

Race, Identity and Epistemology

Lenora Fulani

*Draft of article subsequently published in Holzman, L and Morss, J. (2000). *Postmodern Psychologies, Societal Practice and Political Life* [pp.151-164]. New York: Routledge.

As an African-American child growing up in Chester, Pennsylvania, I (not surprisingly) never heard the word epistemology, rarely heard the word identity, and frequently heard the word race. My race faced mistreatment, poverty and poor education, and I decided that I was going to become a psychologist so that I could help people, and so that together we could change the world. As an undergraduate I was immediately disappointed by what psychology had to offer and disturbed (outraged, really) by the official assessment of the African-American community as a tangle of pathology. I soon became a militant Black Nationalist and immersed myself in Black psychology. I still never heard anyone speak about epistemology, although just about everyone was talking about race, and we nationalists spoke about identity all the time. I rapidly developed one.

It was becoming a political activist, a Marxist, a social therapist and a builder of a multi-racial *development community*¹ that taught me about epistemology and its links to race and identity. Having learned what it is, I strongly urge that we get rid of it! In the following remarks, I will share some of

what this has looked like in my work and, hopefully, give some sense of the power there is in giving it up, especially (though not exclusively) for young people of color.

In *The End of Knowing: A New Developmental Way of Learning*, my colleagues Fred Newman and Lois Holzman provoke us into taking a hard look not just at so-called modernist epistemology and its oppressive and conservatizing force upon us, but at *all ways of knowing*, including some of the current postmodern alternatives (Newman and Holzman, 1997). To them, the problem we human beings face at this moment in history is our epistemic posture--whether individuated, social, cultural or relational. Challenging truth, reality and objectivity but leaving *knowing* untouched won't do, they claim, as a tactic for world transformation. Don't we have to subject the notion of narrative itself to the same rigorous deconstruction as has been applied to modernism's grandnarratives? And can we leave untouched the polarity relativism/absolutism even as we reject the bipolar world view that justifies and perpetuates the status quo? What about the concept of relationality--has it merely slipped all the troublesome individual particulars (including individuated selves) under the rug? Finally, shouldn't we question the common assumption that socially constructed identity and identity politics were and remain a 'natural' stage in the cultural-

political process?

Coming as I do from a working class African-American family and having become a Marxist after I developed a strong Black identity, I find Newman and Holzman's methodological challenges extremely helpful in understanding both the pulls of identity (especially racial identity) and how it is that, more often than not, I successfully resist them in my work, whether that is supporting Black and Latino inner city youth to create new performances of themselves or working within the mostly white Reform Party to restructure the American political process through the building of a viable independent party. We don't follow or apply a method (not even the method of Marxist praxis). What we do is practice method (Holzman and Newman, 1979; Newman and Holzman, 1993), and it is this non-epistemologically based group activity that deconstructs identity psychology and identity politics. As I delineate the features of this method, I will illustrate with examples from my experiences with two New York City youth programs based on the practice of method about which Newman and Holzman write -- the All Stars Talent Show Network, an anti-violence cultural organization, and the Development School for Youth, an after-school leadership training program for high school age students.

What's Wrong With Identity?

Understood culturally rather than politically, the nationalism I embraced as a college student is the dominant tradition in the African-American community. Nationalist political beliefs -- such as the establishment of a separate Black state or a return to Africa -- are not widely held in the African-American community, but a strong nationalist bias is apparent in the widespread belief that African-American *culture* is of great importance and must be expressed in a multitude of ways in daily life.

Racism, of course, historically forced the African-American community to create its own institutions (e.g., Black colleges and Black churches) and foisted on it a constant awareness of racial identification. We would expect the African-American community to be more eager than most for cultural norms based on race to disappear -- but that is not the case. Since the post-integration 1960s, the African-American community has purposefully perpetuated its over-identification with race. This kind of cultural nationalism goes beyond knowing one's history and taking pride in it. It entails a set of postures, attitudes and beliefs — for example, that the way to positively change institutions is to increase Black presence in them -- as well as language, gestures, dress, forms of music, etc., that

have become identified as ‘behaving Black’ and, therefore, in this racially identified context, hip and cool. Parents implicitly and explicitly teach their children this nationalistic model as ‘the way to be’ in the world.

The problem with this model of worldliness is that it’s culturally and politically naive. The postures, attitudes and norms that are hip and cool ‘in the hood’ don’t open doors outside the African-American community; they’re less than helpful in navigating the complex network of societal institutions in our multi-cultural society. Ironically, while many Black-identified cultural postures and attitudes have been adopted by white Americans to enhance their hipness, and by major clothing manufacturers to market a cultivated a hip/ Black image to both white and Black consumers, the African-American community, by virtue of the self-imposed narrowness of its cultural nationalism, has largely been unable to take advantage of this phenomenon.

To complicate matters, “behave Black” isn’t the only message conveyed (implicitly or explicitly) to children by African-American parents. At the same time, they also convey that it’s necessary to assimilate in order for their children to become educated and get a good job. The contradiction between the cultural nationalism of the African-American community and its desire to see its children educated and succeed in mainstream culture is something most parents have not

yet come to terms with. Will children have to subvert their history and culture in order to “make it?” Will they have to deny who they are? Can the contradiction be resolved?

The work of Kwame Anthony Appiah is helpful on this issue. Appiah is professor of African-American Studies and Philosophy at Harvard University whose recent works include *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (1992), *The Dictionary of Global Culture* written with Henry Lewis Gates Jr. (1997) and *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, co-authored with Amy Gutman (1996).

Like many scholars, Appiah argues that there is no such thing as race. Going beyond showing that there is no biological evidence for racial differences, he claims that race is not cultural either. The move to identify racial differences as cultural, according to Appiah, falsely suggests that people in one cultural grouping are the same as each other and different from people in other cultural groupings. Racism is then understood as stemming from cultural misunderstandings. But, Appiah points out (and I agree with him), Black and white Americans understand each other just fine. Racism isn’t a matter of cultural differences and misunderstandings; it’s a matter of political power.

Appiah speaks of the need to get beyond what Sartre identified as anti-racist racism--as exemplified, for example, in black pride and Pan-Africanism. The establishment of this kind of racial identity, he says, is a stage in a people's demand to be recognized. But there are problems that come with identity: it becomes categorical, defining and rigid, signaling association with particular political or social agendas and particular beliefs. Like Ken Gergen (this volume, pp. __), Appiah writes persuasively of the destructive effects of identity politics, as identity-defined interest groups compete with each other for legislative initiatives and social policy on the basis of presumed shared characteristics and on their own behalf. Appiah recommends that we engage in "identity play"--that we step back from our identities, see that they are not always so important, and not all of who we are--and move on to postracial identities. He describes this "moving on" as "the ... imaginative work of constructing collective identities for a democratic nation in a world of democratic nations, work that must go hand in hand with cultivating democracy here and encouraging it everywhere" (19xx, p. _).

Appiah is doing more than offering a practical way out. He is in fact hinting at a different methodological foundation for human social life. Within the model of cultural nationalism life is, methodologically speaking, fundamentally about being 'who you are' (e.g., expressing one's 'Blackness'). Appiah is

suggesting that it's time for the African-American community to "move on" to a life where we are not so narrowly defined, methodologically speaking, but are rather simultaneously "who we are" *and* "who we are not."

Cultural Activity

Taking this analysis as a starting point, I want to develop my argument against epistemology and identity. While I agree with much of what Appiah says, I do take issue with his view that establishing racial identity is a necessary stage in the process of challenging identity and, further, his appeal to dialectics in making the claim that *first* we have to establish our identity and then we can challenge it (Appiah, 19xx, p. _). I see nothing natural or inevitable about this. The fact that historically this is what has happened is more an issue of a mistaken political tactic than the instantiation of the abstract thesis-antithesis-synthesis dialectic, or an equally abstract stagist theory of human history. By relating to Marxism and to dialectics as epistemological rather than as methodological Appiah misses the opportunity to subject identity to the radical deconstruction it deserves.

A book important in my own development, *Black Bolshevik*, is helpful here. In this autobiography, Harry Haywood, an African-American leader of the Communist Party USA in the 1930s and '40s, writes about his struggles to come

to terms with being black and being a communist (19xx). Was he losing his black identity to his communist one? Which identity was dominant? Who was he? ...really?

As I have come to understand it, being a revolutionary (a 'postmodern' Bolshevik, we could say) is not an issue of identity at all. A revolutionary is someone who carries out certain revolutionary activities--it has everything to do with what you're doing and nothing to do with who you are. It is the epistemologizing of Marxism--the distortion of Marx's method into categorization and abstraction -- that makes it seem as if being Black, being a woman, being gay, being working class and being a revolutionary are identities and compare-able.

Without epistemology, what is there? There is revolutionary activity. Marx's usefulness to me is located here--in the self-conscious and self-reflexive "changing of circumstances and of human activity" (Marx, 1974, p. 121). Without such a method to change totalities, to reshape the existing circumstances and create something new, *how* would one be and *why* would one be a revolutionary in non-revolutionary times such as the ones in which we are living?

In their 1993 book, *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Scientist*, Newman and Holzman repeatedly pose this question. Their take on Vygotsky, unlike many of his contemporary followers, is that he is best understood as a revolutionary

Marxist methodologist. From this activity-theoretic (as opposed to epistemological) perspective, one of the most important contributions Vygotsky has made is his specification of Marx's conception of revolutionary activity to human development and psychology.

In attempting to create a psychology that would not fall into the dualistic traps of existing theories, such as behaviorism or introspectionism, nor perpetuate the assumed bi-polarities of individual-social, cognitive-affective, or biological-cultural, Vygotsky argued that *human social-cultural-historical activity* is the proper object of psychological study. He wisely realized that this new object of study required a new methodology--that you couldn't study activity with tools designed to study behavior. What was needed was not just new tools, but new *kinds of tools*--ones that are a dialectical unity with what they produce--or as he put it, "simultaneously the tool and the result of study" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.).

Newman and Holzman take this methodological discovery of Vygotsky and run with it. To them, tool-and-result methodology is not only what is required of revolutionary psychologists, but it is the ordinary, day-to-day process of how human beings learn and develop--unless societal conditions put a stop to it, as they have in the latter part of this century. Human beings create development and learning by creating the environments that make development

and learning possible. In other words, we create developmental, revolutionary activity.

This understanding of development is a far cry from the linear, dualistic, stagist, individuated--and race, gender and class-biased--theory I was taught in graduate school. Vygotsky's views on learning and development are refreshingly and radically monistic and anti-stagist. Development is not something that happens *to us* as we go about constructing a Kantian world, nor is it a prerequisite for learning--as it is for Piaget. Development and learning are sustained revolutionary activities--a dialectic unity in which *learning leads development*. Babbling babies become speakers of a language by participating with their caregivers in creating environments in which they learn in advance of their development--in simple terms, they do what they don't know how to do. They babble, adults talk back to them; they creatively imitate, and so on. There is no knowledge antecedent to this activity, and no understanding separate from it. As some have pointed out, there couldn't be. Babies are related to as speakers, they perform as speakers--this joint activity *is and creates* a new speaker (Newman and Holzman, 1993).

This learning-leading-development activity is key to the work of the East Side Institute and the programs that utilize its approach. Additionally, I think it's

key to practicing postmodern revolutionary Marxism whatever your affiliation. We believe that reinitiating developmental activity is what revolutionaries should be doing today. I think political activists of all kinds--those working against sexual oppression, against reactionary nationalist forces, those involved in anti-racist work, those fighting class oppression, gay activists, those in democracy movements--need to become *activity-ists*.

As I understand it, to be an activity-ist is to be a non-knower and a performer. Methodologically, these two go together: we cannot *know* what developmental activity is; we have to perform it (Newman and Holzman, 1997). Despite how rare and undervalued performance is in our culture, we human beings can, fortunately, reinitiate our performatory capacities with surprising ease. It is the social identities which lock us into acting certain ways because “that’s who we are” that stand our way.

From this perspective, cultural nationalism turns out to be a rather substantial impediment to the development of the Black community, both individually and collectively — it’s a particularly severe case of “that’s who we are.” To the extent that the cultural nationalism that pervades child-rearing among African-Americans reinforces identity, it undermines learning and development in the African-American community.

Growing Up Performed

My work with teenagers has been incredibly challenging, rewarding and developmental. Traditional developmental theory calls adolescence a crucial stage in identity formation. From an activity-ist perspective, identity is — if anything - - as much a part of the problems of violence, drugs, teen pregnancy and school failure as economic and political factors. (Spend a little time with inner city youth if you want to see how destructive and anti-developmental identity can be.) Our youth projects might be said to be anti-identity — we have no interest in helping young people become possessors of different, more secure and positive identities because we believe that won't help them grow. Instead, we support them to continuously create their development through the creative, emergent activity of performing beyond themselves. The All Stars Talent Show Network and the Development School for Youth are cultural-performatory environments in which “identity play” and “performing ahead of oneself” can take place — not *after* or *in* these environments but, in tool-and-result fashion, along with their creation.

The All Stars Talent Show Network. The All Stars Talent Show Network is an anti-violence youth program which is made possible by grassroots fundraising. Now in its fifteenth year, it involves some 30,000 children and teenagers. The young people, primarily from working class and poor Black and Latino communities, produce talent shows in their neighborhoods (up to 65 shows in a year) as an alternative to violence. They not only sing, dance and rap in these shows, they take responsibility for producing them. Working with adults from the All Stars and from their own communities, they find locations for the shows (usually high school and junior high school auditoriums), sell the tickets, stage manage, usher, emcee, run the light and sound boards, and maintain security. They also build the audience and mentor younger children in the program. In the process, these young people not only learn all sorts of technical skills, they also learn to relate to kids from other neighborhoods, to work with adults and to interact with their community's institutions (schools, churches, block associations, etc.). In short, they create an environment in which they can perform as leaders, and most of them, in fact, do.

Among other things, the All Stars can be viewed as a form of supplementary education as this term has been popularized by Edmund Gordon, one of the founders and the first director of research for Project Head Start

(Gordon, 1994). It is an educational activity organized outside the parameters of the public school system and engineered to address the particularities of the population it engages. Educators speak of supplementary education as everything from after school literacy classes to parents bringing their children to museums and concerts. Most supplementary education directed to working class and minority youth has in recent years been cognitively based and focused on buttressing the young peoples' less-than-ideal academic skills. In contrast, the education the All Stars provides has more to do with *developing* than with *knowing*.

The All Stars builds on young peoples' strengths, including their connections to their communities. It begins with what most young working class African-American and Latino youth are interested in, namely, hip hop culture. Every group or individual who auditions, no matter their age or the nature of their act, must create and perform a skit or performance piece on a subject that they think is important to their community. These performance pieces are videotaped and shown on a big screen before a group's live performance at a talent show. The creation of the skits not only gets young people articulating their views and experiences, it also helps them realize, in many cases for the first time, that they actually have something to say. In addition, the creation of dramatic skits expands

the meaning of performance for the participants beyond singing, dancing and rapping.

In our culture, inner city youngsters are typically over-identified with destructive behavior, defined by others as having nothing to give, and all too many of them adopt the appropriate identity and act out the expected roles.

Participating in the All Stars requires that they perform as builders and givers and, in doing so, they discover that they can. In this process, they create new options for who they are and how they want to be. They create opportunities to actively participate in ever-broadening arenas. For the past five years, the youth of the All Stars have produced the annual Phyllis Hyman Phat Friend Awards in which they honor adults in government, education, entertainment, sports and other fields whose work supports the development of young people. Last year, they co-wrote and co-produced with the Castillo Theatre a play entitled *Crown Heights*, which brought Black and Jewish youth together to re-examine the disturbances that took place in 1991 in Crown Heights, Brooklyn (a neighborhood shared uneasily by Hassidic Jews and Blacks). In 1994, All Stars members traveled to Moscow where they presented a symposium, "Developing in a Violent World," at an international conference of Vygotsky scholars; in 1998, to Canada for the United Nation's Youth Vision Jeunesse Drug Abuse Prevention Forum, and to

Santiago, Chile for the 19th World Scout Jamboree where they displayed “development through performance” by creating a talent show with some of the 20,000 young participants.

At its best, the All Stars provides its participants with a worldliness that they previously lacked, and, as part of that worldliness, with experience and skills in leadership. Its effect is the growth of the whole person. In the best sense of the term, the All Stars is about moral development. Its impact, therefore, goes beyond individual education, to influence the culture of the community.²

The Development School for Youth. This is a newer and smaller outside of- and supplemental to-school performance project. Launched in Spring 1997, the program graduated over 100 high school students in its first two years. Unlike the All Stars, which is an ongoing and continuous program (in which many youngsters have “grown up”), the Development School for Youth is a twelve-week program (with two cycles per year). There is, in addition, a summer program in which the teens are placed as interns in businesses in the New York metropolitan area (including Merrill Lynch, area banks, media and other corporate environments).

During the twelve weeks, students work with program associates (these are financial donors to the program who additionally have volunteered to train and

teach the young people how to perform in the culture of the donor's/associate's professional location, e.g., Wall St., banking, entertainment, computer graphics, etc.). These sessions are structured as performances and challenge the deeply rooted assumptions about who teenagers are and their ambivalence about confronting the question of who these particular young people are becoming. Each week, the stage is set, casting done, directors chosen, and when the director calls "Curtain," the performance begins.

On a trip to Washington, D.C., the young people were directed to perform professionalism in the offices of Congress. They rehearsed looking a politician in the eye, shaking hands, and saying "My name is _____. It's a pleasure to meet you." From an epistemological perspective, one might see this as a potential clash of identity for these mostly poor, very unprofessional kids. Are they subverting their class identity by being professional? Are they denying who they really are? And, if so, isn't this impositional? I don't think it's impositional. On the contrary, as I see it, identity is impositional -- because it carries the presumption that one can know who these kids "really" are.

The challenge to identity begins before the start of the program, with both the recruitment and orientation process. We currently recruit at fifteen New York City high schools, and in our opening "speech" we (co-director Pam Lewis and I)

talk to young people about development. Among the things we tell is that we all hear people say how important it is to reach kids when they're young and we're concerned that this sends a message that by the time you're 13 or 14 you're already formed, you're all you're going to be. We tell them we don't believe this and that people can develop all through their lives. Fearful of making mistakes, all of us tend to do only what we know how to do, which is a sure fire way to stop growing. We tell them that what's unique about our approach is that we create environments where they can make mistakes, fail, get up and do it again and again. The Development School for Youth is a place where they can create without getting hung up on rightness and wrongness.

The current format for orientation illustrates the performatory approach we take to identity play. All incoming students, their parents, the workshop leaders, program associates, support committee members and donors are invited to attend. At the most recent orientation, emceed by a long-time donor, I chose for my "development topic" the cultural nationalism of the Black community and the work I had been doing getting to know and prepare the program associates to work with young people who they, by and large, either thought they already "knew" or were afraid to get to know. After my talk, the program associates (nearly all of whom are highly accomplished, top management professionals) got

on the stage and performed a skit they had created entitled 1-800-THE GAME, in which they performed as young people” before” and “after” going through the program. Many of them “made fools of themselves” as they imitated teens describing what it was like to learn how to talk, dress, be on time, etc. The young people then went to the stage one at a time and introduced themselves. They did this with widely varying levels of skill. Some wrote poems for the occasion and others read poems written by others. Some were terrified and barely got out a sentence. Some were funny while others were very serious. I remember particularly one 17-year-old African-American young man who got on stage and said, “When they asked me to introduce myself I realized I didn’t know myself enough. I guess the reason I came to this program was to learn more about myself and what place I can have in this world.”

In Schools for Growth: Radical Alternatives to Current Educational Models (1997), Holzman discusses performance in relation to education and institutionalized learning. She argues that current educational reforms (even radical ones) apply an epistemological paradigm. They misidentify the source of the educational crisis as stemming from either specific learning and teaching methods or strong ideological bias. They then focus on bringing into schools materials that tell the real (instead of the ideological) story and other ways of learning and

teaching that are sensitive to culturally different ways of knowing. But the problem with schools, Holzman says (and I agree) is not a particular epistemological bias, but the bias *toward epistemology*. Schools separate learning from development. They discourage the creative joint activity of learning-leading-development; they wrench learning from this unity, and attach it to the acquisition of knowledge.

If, as Holzman, Newman and I argue, knowing has outlived its usefulness and actually gets in the way of growing, then efforts to create better knowers are doomed to failure. What should schools be in a culture where development has stopped? We need to transform schools into environments where developmental activity dominates. We need, above all, to teach development--a non-knowing performatory activity. Students should not be captured by culture but participate in creating it.

The strength of our activity-based youth programs lies in their capacity to reinitiate performance -- that capacity to be who you are and who you are not at the same time. This kind of developmental activity is vital to inner city youth who are trapped in very limited and too often negative social roles at an early age. How does a high school freshman with failing grades approach the principal of her school about using the auditorium for an All Stars show? By performing as a

community organizer. How does a dance group with sharp, sophisticated moves come to teach them to kids with a shaky performance? By performing as mentors rather than competitors. How is it possible for 12-year-olds to provide security for a show with 40 acts and 2,000 in the audience? By performing the moral authority to provide leadership to the older kids and adults in attendance.

From a non-epistemological, activity-ist perspective, what's significant about our young peoples' performances of professionalism and leadership as producers of the All Stars, interns at Merrill Lynch or guests of Congress, is not that these young people now *have* a new identity, but that they have the capacity to *project it* and, given the opportunity and support, they do. This is what is developmental about performatory activity. And this is how, as I understand it, we cannot get rid of race without getting rid of identity--and the epistemic posture that supports it and all of its weight.

Notes

1. The development community (or developing development community) is what Newman and Holzman call the environment that that we are continuously building, one that is not overdetermined by epistemology and the varied institutional arrangements that perpetuate it” (Newman and Holzman, 1997, p. 47).
2. While it’s impossible to measure the impact of a single program on the totality of a community with any exactitude, All Stars producer Pam Lewis feels that the program has been a factor in the gradual but clear shift away from crack and a glorification of violence among young people that characterized inner city communities in the 1980s. While there are many factors that have contributed to the dramatic drop in violence in New York City over the last few years, statistics supplied by the All Stars indicate that those neighborhoods where the All Stars have had the longest and most consistent presence — among them Bedford Stuyvesant, East New York and Brownsville in Brooklyn, the Morrisania and Soundview in the South Bronx, Central and East Harlem, and Jamaica and Far Rockaway in Queens -- have also had the biggest drop in violent crime.

References

- Appiah, K. A. (1992). *In my father's house: Africa in the philosophy of culture*.
New York: Oxford University Press.
- Appiah, K. A. (1996). Race, culture, identity: Misunderstood connections. In K.
A. Appiah and A. Gutmann (1996). *Color conscious: The political
morality of race*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 30-105.
- Appiah, K. A. and Gates, H. L. Jr. (1997). *The dictionary of global culture*. New
York: Knopf.
- Gordon, E. (1994). Too much schooling too little education. *The Journal of Negro
Education, 63 (3)*.
- Haywood, H. *Black Bolshevik*.
- Holzman, L. (1999). *Performing psychology: A postmodern culture of the mind*.
New York: Routledge.
- Holzman, L. (1997). *Schools for growth: Radical alternatives to current
educational models*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Marx, K. (1974). Theses on Feuerbach. In K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German
ideology*. New York: International Publishers, pp. 121-123.

Newman, F. and Holzman, L. (1993). *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary scientist*.

London: Routledge.

Newman, F. and Holzman, L. (1997). *The end of knowing: A new developmental*

way of learning. London. Routledge.

Vygotsky, L .S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University

Press.