

Race and Rachel Dolezal: A Conversation with Patricia Sunderland

Recent news surrounding Rachel Dolezal has led to quite the discussion on race. Our associates at the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference ([EPIC](#)) pointed us to an article ([‘You May Not Know It But I’m Black’: White Woman’s Self-Identification As Black](#)) that Patricia Sunderland, a longtime AAA member and leading consumer researcher, wrote about in *Ethnos* **18 years ago!**

Below is a brief Q&A with Patricia. Join the discussion and add your own responses in the comments section.

Q: To what extent do you think your article is still relevant today?

A: Absolutely still relevant, as the way that Rachel Dolezal is constituting her identity is completely in line with the way women in my research constituted their identities 25 years ago. My article featured details of the constructions of five women; Rachel’s example could have been example six.

As I argued then, it is an intertwinement of the discourse of race and the discourse of ethnicity, combined with the option of mixed identities and the context of their everyday lives that allows this particular identity narrative to make cultural sense. As I wrote in the abstract for that 1997 article “...The element of choice involved with American ethnic discourse, combined with a general shift toward the allowance of mixed identities, allows this identity construction to be understood as a sensible one.” My work drew in part of the work of Karen Blu (The Lumbee Problem) and her prediction 35 years ago, that “There is no ‘right’ to choose one’s ‘racial’ ancestry, as race is currently conceived, but if race and ethnicity become progressively intertwined in a new way, it is possible that being Black will, in years to come, be more a matter of individual choice and less a matter of assignment by others” (1990: 210)

Q: How does this help us put the current story about Rachel Dolezal in a richer context?

A: It can help us see that it’s not just the identity narrative of one odd person. It seems that Ms. Dolezal has told some strange stories (e.g., that she lived in South Africa for some time, but her brother says other members of the family did, but she did not). Hers is a complex individual story and the family dynamics are odd. As it has been pointed out, for anyone to pass (in any way, shape, or form) without anyone knowing, family members (and others) have to be complicit. BUT, that she would use race/ethnicity strategically is quotidian; and that she would embrace this identity is a separate issue. Women in the mainstream jazz world I studied, a milieu in which whiteness is not the ascendant cultural form, drew on past lives, ways of looking, being, ancestors, all kinds of things to make themselves black – in short, drawing on the discourse of race as well as the discourse of ethnicity -- and this is what Ms. Dolezal is doing. Like Rachel Dolezal, white women of the mainstream jazz world also framed their identity narratives in line with their anti-racist desires.

If there is something good about this entire Rachel Dolezal issue it is that it has stirred debate on top of the other recent debates spurred by the publicity of the more horrifying events in Ferguson, Charleston, Baltimore, Cleveland, Staten Island and the US as a whole (note minutes 9-13 and 36-37 in [Alice Goffman’s Plenary talk](#) at the 2015 British Sociological Association; and Goffman’s work is at the center of another debate playing out in the press at the moment).

Some interesting things have been written, for example in the *New York Times*, that clearly show there is a history of Ms. Dolezal’s construction. See for example: ["Rachel Dolezal’s Unintended Gift to America"](#) and ["Rachel Dolezal’s ‘Passing’ Isn’t So Unusual."](#) Of course there is a critical other view that passing for white when your skin is dark is *not* an option and what’s really going is white privilege in another guise. This I also discussed in 1997, but to stay with the *New York Times*, see for example: ["Black Like Who? Rachel Dolezal’s Harmful Masquerade."](#)

As Peter Erickson noted in 1995, embracing an identity in line with political beliefs, or having to become

'blood brothers,' may be a peculiarly American and problematic way of doing things." Race is an exceedingly culturally complex and fraught issue, as I concluded, quoting from this 1997 article, in my own comment to the *New York Times*, "As a woman of the jazz community also said 25 years ago, "So anyway, you know, we're living in a world where the major psychosis is racism and it's something that one is aware of all the time, every moment of the day and night. And choosing to align yourself with something other than what's portrayed as the, ah, appropriate thing for white people, is always a danger. I mean that's not really enough, not nearly enough to say about racism by all means. But that's a little piece of it."

Individual anthropologists should, and will continue to have, a lot to say about this issue. I saw the AAA statement on race posted ... let's have the debate continue, here and in the popular press with our voices.