

Paper Prepared For 2009 Centennial Commemoration Academic Conferences  
Knowledge, Practice, Experience: Implications for Psychology  
Clark University October 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>  
DRAFT 09/17/09

Present President Hall, Drs. Boring,  
Sumner, Femberger and Carlson

Voted that the candidates thesis,  
entitled 'Psychoanalysis of Freud and  
Adler' be accepted.

The following instructors examined  
the candidates for the times opposite  
their names.

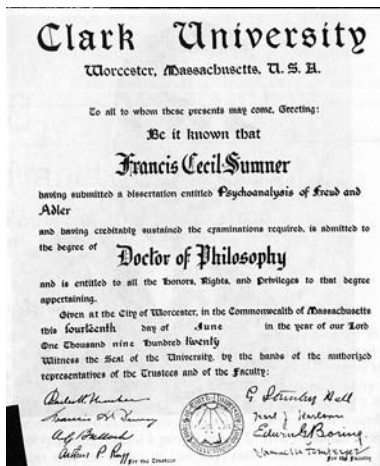
Dr. Carlson	3:10-3:55
Dr. Hall	3:55-4:30
Dr. Boring	4:30-5:00
Recess	5:00-5:10
Dr. Femberger	5:10-5:25
Dr. Sumner	5:25-5:28
Dr. Hall	5:28-5:35

Voted that the candidates examin-  
ation was satisfactory and that he be  
recommended for the Doctors degree  
Wm. H. Burnham,  
Clerk of the Day

(Guthrie, 1998, p. 216)

## The Cultural Motion of Meaning Of Race Within Lives: Guided Autobiography as a Tool for Building Knowledge and Practice Bridges in Psychology

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## **Abstract**

The field of psychology, like the United States of America, has a self-contradictory record in its theory and praxis of race of the meaning of race within lives and society. In light of dramatic demographic shifts on a global scale, this is an important historical moment to develop tools for a cultural understanding of race as a psychological and social phenomenon. Although “racial studies” have been a notable element of the research literature of the social and psychological disciplines since their origin, there has been surprisingly little attention given to the *meaning* of race as a cultural object of experience. Similarly, the narrative processing of the meaning of race has also been ignored in psychological theory and research. Yet, the storied aspect of human thought is fundamental for identity construction and personality development. Building on Wortham’s (2009) idea of cultural motion, this paper focuses on the circulation of the meaning of race across time and space. It also advances the idea that guided autobiography can be used as a tool to bridge knowledge and practice relevant to the multiple meanings of race within lives and society. This is a new and authentic center of inquiry. The pragmatic applications of cultural theories of race, with guided autobiography strategies of inquiry, offer the promise of capturing the density of the meaning of race in human science and society. The occasion for which this paper is written is also significant in the development of the field of psychology. In 1917, with the help of G. Stanley Hall, Francis C. Sumner came to Clark University and in 1920 became the first African American to earn a Ph.D. in Psychology. He later went to Howard University where he established the institution’s independent Department of Psychology and was responsible for the training of the field’s most influential African American scholars and teachers of psychology including Kenneth B. Clark, James A. Bayton and Leslie H. Hicks. It is in this tradition of intellectual synergy between Clark University and Howard University that this paper is written for discussion at Clark University, interrogating the field of psychology’s treatment of the meaning of race.

## **Summary**

The field of psychology, like the United States of America, has a self-contradictory record in its theory and praxis of the meaning of race within lives and society. In light of dramatic demographic shifts on a global scale, this is an important historical moment to develop tools for a cultural understanding of race as a psychological and social phenomenon. Both the practical problems of the lived experience of race in the United States, and the future of learning about race in formal and informal settings depends on much stronger practical theory and methodological tools to capture the complexities of *living race*. In many ways, knowledge generation, theory development and methodological innovation compose the blackbox within which knowledge, practice and experience converge.

Building on Wortham’s (2009) idea of cultural motion, this paper focuses on the circulation of the meaning of race across time and space. It also advances the idea that guided autobiography can be used as a tool to bridge knowledge and practice relevant to the multiple meanings of race within lives and society. This is a new and authentic center of inquiry. The pragmatic applications of cultural theories

of race, with guided autobiography strategies of inquiry, offer the promise of capturing the density of the meaning of race in human science and society.

Guided autobiography has a long tradition in the field of psychology. And yet, it has largely not been used as a tool for reconstructing knowledge about the meaning of race within lives. It has particular utility for capturing race as a cultural phenomenon that persons *live* within racialized societies. Aligned with the argument advanced by Craig (2009), culture here is conceptualized not as simply containing homogenous beliefs and practices. Instead, the constitutes of culture are circulating signs, models and practices. Therefore, this cultural motion of the meaning of race within lives demands that psychologists, as well as the everyday human keepers and liverers of healthy lives have tools that allow for movement. It is a theoretical, practical and experiential motion that narratives invoke that can create the most flexible, and yet complex constellation of identity configurations of race meaning.

If identity is conceptualized as an internalized and evolving narrative self as it is in contemporary personality theory (e.g. McAdams Life Story Model of Identity), knowledge and experience of the meaning of race within lives may be constructed and communicated in the form of narrative. Guided autobiography has the power to stimulate persons to construct narratives in the form of autobiographical memories of race. This narrative form provides analytic insight into how individuals craft language and experience into stitches of meaning making with representations of counternarrative well represented. The psychological function of these narratives or what Bamberg (2009) calls “small stories” is interesting to explore from the perspective of both the storyteller and the audience. Expanding knowledge about the meaning of race within lives demands a simultaneous attention to the referential level of what the story is about, as well as how the linguistic devices are contextualized within the story (see Bamberg, 2009).

Although “racial studies” have been a notable element of the research literature of the social and psychological disciplines since their origin, there has been surprisingly little attention given to the *meaning* of race as a cultural object of experience. Similarly, the narrative processing of the meaning of race has also been ignored in psychological theory and research. Yet, the storied aspect of human thought is fundamental for personality development. On the one hand, narrative theories of personality explain the storied nature of human thought in terms of autobiographical memories and narrative identity (see McAdams, 2001; Singer, 1995). On the other hand, theories of the psychological significance of race typically focus on racial identity, racism and differential experience (see Boykin, 1986; Cross, 1991; Lewis, 2004; Jones, 2003; Harrell, 1997; Sellers et al., 1998). However, theory and research in these two areas are, for the most part, isolated and do not inform one another. The theory of race self complexity is a new narrative theory of personality that describes and explains the nature, form, and psychological function of race narratives within lives and society (Winston et. al., 2004; Winston, 2008).

There are several pilot studies that have been conducted in the Identity and Success Research Lab (ISRL) at Howard University by Winston and colleagues, that provide persuasive evidence for the utility of guided autobiography generally and race narratives specifically to traverse the gap between theoretical and practical

activities. Such a bridge provides practice applications for social work, parenting, clinical and counseling psychology, as well as professional development of teachers. For example, within the Personality and Lives Study (PALS) more than 400 race narratives were collected using Guided Autobiography of 7 central life episodes. Most race narratives for this geographically diverse sample of college students who attend Howard University are oriented in a variety of settings, with school settings being most dominant. Similarly, the actors in these race narratives are most often people who are in positions of power or authority with respect to the main storyteller character (i.e. the study participant). Themes of diversity and sameness of race experience meaning are evident within the narratives with cultural racism and racial pride being the most dominant. Interesting features of these race experience themes are the ways in which persons position themselves in relation to dominant and hegemonic narratives of the meaning of race. These race narratives also typically are emotionally dense with a wide range of basic and self-conscious emotions represented, especially in narratives centered on academic emotion. Taken together this work suggests that race narratives are relevant not only to advancing knowledge production about what race means within lives, but also can be used as a tool for training and practice of professionals who are responsible for the learning, teaching, socialization, healing and transformation of individuals who contend with complex racialized experiences as part of their daily life experiences.

The occasion for which this paper is written is also significant in the development of the field of psychology. In 1917, with the help of G. Stanley Hall, Francis C. Sumner came to Clark University and in 1920 became the first African American to earn a Ph.D. in Psychology. He later went to Howard University where he established the institution's independent Department of Psychology and was responsible for the training of the field's most influential African American scholars and teachers of psychology including Kenneth B. Clark, James A. Bayton and Leslie H. Hicks. The significance of this is that Howard University has been responsible for the training and education of 90% of the nations' African American bachelors, masters and doctoral degree recipients. Without Clark University's unusual vision and model for racial inclusion at the time of institutionalized segregation, the influence of generations of African Americans to the field of psychology could be very different. It is in this tradition of intellectual synergy between Clark University and Howard University that this paper is written for discussion at Clark University, interrogating the field of psychology's treatment of the meaning of race on conceptual, methodological, and practical grounds.