The United States (U.S.) like many societies worldwide is a stratified society (e.g., hierarchies based on social class, etc.). As a consequence of its history, race and culture are two sources of stratification in U.S. life. This stratification has grave implications for the distribution of human, material, and symbolic resources and access to opportunity. Because the inequalities and inequities that result from this stratification are systemic in nature, it will take systemic efforts to address them. Systemic efforts occur at the group rather than individual-level; consequently, this paper considers the constructs of race and culture with respect to groups with subsequent effects upon individuals as members of groups. The group of interest is African Americans.

Race

What is race? How does it differ from culture? Many scholars across diverse disciplines have entertained the aforementioned with respect to the historical and contemporary U.S. Some located race as central to understanding the U.S. socio-political (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1999) which encompasses the educational, economic, social, cultural, and political spheres of a society. Race is one core factor in the differential possession of and access to power, privilege, and capital that afford and perpetuate advantages for some U.S. groups and their individual members and disadvantages for others; its role was established early in U.S. history.

At the settlement of the U.S. colonies, race was used to categorize in a general way (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). As the demands for labor increased, the term was more narrowly
Note: Ideas contained in this presentation are included in a manuscript under review used to refer to Native Americans, Blacks, and some Whites (Smedley, 1999; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). As other countries’ moral condemnation of the indenturing and enslavement of Whites intensified, race became a positioning construct to subdivide human beings into groups based on physical characteristics and to assign value to these groups in relation to the needs of the developing colonies. By the mid-1800s, a Western racial ideology that separated humans into groups based on phenotype; that inextricably linked physical characteristics to behaviors that were considered culturally virtuous or depraved; that designated groups as superior or inferior; and that organized reality such that group membership indelibly shaped the lives of group members was embedded in the fabric of U.S. society (Manning, 1993; Smedley, 2001). Race and its corresponding ideologies were subsequently promulgated by science (Gould, 1981), claims debunked by research later in U.S. history.

As buttressed by the historical account of race, numerous scholars considered race a social construct, manifested in varied ways (Brayboy, Castagno & Maughan, 2007; Lynn & Parker, 2006), that serves socio-political aims (Anderson, 2007; Banks, 1995). Building upon the previous premises, I also treat race as a social construction, with a traceable and distinctive historical origin, that ascribes meanings to aspects of physical bodies (e.g., skin color, facial features); these meanings position individuals as isolates and as collectives within social and political hierarchies that impact their realities and lived experiences. Although race is often
Culture

Cole (1995) implicated the abundance of perspectives on culture in his statements that “competing definitions of culture are more like theories in that they seek to make substantive propositions about an aspect of the world. The ‘definitions’ one offers depend upon what kinds of propositions about what aspects of the world one is interested in” (p.30). These definitions of culture are often situated as certain entities articulated by the exclusion of other entities. This articulation through exclusion is illustrated in Nasir and Hand’s (2006) discussion of two prominent traditions in the investigation of culture. They argued that one tradition treated culture as a static system of beliefs and practices that individuals carried with them from one context to another whereas the other cast culture as dynamic sets of entities (e.g., beliefs, practices, values, worldviews, etc.) that are constructed, reconstructed, and reproduced in the act of living. I employ an eclectic view of culture that highlights both its dynamic and less resilient nature.

I view culture as a system of entities (beliefs, values, practices, worldviews, etc.) and their relations. This system, like the repertoires of practice posited by Guiterrez and Rogoff (2003), is developed, reproduced and co-produced by individuals, separately and collectively, who are immersed within communities that have existed for generations. Culture as a system becomes visible through its prevalent and consistent enactment and reenactment. Some entities of the system are within the threshold of awareness and thereby are susceptible to change.
Note: Ideas contained in this presentation are included in a manuscript under review (Guiterrez & Rogoff, 2003) whereas others are deep structures and processes (Boykin, 1994) that are beyond consciousness; these aspects of culture are more impervious and resistant to alterations.

In stratified societies like the U.S., dominant and non-dominant cultures exist. Beliefs, values, practices, worldviews, etc that govern the socio-political constitute the dominant culture. The dominant culture often reflects the culture of the group that controls the production and reproduction of the socio-political in society. Encompassed within the larger society and its dominant culture are communities with their own culture. Culture within these communities may coincide or contradict the dominant societal one. In the U.S., research and policy often juxtaposed the U.S. dominant and non-dominant cultures and assigned value to non-dominant cultures with respect to the dominant one. For example, culture with respect to African Americans is positioned in four distinguishable ways in the literature: invisible, i.e. an African American culture does not exist; deficit, i.e. African American culture is an inferior replica of the dominant culture; different, i.e. African American culture exists and is distinctive; capital, i.e., African American culture is valuable (Parsons, Simpson & Cooper, 2009). As evident by the evaluative juxtaposition of non-dominant cultures to the U.S. dominant one, culture is also a social construction that serves socio-political aims by way of ranking humans (Parsons, Simpson, & Cooper, 2009) which has ramifications for access to power, privilege and resources.

Race and Culture Connections

In the US, race and culture are related in at least two ways: through socio-political aims
Note: Ideas contained in this presentation are included in a manuscript under review and the segregation of groups (see figure 1). Communities segregated by race, an accepted norm in the U.S., is an outcome of various socio-political processes. As a consequence of their shared lived experiences, individuals that comprise these racially segregated communities may share and reproduce similar beliefs, practices, worldviews, etc. (culture). However, race, socially ascribed meaning to physical characteristics that serve socio-political aims, does not necessitate, determine, or prescribe an individual’s culture. For example, African American children adopted and reared by European Americans in segregated European American personal contexts will likely differ culturally from African American children socialized in segregated African American personal contexts but the children in both circumstances are racially classified as Black.

Why Should It Matter?

The development of deeper and more comprehensive yet nuanced understandings of race and its ramifications, culture and its unique influences, and their dynamic interplay is needed. Many well-intentioned initiatives are developed to provide quality education for all but their effectiveness are severely compromised by the inadequate diagnosis or misdiagnosis of the influences these initiatives are tailored to address. For example, many efforts attempt to prepare teachers to be culturally sensitive or responsive to their racially diverse students, a cultural remedy, but fail to prepare teachers to interrogate and address the structural arrangements (e.g., teachers classified by criteria as “higher quality” and greater per pupil expenditures in low-minority enrollment schools), that privilege whiteness, a racial response. Recognizing and
Note: Ideas contained in this presentation are included in a manuscript under review.

Disentangling the influences of race and culture [examples in Power Point on CD] may facilitate systemic efforts promoted in policies, reforms, research, and practices that address the role of both in educational inequalities and inequities.

References


Note: Ideas contained in this presentation are included in a manuscript under review

*Teachers College Record, 97*(1), 47-68.


Figure 1: Distinctiveness and relatedness of race and culture