Racial Identity and the Sociological Imagination

At 4 weeks of age, Deirdre Royster was adopted by a black family living in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. Royster’s biological mother was white, and her biological father was black. Although she was light skinned and could easily pass for white, she was, in the racial thinking of the day, black, not “mixed.” She grew up in a middle-class, mostly black neighborhood and attended schools with diverse student bodies and was often able to form friendships across racial and ethnic lines. However, she became aware of her dual identity early on: “I knew, as early as first grade, that in school I was white and at home I was black.”

Royster was able to accommodate comfortably to the multiple racial worlds she lived in for much of her childhood but gradually began to puzzle over the meaning of race in the larger society and for her personally. In the passage below, she describes how her concerns led her to explore her own identity and probe and question the racial realities that surrounded her. People of mixed-race backgrounds may feel that they are marginal in the larger society: members of two (or more) groups but not fully accepted or completely at home in either. Marginality can be uncomfortable, but it can also stimulate a questioning, critical attitude toward the taken-for-granted realities of both communities. In Royster’s case, this analytical journey eventually led her to the discipline of sociology as an undergraduate major and, ultimately, as a profession. She is now an award-winning instructor and a professor of sociology at the College of William and Mary. Her first book, Race and the Invisible Hand (see Chapter 6), won the Oliver C. Cox award from the American Sociological Association in 2004.

White Like Me Black Me
Deirdre Royster

I live in a body that is routinely assumed to belong to a white person, so I enjoy the privilege of not appearing suspect to landlords, bankers, shopkeepers, police officers, and lots of other institutional representatives. People generally view me as an ordinary white person or a white ethnic person, like an Italian or Greek, and this is especially the case when I’m with my white spouse. When I’m alone, some see me more exotically as a Latina, Indian, or Middle Eastern woman, but only once in a while does a person guess that I am mixed or black, my actual backgrounds. My appearance or phenotype is white or nonblack, but my self-conception and interpretive lenses are black. Looking as I do, people from many racial and ethnic backgrounds are friendly and open toward me. Many from unique ethnic backgrounds are curious about whether
we share an ethnicity, while many whites seem to just find mine a pleasant and uncomplicated presence to be around. As a result of this comfort zone, in everyday encounters, I’ve been privy to private racial talk: talk that is sometimes critical of another group, more often than not not blacks, but that is only uttered among those the speaker considers an insider. Private racial talk sometimes reveals hidden prejudices that . . . structure life negatively for those who are racially vulnerable. But sometimes private racial talk allows individuals to check how they have interpreted racial experiences or other stimuli with a trusted other who can provide an alternative point of view. So, private racial talk can contribute to deepening our society’s racial difficulties, but also to easing them. I’ve been a fly-on-the-wall in the midst of both types of racial talk, and living as a racial chameleon probably led me to study sociology, a social science that sheds light on the historical and contemporary experiences of different groups in society.

Sociological insights have helped me to understand the nature of prejudicial attitudes, but also that getting rid of prejudicial attitudes, hard as that has been and continues to be, will not eliminate patterns of racial inequalities that have accumulated over hundreds of years. Our paradoxical beginning as a “democratic” republic that institutionalized white supremacy haunts us today, as it has every generation of Americans, including the country’s first forebears. We sense that those early social, political, economic, and cultural choices—that some of the forebears argued were unacceptable trade-offs—live on somehow in the present, but our ethos as a young and dynamic society that sees itself as always improving, moving forward, and growing, makes us reticent to gauge more deeply the continuing price of earlier mistakes. While we are generally aware that some groups enjoyed a newfound freedom and opportunity on these shores while other groups found un-freedom and blocked opportunity, we typically don’t know any group’s experiences as well as our own group’s (which we might not know well either), and we know very little about the full spectrum of difficulties that faced (and face) the most vulnerable groups. In our best moments as a society, we express a common and undifferentiated language of pride and admiration for every vulnerable group’s ingenuity, hard labor, and tenacity in overcoming the specific set of obstacles they faced in the United States. What we seem to lack is a common language of anguish for the vulnerabilities that remain, vulnerabilities that are racially concentrated and that could be addressed as earlier groups’ vulnerabilities were addressed. As a sociologist, my aim is not just to share my personal experience of privilege as a phenotypical white person and vulnerability as a self-conscious black person, but also to unveil the hidden nature of rewarding and punishing systems that influence the life chances of Americans across the color spectrum. . . . My story . . . tells a far larger story of privilege and vulnerability about which many Americans are sadly, and unacceptably, unaware. We have many important decisions to make as citizens in this democracy; I hope [my thoughts] will provide useful perspectives to consider as we try to make informed choices about which policies and practices might best address the racial conditions we wish to change.

The Blending of America: Mixed Race

It has been projected that over the next several decades, as American society becomes more culturally and linguistically diverse, the population of the United States will also look like the rest of the globe, that is, less white. As the population becomes more ethnically diverse, it also seems to be becoming more racially “mixed.” In my own lifetime, the marriage of Italians and Slavs, even when both bride and groom were Roman Catholic, was looked upon somewhat as a “mixed marriage,” and marriages between Jews and Gentiles were extremely unusual. Historically the most problematic forms of social integration or blending have been racial.

For example, socially created racial categories like black and white (as well as even more arbitrary human colors of “yellow” for Asian and “red” for Indigenous Americans), despite the lack of a scientifically biological basis, were seen as fixed. The hierarchy of racism argued that just one drop of black blood would essentially contaminate an otherwise apparently “white” and allegedly also superior person. In fact, marriages between arbitrarily defined white and nonwhite races were illegal in many states. Following are a number of 19th-century illustrations that cast racial mixing, or miscegenation, as sinister and threatening to society.
Jack Johnson (pictured at right) was the first African American heavyweight champion. There was a campaign of hatred and bigotry waged against him by whites who wished to regain the heavyweight title and who also resented his interracial relationships with women.

After his first interracial marriage and his defeat of several white hopefuls, Johnson was convicted in 1913 under contrived circumstances for violation of a federal law, the Mann Act.

Popular media reflected and in some cases helped the movement in the United States for racial equality. Films such as “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” (1967; see below), which starred Sidney Poitier, presented the issue of interracial marriage, once a virtually taboo subject in mass media, in a humorous way.

The opening of Hollywood for black movie stars ironically led to the decline of “race” films; a notable artistic and commercial industry of black writers, producers, directors, and actors which had resulted from segregation and discrimination.

Having stars like Sidney Poitier in leading roles side-by-side with white men and (once even more unthinkable) women have greatly enhanced the American movie industry.

Racially mixed gatherings and residential neighborhood integration continued to be unusual in the 1970s even after the many successes of the Civil Rights Movement. Organizations such as “National Neighbors” worked to bring groups together in successfully integrating neighborhoods.

Karen Krase and friends at Prospect-Lefferts-Gardens Neighborhood Association gathering, photo by Jerome Krase

Although it might seem that we have come a long way since the days when miscegenation was illegal, both interracial dating and interracial marriage continue to evoke hostility and, in too many cases, violence as well.

But things are changing. Perhaps the strongest indication of the belated acceptance of interracial mixing in the United States today is the fact that some of the most celebrated idols of beauty and athletics could be called “Blended Americans.” Moreover, many of our newest immigrants and migrants to America are in one way or another “mixed,” such as European-, Indigenous-, and African-blended Latinos. Other groups, such as those from South Asia as well as the Middle and Near East, also challenge the old racial categories.

Photo by Jerome Krase.

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