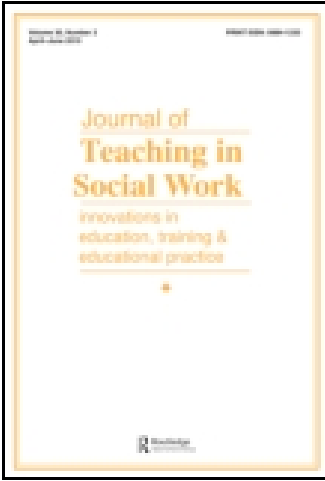


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### Raising the Voice: Teaching Through a Multicultural Lens

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## **Raising the Voice: Teaching Through a Multicultural Lens**

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*Questions pertaining to racial and cultural identification are salient among social work educators in their role as teachers in the classroom. In the context of the 21st century, as an increasing number of people cannot be classified by race, an awareness of the complexities of cultural and racial identity is more important than ever. For social work pedagogy there is a need for critical reflection, increased awareness, sensitivity to multiculturalism, and cultural diversity. As social work educators, it is crucial for us to teach through the lens of multiculturalism and create spaces for voices of students who belie traditional racial and ethnic categories. This article elevates the voices of Black ethnic women, underscoring the complexity of identity construction within the United States. Qualitative interviews explore the dynamic social constructions of identification for 10 women who identify as Black and ethnic, as one example of a nuanced differentiation of race and culture. This article is a discussion of research findings and includes implications for teaching social work practice that broaden our range of understanding and highlight representations of women with marginal identities, thus furthering our social justice mission.*

**KEYWORDS** *race, Black, ethnicity, Caribbean, gender, multiculturalism, pedagogy*

### INTRODUCTION

Teaching through the lens of multiculturalism is critical to achieving and maintaining the safest and most productive learning environments for students and, ultimately, for creating a more just society that furthers the

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mission of the social work profession. What this demands is widening our scope as educators to continually examine the role of power, and the cultural, race, class, and gender forces that have shaped our pedagogy. *Multiculturalism* is defined as a movement and a way of being in life that includes the acceptance, acknowledgement, and the institutionalization of human diversity. As Darobe (2010) explained, the multicultural movement seeks to preserve difference without “melting” ethnicity into a common culture. Multiculturalism is ethically driven by the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). That is, the NASW Code of Ethics, that guides social workers’ conduct (NASW, 2008) sets forth values, standards, and principles designed to move social workers toward culturally competent practice, which translates into the ability to think critically, practice reflexivity, and, ultimately, to be more inclusive.

Through qualitative inquiry, this article documents the lived realities of 10 women (who identify as both Black and ethnic) as one example of the nuanced differentiation of race and culture within the United States. What makes this topic important for social work pedagogy is the crucial understanding of “difference” in a classroom setting. It appears as if social workers educators, along with the general public, have fallen into a trap where language and labels are used to describe and generalize populations. That is, United States society typically assigns monolithic identifications to individuals and groups primarily based on race. Race is interpreted based on phenotype and physical characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, and body shape. In contrast, *ethnicity*, which refers to shared religion, language, food, geographic origin, ancestry or other social characteristics, is less detectable and more likely to be ignored, overlooked, misread, or silenced. Undeniably, Black women of diverse ethnic ancestry are pressed to adopt a single and predetermined racial label (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2001; Omi & Winant, 1994; Root, 1992, 1998, 2000; Wallace, 2001). As stated by Hollinger (2003),

The stigma carried by blackness is unique, and is affixed and perpetuated resolutely by the American practice of treating blackness as a monolithic identity, that an individual either has it or does not have it on the basis of the principle that any African ancestry at all determines that one is simply black. (p. 1368)

In effect, Black women’s inclusion of their cultural identity in their identification is sociologically constrained by sociohistoric and institutional processes in the United States where one’s perceived race remains one’s dominant identity. Racial categories are relational in that they are mutually exclusive; in U.S. society, people are perceived as belonging to only one group. For example, Americans of Caribbean ancestry often are ascribed a single identity—Black—which conflates race and culture (Nagel, 1994).

Black is typically used as a “catch-all” designation for people of color when, in fact, Black people do not always share group membership with others of similar skin color. As Hadden (2002) suggested in her research on HIV prevention with Black immigrants, “HIV prevention strategies need to be cognizant of the fact that Blacks are not a homogenous population with a single culture and not ignore historic and contemporary differences within the group” (p. 78). As such, a dimension of invisibility comes into play as Black immigrants often find that they are lumped with Blacks born in the United States and are designated an artificial and monolithic minority status.

In terms of pedagogy, how often do educators use the term *African American* as a synonym for the Black experience? We witness the conflation of identity within the classroom as students with dark skin often are referred to as (or assumed to identify as) African American when, in fact, they may not identify as such. Presenting students with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of differing ideologies and ways of knowing, both within and across different racial and cultural groups, is crucial to the development of the personal and professional self. We teach students to ask clients about their backgrounds and unique immigration experiences in an effort to understand obstacles they may face. Yet, do we as educators practice the same reflexivity and cultural sensitivity in our own classrooms?

### IMPACT OF CONFLATION

Despite the saliency of cultural and national identity, women who locate themselves as having both a Black racial identity and a cultural identity are silenced by the limited and fixed constructions of race. The term *Black* is used to describe a universal set of social experiences, thereby reducing identity to one’s perceived race and assuming a commonality of experience based on appearance. As a result, there is a lack of understanding of changing subjectivities and individual agency. These attributions of perceived and diminished identity become problematic because the complexity of the individual’s experience is conflated. Individuals with a Black and ethnic identification are unable to operate with their fluid and dynamic identities because of the narrowness of race in the American context, and there are consequences to this constriction. When one’s personal cultural identification is not recognized, validated, and legitimized by others, one may never feel fully “authenticated” (King & DaCosta, 1996). That is, when an aspect of the self goes unrecognized it is almost as if that part of the person ceases to exist. Combating invisibility, marginalization and the stagnation of identity is a struggle Black ethnic women must contend with every day. How does this play out within the classroom setting? As

educators, how do we elevate the voices of students who belie traditional racial and cultural categories thereby creating a safe space for them to be heard?

As one example, we witness the suppression of identity when one is required to “check one box” and adopt a monolithic identification for the sake of others. Despite the fact that this may be an everyday experience for some, little is known about the psychological processes at work when a person checks a box reporting to be a member of a particular racial or ethnic group (Snipp, 2003). This decision of what box to check on application forms for school, jobs, scholarships, loans, mortgages, and for the U.S. Census is an example of an externally imposed barrier that forces individuals to choose (and use language) that may not be a full and accurate representation of their identity.

Second, in U.S. society, blackness is associated with deeply held beliefs of stigma and inferiority, while in contrast, whiteness represents power and privilege (Aspen Institute, 2004). The dominant culture has the power to name what’s good, what’s bad, what’s normal, and what’s different, naming White as superior and Black as inferior. As such, there are social implications and psychological meanings attached to the way that Black ethnic women think about their racial group membership and construct their personal identification. The racially informed images and meanings that have developed over time effect personal identification for others as well (Carter, 2007). For example, Latinas with dark skin are less likely to assume a Black identity because they understand the way that Black people are stigmatized in the United States (Landale & Oropesa, 2002).

As Daniel (2010) explained, there exists a disconnect between one’s internal identification and the social construction of what it means to be Black. That is, in the United States, the positive attributions and value placed on one’s culture are diminished by the social constructions of blackness. Although most legally sanctioned forms of racism no longer exist, racism’s historical legacy and resultant racial inequities remain embedded in the nation’s political, economic, and sociocultural institutions. This “structural racism” (Aspen, 2004) and accompanying politics of inclusion and exclusion disturbs the construction of identity because Black women must contend with the negative meanings and politics associated with the notion of what it means to be Black and the accompanying power and privilege of White identity. As a result, individuals of color often have to confront demonizing stereotypes that have been built up from false teachings and gross mischaracterizations based on social constructions of race and ethnicity grounded in the biological claim that people of color are naturally inferior (Rothenberg, 1990). Such mischaracterizations of Black inferiority and White superiority act to justify social exclusion, unequal treatment, and to foster a lack of appreciation for diversity and difference.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory of the social construction of race and hybrid identities guides this research. By viewing race and ethnicity as social constructions, for example, identities are understood to be malleable and subject to shift within different contexts, including the classroom setting. Appreciating race and ethnicity as social constructions creates space and opportunity for fluid personal identification and the flexibility to be able to use one identity or another, as needed. Furthermore, viewing the concepts of race and ethnicity as social constructions diminishes the meaning and impact of racial and ethnic stereotypes (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Within the social constructionist framework, race and ethnicity are socially produced, heterogeneous, and dynamic processes of being and becoming (Dein, 2006). Therefore, identity for the Black and ethnic woman is hybridized in that she may be actively assembling elements of her racial and cultural worlds within various contexts.

Traditional models of identity formation, however, contribute to an understanding of identity construction as a static process complete with monolithic and universal categories. These traditional models of identity formation are problematic for understanding identity construction among Black ethnic women in three distinct ways: identity is viewed as a linear process; the Western emphasis is on achievement of a singular racial or ethnic identity; and there is limited research on gender as an additional construct impacting the process of identity development. Moreover, although theories of racial and ethnic identity formation for women of color exist, few instructors discuss the experience of Black women with mixed ethnic ancestry.

First, identity is a fluid process. As discussed, identity can change over a lifetime in a way that is not reflective of a staged process (Root, 1990). Yet within traditional identity models, fluidity of identity is viewed as pathological rather than a sign of vitality (Wallace, 2004). Second, Black ethnic women are faced with a multiplicity of identities and may seek simultaneous group membership from more than one reference group. According to Wallace (2004), this notion of achieved identity is an example of traditional Western achievement-oriented ethnic and racial model whereby an individual may be labeled “at-risk” or “unhealthy” by failing to identify with, and settle on, a single socially constructed identification. Traditional models of identity formation contribute to women’s pressure to adopt a single and predetermined racial or ethnic label and add to the mischaracterizations that women of color from mixed ancestry regularly confront. Finally, traditional theories neglect the intersectionality of gender, racial, and ethnic identity among this population. Indeed, Black ethnic women live racially structured lives that impact identity formation in ways not faced by males of color or their White peers (Frankenberg, 1993). These three critiques support the move toward a social constructionist approach for understanding identity among Black ethnic women.

Social constructionism considers the complexity and interactionality of identity construction and creates space for the multiple and shifting realities of racial and ethnic categories. Within this orientation, identity is context driven and created through interactions. Social constructionism highlights the fluidity and dynamism of identity formation within specific social contexts. For Black ethnic women, identification takes place in the context of society through interpersonal relationships while constantly undergoing reconstruction and redefinition. This reality means that the racial and ethnic categories people use to identify themselves and others are continually created, inhabited, and transformed throughout an individual's life, depending on their history and daily experiences. In other words, identity and identification are a social and interactional process. Further, at different times and in different contexts, certain aspects of identity may be more relevant than others (Dein, 2006). For example, in a pilot study Root (2000) asked participants what aspects of identity were important to them in the contexts of home, work, school, friendships, in their own community, and in a community in which no one knows them. Root (2000) found that the salient aspects of identity changed depending on the environment. Rockquemore and Brunson (2002) referred to this phenomenon as a "protean identity," meaning that individuals exercise fluidity of identification depending on the context of their interactions.

Yet as Glenn (1998) noted, racial and ethnic categories are never free-floating and the agency to claim a cultural identity for Black women often is silenced by historic social constructions of race. Sociocultural conditions, such as racism and sexism, racialization, and the limited menu of racial and cultural categories presented in the dominant society restrict Black ethnic women's choices in deciding which labels to adopt. This cohort of women has grown up in variegated worlds and, as a result, their personal racial and cultural identity is typically more complex than what outsiders may perceive.

## RESEARCH DATA AND METHOD

This article draws on in-depth interviews of 10 Black and ethnic women to further illustrate society's fragmentation and silencing of hybrid identities. This study received institutional review board approval from Hunter College (City University of New York) and Adelphi University. The 10 participants were between the ages of 30 and 40, all born in the United States, with a bachelor's degree, and with shared a perspective of being racially black and culturally diverse. The focus was on women's understandings and descriptions of their own identities, rather than labels imposed from the outside. Efforts were made not to assign labels but instead to remain open to all possible racial and ethnic identities. We were careful not to impose or essentialize identities because a goal was the avoidance of ascribed identity.



The unit of analysis for this study was women who identified as women of color and shared a perspective of being of more than one race or ethnicity. The intensive interviews focused on self-definitions of racial and ethnic identity as well as different experiences that impacted the women's personal construction of a mixed racial and ethnic identity. The focus of analysis was on women's construction of their racial and ethnic identity as influenced by structural forces within specific contexts.

*Women of color* initially were defined as women who had at least one parent from Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, Latin America, South America, or who were of Native American heritage. The ancestral make-up of these 10 women, as defined by the women, include African American and Puerto Rican; Caribbean Black American; Black and Caribbean ancestry; Black and Jamaican; Black, Hispanic and Native American; woman of color; West African; African American from Africa; Black, Jamaican, and multiracial. Again, these women shared the perspective of being racially Black and ethnically diverse. For example, one participant identified as a Caribbean American. Her mother was born in Jamaica and her father was born in Brooklyn. She was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York with her mother, father, and siblings. Physically, she described her skin color as "brown-skinned" and her features as "African."

Qualitative study in the tradition of grounded theory was the research methodology used to explore this topic. Qualitative research lent itself to engaging participants around both the constructions and meanings associated with their racial and cultural identification. A deeper understanding of the complexity of racial and ethnic identification was sought through a hybrid interview guide consisting of both the general interview guide approach and the standardized open-ended interview approach (Patton, 2002). The reviewed literature, the researcher's own history as a woman of mixed heritage (and prior knowledge of the development of racial and ethnic identity among women from mixed ancestry) served as a guide for the initial development of the interview guide. Loosely operationalized concepts, such as racial and ethnic identity, internal identity, external identity, and influences on identity provided a starting point for data collection and analysis (Bowen, 2006). The combined approach ensured that the same key questions were asked of each woman, yet flexibility in the format and wording allowed for a genuine account of the construction of their racial and ethnic identification. For example, some women felt more comfortable using the term *culture* instead of *ethnicity* when discussing their heritage.

The interviews conducted focused on women's self-definitions of their racial and ethnic identities, in addition to the diverse experiences impacting women's personal construction of racial and ethnic identity within specific social contexts.

This guide primarily served as a reminder to ask all the relevant questions, as it was easy to get distracted by the participants' stories and miss



opportunities to probe further for detail and clarity. Despite the preparation and planning, interviewing was an unpredictable process because the women guided the interview. For example, there were many moments when the interviewer departed from the interview guide. Charmaz (2006) noted that there are times in an interview when participants tell painful stories that they might have never imagined mentioning. In one instance, a woman in the study described her experiences as a child being bused to a different school in an outer borough. She described her experiences as the only Caribbean American child, and what it felt like to be teased by the African American children because of her accent and the colorful ribbons her mother put in her hair. At one point during the interview she started to tear. She had prefaced her story by stating, "it's so painful, so if I start crying don't feel bad." In this instance, the interviewer's role focused on assessing her safety and comfort level, rather than on obtaining information to advance the study.

However, fieldwork strategies, such as personal engagement, and direct and personal contact with the women, allowed for greater depth in the exploration of the women's construction of their racial and cultural identities as influenced by structural forces within specific contexts.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Silencing

The findings of this study remind us that regardless of the complexity of identity, others are viewed through a racialized lens. All 10 Black and ethnic women shared stories about how their cultural identities are silenced by society's social constructions of race and by the accompanying stereotypes of what it means to be Black in the United States. Echoing the literature, these women report experiences where Black or African American is used as a "catch-all" designation. As stated by a woman with an African American and Jamaican ancestry:

My racial identity is my phenotype, you know when people see me they are going to see an African American woman, and even though I don't even identify with being African American, that's what people are going to say when they see me.

Her experience as a woman who identifies beyond the boundaries of her phenotype is echoed by a second subject who self identifies as Black, Hispanic, and Native American. She strives to incorporate her whole self because choosing one label negates her connection to her parents and diminishes her sense of self.

I always try to put my identities altogether, even though people are like, you are more Black, you are more this. My mother and my father are very important people and I love them both.

I think Americans can be a little basic. They really tend to collapse things in ways that are not productive or helpful or even true. It seems like all of that, my culture and values, is silenced because race took precedence.

A third interviewee spoke to the challenge of combating invisibility and marginalization when she is asked to fill out a form asking for her race. She identifies as West African and explained her frustration with the pressure she feels to identify her race on forms. As previously discussed, the psychological implications of “checking a box,” are felt by such women.

I’ve always resisted having to answer the question, because I figured it doesn’t have anything to do with anything I am applying for when I’m sending out applications. If anyone is looking at me they can tell. I’ve never understood why they need to answer in the big picture other than a descriptive detail of what I look like. So I’m really never committed to, “oh I’m Black.”

Similarly, a fourth participant, a self-identified African American and Latina woman, notes how “checking a box” is another example of how the complexity of identity is silenced as she is pressured to fractionalize and segregate her diversity, thereby reducing her sense of her whole self.

I always check African American and Latino and my mom would be like “you should check everything because that is what you are.” I always check multi boxes. But I don’t do a multiracial box. For some reason I feel like that is an easy out. I don’t know why, I just don’t really do that one.

Within these confining realities women strived to construct a personal identification that included their racial and cultural identities. As one woman desperately stated, “I yearn to accept my beauty without oppressing another’s.” Although 21st-century America offers Black ethnic women more freedom than previous generations to self-identify and “check more than one box,” enduring sociocultural conditions and a lack of tolerance for complexity and pluralism often silence ethnic identity.

Consistent with the literature (Anzaldúa, 1999; Campbell & Rogalin, 2006), women in this study shared that the American prototype of racial identification and subsequent conventional racial labels limited their choice of identity, confounded their phenotypic complexity, and enhanced their struggle to claim a personal identity that included more than just their

perceived race. In yet a final example, a woman from a Black and multiethnic background expressed the constraints of choice she experienced in American society related to her self-identification. She stated that it was not until she arrived in the United States that color took on meaning and encapsulated her identity.

It is hard to process, I just never thought of it before in relation to me. It was like a slap in the face. "You mean my choices are actually limited, I thought the only person who could limit my choices was me!"

## DISCUSSION

The participants in this study represent the challenges faced by those with hybrid identities. Social work educators have a responsibility to remain critically aware of the complexity of identity as it exists within themselves, the classroom, and the contexts of the settings in which students will practice.

In this study, Black ethnic women attempt to construct their personal identity in the face of the United States history of ethno-racial classification, demonizing of stereotypes, and faulty characterizations when race dominates culture and contributes to the silencing of complex identities. Black ethnic women are seen through a racialized lens and placed along a racial hierarchy. Although race can contribute to ethnicity, it is neither accurate nor appropriate to assume that one's culture is based on one's perceived race. The question of agency for this population remains: To what extent can individuals from Black and ethnic ancestries freely construct their identity within the multiple and fluid environments within United States society? Bell hooks (2003) discussed the process involved in moving from society's definition to a self-definition and labeled this process "claiming the I." Using hooks's words, "claiming the I," in a race-dominated society that conflates multiple realities, is a challenge unique to this population. That is, defining a self that falls outside, on the border, or in the margins of dominant and mainstream categorizations, requires constant negotiation, internal affirmation, and the need for a community where struggles and strengths can be voiced. As social work educators it is imperative that this community is created within the classroom setting.

Social constructionism offers a paradigm of racial and cultural identification that includes both individual and sociological complexities by recognizing external forces that impact racial and ethnic identification in our society. The creation of identity is understood to be located within the social realm and considers the actors inhabiting it (Burr, 2003). It is this analysis that such approaches create the space for a fluid and flexible personal identification while recognizing the constraining factors that impinge on the internal identifications of Black ethnic women.

## IMPLICATIONS

The complexity of racial and ethnic identification is an important concern that raises questions which social work educators may experience in themselves and in their work. This is a topic that has significant practice, research, programmatic, and pedagogical relevance. Among the implications for social work pedagogy is the need for social work educators to prepare themselves for the complexity of identity as it exists in their classroom, thereby allowing for the “entire person” to be present. Ways to achieve this outcome are through the practice of reflexivity, cultural consciousness, and acknowledging multicultural practice as a purposeful intellectual activity. Practicing reflexivity as an educator translates into ongoing self-examination. Strauss and Corbin (1990) purported that reflexivity, which includes continual self-reflection, is a valuable tool used to question one’s perspective, source of knowledge, and the impact of that knowledge. From reflexivity comes a deeper level of self-knowledge and self-awareness that directly impacts social work pedagogy and practice. As educators, we must question the status quo, move beyond rigid monolithic labels, embrace complexity within and outside of the classroom, and consider both history and the context in which our students and clients live. It is through the practice of reflexivity that educators also will understand how privilege and oppression operate in their own lives as well as in the classroom. Essentially, this is a parallel process, as the educator becomes the model by which students learn to further the mission of social justice in themselves and their practice. Teaching through a multicultural lens also requires social work educators to facilitate dialogue and engagement within the classroom so that students will feel safe dealing with difficult discussions about structural oppression that may impact identity and their personal and professional selves. We need to find a way to create space in an already crowded curriculum to incorporate issues of multiculturalism; include culturally sensitive approaches to problem assessment and intervention; and pay close attention to language and the power or naming. Henry Giroux (1988) and bell hooks (1994) believed that educational institutions that are critically informed can challenge social inequality by fostering dialogue, critique, and student voices (Saleebey & Scanlon, 2005). At the author’s university, students are invited to an open forum once a month to share diverse student experiences in the classroom and in the field. These “Diversity Dialogue” forums are an opportunity for dialogue among faculty, administration and students. In this way, teaching becomes not merely an avenue to share information but to participate in the intellectual and spiritual growth of students by valuing and encouraging expression. As hooks stated in her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), “to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (p. 13).

A key goal in working with marginalized populations is amplifying their individual and collective voices and strengthening their resilience. Finding ways to create spaces for voices and communicating the experiences and realities of difference is what Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) noted as a first step on the road to justice. This article is one attempt to incorporate a multicultural, nuanced, and critical lens to social work pedagogy. This research we believe encourages engagement in an analysis and continued discussion of the social and psychological effects of social constructions of race and culture (both the social work educator and the student) and the implications of such constructions within the framework of social work pedagogy.

Understanding diverse ways of knowing and being is a social justice issue. As noted by Irving and Young (2004), “dualistic western thinking has resulted in the social construction of oppressive social and symbolic systems where too many have been dehumanized, objectified, and controlled for being different” (p. 216).

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