. Everyone had to stand on one side of the room, and when I called out a category, they were instructed to step out, leave the group, walk across the room, and turn and face the group in complete silence if they identified with that category. I call this the "Up Front" exercise and adapted it from an exercise I participated in while in college. Depending on how many students stepped out and faced the group, the other side could be a very isolating experience. After the exercise, we discussed the students' feelings, thoughts and experiences with having to cross or not cross. Some of the more interesting and revealing discussions involved race and *being* black and white.

Black students often expressed a sense of *being* black and typically defined themselves as black *before* self-identifying as American. In contrast, white students tended to see themselves as Americans first and didn't have a sense of being raced or white. The discussions always led to their lived experiences in the US, far from the Dominican Republic where we were physically located. Interestingly, when black students discussed race, they would

pause and say something like, "I know races don't exist biologically, but…" White students often dismissed the topic of race by stressing "races didn't exist."

There were tense moments as both black and white students reflected on their lives, identities and lived experience. Black students were looking for more than a "race is a social construction" response—being black was central to their identity, and to them race was very real.

Learning and Understanding

What made the black students' experience more troubling in the Dominican Republic was that they were surrounded by people who phenotypically looked like them—ranging from light to dark—but did not, in most cases, define themselves as black. One day, as I explained the Dominican racial system to the group, an African-American student from Morehouse College asked me, "What's wrong? They don't *know* they are black?" My first response was that they didn't *learn* that they were black. I asked him, "How do *you know* that you are black? That we are black?" He stopped and said, "but look at them." The striking part of his question is the idea of knowing. How do we come to know, or understand, who we are in racial terms? I suggest that it is through a process I call racial enculturation.

Race and racial categories, as socio-cultural constructions, rooted in historical and political circumstances, can be understood in an abstract sense, but the students were not operating abstractly. They wanted to know how it was possible for someone to reject *being black*—to reject their history and ancestry—and not accept *who they were*. I explained that *black*, as a category, and pride in being black, is a process—that racial enculturation is a process by which we come to understand and internalize racial definitions and concepts. All of these ideas are reinforced throughout society, especially in families, schools, religious institutions and among peers.

This exercise, facilitated by me several times in the US and in the Dominican Republic, revealed how race continues to be a lived experience in the US in terms of how we live, how we understand "who we are" in relation to others, and how particular experiences are racially transcribed. US students encountered a new racial system in the Dominican Republic where they were faced with new racial categories and pressed to reflect on their own processes of racial enculturation.

Because racial enculturation processes were somewhat different throughout the African Diaspora, someone who is *black* in the US may be seen depending on skin tone as *indio/a* (a color category representing various shades of light (*indio/a claro/a*) to dark (*indio/a oscuro/a or moreno/a* (brown or black) in the Dominican Republic—this is what many of the black students encountered. The reverse is also true for someone who is defined as *indio/a claro/a, moreno/a*

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or *mulato/a* (a black-white mixed racial category) in the Dominican Republic as he or she may be considered *black* in the US.

Recasting Race and Diversity

Contextualizing racial formation is necessary to understand how certain racial categories have emerged in different places. My own research has shown that African Americans and Dominicans understand race and color from different vantage points, enculturation and experience. For example, despite mixture, African Americans, for the majority of the 20th century, have been defined and have defined themselves as black, while Dominicans have been defined and have defined themselves as mixed.

In the US, African Americans don't often talk about themselves in terms of being mixed unless they are "bi-racial," meaning having one white parent and one black parent. Still African Americans may acknowledge having mixed ancestry, for they typically use color categories among themselves—light to dark skinned—to describe skin color like Dominicans use the term *indio.* For African Americans especially, these categories of light to dark emphasize color within the group and represent a type of intra-group naming practice I refer to as colorization. Black becomes the racial umbrella encompassing "African American" as the ethnic designator, and the various color categories address issues of phenotypic diversity within the group. In contrast, in the Dominican Republic, Dominican is the umbrella national and ethnic category encompassing the racial-color designator *indio.* While the other official state categories of white, black, yellow (Asian) and mulatto are also in circulation, *indio* is the once with the most predominance.

To understand these differences in defining and officially categorizing identity, it is important to turn to history. The one-drop rule in American history contributed to the idea that African Americans *became* racially black with a range of skin color variation. In this way, in the US, being black is linked back to an individual having had at least one African ancestor. Clearly, racial formation in the US is tied to particular historical events and social movements—like slavery, segregation and the Civil Rights Movement; these formations have been primarily centered on the distribution of power and resources.

In contrast, for much of the 20th century, Dominican notions of race have been socially constructed *without* a direct historical reference to African ancestry. Rather, ideas surrounding African ancestry and "blackness" have been historically associated by Dominicans with Haiti and Haitians. The Dominican Republic and Haiti share the island of Hispaniola; they also share a unique, entwined history of colonization, unification of the island from 1822 through 1844, and subsequent waves of Haitian migration to the Dominican Republic. Racial distinctions on the island have been made to clearly demarcate differences between lighter-skinned, wealthier Dominicans and darker-skinned, poorer

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Haitians—if Haitians are black, Dominicans are non-black. If Haitians are "African-like," Dominicans are not. Even during the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo between 1930 and 1961, when Dominican national identity was constructed with references of mixture, these references were made without implying African ancestry. This is only beginning to change as my research with the Black Women's Identity Movement in Santo Domingo suggests. Many members of this movement reflected on their own racial enculturation during stays in the US, and because of interactions with other Afro-Latino/as and African Americans who self-define as black, they have begun to also self-define as Afro-Dominican, black and *mulata* in relation to others with a similar background and experience.

My research and my students' experiences in the Dominican Republic with race and identity reveal that racial enculturation is a gradual process involving multiple social forces that shape, influence and help create a sense of who we are in racial terms within very particular social, cultural, historical and political contexts. As anthropologists, we have much to offer in terms of current debates and discussions surrounding race in classrooms, in politics and in the media. By interrogating race, as lived experience, we recast it as being complex and historically and contemporaneously significant in the lives of people.

Kimberly Eison Simmons is an assistant professor of anthropology and African American studies at the University of South Carolina, Columbia. She studies racial, color and gender identity formation in the Dominican Republic and the US in the context of the African diaspora, and social clubs and women's organizations.