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David W. Stinson
Georgia State University, dstinson@gsu.edu

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EDITORIAL

"Race"[1] in Mathematics Education: Are *We* a Community of Cowards?

David W. Stinson
Georgia State University

> Though this nation has proudly thought of itself as an ethnic melting pot, in things racial we have always been and continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards.
>
> – Eric Holder Jr. (2009), Attorney General of the United States

The title of this editorial is evidently inspired by Attorney General Holder's statement, extracted from a speech he delivered on February 18, 2009, during the U.S. Department of Justice's African American History Month Program.[2] The specific phrase "a nation of cowards" quickly became a sound bite on television news stations from CNN to FOX News and a headline in newspapers from *The New York Times* to *The Wall Street Journal*. The media frenzy surrounding the phrase continued for days and even weeks within the op-ed pages of newspapers, postings on Internet blogs, and the sound waves of talk radio.

Many people—from political pundits to everyday citizens—who responded to Holder's (2009) remarks claimed that his use of the word *cowards* was too harsh and ultimately, divisive. But others, including President Obama, argued that

[1] It is important to note that I use the term *race* not to mark some biological taxonomy—no such taxonomy exists—but rather as a powerful socio-cultural and -political *discursive formation* (cf. Foucault, 1969/1972) or worldview

> invented to assign some groups to perpetual low status, while others were permitted access to privilege, power, and wealth. The tragedy in the United States has been that the policies and practices stemming from this worldview succeeded all too well in constructing unequal populations among Europeans, Native Americans, and peoples of African descent. (American Anthropological Association, 1998, ¶ 12)

For the American Anthropological Association's complete "Statement on 'Race,'" as adopted by the Executive Board May 17, 1998, see http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm.

[2] For Attorney General Holder's complete remarks as prepared for delivery, see http://www.justice.gov/ag/speeches/2009/ag-speech-090218.html.

DAVID W. STINSON is an associate professor of mathematics education in the Department of Middle-Secondary Education and Instructional Technology in the College of Education, at Georgia State University, P.O. Box 3978, Atlanta, GA, 30303; e-mail: dstinson@gsu.edu. His research interests include exploring socio-cultural, -historical, and -political aspects of mathematics and mathematics teaching and learning from a critical postmodern theoretical (and methodological) perspective. He is a co-founder and current editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education*.

although it was perhaps not the "best" word choice, that the Attorney General did have a point (as reported in *The New York Times*):

> President Barack Obama has chided his attorney general, Eric Holder Jr., for describing America as a "nation of cowards" when discussing race, wading into a tumult that flared over Holder's indictment of the way this country talks about ethnicity.
>
> "I think it's fair to say that if I had been advising my attorney general, we would have used different language," Obama said in a mild rebuke from America's first black president to its first black attorney general.
>
> In an interview with The New York Times on Friday, the president said that despite Holder's choice of words, he had a point.
>
> "We're oftentimes uncomfortable with talking about race until there's some sort of racial flare-up or conflict," he said, adding, "We could probably be more constructive in facing up to sort of the painful legacy of slavery and Jim Crow and discrimination." (Cooper, 2009, ¶ 1–4)

But what does Holder's (2009) statement have to do with mathematics education? And why even bring up Holder's 2009 statement here? Isn't that just old news? Is it to incite divisiveness? Or, is it to pose a question regarding an issue that we are too often uncomfortable talking (and researching) about? Given the mission of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education*—to foster a transformative global academic space in mathematics that embraces critical research, emancipatory pedagogy, and scholarship of engagement in urban communities—the intent is evidently the latter. Because, at the end of the day, even within the euphoric "post-racial" sentiments surrounding the Obama presidency (Bonilla-Silva & Ray, 2009), race still matters (West, 1994), if we wish to hope that democracy still matters (West, 2004).

For over 3 decades now, a growing number of mathematics education researchers and scholars have put forth reasoned arguments for researching and theorizing race in mathematics education, linking such arguments to goals of equity (for some of the earliest arguments see, e.g., Matthews, 1984; Reyes & Stanic, 1988; Secada, 1992; Tate, 1994).[3] And more recently, Martin (2009b) ad-

[3] Matthew's (1984), in her review of "minorities" in mathematics education, marked 1975 as the starting point of researching (theorizing?) race in mathematics education. But even as she did so, she noted several problems that limited the "usefulness and appropriateness" of these early studies:

> One problem is that most reports of the studies are either unpublished papers or final reports to funding agencies and therefore are relatively inaccessible. Another problem is that some of the findings could be fortuitous in that neither the original nor the primary focus of the study was on minorities. More often than not, the study concerned sex-related differences, and race was included as a background variable. Inadequate reasons are then given to explain any race effects. (p. 84)

For some of the earliest arguments for theorizing race in U.S. education in general, see Woodson (1933/1990) and Du Bois (1935); evidently, calls for theorizing race in education began long before the 1970s.

dresses, directly, the task of theorizing race in mathematics education; he asks us to consider mathematics education as an *institutional space of whiteness* (Martin, 2010) and *mathematics learning (and teaching) as racialized experiences* (Martin, 2009a). Therefore, in some ways, one might claim that we, as a community of researchers and scholars, have made progress in "understanding" race in mathematics education over the past 3 decades or so. Certainly, as a community, we have grown to understand how race, racism, and white supremacy function in education policy and within our communities, schools, and classrooms, and specifically, in our (urban) mathematics classrooms, haven't we? That is to say, we have become more informed, haven't we? Here, I do not attempt to provide answers to these questions but rather briefly revisit some old data and present some new data that might shed some light on the more general question: *Just where are we in regards to race in mathematics education?*

The data are extracted from two analyses of mathematics education literature: Lubienski and Bowen's 2000 *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* (*JRME*) Brief Report "Who's Counting? A Survey of Mathematics Education Research 1982–1998" and Parks and Schmeichel's 2011 American Educational Research Association paper "Theorizing of Race and Ethnicity in Mathematics Education Literature."[4] Both analyses were conducted, in part, to determine the larger, "mainstream" mathematics education community's commitment (or lack thereof) to issues of race/ethnicity by determining—through ERIC database searches between the years 1982–1998 and 1999–2010, respectively—the number of peer-reviewed journal articles published that contained both mathematics education and race/ethnicity descriptors.[5] Moreover, both analyses, as mentioned, focused solely on peer-reviewed journal articles with the assumption that they "reflect the interests and values of 'mainstream' research communities more closely than books" (Lubienski & Bowen, 2000, p. 627). Hence, the combined analyses provide if not an exact picture,[6] then certainly a detailed sketch, of the larger, mainstream mathematics education community's interests and values around issues of race/ethnicity over the past 3 decades. That is to say, if you believe in

[4] Parks and Schmeichel (2011) extended their search to include two other methods, providing a fine-grain analysis (e.g., searching every *JRME* article published between 2008–2011).

[5] Lubienski and Bowen's (2000) descriptor search included those pertaining to gender, ethnicity, class, and disability; Parks and Schmeichel's (2011) included those pertaining only to race and ethnicity. In other words, Lubienski and Bowen's analysis explored "equity" research in mathematics education generally, whereas Parks and Schmeichel's zeroed in on race/ethnicity specifically.

[6] Due to the sheer size of the ERIC database, an exact counting is somewhat unproductive. In other words, analyses such as these are not an "exact science."

numbers, and if you believe that what we write about reflects what we value (e.g., the greater the number, the greater the interest and value).

So, by the numbers, what might the two analyses say about the mathematics education community's interests and values in addressing the complexity of race/ethnicity? Lubienski and Bowen's (2000) search resulted in 112 articles with descriptors of ethnicity, published largely in non-mathematics education journals, out of 3,011 total mathematics education articles, or 3.7%. Parks and Schmeichel's (2011) search resulted in 403 articles with descriptors of race or ethnicity, again, published largely in non-mathematics education journals, for the years 1999–2010, and specifically, for the years 2005–2010, they identified 320 articles out of 8,326 total mathematics education articles, or 3.8%. Thus, the actual count of articles between the two searches is encouraging, nearly a four-fold increase (112; 403). But as the percentages reveal, in real gains, this numerical increase is deceiving. In short, percent wise, there has been virtually no increase (i.e., for nearly 3 decades, the percentage of peer-reviewed journal articles that address mathematics education and race/ethnicity has stayed constant [3.7%; 3.8%]). So, is addressing the complexities of race/ethnicity of only 4% interest and value to the mathematics education community? Or, more generally, one might infer that issues of equity are of only 4% interest and value to the mathematics education community.

Either way, even this constant of roughly 4% is dangerous, as Parks and Schmeichel (2011) note:

> Taken as a body of work, the density of studies that conceptualized race as a variable contributed to a discourse of race as primarily an easily-defined (or often not-defined-at-all) category to which one belongs and to which particular traits or outcomes can be assigned. This way of thinking about race is quite different from thinking about it in the ways common in socio-political theories, where it can be analyzed as a performance, which allows researchers to study "the enormous number of effects race thinking (and race acting) have produced," (Omi & Winant, 2004, p. 9) or as a construct implicated by history and racism as Critical Race Theory and LatCrit theory allow scholars to do. (p. 8)

These comments, in part, echo Lubienski and Bowen (2000), who a decade earlier noted:

> Because the majority of articles on ethnicity or class pertained to student achievement whereas only a few related to educational environment, students in classrooms, assessment, or teacher education, one gets the impression that researchers look primarily at outcomes of these equity groups and rarely examine how schooling experiences contribute to these outcomes. (p. 631)

Based on these arguments, it appears that not only has the interest and value of race/ethnicity stayed constant over nearly 3 decades but also the ways in which it

is conceptualized in mathematics education research has stayed more often than not constant: "as primarily an easily-defined (or often not-defined-at-all) category to which one belongs and to which particular traits or outcomes can be assigned" (Parks & Schmeichel, p, 8, 2011). This dangerously limiting, one-dimensional perspective of race/ethnicity as a category has resulted in a proliferation of "gap-gazing" research studies over the past several decades where the "achievement outcomes" of African American and Latina/o children are compared to their European and Asian American counterparts (Gutiérrez, 2008). These studies, taken to their extreme, offer little more than a static picture of the schooling inequities experienced by children, capturing neither the history nor the context of learning that produced such outcomes (Gutiérrez).

Nevertheless, here I neither wish to discuss the pros and cons of gap-gazing research in mathematics education—that has been done effectively elsewhere (see, e.g., Lubienski, 2008; Lubienski & Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez, 2008)—nor to argue the vital importance of capturing the history and context of student learning—that too, has been done effectively elsewhere (see, e.g., Martin, Gholson, & Leonard, 2010). But rather thoughtfully return to and focus on the 4%!

– Are *we* a community of cowards?

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