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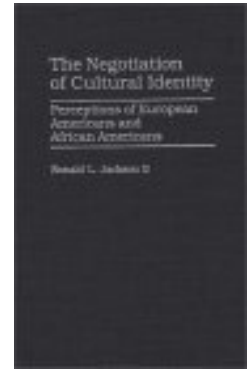## The Negotiation of Cultural Identity: Perceptions of European Americans and African Americans

Ronald L. Jackson, II
Praeger: Westport, CT (1999)
128 pages
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In *The Negotiation of Cultural Identity: Perceptions of European Americans and African Americans*, Ronald L. Jackson II attempts to examine both the process and the outcome of cultural identity negotiation by African Americans and European Americans. In the foreword to the book, Molefi Kete Asante argues that Jackson "sees everyday communicative experiences as fundamental to the way we intensify and extensify our individual sense of personhood within the spaces we share with others" (p.xii). Jackson indeed challenges core assumptions and practices in past identity research, such as the tendency to conflate *race* and *ethnicity*. The text clearly illustrates Jackson's commitment to identity studies, and the research questions for the study are undeniably important:

> What similarities and differences were reported in the way that European American and African American students define themselves culturally? What are the similarities and differences in the process of cultural ientity negotiation among European American and African American students? How does negotiation of cultural identity pose long-term identity consequences for European American and African American respondents? Under what conditions do European American and African American respondents feel the need to reconsider their cultural identities? (8)

The text has substantial weakneses, however, that limit my recommendation of it.

Jackson's work has two main strengths: an exhaustive literature review and crystalline definitions. The first two thirds of the book is devoted to the literature review, and to his credit, Jackson thoroughly examined the available literatures on identity, including those in sociology, psychology, communication, anthropology and philosophy. By the end of these four chapters, a reader is assured of the author's knowledge of past and current research on identity; race; and their combinations in racial, ethnic, and cultural identity. Unfortunately, though at times the literature was synthesized well, many individual works were simply summarized with long paraphrases about the original work. The author's central questions seemed lost in the details and in the concurrent repetition of summarized arguments. While impressive in scope and intent, this section would have benefited from more rigorous editing. Nonetheless, parts would aid scholars in advanced inquiry on identity negotiation and topics related to cultural, ethnic, and especially racial identity.

Along with a careful and thoughtful literature review, the definitions Jackson sets up as the philosophical grounding to his study are crystal clear. A reader may not always agree with the definitions (e.g., "Sub-cultural groups, such as those related to age, gender, sexual preference, and the physically challenged are

not to be identified as cultures," p. 9), but Jackson is concrete and consistent in his use of terms.

However, in the final analysis, these strengths seem overmatched by weaknesses in the author's own research. The research questions are important; unfortunately, they are not addressed by the method of the first of two reported studies in the book, and they are incompletely addressed in the second, follow-up study explicitly designed to bolster the results of the first study.

The first study was intended to address minority identity negotiation and included two focus groups of six individuals: one group of African American students from a predominantly European American college and one group of European American students from a predominantly African American college. The groups were asked a single question to start discussion: "What's the first thing that comes to mind when someone asks you what culture you are?" The transcribed hour-long group conversation was then analyzed for emergent themes. The use of the constant comparison technique of data analysis, originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is not in question, but the data set itself seemed insufficient to answer the research questions o n identity negotiation. The author discusses the interpretive paradigm and extols the virtues of triangulation, but the second study--a quantitative project "implemented to verify the initial results from the focus group interviews" (p. 67)--cannot speak to the validity of a study completed with a different subject population and entirely different methodological assumptions.[1] The text seemed inconsistent on several points, includ ing on the intent to generalize.

Parts of the reported research were fascinating, including the themes that emerged from the focus groups in the first study. One such theme, labeled *Just American*, was illustrated by European American participants who claimed that defining oneself as anything other than American was "unnecessary and inappropriate" (p. 78); another theme, supported by comments by African American participants, strongly suggested the *Necessity of Cultural Identity* so that one does not get lost in a world wherein that identity may not be taken seriously. Because the themes were compelling and this research area is important, I found myself frustrated with the limitations imposed by the method and subject pool. This may have been a fascinating qualitative, interpretive study. But it is not written or designed as such, and the author does not provide a convincing argument for a combination of studies.[2] Given the thoroughness of the first five chapters, the spare nature of the method and analysis section was puzzling and left many questions unanswered.[3]

In the end, though impressive in intent, the text seems not to find its argument or its audience. The thorough literature review and background stand in contrast to the original research study, and the author's voice shifts perceptibly in these sections, perhaps to address different audiences or justify methodological decisions. This would be a helpful text for the literature and somewhat less helpful as a model for research.

Works Cited

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.

Notes

1. The secondary study consisted of a Likert-type scale given to 15 European American and 15 African American students in the southern United States with 14 statements derived from results from the first study (e.g., "African American/European American culture is the same as American culture").

2. One argument for the inclusion of the secondary study was to incorporate a balanced subject population: "In the initial study, the recruited participants were African American undergraduate students and European American graduate students. There was some concern about this disparity. Consequently, in the second study I recruited African American graduate students and European American undergraduate students" (p. 69). A comparable subject pool may be important if the goal is to compare or generalize, but the first study was introduced with reviews of the interpretive paradigm, wherein generalization typically is not the end goal. The inclusion of the secondary study seemed forced.

3. For example, from the method section: "If a potential participant appeared to be European American, but denied European ancestry, claiming to be of another ancestry, that individual was considered ineligible and was not recruited to participate" (p. 67). No explanation was offered to justify this practice. Given the thorough examination of the complexity of identity, a rationale should be offered.

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