Introduction to Part I

The Journey to Adulthood

Although the development of racial and ethnic identity, much like other types of identities, continues throughout one’s life, its seeds are sown in the early childhood years. Even preschoolers have demonstrated knowledge of their own race and ethnic identities as well as of those around them. This is demonstrated in Debra Van Ausdale and Joe Feagin’s sociological study\(^1\) (which can be called a classic today) on race and ethnic awareness among children three to five years old. While the racial and ethnic categories are at the level of social structure, Van Ausdale and Feagin show that the young children interpret that “structure” of race and ethnic categories and act accordingly. Continuous exposure to the world outside the home, including experiences of discrimination, prejudice, racism, devaluation, and exclusion, might impact the development of racial and ethnic identities for children in their middle childhood, i.e. between the years of six and twelve.\(^2\) The advent of adolescence brings its own narratives of racial and ethnic identity development. In adolescence, Beverly Tatum\(^3\) has argued, questions of “who am I” surface in the minds of young people. The answers are often connected to the quality of racialized or ethnicized experiences of individuals categorized into different racial and ethnic categories, including attainment of knowledge of being the racial or ethnic “other” as a result of racial prejudice or discrimination. Receding into the comfort of one’s “own” racial or ethnic group, which is likely to be seen as self-segregation by majority group members, is a way of shielding oneself from interactions that devalue non-white youth. Through this process of racial and ethnic experience, beginning in early childhood, individuals are likely to reach a sense of group membership as they emerge from adolescence into adulthood.
At least two points should be noted here: (a) what is presented here are broad questions raised by the research on racial and ethnic identity formations through adolescence; these configurations and reconfigurations of identity are not always linear; individuals can “recycle” through identity development as additional “encounters” occur; and (b) a conscious racial and ethnic identity is emergent among non-white youth simply because a racialized experience in particular is not a conscious part of identity development in white youth because whites are members of the “in-group.”

It is the aforementioned broad themes regarding the process of identity development—including the ways in which individuals make meaning of their racial and ethnic classification—that are explored in the essays presented in this section. The section opens with the essay by Christopher Donoghue, *Psychological and Sociological Perspectives on the Acquisition of Ethnic and Racial Prejudice in Children*. In the essay, recognizing that the process of acquiring ethnic and racial prejudice should be expected to be lifelong, Donoghue uses both psychological and sociological perspectives to assert that its beginnings lie in early childhood. Donoghue’s essay thus shows the need to integrate both psychological and sociological perspectives as a way to uncover the internal and external processes involved in the development of ethnic and racial prejudice. What are some of the social factors (the realm of sociology) in that time of one’s life and what are some of the cognitive processes (the realm of psychology) in the same period that lead to the development of the same? By so doing, the author demonstrates the simultaneity of macro and micro social factors that favor ethnic and racial prejudice in this phase of the lifecourse. Broadly, Donoghue urges for the development of a framework that integrates both psychological and sociological insights in understanding the phenomenon.

In the autoethnographic piece entitled *Childhood, Identity, Social Ambivalence and the Mystique of Race*, Rutledge Dennis walks us through his early childhood years (the time when most non-whites recognize race in themselves and others), through adolescence (a time when most individuals begin to focus on the “who am I” question), and reflects on what it meant to have grown up as an African American male in the South during segregation. Dennis shows how he, as a black child and later as a black male youth, navigated the segregated black
world created by a society informed by blatant racism. For him, racial consciousness developed through exposure to the intimate world of blacks, through the people in his “local” life, and the mostly distant external world of whites. As Dennis takes us on a journey from the time he was five to the time of his teenage years, we see that he does not passively accept the social reality of racism. Instead, he makes observations very actively and understands the social context in which he lives, which then plays a role in his own consciousness as a black male. In the process, Dennis speaks to one of the themes that guide this volume—the interplay between the micro and macro social contexts in understanding how individuals evolve as racial and ethnic beings.

The last one in the series of essays in this section is by Natalie Byfield entitled *Targets: The Existential Crisis of Black and Latino Male Youths.* Byfield looks at the impact of age, race, and gender in the daily lives of black and Latino youth in urban areas. The focus is particularly on the criminalization of black and Latino youth beginning with the *War on Drugs* and continuing through today as seen in the various goals and strategies of the criminal justice system to curb crime. Adolescence, as argued above, is a time when racial and ethnic identity is consolidated (in non-whites) through sustained encounters with various forms of racial and ethnic “othering.” How that racial and ethnic “othering” at this point in the lifecourse intersects with gender and what that means for the day-to-day living of black and Latino youth forms the crux of Byfield’s essay. That is also how the author forces us to consider the relative impact of structure and agency in the lives of these two non-white groups.

**Notes**

4. An “encounter” can be defined as “a significant personal or social race-related event that is inconsistent with an individual’s existing frame of reference. Such an event is thought to move individuals into racial identity exploration (immersion-emersion), challenging them to think through their existing attitudes and beliefs to consider various other possible perspectives relating to their race” (see Thomas E. Fuller-Rowell, Anthony L. Burrow, and Anthony D. Ong, “Changes in Racial Identity Among African American College Students Following the Election of Barack Obama.” Developmental Psychology, 47 (2011), p. 1609). We extend this idea to ethnic “encounters” as well. See Fuller-Rowell et al., “Changes in Racial Identity Among African American College Students,” pp. 1608–1618.