

In-Human Development: A Micro-Cultures Alternative

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In the intricate process of human development, the social construction and imposition of the idea of race and its hierarchy of categories contributes to “in-human” development. In the USA particularly, racial categories have been delineated around certain identity contingencies [Steele, 2010], and despite being inaccurate and unscientific, they are used to forcefully, yet problematically shape human identities and development. Nearly two decades into the 21st century, globally shared events and innovations work to simultaneously deconstruct and reconstruct the idea of race. The Trump campaign for the Presidency of the USA propagating white identity politics and the rise in Europe of similar political forces are examples of these kinds of pivotal events.

The development and pervasive use of social media and other digital texts and tools are pivotal innovations. As innovation intersects with and ultimately becomes events, personal identity development can be enabled or constrained in myriad ways. In this essay we argue that human development is best served by understanding and engaging micro-cultural identities and affinities of each individual in society – attributes and practices that are veiled by color-coded categories of race. Then we suggest how unique micro-cultural positioning, practices, choices, and perspectives of individuals raise important questions for research and educational practices connected to identity and human development.

Identity contingencies like skin color, facial features, hair type, and body size are linked to how we are socially constructed and treated in society as well as how we interact with the world [Steele, 2010]. However, in outlining enabling aspects of digital media, Gee [2003] indicated the significance of identity affinities. This idea is that people (and particularly youth) utilize digital affordances to develop selective group affinities through which membership or participation is defined primarily by shared endeavors, goals, and practices, rather than shared race, gender, nation, ethnicity, or culture. Gee [2013] further delineated a collateral concept of “activity-based identities,” the freely chosen practices that contribute to grounding and delineating a person’s sense of self. These practices can reflect resident and emerging forms of social organization, and they can be (but do not necessarily have to be) digitally mediated.

Although identity contingencies and the sociocultural position one is born into contribute to how we are perceived, they are not determinative of our identities. Against the grain of social constructions, our identities are shaped by the range of practices (activities) that we engage in throughout our lives. These practices also reflect or extend from major and minor life choices we make as well as perspectives we develop about ourselves and others at the intersection of social and material worlds. The interaction of components of our personal/cultural positioning, practices, choices, and perspectives reflects our actual identities beyond the reductive categories propagated through the rhetoric of race.

Micro-cultural identities are limitless. At any moment, a vertical axis of micro-cultural components of identity – like fingerprints – reflect and define the ultimate uniqueness of an individual. On multiple horizontal axes, alignments of components also reflect similarities of individuals to specific others in shared or connected experiences within histories and geographies – within time and space [Mahiri, 2015]. Unlike fingerprints, the combinations of micro-cultural components of identities are dynamic and constantly changing, and this fluidity informs considerations for human development.

Developmental researchers can guide the scientific community in understanding the limitlessness of identity – drawing attention to the unexpected affinities between people in addition to the expected ones. A micro-cultural approach aligns well with a constructivist view of development, in which children are simultaneously making sense of patterns and experiences and influencing their environment. Since micro-cultural identities are dynamic, each new convergence of unique affinities, activities, and contingencies presents a new challenge for the individual to navigate, and a new lens through which to make sense of their surroundings.

Research into children’s moral development has shown that children gradually construct an understanding of the conventions and norms of the society they live in. Social domain theory [Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014; Turiel, 1983] in particular has shown that there are age-related changes in how children understand social conventions. Conventions are the agreed upon practices that serve to organize groups. Male and female signs on the outside of restrooms are an example of an organizing convention that is based on an identity contingency: gender. However, there are moral consequences to conventions when some people feel excluded or forced to associate with a gender they do not identify with. Developmentally appropriate interventions can facilitate children engaging in moral reasoning to wrestle with the consequences of socially accepted identity norms and construct more nuanced understandings of how society *could be* organized [Nucci, 2016].

Educators have key roles in understanding and integrating research that reveals complexity of human development beyond the “color-bind” into teaching practices and educational policies. They are uniquely positioned to refocus and expand learning experiences that counteract what we consider to be in-human development that reinforces racialized identities. Unfortunately, schools are often prime locations for separating children and adolescents into groups based on external identity contingencies. When we segregate students who speak native languages other than English, or students with disabilities away from other students, we are reinforcing contingency-based identities, and sending the message that these aspects of identity matter most. Instead, educators have the opportunity to stimulate identity-related reflection, honor and validate these reflections, and foster commu-

nities that see the diversity present among them that is much more complex and nuanced than categories of race.

Educator Shivani Savdharia, for example, created a learning experience for her upper elementary school students that engaged them in creative identity exploration¹. They began with the metaphor of the “cultural iceberg” in order for students to visualize how their identities constitute much more than is seen on the surface. Next, students brainstormed about eight different aspects of diversity (age, gender, sexual orientation, ability, race, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status). She then had them answer a series of questions from Christine Sleeter’s *Critical Family History*, such as: What is the structure of your family? Who are members of your family and what roles do they play? Next, students reflected on which aspects of their identities others can perceive, and which aspects others cannot perceive. Students were then given the opportunity to create an online avatar, or animated character, using a free digital media app called Tellagami. The program gives students the freedom to design physical attributes, mood, background environment, music as well as record a voiceover explaining who they are. The project culminated in class-wide presentations of their avatars. In addition to stimulating reflection and awareness and creating community, Savdharia embraced digital media as a creative, shareable, exciting space for remixing representations of one’s own identity. Educators like Savdharia are reframing multicultural education by designing learning experiences that illuminate and build upon students’ unique micro-cultural identities.

Recognizing the potential to activate a component of a student’s identity, in addition to fostering a set of academic skills, is an exciting realm of leadership that educators are stepping into. This is progress towards countering the strong associations between low achievement and students of nondominant racial categories. Contingencies like skin color should not define and distort identity. Researchers and educators can circumvent this kind of in-human development by illuminating and leveraging a micro-cultural alternative.

References

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¹ Savdharia’s learning design is included in Mahiri’s forthcoming 2017 book entitled *Deconstructing race: Multicultural education beyond the color-blind* published by Teachers College Press.