

African American Identity: An Examination of Genealogy, Genetics, and Race

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Abstract

The following is an examination of African American identity, made through complex and ambitious research. Further, this is an overview that helps to answer the overarching questions of the who, what, when, where, and how of African American identity. The purpose of this paper is to explore how genealogy and genetics studies fit within the context and concept of African American race and racial identity. Cumulative research in genetics, genealogy, history, sociology, and psychology are essential in clarifying the understanding of race and racial identity. Once this understanding is reached, one can answer how genealogy and genetics studies fit within the context and concept of race and racial identity. Overall, all these ideas contribute to the conception of African American identity. This article is a smaller portion of a larger work.

The concept of understanding identity and who exactly one is, especially as it relates to being African American, is complex. The complexities of African American identity cannot be broken down into merely one paper; one can only answer this question when one looks at the origins, history, and experiences that play into the ideas and concepts of race.

I aim in this paper to paint an overview of how these areas of studies help us to understand the overarching question in the who, what, when, where, and how, of African American identity. I will accomplish this by examining how African Americans see themselves in both an individual and social perspective. The purpose of this paper is to explore how genealogy and genetics studies fit within the context and concept of African American race and racial identity. Therefore,

cumulative research in genetics, genealogy, history, sociology, and psychology are essential in clarifying our current understanding of race and racial identity.

Once we reach this understanding, we can answer how genealogy and genetic studies fit within the context and concept of race and racial identity. In conclusion we will see how all these ideas contribute to the conception of African American identity.

Genetics: Nature vs. Nurture

Webster's dictionary defines identity as the fact of being who or what a person or thing is (Merriam-Webster, 1828). An understanding of identity is formed throughout life and life experiences. Throughout these experiences, individuals are posed with a two-sided dilemma: 1) how one sees oneself, and 2) how the world sees

them. For African Americans, this dilemma is a daily battle. W.E.B Du Bois examines this dilemma in his book *Souls of Black Folks* and refers to it as double consciousness. W.E.B Du Bois was an American civil rights activist, leader, Pan-Africanist, educator, historian, writer, poet, scholar, and sociologist. His term, “double consciousness”, describes the two competing identities that Black Americans face: “One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” (W.E.B Du Bois, 2015, page 11). From Negro, to Black, to African American, a progression in classification and labeling makes the concept of identity, more complicated. There is a psychological challenge between seeing one’s self as an American and seeing oneself as a Black person; or within one’s Africaness, all while living in a white-centric America.

How does being the “non-dominant” race in American society affect identity? The term double consciousness helps illuminate the oppression African Americans go through and had gone through on a daily basis. They are subjected to living in a society that devalues them and does not see them as equals, despite an ever-growing request in a post-antebellum culture for equality and dignity. This psychological battle threatens to damage not only one’s identity, but their self-esteem and self-conception. African Americans also, as a result, have a hard time unifying their African American subculture with their overall American identity. This concept of double consciousness brings into play ideas of psychology, but also shows that genetics and genealogy can play into the conversation as well.

Oftentimes when we examine racial identity, we refer to Du Bois’s (2015) concept of double consciousness however, nature vs. nurture is also a concept worth examining in this conversation (11). Nature

vs. Nurture can help us to examine how genetics plays into the role of identity. The concept of Nature vs. Nurture shows us how our innate being formed experiences, and circumstances, all interplay in affecting concepts of self. Finally, as human beings first and foremost, our self-conception determines our ability to accomplish self-actualization. Self-actualization, recognized as a main goal in life, is the realization or fulfillment of one’s talents and potentialities; a drive or need present in everyone.

Nature refers to biological and genetic impact on human traits (i.e., physical appearance and personality characteristics) while nurture describes environmental influences, examines the impact of who we are, and views how we grow to be (i.e., how we were raised, our social relationships, and our surrounding culture). This results in a debate which involves the extent to which particular aspects of behavior are a product of either inherited (i.e., genetic) or acquired (i.e., learned) influences. Nurture is the influence of external factors after conception; examples of these factors are life experiences, exposure to certain things, and the learning & education an individual receives. Nature is what we think of, as being pre-wired and is influenced by genetic inheritance and other biological factors. So, what roles does nature vs. nurture play into African American identity? The answer is genetics.

Genealogy: A Reflection on the U.S. Census Bureau

When looking at genetics, as it relates to race, we should look at how individuals in America categorize themselves. The Census Bureau defines race as a person’s self-identification with one or more social groups. An individual can, report as: White; Black, or African American; American Indian, Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other

Pacific Islander. The Census Bureau explains each racial category and makes note that the concept of race is separate from the concept of Hispanic origin. Each racial category has its own definition; Black or African American is defined as “a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa”. This includes people who indicate their race as Black or African American, or report entries such as Kenyan, Nigerian, or Haitian (United States Census Bureau, 2020). The Census Bureau has been questioned in its offers of racial categories, specifically as it relates to Hispanic individuals. This demographic in recent years has begun to examine its heritage and roots, specifically its African roots. The Hispanic/Latin American community has begun to examine its African diasporic connection and faces a dilemma in what they call their Afro-Latinidad identity. If the Hispanic population faces this dilemma, imagine the cognitive dissonance African Americans have about their Africaness.

The relationship between race and genetics is relevant in the Census Bureau discussion and how it relates to the overarching question of African American identity. If we focus on our systems of racial

classification, we see that as a society we have been going the wrong way about connecting genetics and genealogy to the concepts of racial identity.

Conclusion

African American identity is a complex understanding and conclusion of being. Thus, it can be supported and discovered through a societal view of genetics, genealogy, history, sociology, and psychology. However, the decision of how one identifies is based on a balance of interpersonal and intrapersonal conclusions. As generations come and go, society changes, and new information is found; African Americans continue to view their identity in new and complex ways. Self-actualization is a process that starts from conception and follows us through life. The questions, evidence, experience through nature vs. nurture, origin, history and culture, and society and thought help African Americans define their identity in their own unique way and therefore reach self-actualization, self-awareness, and enlightenment about their own being, along with how it fits in relation to the greater world.

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Recommended Citation

Abdullah, N. Y. (2021). African American Identity: An examination of genealogy, genetics, and race. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com/paper-65>