

EILEEN PARSONS

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Race Matters: Making it Central to the Research and Conversation within Science Education

My Vexation:

When I consider my current “vexation,” I am reminded of a television series called “Black-White” that consisted of six shows. In this series, a Black family and White family, both comprised of two parents and a 16-year old child, lived together for a few months and each was transformed by make-up to the other’s racial group. As the show chronicled the individuals’ experiences, some substantive and some shallow issues regarding race emerged. My current vexation arose as a response to a few episodes revolving around the two 16-year olds, one Black male and one White female, in the show. I share one specific incident below.

Under the guise of bronze make-up, the White teenager elected to join a poetry group comprised of African Americans. Throughout the series, she voiced sentiments regarding the group’s distinctive way of being, the extraordinary talent and performance illustrated by these individuals while functioning within this way of being, and her struggles to perform well within a worldview that contrasted her own. This White female of exceptional ability spoke of her substandard performances despite her motivation, hard work, desire to do well, and the support she received from her mother and the parents from the live-in Black family. She shared how this asynchrony began to impact her self-image and self-esteem; and she visibly demonstrated emotional and psychological distress.

Reflection upon the White teenager’s academic or performance meltdown and the sentiments she openly shared about her experiences of wearing Black skin in the United States re-fueled my earlier desire to examine the underachievement of African Americans from a position of race.

My research has focused primarily upon context and culture, specifically African American culture in relation to what occurs in classrooms. After a few years of reading extensively in the psychological literature on African American culture, I recently realized that I use culture and race interchangeably. In the more recent past, I began to see the social constructs as interrelated but distinct. As I reflected upon various statements like “He’s not *really* Black” (looks Black but does not adhere to worldview generally accepted by Blacks) that I sometimes heard in the hallways at school research sites, the epiphany that race and culture were distinct was not a groundbreaking one. Because culture and race are distinct but interrelated, my work on culture is incomplete without the racial component. As it pertains to African Americans, how is race conceptualized and operationalized in the science education research literature? How do I approach race in an enlightened way that contributes to knowledge and encourages both constructive conversations and productive pursuits in practice?

Race Matters: Making it Central to the Research and Conversation within Science Education

My Venture:

Race, particularly with respect to African Americans, is widely and directly discussed in the historical, psychological, and sociological literature but is rarely and only tangentially addressed by the science education community. The venture that I have just begun involves organizing and synthesizing the literature such that I attack the aforementioned “vexation” questions. Because the literature on race comes from diverse fields, my initial attempts involve using context as a way to broach the enormous task; as such, I collapsed Bronfenbrenner’s and Cole’s theoretical frameworks into one (see Figure 1).

By synthesizing the two theoretical models, the immediate and local contexts as well as the distant (past and future) and far-reaching contexts surrounding the African American experience in the U.S. can be captured and considered when understanding the science underachievement of this group. In addition, conceptually coherent and insightful syntheses of the various factors examined in the research on the science achievement of African Americans may be possible via the components of the theoretical model portrayed in Figure 1 which may subsequently result in a refined or extended theoretical framework to be used in directing future research efforts.

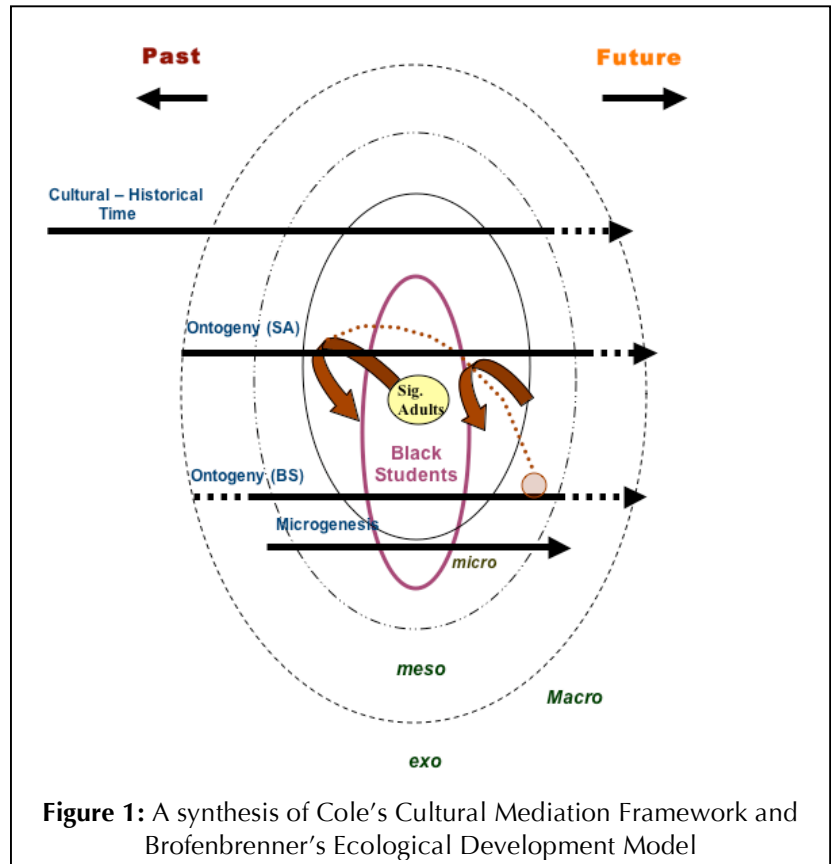


Figure 1: A synthesis of Cole’s Cultural Mediation Framework and Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Development Model