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## Young Children's Racial and Ethnic Definitions of Self

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Both Cooley and Mead propose that the individual acquires a self by taking the attitude of others toward him- or herself. What they imply, but do not explicitly address, is that the attitude of others toward the individual, the way they respond to her or him, is guided by social meanings. We define one another in terms of shared systems of social classification and typification. We attribute different identities and different characteristics to one another based on those classifications, and respond to one another accordingly. As individuals come to respond to themselves as others do, they define themselves similarly and assume the identities and characteristics others attribute to them. For example, within moments after birth, most newborns are identified as either female or male, and from that moment forward are responded to as either a girl or a boy. As children come to understand gender classification, they also start to understand the gender-related meanings of names others call them and ways others treat them. Responding to themselves as others do, they adopt the gender identity others attribute to them as their own and take on the characteristics others attributed to them based on that identification. Gender identity thereby becomes an important dimension of the self. By the age of

five, if not earlier, most children emphatically identify themselves as either a girl or a boy and insist on dressing, playing with toys, and generally acting in ways that confirm that identity.

Similarly, in a racially and ethnically diverse and conscious society like our own, racial and ethnic identity often is an important dimension of the self. This selection examines young children's use of racial identities in a preschool that promotes racial and ethnic diversity and tolerance. Although many developmental theories argue that very young children cannot understand racial and ethnic distinctions, this study demonstrates otherwise. It illustrates how children use skin color, family background, national origin, and other racial and ethnic "markers" to define themselves and others. More tellingly, it suggests that preschool-age children adopt the racial and ethnic identities others attribute to them as their own.

Although most children eventually do adopt the racial and ethnic identities others attribute to them, they do not passively acquire racial and ethnic identities but actively explore racial and ethnic classification in their interactions with others. Their racial and ethnic classifications often do not correspond to those of adults, but they clearly recognize that such classifications are of some importance. Others', including their peers', responses to their racial and ethnic identifications deepen their understanding of and sharpen their skill in applying the socially prevailing system of racial and ethnic identification. Unfortunately, as this study illustrates, young children consequently learn that different racial and ethnic identities are not equally valued. On the other hand, children's creative uses of racial and ethnic identities reveal just how arbitrary racial and ethnic identification is. The grounds on which they racially and ethnically identify themselves and others are questionable only if the grounds on which adults do so remain unquestioned. Yet, however arbitrary, racial and ethnic identification is an important dimension of self in our own and many other societies. We find ourselves on what might be called, borrowing the language of Zerubavel's earlier selection, racial and ethnic islands of meaning separated by a wide gulf from those on other islands. This

separation is not natural but a product of how others have responded to us.

In this [selection] we examine when, where, and how children make use of racial and ethnic understandings and distinctions to define themselves and others in their everyday lives. . . . Our [empirical information] comes] from extensive observations of fifty-eight preschool age children over nearly a year in a large preschool in an urban setting. The children involved in this study ranged in age from barely three to more than six years of age. . . . The preschool had several racially and ethnically diverse classrooms and employed a popular antibias curriculum. The school's official data on children in the classroom we observed was as follows: white (twenty-four); Asian (nineteen); Black (four); biracial (for example, Black and white, three); Middle Eastern (three); Latino (two); and other (three). . . .

Debra Van Ausdale, who did the classroom observations, made a conscious effort to play down or eliminate the researcher/adult role and to remain nonauthoritarian and supportive in her interactions with the children. While some of the children were initially puzzled by her behavior, they soon accepted that an adult could actually not be in charge of anything or anyone. . . . Debi was able to operate as a nonsanctioning playmate-adult. Debi's activities in the day care center evolved to become a combination of teacher's helper, children's playmate, and official lap for children who needed comforting. Debi was soon accepted by the children as a non-threatening, uninteresting component of the preschool world. . . .

The obvious, physically grounded racial and ethnic markers of skin color, facial features, and hair color and texture were widely used within the children's interactions with each other. A variety of other, more subtle symbols also came into play. . . . Children as

young as three invented complex combinations of racial meaning, for themselves and for others, and incorporated social relationships and physical characteristics to produce explanations for how their world was racially constructed and maintained. . . .

[For example, in one] episode in the classroom, skin color . . . takes center stage. It is just after nap, and Mark, a white teacher's aide, is sitting with Lu (3, Chinese), Susan (4, Chinese), Corinne (4, African/white), and Mike (4, Black). The children are listening to a story read by another teacher. The purpose of stories after naptime is to delay the children from racing to the snack tables before their hands are washed. They are required to sit and listen until they are released, and this release is accomplished by allowing only a few children at a time to leave the room. This prevents them from lining up and destroying each other while they wait. A favorite device for delay is to play the "color of the day" game, where children must remain seated unless they are wearing a particular color of clothing. Jeanne, the teacher, finishes her reading and announces, "If you have something brown on, you can get up and wash your hands for snack."

The children look around and seem to collectively decide that this invitation includes brown skin, hair, and eyes. Mike jumps up, yelling "I have brown skin on!" and rushes to the sink to be the first in line for food. Upon seeing this, Corinne also smiles widely, yells, "Me too!" and dashes away. Mark, regarding Lu with a smile, leans over and tells her, "You have brown skin too." Lu retorts, "I do NOT!" She appears to be very indignant. "I have white skin." Lu looks to Susan to support her. Susan verifies this, telling Mark, "Lu's skin is white, Mark, not brown." Mark seems surprised, then says, "My skin is brown from the sun." Susan nods, remarking, "Lu, you have brown eyes." Lu looks her over and smiles saying, "So do you!" Susan peers deeply into Mark's face, asking him, "Do I have brown eyes?" Mark gazes back, pretending to think

deeply. "Why yes, you do have brown eyes!" he finally declares. "So we can both go get snack," Susan declares. All three of them rise and go to the next room.

The desirability of whiteness, of white identity and esteem, is . . . evident in [this] exchange . . . Lu . . . insists that she . . . is white, not brown, despite the fact that she would probably not be construed by others as white since her skin has an olive tone. She angrily denies having brown skin and draws another child in to support her evaluation. . . . One significant aspect of Lu's denial is her anger at being assumed to have darker skin. She is annoyed that Mark would make such an error and appeals to another child to verify her skin color for him. Her indignation at his mistake is a clear indicator of the importance she is already attaching to her physical appearance and, more importantly, to valuing the category of whiteness. She seems to want to deny that she could possibly be dark or close to the category of Blackness.

Here we see an Asian child trying to find her place in a white-dominated society that implicitly and explicitly accents a racist continuum running from positive whiteness to undesirable Blackness. [C]hildren's actions and understandings in their interactive settings reveal aspects of the larger society and its deep-lying historical roots. As they have entered and increased in number in the United States, each new group of color has usually been placed, principally by the dominant white group, somewhere on a white-to-Black status continuum, the common gauge of social acceptability. . . . This long standing continuum accents physical characteristics and color coding in which European-like features and cultural norms tend to be highly privileged. Not surprisingly, all children in this society learn at an early age that, generally speaking, whiteness is privileged and darkness is not—and thus their choices in this regard are usually not surprising. In particular, Asian and Latino American children, like their parents, may often find themselves

placed by whites on the continuum without their active involvement, and thus they may struggle for a better placement, and definition, of themselves on that white-originated continuum. . . .

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Adult definitions and reconstructions of children's activities have a strong influence on . . . children's lived realities. . . . In [the following] episode, . . . we see . . . that the presence of adults radically changes the nature of interaction between children. . . . [C]hildren realize that adults disapprove of some of their activity. Their awareness of adults' opinions prompts them to avoid confrontations or arguments with grown people, choosing instead to merely acquiesce to adult demands.

Debi is sitting with . . . three children on the steps to the deck, playing Simon Says. Brittany (4, white) is Simon. While Debi stays in the background, Rita (3, white/Latina) and Joseph (3, Black) discuss what racial group they belong to. Keep in mind that this conversation is unprompted by adult influence and that the only adult on the scene so far is Debi, who is being thoroughly ignored. Joseph informs Rita, "I'm Black, and you're white." "No," she retorts angrily, "I'm not white, I'm mixed." The two debate back and forth for a few moments, their voices getting louder and angrier. Joseph maintains his definition of Rita, and she as vigorously denies it, reiterating and reinforcing her own conception. Debi listens and watches quietly, ready to intercede if the children get too upset. However, the noise attracts the attention of a teacher who enters the scene from inside the building and approaches as Rita shouts, "I'm mixed, you stupid!" into Joseph's face. He merely rolls his eyes at her, making her even angrier.

Patricia, an African American teacher, enters this scene from inside the classroom . . . [and joins] the children on the playground. She listens to Rita's last declaration, quickly evaluates the situation, and intervenes. "You're not

mixed, Rita, you're Spanish. What race am I?" Patricia is making an attempt to change the subject between the two, in hopes of calming the argument. Rita looks up at Patricia and reluctantly replies, "Mixed." "Mixed!?" Patricia responds, laughing. "Mixed with what?" Rita ponders for a moment, looking uncomfortable. "Blue," she says finally. Patricia is wearing an entirely blue outfit today. "Oh," Patricia says, "I'm Black too, like Joseph; I'm not mixed. What an interesting conversation you guys are having." Patricia smiles ineffectively at the children, which prompts them to begin squirming and looking for a way out. Rita says nothing in response, and Joseph has remained silent throughout Patricia's exchange with Rita. The child leading Simon Says (Brittany) finally tells the kids to go to the playground, and Rita and Joseph run off in different directions. Patricia smiles at Debi, shaking her head, but offers no comments. . . .

Here, the teacher seems to allow no mixed category for a child's identity and self-conception. This is suggestive of a common adult tendency to limit children's understandings of the nuances of racial meaning. In Rita's case, her use of the term "mixed" probably referred to her knowledge of her parents' origins. Her mother and father were from different countries in Latin America. While she appeared white to outside observers, with pale skin and curly dark hair, her assessment of herself was that she was mixed. Joseph's insistence that she was white finally provoked her into an angry retort, complete with name-calling. Rita's racial-ethnic group status is very important to her. She reacts to the teacher's inquiry by becoming relatively uncommunicative. Clearly not wishing to engage in the argument with a teacher, Rita and Joseph abandon their interaction and address the more urgent need of responding to an adult. The lesson is not lost on them, however, given their behavior. It is better, in their world, to submit to the adults' definitions of racial matters than to attempt to enter an argument. Young children quickly learn that

debates with adults are typically unproductive.

## The Children's Views

Both teachers and children regularly seized upon the connections between skin color and other markers of differences between people, although for different reasons. The celebration of ethnic and racially oriented holidays precipitated considerable interaction among the children, and at times this interest incorporated skin color and its salience to ethnic identity. Children were keenly interested in any information about unfamiliar customs and holidays. Non-Jewish children, regardless of race, delighted in activities oriented around Hanukkah, such as the making of challah and storytime books about the Festival of Lights. White children displayed intense interest in explanations of Kwanzaa, asking questions and listening quietly as teachers read books about this holiday. The history of Kwanzaa's origins was covered in the curriculum and was made a point of discussion by the teachers. That different holidays were connected to different racial and ethnic groups was not missed by the children. In the case of Kwanzaa, teachers explicitly connected the holiday to African Americans, as is appropriate. The children, however, refined and extended this meaning on their own. In this next situation, one child uses skin color as a determinant of what kind of ethnic activity another child can do.

Aaron (4, white) taunts Amy (4, Black/white). She is alone, playing quietly near the gazebo. He approaches her and sticks his tongue out, informing her, "You can't celebrate Kwanzaa, you're not Black." Amy retorts, "Oh yes I am. You don't know. You're stupid." "I am not," he replies, sniffing at her and adding, "and you're not Black." "I am too Black!" Amy responds hotly. "My Dad is Black and so is his parents, my granddad and grandma." "Stupid!" he

shouts at her. "You're stupid!" she yells right back. "You don't know nothing about me." She rises and faces Aaron with an angry glare on her face. Aaron responds in kind, and they glare at each other until he finally backs down and leaves. Amy resumes her play.

It is immediately apparent that Aaron defined Amy's qualifications to participate in Kwanzaa celebrations according to her skin color. He has named and imposed his comprehension of what Black identity is and how it is to be measured and noted. Amy's skin was pale, and she had curly, dark blond hair. According to Aaron's interpretation, Kwanzaa was for "Black" people as he mentally defined them, and thus Amy was not to be included. She was, to all outward appearances, white. Amy, however, relied on her family history and her knowledge of black and white ancestry and its meaning to define her capacity to be included in Kwanzaa. Each child was basing their interpretation of Amy's status on different criteria, each using a different model of explanation. For the white child, another's skin hue was decisive. For the Black child, skin color was but one gauge. Far more important were her ancestry and knowledge of her family. Her skin color was not a key factor for her. . . .

In yet another situation, skin color provides the opportunity for extensive comparison with the colors of other objects and the color of people. In this scene, Taleshia [3, Black] makes use of color to categorize other things and other people in order to draw a contrast with herself. Her understanding of self, as an abstraction, is evident in this exchange.

Debi sits on the rug, cross-legged, with Taleshia leaning up against her. This is a common position for Debi, and children at times will vie for the use of her as a cushion. They are waiting for a teacher-led activity to begin. Taleshia snuggles up and says, "Your T-shirt is black." Debi agrees and adds, "I really like black. It's a pretty color." Taleshia nods, announcing, "Your hair is black." Again Debi

agrees. The child continues, "And so is Mike's hair and Steven's hair and Mitchell's hair and Elizabeth's hair." She has named all the Asian and African American children currently in the room. Debi nods, "Black hair is prettier than T-shirts." Taleshia laughs, touches Debi's arm and remarks, smiling, "I'm Black too." Debi says, "Yes, and so is Mike." Taleshia nods again and says, "And Joseph." She holds her hand up, turns it from side to side. "See?" she asks. "I'm *Black!*" She shouts the last word, delighted; holds up her hands; and sings loudly, "I'm Black, Black, Black." By now she is in Debi's lap. She holds her arm up against Debi's legs. "I'm *real* black," she notes, eyeing the contrast between the two skin tones. "And I'm *real white*," Debi replies, imitating her emphasis. Again Taleshia laughs and sings, "I'm Black, Black, Black!" The two remain in contact, with Taleshia singing and Debi serving as her perch, until the teacher-led activity begins.

The contrast between Debi's pale skin and Taleshia's dark skin is striking. The conversation she started was a device employed to engage Debi, first in a maneuver to gain possession of Debi's lap. Then Taleshia moved her comparisons from clothing to hair color to skin color. She made a game of it, moving with ease from one object to another, all the while proclaiming her awareness and delight in her own color. She also managed to get exclusive control over an adult's attention, quite an achievement for a preschool child. . . .

More mental pictures are created in the next account, with color and skin again incorporating nonhuman objects. There are several rabbits in residence at this school. The two males are gray and white and black and white, and the solitary female is solid white. True to their nature, the rabbits have indulged in procreation, and the result was six bunnies: two solid black in color, three white, and one black and white spotted. Corinne (4, African/white) and Sarah (4, white) are playing with the bunnies, which are temporarily contained in a galvanized

bucket while a teacher cleans out their cage. The bunnies are about a week old and are an object of great interest for the children. The two girls count the tiny rabbits and discuss their colors. Corinne announces, "The black ones are girls, and the white ones are boys." Sarah gazes into the bucket, then looks skeptical and asks, "How do you know?" Corinne instructs, "My mommy is Georgine and she is Black and she is a girl, so the black ones are girls. My daddy is David and he is white and he is a boy, so the white ones are boys." Sarah giggles. She picks up the lone black and white spotted bunny and asks Corinne, "Well, what's this one, then?" Corinne gets a huge smile on her face and yells, "That's *me!*" at the top of her lungs. Both girls dissolve into silliness, abandon the bunnies, and run off.

The dual nature of Corinne's origins is very important to her, and she makes great efforts to explain and clarify this to anyone needing educating, whether child or adult. Like all people, she experiments with what she knows to sharpen, deepen, and crystallize her understandings. She makes use of a variety of objects and situations to point out her skin color and its origin. Color matching seems to be one way of drawing out and explaining the relationship of skin color to self. For Corinne, the meaning of skin color and identity is complicated, and she does not try to simplify her explanation. She incorporates gender as well as color and family history to construct an explanation of each to another child. She is exploring the many meanings of racial group, gender, relationships, and color and experimenting with different definitions for each. Clearly, she is developing a strong sense of her multiracial identity and a positive sense of her self, in spite of the constant questioning she must endure from adults . . . about these matters. Faced with the negative imagery that is generally imposed on Black children and biracial children like herself, Corinne presses forward with a very positive interpretation and delineation of her biracial identity.

Drawing on her awareness of her own racial group and her relationship to her parents, she supplies some of those meanings to her friend, extending her awareness of her family's characteristics and her biracial identity to another child. That she is incorrect in her system for assessing the bunnies' gender is inconsequential to the importance of her own self-definition. Her analogies make some experimental sense, to her and another child, affording each with an enhanced idea of the meaning of color differences.

In a separate episode, another child makes use of the center's animals to examine this relationship between color, gender, and self, again expanding and refining the base of personal knowledge. One day, a pregnant cat took up residence near the playground. For weeks, the mother cat evaded capture and cared for her babies, but eventually the animal control staff was successful in capturing her. Her kittens had become habituated to people, and the center's director decided that they would be placed in adoptive homes. Debi volunteered to take the kittens to her veterinarian and have them checked. On her return from this trip, the following exchange with a child took place.

Debi enters the classroom with the carrier full of kittens, and meets Mike (5, Black), who runs up and asks, "Whatcha got?" Debi responds, "These are the kittens that were under the deck." "Oh, I want one!" he replies loudly, snatching at the carrier. "They already have homes, honey," Debi tells him. He ignores her, stating, "I'll have that black one, because I'm Black and me and my mommy are Black." Told again that the kittens already have homes, he says, "Oh. You want to play a game?" He immediately loses interest in the kittens when Debi tells him she must wait for the parents to pick up their new pets and that she cannot play right now. Similar to the way in which Corinne explained her parentage, Mike determines that since one kitten is black it qualifies as a pet for him and his fam-

ily. In this case, color matching takes on still another meaning. . . .

Racial markers and skin color are also used to point out differences between people. Once again, for Black children and for the children who are of mixed racial-ethnic heritages or from other countries these variables are compelling. One teacher, Jeanne, is reading a storybook to the kids. Afterward, the children respond eagerly to Jeanne's question, drawn from the story, "How are we the same and different at the same time?" The children mention hair, age, and skin color. No prompting or suggestions are needed to get them going. Taleshia sits next to Debi, with her hand on Debi's leg. She studies the contrast once again, then turns and says to Debi, "We're different colors." She continues to study the skin tones, turning her arm over and back several times. Other children make observations about height, hair, and other physical characteristics. Corinne offers, "My mommy and I have the same skin, but my daddy doesn't. But we're one family." For children in families where difference is a part of daily life the nature of racial group, skin color, and other differences may assume particular importance. The more differences are noticed, in any context, the more they become part of dialogue and behavior among the children.

On one occasion talk about racial group and color involved a group of four children. The dialogue begins with a discussion of clothing colors, which moves into a comparison of clothing, hair, and skin colors. Debi is pushing Taleshia (3, Black), Christine (3, Asian), and Amber (3, Asian) on the tire swing. Brittany (4, white) comes over and informs Debi, "You have on white shoes and black socks and then black shorts." "Sure do," Debi replies; "and you have on white socks and blue shorts and a blue shirt." This technique of simply repeating what the children told her has proven to be very effective in carrying on child-centered conversations. Brittany grins, looking down and regarding

her clothing with some amusement. The similarity between her clothing and Debi's is apparent. Also apparent is Brittany's ultimate design: she seeks a spot on the tire swing. Taleshia then informs Debi that Debi has black hair. Debi replies, "Yes, but really I have black and white hair. See?" Debi bends toward the children and gestures to the gray streaks in her dark hair. Taleshia looks closely and then nods her head. Debi continues to push the swing, while the three girls chat.

"You," Taleshia says emphatically to Debi, "are white." "Yes," Debi agrees and continues, "and you are Black," once again imitating a child's remarks. Taleshia grins delightedly. "She's white too," Taleshia continues, pointing at Peggy, who has now joined the group. "Yes, she is white too," Debi agrees. Taleshia regards Elizabeth (3.5, Chinese) for a moment and then announces, "She's not white." "She's not white," Taleshia repeats. Debi agrees with the child's assessment and responds, "No, she's not white, she's Chinese." Debi extends Taleshia's remark to include nationality. "She's from China," Taleshia states, verifying Debi's remark and providing evidence that she realizes the connection between "Chinese" and China. "Yes, she is," Debi agrees, while Elizabeth laughs, apparently delighted that another person is bringing her into the conversation. "She's from China too," says Taleshia, pointing at Amber. "Yes, she is from China too," Debi tells her. "She's got black hair like you do," Taleshia continues. "She sure does," Debi notes. "So does Elizabeth. Very pretty black hair," Debi adds, making Elizabeth smile. Taleshia throws her head back and laughs. "Everybody's got black hair," she says. "No," Debi disagrees, "not everybody. Who doesn't have black hair?" Debi asks her. "Robin," she replies. Taleshia thinks for a moment and adds, "Sarah." "Anybody else?" Debi asks. "Peggy!" Taleshia shouts. "Sure enough," Debi says, "but what color is it?" "Brown," Taleshia again shouts, delighted that she is getting the right answers to this game. "Right again. Is that the same as

Robin's?" "No!" she shouts again. "What color is Robin's hair?" Debi asks. "Yellow."

Suddenly tired of the talk, Taleshia leans back and begins to sing, "Nanny, nanny, boo, boo, you can't get me!" to Sarah, who is passing by. "I want off now," she demands, and Debi lifts her down from the swing, replacing her with Peggy. Taleshia and Sarah enter a game of chase. Elizabeth and Amber begin to chant, "Ahhhh," starting low and rising up until it ends in screeching laughter as the tire swing moves from low to high.

The details of this scene are complex. Here the children are discussing and playing with various color and cultural issues, sometimes individually, sometimes all at once. They are quite excited by the game. A discussion of clothing quickly dissolved into an activity featuring categorization of different persons into racial and ethnic groups. The children begin their talk with a simple comparison of clothing, but the game soon evolves into a complex dialogue adding racial group, skin color, and national origins. Debi's responses to the children were primarily imitations of those addressed to her. Taleshia demonstrated a sophisticated ability to categorize the other children, recognizing that Elizabeth and Amber are not white. Yet she did not dichotomize color, reducing it to a matter of either black or white. Instead, color, racial group, and nationality are combined. Taleshia extended her evaluation of the Asian girls' color to incorporate their national origin and racial group, noting that while they were not Black, they also certainly were not white. It became necessary to use yet another category: Chinese. This category was not a new one for the children. Taleshia knew immediately that being Chinese meant a person was from China. The complicated nature of difference is not lost on this child, who strives to keep a complex matter intact.

A word here on Debi's involvement in the conversation: All the while she was engaged with the children, it was on her mind that she not lead them to conclusions. When she of-

fered a name for the "not white" category, she was drawing on her knowledge, shared by the children, that Chinese was a category of people. The ideas of nationality and ethnicity were well known to these children. They had been exposed to many different racial, ethnic, and national labels, through their experiences with each other and through structured lessons delivered by the teaching staff. Food, language, dress, and other markers had been widely shared. That Taleshia eagerly concurred with Debi indicates that this view was not novel. Much of what Debi did in this interaction was in imitation of the children, a practice that the children themselves engage in often. . . .

In the next scene the differences between the children become an occasion for mass comparisons. We are at the tire swing again, and Debi is pushing three children, Dao (4, Asian), Rita (3, white/Latina), and Trevor (3, white), and listening to their conversations. Joseph (3, Black) joins them. Rita remarks to Debi, "You know what? I like his hair." She points to Joseph's head. His hair is done in five or six rows of plaits that run from front to back and are gathered in a knot in the back. "It's curly," Rita continues, reaching out and patting Joseph on the head. Joseph smiles at Rita as she touches his head. He says nothing. "I like his hair too," Debi tells Rita. Trevor says to Rita, "That's because he's Black." Rita agrees, adding, "Yeah, and my hair is curly too. And it's getting long and pretty. But I'm not Black, I'm Spanish." Trevor says, "My hair is straight. Debi's hair is straight too, and really, really, really, long. Right?" He looks at Debi for confirmation. "Yup," Debi agrees with him, "my hair is straight and long and dark brown with lots of gray streaks." Trevor adds, "Because you're old." Debi nods. "Old as the hills, right Dao?" Debi addresses another child. Dao nods and says, in a low voice, "My hair is straight and short and dark." This remark is unusual for Dao, who is usually very quiet, rarely saying anything. During this exchange Joseph says nothing, although



he has pointed out to Debi in the past that he is Black. . . .

In this case, [the] children feel obliged to point out differences in coloring and hair type and are intrigued by these distinctions. Perhaps they suspect that other children would not notice or comment on differences unless attention is directed toward them. The exchange demonstrates the everyday nature of racial and ethnic comparisons within the center. At least eleven children were involved in the previous two dialogues, a figure that represents a substantial percentage of the center's classroom population. The children sought out differences and remarked on them in detail and at length, often with some sophistication. They are dealing with racial and ethnic identities, as well as racial-ethnic histories and cultural matters. They incorporated into their interactions many aspects of ethnicity and racial group that are not generally believed to be part of preschool children's repertoires of abilities. The extent of this sharing allows them to ask questions, support each other's conclusions, and contribute to the direction of discussion, skills developed to a significant degree outside the teacher-dominated spheres of center life. They are in charge here, acting on their thoughts and considerations. These scenes illustrate how peer relations become a critical aspect in learning about the meaning of racial and ethnic differences. No teacher initiated these conversations. Only one adult was involved and that involvement was limited. The topic of discussion was both salient and spontaneous for the children.

The children here were wrestling with complicated and socially important ideas. These markers of racial and ethnic origin informed them about each other. They named, indicated, and discussed several aspects of racial group and ethnicity. These were frank and curious discussions of social markers useful in understanding the nature of the larger world and relationships within both

that world and the more constrained and circumscribed world of the preschool.

### Sharing Ideas About Racial Group and Ethnicity

Since the center housed a racially and ethnically diverse population, there was plenty of opportunity for discussion about children's backgrounds. For individual children, skin color was not the only element in the creation of self-identity and self-concept. Nationality and ethnicity also occupied the center of recurring interactions in the classroom and on the playground. Sometimes this discussion arose from an activity or from an adult question to a child. On more than one occasion, however, the children themselves initiated dialogue with each other about their nationality or ethnic background.

In one situation, Kumar (6, Asian), who is visiting the classroom; Corinne (4, African/white); and Susan (4, Chinese) are discussing their origins. Susan says to Kumar, "You're not American. Where are you from?" Kumar replies, "Yes, I am American, I was born here." Susan shakes her head, "You don't look American." Kumar just looks at her, apparently waiting for further remarks, with some irritation on his face. Susan then informs him, "I'm from China. That makes me Chinese." Corinne adds, "Yes, see, she is from Chinese." "No, silly, not Chinese," says Susan, "China. China is the country. Chinese are the people." Corinne volunteers, "I'm from Africa." Susan nods, "Yes, you are from Africa, and now you are here." Corinne nods and smiles. Kumar says, "My brother is from Africa, and my mother and father are from Asia." "How can your brother be from Africa and your mother and father from Asia?" questions Susan. "That's silly. You can't be from different places." "Yes you can!" retorts Kumar. "I am from here and my brother is from Africa and my mommy and daddy are from Asia. We move around a lot," he offers

in explanation. "So what *are* you?" Susan asks Kumar. "A person," he replies. He then leaves the group and goes to get a drink from the water fountain.

Kumar offered a detailed and precise explanation of his family's multiple ethnic origins. Not only was he able to describe the complexity of his family, but he offered a reasonable explanation for it. Though originally from Asia, his family had at one time lived in Africa, where a brother was born. He had been born in the United States. Susan questions him in detail, demanding explanations for what appear to her to be contradictions. Kumar was able to provide her with a detailed and accurate accounting of his family's complex national origins. Susan also observes that dark-skinned Kumar doesn't look like an American, a remark that causes him to fluff up in anger. We see that the discussion of nationality and ethnicity among children can arouse strong emotions. Kumar's response indicates that he is aware of what he looks like and that being born in the United States makes him an American. Yet Susan's categorization of what is an "American" does not seem to include dark-skinned, black-haired youngsters. She doesn't explicitly state what "American" looks like, but it is fairly clear that she is confounding a certain light-skinned appearance with American. Clearly, Kumar is uncomfortable with the entire dialogue. His final evaluation of himself is that he is a person, a status with little emotional baggage, but one with great dignity.

This example illustrates key aspects of our arguments about how children use and process ideas, understandings, and language about ethnic, racial, and nationality distinctions. A child has picked up an embedded feature of the surrounding white-dominated society and is experimenting with it in her everyday interactions. One issue here is the general understanding of what an "American" is. In most media reports, in the minds of most white Americans, and in the minds of many other people in the United States and

around the globe, "American" is synonymous with native-born white American. . . . In the case above, even a four-year-old Asian child sees another child, whose parents have lived in Africa and southern Asia, as not looking "American." At the same time, she is clearly experimenting with the ideas and is willing to discuss the matter fully.

Experimentation with racial and ethnic concepts was part of most of the children's activities at the center. For the American-born children, trying out new concepts was enhanced by the ready availability of children from other countries. The diversity provided these children with opportunities to juxtapose their developing sense of self with their recognition of others as different, contrasting a sense of self-identity with their growing awareness of others. Racial and ethnic markers became useful tools for the task. The children from other lands often found that their origins became a source of conversation and interaction with others. Their racial, ethnic, and nationality backgrounds afforded them opportunities to engage in personal interaction, thereby gaining attention and increasing their knowledge of how these concepts functioned in social life.

The children of foreign-born parents afforded us with opportunities to watch deep explorations of racial and ethnic meanings and understandings. For example, Corinne, the four-year-old child of a white American parent and a Black African parent, incorporated several social variables in her young life. She was a rich source of information about racial-ethnic understandings among young children. Her biracial, dual-continent origins were questioned on numerous occasions, yet this girl successfully negotiated her biracial identity: not merely Black but also white, not only American but also distinctively African. Her multiple identities confused many adults and other children, yet she easily accounted for and understood her identities and was able to explain them and their meanings to others. She had created an ex-

traordinarily strong sense of her self, one that she defended and explained with great dexterity.

One day, close to parent pickup time, Corinne, Mike (4, Black), and Debi are sitting at a picnic table. The two children are coloring, ignoring Debi and the other children around them. Corinne's father, David, arrives to pick her up, and when she spots him she leaps up and runs to him. They walk back to the table together, holding hands, and sit down again with Mike and Debi. David greets Debi, remarking that he would like to wait and meet his wife here.

"Who's that?" Mike demands, looking at Corinne's father. "That's my daddy," she replies, beaming at her father. Mike regards the man unsmilingly, then sniffs and shakes his head vigorously. "Uh, uh," he declares, indicating his disbelief. Corinne stares at Mike for a moment, then says, "Yes he is!" David looks on in amusement, a smile on his face. "How come he ain't Black?" Mike asks Corinne. "Because he's not," she retorts, glaring at Mike and grabbing her father's hand. "Uh, uh, you can't have a white dad. Black kids have Black dads," Mike states, smiling. "Yes I can. I do. We're from Africa." Corinne's tone has now taken on a quieter quality, but she still frowns at Mike. "Uh, uh," Mike insists, "nope." David sits smiling gently, as though he cannot quite believe what is going on in front of him.

"Stop it!" Corinne is now yelling at Mike, which prompts David to intercede. "Corinne's mommy is Black," he explains to Mike, retaining his smile. Mike does not respond to him, instead staring at the man as though he does not exist. Corinne sticks her tongue out at Mike, who ignores her and continues to stare at David. "When Black people and white people fall in love and get married they have beautiful brown babies," David continues, hugging Corinne and smiling at Mike, who does not reply. At this point, Mike's mother also arrives to pick him up from school, distracting him and ending the episode.

Mike adamantly refused to acknowledge that Corinne's father was white, despite the facts that a white man was sitting right in front of him and that Corinne declared this man to be her father. Mike justified his disbelief by referring to a rule he had garnered from his own experience: Black children could not have white parents. Mike's denial of Corinne's origins, and by implication her multiracial identity, was met with opposition from her and an explanation from her father, but he persisted. As far as he was concerned, Corinne was a Black child, and Corinne's skin color and facial features confirmed his evaluation. Hence she could not have a white parent, since in his experience Black children invariably had Black parents. The contradiction of Corinne's parentage was too much for him to bear.

Mike was not the only person who challenged Corinne's explanation of her origins. Adults, too, questioned whether or not Corinne really knew who, and what, she was. One day, during a sharing circle, Corinne was invited to describe her family and her home. She eagerly launched into a description of her home in Africa, elaborating the story with a tale about riding elephants in the backyard. As Corinne spoke, Debi overheard Cindy and Lynne, two center employees, remarking on her story. "Isn't that cute!" Cindy said, "That little girl thinks she's from Africa." Lynne smiled and said, "Oh, she probably heard her parents say that she was African American and is just confused." Corinne continued with her story, blissfully unaware of the disbelief evident on the adults' faces. . . .

Neither children nor adults had difficulty accepting that several of the children were born in Europe or Asia. Yet, whenever Corinne offered to a newcomer her story that she was from Africa, there was disbelief, especially on the part of adults. The task of explaining her origins became a recurring chore for Corinne. She was forced to continually defend herself, especially to adults, the authority figures in her life. They provided

her with the most difficulties. Eventually, she acquiesced and no longer attempted to talk to adults about her origins or correct their mistaken beliefs. One day, when once again instructed by a well-meaning adult that she was African American, Corinne merely rolled her eyes and replied, "Whatever." She had learned a valuable lesson: Adults often do not believe what small children tell them, even if it is true. . . .

The belief held by most white adults that young children have little awareness of their racial-ethnic characteristics and identities acts to exacerbate a child's task of explaining herself to others. Teacher-led activities often did not lend themselves to encouraging children to explain and describe their own racial-ethnic understandings. These teacher-children activities were almost always designed around teacher questions and children's answers to those predetermined questions. This assertion is not an effort to blame teachers, or to suggest that they are somehow scheming to ignore or denigrate youngsters. This is merely the virtually universal nature of the schoolroom. Teachers ask questions; children answer. The nature of the teacher-child interaction in most cases of racial-ethnic sharing did not permit the children to engage in elaborate dialogue or provide detailed stories as they did in interaction with other children or with Debi. The children were usually limited to simple yes/no answers or an occasional explanation of an unusual custom or word. The following episode is illustrative of the pattern present when adults were in charge of self-description.

On a few occasions, especially when a new semester started or new children entered the facility, teachers led activities designed to introduce children to each other. These sharing circles were occasions for reporting all aspects of oneself, including racial group and ethnicity. Shortly after the center reopened from a holiday break, Dean, a teacher from another classroom, arranged to present new students from his room to our

classroom. He begins the activity by announcing his name and that he is from the United States. The children then take turns sharing where they are from. "I'm from China," says Susan, predictably. "I'm from Korea," an Asian boy responds. "Where are you from?" Dean asks a boy, whose name tag reads "Emile." Before the child can reply, another teacher in the circle responds, "France." However, Emile vigorously shakes his head no on hearing this and points to the ground. "Are you from here, Emile?" Dean asks. Emile nods and continues to point at the ground, a smile on his face. "Are your parents from France?" Dean continues, smiling at the child. "I don't know," Emile shrugs. Dean turns his attention to the next child in the circle. "I'm from Sweden," a tall blond girl contributes. Most of the children seem to know where they or their parents are from but offer no detail. However, Kumar breaks from this pattern and tells a long, involved story about how he is from the United States, his brother is from Africa, and his parents are from Asia. "My dad is there now," he adds. "Where is your mom?" another boy asks. "She's here," replies Kumar.

Dean interrupts him, moving on to Corinne. She heaves a deep sigh and reports, "I'm from Africa." She waits, looking around her. "Really?" Dean replies, "Are you African American?" The look on Corinne's face is simply priceless. In a display of comical exaggeration, she rolls her eyes, shrugs her shoulders, and flops her hands into her lap in helpless resignation. "Nope, just plain old, stupid African," she sighs, obviously wishing this activity was over. Dean obliges her and moves on without remark. Given the question-and-answer format of these activities, the children learn that adults are not really interested in in-depth discussions with children, or in the racial-ethnic worlds in which they live and interact every day. . . .

## Conclusion

In this chapter we showed how white children and children of color use the racial-ethnic concepts widely found in the surrounding societal environment to interact and build and define the meaning of their own selves and the selves of others. We saw how they interact with each other and with adults—fine-grained data that are only available from extensive observations. . . . The episodes we observed in children's lives demonstrate how children obtain and organize ethnic and racial information from others and then use this information to construct their social lives. Racial and ethnic attitudes, group preferences, and self-identity are all parts of the same process: building a racial-ethnic reality.

In our study we see that the children are learning from cumulative experiences with racism, color coding, and racial-ethnic identities. Negative and positive experiences accumulate over time and in elaborate interaction, eventually, with a wide variety of different others. This makes such experiences longitudinal and significant as social phenomena. How children come to know themselves in

racial-ethnic terms arises in part from their grounding in a racist society and in part from their own daily interaction with other children and with adults. Despite the fact that they might not be aware of the workings of the world in a refined, adult way, they have substantial abilities to employ self, color, and racial concepts by the time they are three. In general, the children we observed were able to use color coding consistently and in detailed comparisons, whether the color was of skin, clothing, hair, eyes, or inanimate objects. They routinely created complex explanations for themselves and each other based on skin color and offered descriptions and verification of physical characteristics in a variety of ways. Some, particularly children of color and those whose parents included someone from another country, were able to construct and maintain very complicated self-identities that incorporated aspects of racial group and ethnicity.

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