The Stickiness of Race

THE STICKINESS OF RACE
Re-articulating Racial Inequality

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Race has sticky properties. Much like the classic 'tar baby' encountered in the Uncle Remus and Br'er Rabbit tales, once you make the error of putting a hand in or on it, it becomes very hard to extract one's self from the incredibly adaptive and adhesive grasp of race. Indeed, ironically, the more one resists and struggles, the more tenacious the tar baby's hold.

Of course, for those pursuing an expressly colonial or imperialist project, this sticky quality is precisely what was assumed and hoped for in a racial classification system. In contrast, for those aiming to reduce or undo inequality, race, and racial distinction this "stickiness" has been a matter of greater controversy. Certainly old frameworks like the "race relations cycle" and straightline assimilation theories envisioned, if not rapid transformation, at least the inevitable erosion of ethno-racial distinctions: in effect scholars such as Robert Park (1950) posited the deep non-stickiness of race. Scholarship of today is a good deal more agnostic on the question of the trajectory of "race relations," and far more nuanced and qualified versions of assimilation theory now dominate, even as an explicitly constructivist understanding of the concept of race itself reigns in the social sciences. Scholars increasingly hold that once race is deployed as a tool of social and self-understanding—and especially once it has been used to systematically structure who occupies positions of power, money, and prestige—its effects are extremely hard to undo.

To be sure, some theorists have long argued that the initial terms of contact in and configuration of race relations exert durable influence on the trajectory of intergroup dynamics (Lieberson 1961). Yet, the notion of race as potentially having profoundly sedimentary, or "cementing"-like qualities rose to new prominence with Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro's now classic intervention regarding wealth inequality as a core feature of racial stratification (Oliver and Shapiro, 1995 , pp. 50–52). Generally, this line of theoretical argument can be traced, in part, to the lessons taught by a long post-Civil Rights era in which lived social experience—much intellectual fervor and ideological prognostication to the contrary notwithstanding—never seems to fully rise to the postracial moment.

Scholars attuned to the inherent micro-level aspects of racial differentiation have sought to theorize and unpack the stickiness of race. Some scholars point to the dynamics of racial institutional orders (Lieberman 2002; Smith and King, 2005). Some approaches stress the impact of status groups and of status group processes. Thus, for example, Cecilia Ridgeway (2013) has argued that inequality becomes more socially durable when expressly linked to socially constructed categorical group boundaries and distinctions. Doing so bestows an element of both perceived essential or natural difference between groups in an unequal relationship and facilities the assertion claims about the legitimacy and normative appropriateness of inequality,

whether the status boundary is based in class-, gender-, or race-distinctions. Likewise, students of ethno-racial attitudes point to the importance of group boundaries, identities, and feelings; racial stereotypes; and the active, conscious protection of group position as key factors in the maintenance and re-articulation or re-formation of racial relations (Samson and Bobo, 2014). A number of the articles in this issue of the *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* identify and unpack the ways in which the stickiness of race operates.   For example, the distinguished sociologist Herbert Gans develops an agenda for future examinations of the very bottom of American society, by which he means the poorest of the poor. He considers several possible criteria for defining who falls at the economic bottom of society and specifies several types of conditions or statuses likely to result in a person or household occupying this bottom rung of the economic order (e.g., severe chronic underemployment or multigenerational severe poverty). Gans maintains that those of darker skin tone, particularly African Americans, are heavily overrepresented at this bottom rung. He provides a careful specification of the type of new data needs, research strategies, and key unanswered questions calling for new empirical work if we are provide a deeper understanding of the social dynamics of existence at the bottom of American society.

With the publication in 1993 of his now classic work *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, Douglas Massey argued it was the creation of the ghetto that provided the core glue or stickiness to racial inequality (Massey and Denton, 1993).   Processes of racial residential segregation are a core, defining mechanism in the creation and maintenance of Black disadvantage. The high-priority focus put on residential segregation by some social scientists has recently been called into question by economists Edward Glaeser and Jacob Vigdor. In a widely publicized report issued by the Manhattan Institute, Glaeser and Vigdor (2012) argued that we have arrived at the end of the segregated century. Pointing to data on a decline in the number of exclusively White neighborhoods and to declining levels of BlacknonBlack segregation in many large metropolitan areas, they celebrate the arrival of a new era of declining (rather than durable) segregation. Jacob S. Rugh and Douglas S. Massey in this issue of the *Du Bois Review* make a careful assessment of this claim. They argue for a more complicated and cautious set of conclusions. While noting some secular declines in segregation between Blacks and Whites, they note that this is dependent on region of the country, size of place, size of the Black population, and levels of anti-Black prejudice. Moreover, levels of segregation for Hispanics and for Asians (though at a lower absolute level) are on the rise. Rugh and Massey also point to a variety of processes, such as changing zoning ordinances, which can greatly influence the prospects for either breaking down or re-inscribing residential segregation.

Race and space intersect in ways that powerfully affect life experiences and life chances. Economist and African American studies scholar Gerald Jaynes takes up this issue in a careful and probing review of Robert Sampson's book *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (2012).   He provides an engaging assessment of Sampson's claim that neighborhoods have properties qua neighborhoods—not as mere collections of individuals and their attributes—that exert significant effects on social dynamics: a proposition rife with implications for how we should understand "the ghetto" and the consequences of growing up in racially segregated and disadvantaged social spaces.

One of the key factors, assimilation theory maintains, that should undo much of the stickiness of race is increasing social intimacy, especially interracial marriage. As the extent of such unions

grows, one presumably is witnessing the fundamental undoing of prior racial barriers. A growing range of research, however, raises profound questions about this presumption, pointing to the stickiness of race even when intimate spheres of life such as family and marriage are at issue. Two articles problematize standard assimilation theory assumptions about how Latino/as experience and respond to racial differentiation. Cynthia Feliciano and Belinda Robnett focus on dating, showing that racial differentiation is not merely something imposed by others on Latino/as, but also proactively influences the choices and decisions Latino/as make regarding possible dating partners. Relatedly, Jessica M. Vasquez shows how the White partners of Latinos may in fact experience increased cognizance of race. Interracial relationships thus can be read as not so much signaling the end of the significance of race, but rather these spaces become arenas where race is negotiated in new and different ways (Tuan and Shiao, 2011; Twine and Steinbulger, 2007).

The power of this sticky quality to race comes through in studies of U.S. politics as well. In this issue political scientist Baodong Liu examines support for Obama as a function of state-level variation in "racial tension." His racial tension measure, an index combining what prove to be highly correlated indicators of Black density, racial diversity, social capital, and state political cultures (i.e., moralistic, individualistic, or traditionalistic), suggests the operation of a strong institutional racial ordering dimension (King and Smith, 2005; Lieberman 2002; Soss et al., 2008). This composite measure proves to have strong effects on the share of the White vote going to Obama, belying the notion that his electoral success somehow signals the unimportance of race.

Although focusing on the context of anti-immigration political mobilization, Kim Ebert, Emily P. Estrada, and Michelle Halla Lore's article in this issue reveals and validates important claims of a competing-racial-orders approach. They examine how conservative advocacy groups influence both policy formulation and the passage of legislation.

They show that groups on the "colorblind" end of the competing racial orders spectrum influence both stages of the political process, but that this influence is contingent on other contextual factors such as level of Republican dominance in the state and general anti-immigrant sentiment. A very similar logic to the dynamics of racial politics appears to operate at the micro or individual level as well. Using data from the 2005 National Politics Survey, political scientists Vincent L. Hutchings and Cara Wong examine the sources of White and African American views on immigrants and immigration. They find that some traditional aspects of racial prejudice matter but additionally that perceived competitive threat is also important in shaping these outlooks.

To observe, specify, and theorize about the stickiness of race, however, is not to presume it is a simplified, uniform circumstance or experience, or that the dynamics invariably transcend context or overwhelm all other considerations. For example, it is enormously important to consider how, among other things, race and gender intersect. Political scientists Michael D. Minta and Nadia E. Brown take up the issue of descriptive representation by race and gender and the level of Congressional attention (e.g., hearings) devoted to women's issues. Although much prior research points to the importance of descriptive representation, Minta and Brown's results complicate the picture for the period from 1951 to 2004 by showing the importance of minority male representatives to the attention devoted to women's issues. Likewise, ethnicity and class can shape how presumed "racial" dynamics may play out. Sociologists W. Carson Byrd,

Rachelle J. Brunn-Bevel, and Parker R. Sexton assess differences in academic performance of Black students at elite colleges and universities. They show that ethnicity and immigrant status importantly shape the familial background resources Black students are likely to bring to college (e.g., African immigrant children were more likely to have parents with advanced degrees) as well as affect pre-college socializing experiences (e.g., African immigrants are more likely to have attended predominantly White high schools).

Culture, thought of as the tool kit of ideas, beliefs, values, and resources individuals and groups have for adapting to social experiences, is one factor in the adhesive or potentially nonadhesive character of racial dynamics. For example, it is arguably easier to challenge, and potentially reform, patterns of racial inequality and marginalization for some groups in a cultural context in which there is widely known and disseminated information about historically exploitative and oppressive social relations between groups. Based on this premise, Melissa F. Weiner reveals the relative absence of a full and accurate depiction of the extent of Dutch involvement in the international slave trade and the importance of slavery to Dutch economic development. As such, she theorizes, the cultural landscape with regard to racial diversity is systematically distorted. This simultaneously weakens the chances of mobilization from "below" and the potential for reform favorable to the Afro-Dutch population.

Cultural tool kits can be influenced and re-shaped by important broader institutional changes. Thus, Timothy Bates and Stephen Tuck consider the realm of Black business entrepreneurship in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. Some scholars have anticipated relatively limited impact from government efforts to encourage greater Black business activity, reasoning that safety in segregated market niches and cultural predilections would work against any great pay-offs to effort to expand business ownership and entrepreneurialism. Bates and Tuck find just the opposite. As discriminatory barriers generally declined and the capital to expand business became more readily available to African Americans there was clear increase and great diversification in patterns of Black entrepreneurship.

The dynamics of race often exhibit properties of profound stickiness. This does not mean, however, that race involves static lines of differentiation. It does suggest that as scholars of ethnoracial differentiation we should routinely consider the ways in which dynamics within the economy, the polity, and cultural arenas interact. This is the key implication of Rashawn Ray's careful review essay on two important new books: *Documenting Desegregation: Racial and Gender Segregation in Private Sector Employment Since the Civil Rights Act* (Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey 2012) and *The American Non-Dilemma: Racial inequality without Racism* (DiTomaso 2013). Inequality can persist or be greatly re-configured in response to key reform efforts, without fundamentally erasing deep structures of race inequality. To wit, shifts in one domain of life, even of great scope, do not simply or inevitably determine parallel lines of change in these other arenas. Indeed, politics and political arrangements can become an impediment to economic reforms; seemingly logical and efficient economic arrangements may yield to cultural tastes of employees, customers, or larger community standards; and seemingly intransigent attitudes, beliefs, and outlooks may yield under the weight of rising economic and political power resources in the hands of previously marginalized groups and their allies. The essays, theorizing, and new empirical research in this issue of the *Du Bois Review* highlight the manifold ways in which change can result in the both the reform and re-articulation of racial differentiation and inequality.

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