The concepts of race, ethnicity and nation are social constructions. In the following essay I will describe how these concepts have affected my own process of identity formation, in particular, how I have come to recognize myself as a racialized person in relation to others. I will illustrate this by describing events in my life that have made me aware of not only my race, but also how my race affects my interaction with others. I will also describe how my identity as a Canadian has been shaped by these interactions. But before I continue I think it is necessary to offer a definition for each of the concepts in question. Once this has been done, I will then expand on the definition by referring to my own experiences.

First, let me begin by discussing the socially constructed concept of race. The term race is a social construction used to categorize human beings based on biologically transmitted traits that are deemed socially significant. Historically the purpose of categorization has been to legitimize inequalities of power and to create a hierarchy in which the powerful – in this case White people – are the dominant class. Unlike most White people I won’t deny that I have a racialized identity within society. My family is a mix of Dutch-German and British. My parents were both born in Canada, as were each of their parents aside from my grandmother on my mom’s side, who came to Canada after World War Two as a “war-bride.”

The concept of race has affected my identity formation, not only in the way I see myself but also in the way that others see me. While it may be cliché to say this, I do not “see” race. That is not to say that I am unaware of race because that would be impossible, having been socialized into a culture that has an almost unhealthy obsession with the categorization and separation of our skin-deep differences. So when I say I do
not “see” race I mean that I do not use race as a measurement of a person’s character. This is in part because of being raised in a very multi cultural community and also because I was always taught that race was irrelevant. Even through she used the term social construction, I believe that is what my mother meant when she said that race did not matter.

As a child growing up in a single parent household that frankly had to save up to be poor, I also became aware of the differences between White people and how “Whiteness” is an acquired position not based solely on social indicators such as skin tone, hair texture or eye colour. “Whiteness” is an ascriptive category based on the obtainment of wealth, prestige, and power. To me it makes little sense for me, a person who fails to meet any of the aforementioned requirements of wealth, prestige and power to identify myself as White. Instead I chose to identify with my peer group, which consisted of people from various racial and religious backgrounds. It seemed that I identified more closely with people who shared the same low socioeconomic position as I did. This leads me to the concept of ethnicity.

Ethnicity, is socially constructed and is based on the historical representations of groups of people. In short ethnicity provides individuals with a sense of not only inclusion into one group, but also exclusion from another group. Inclusion or exclusion is determined during social interaction through the use of symbols. These symbols come to represent an individual’s identity within or apart from a particular group. Now since I realize that race is a social construction and of little importance in my selection of friends, I again am going to further separate myself from other white folks. In terms of grouping by race and ethnicity I am for all intents and purposes a White Canadian.
However I do not identify solely with White Canadians. Lest anyone think that I am some bleeding heart that feels that he “understands the pain” of my minority brethren please allow me to clarify my point. Simply put in terms of ethnic grouping I have come to identify myself as a member of several different ethnic groups. Primarily I identify with anyone who shares the same socioeconomic position that I do. Also I identify very strongly with anyone from my neighbour-hood - please forgive my non-global thinking – and with people who grew up in single parent homes.

Another example of how ethnicity – along with racial representations – has affected my process of identity formation is in the way that other people perceive me based on my race and ethnicity. This example also relies on the concept of inclusion and exclusion insofar that my ethnicity which consists of my economic class and geographic location – and my race – being a White Canadian determines whether or not I belong and in effect who I am. It has been my experience that my race and ethnicity have made people jump to conclusions about me based on preconceived – and often – stereotypical notions. The most frequent of these encounters is actually with other White people and revolved around the idea of being a Canadian. This leads to me to the concept of nationality in the process of identity formation.

Everyone is familiar with the stereotypical image of Canadians. The story goes that there are only two kinds of Canadians, hockey players or lumberjacks. Now I can neither skate not climb trees so where does that leave me? While they may be somewhat amusing, these stereotypes are not the only one’s that people have about who Canadians are. It has been my experience that most people assume Canadians to be white, which would come as a surprise to anyone who is actually from here. In fact what makes
Canada great in my opinion is its diversity. We are a country of immigrants – my family included – who somehow manage to come together very well. But this thinking that “true Canadians” are white is still an ever-present opinion and can be illustrated by the actions of particular types of white people.

I have mentioned the significance of social indicators before and I would like to do it again as it relates to the next point. As a White Canadian I have never been asked, “where are you from?” My non-whites friends on the other hand are constantly being asked this question by strangers, who are almost always white. This strikes me as odd because my friends are no less Canadian than I am yet they are repeatedly being asked to justify their nationality all because they don’t fit the normative white mold. In essence they are being treated like “foreigners” in the country in which they were born. An instance like this is something that I can only image, as due to this line of thinking my physical characteristics leave no question about my nationality.

One of the things I find most offensive about this logic is that based on it, I should act the same way, as all other white people. Furthermore other white people seem to expect me to behave in this way. More times then I wish to remember some white person has tried to engage me in a conversation of the “us against them” variety. It seems that they can’t wait to tell me the latest racist joke. They assume that because I look like they do that I will also be bigoted like them. But this is not the case, as I have no patience for people who place such importance on qualities that are superficial and fictitious at best. Other times in dealing with people who are non-white I have noticed what appears to be apprehension in the way they approach me. I feel that these people may have an negative
impression of me based on previous experiences with someone with whom I share similar features or mannerisms.

In conclusion the Canadian social constructions of race, ethnicity and nation have affected my process of identity formation in that I have come to the realization that even through they are social constructions and essentially illusionary, these social constructions play a powerful role in how I recognize myself as a racialized person in relation to others in society.

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