

Why Rachel Dolezal deserves a break



Former NAACP leader Rachel Dolezal, shown on the “Today” show set in New York on June 16, 2015, is racially human and culturally black, just as she said her son described her. (Anthony Quintano, AP)

By James M. Calcagno

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In the [1979 movie "The Jerk,"](#) Steve Martin introduces us to his character (Navin Johnson) with the classic and hilarious line: "I was born a poor black child." The flashback to his upbringing shows him surrounded by his happy black family singing and dancing on the front porch of their sharecropper's shack in Mississippi. Despite his lifelong surroundings, Navin is dressed differently, acts out of place and has no sense of rhythm. Whether his awkwardness is due to his being white or being a jerk is unclear, but the joke clearly works because Martin is so immediately seen as instinctively white. Or so we presume.

Sticking with our fictional character, let's imagine a more realistic outcome to this story. Assuming normal aptitudes and abilities, he would talk like the rest of his family, dress like the men around him and sing, dance and clap to the beat. Without a doubt, our Steve Martin look-alike would be "culturally black." So much so that when he came in contact with white people, they would likely be startled by his black persona, which might generate scorn and discrimination. Yet we have no choice but to be shaped by our culture, until we can choose a culture with which we wish to identify and have shape us, if we have that luxurious option.

Regardless, even though Navin Johnson was indeed born and raised a poor black child, he could never claim to be black because he is not genetically black, he's simply culturally black. Of course the glaring problem with that distinction is that there is no such thing as being genetically black, nor being Caucasian, a scientifically worthless term from the 1700s that, unfortunately, still haunts us. The genetic race concept for humans does not work, plain and simple, and being identified as black or African-American tells us about your culture, not about your genetics. Anthropologists have been trying to convince people of that fact for decades, with increasing — though still relatively limited — success.

Enter Rachel Dolezal (before you ever heard of her). Her skin color seems to pass for that of a light-skinned black person. She is a chapter president of the NAACP in Spokane, Wash. She graduated from Howard University. Her former husband is black, she has a child who is black. She has four adopted black siblings. Dolezal certainly has more black cultural experiences than most white Americans. Plus, she told us she's black, which, until recently, was either obvious or uninteresting.

Yet her big stumble was how to answer the question: Are you African-American? Gotcha! You're not genetically black, just acting culturally black, even though genetic races do not exist and race is purely a cultural construct.

In his interview on NBC, "Today" show host Matt Lauer drove that point home numerous times. After displaying a picture of Dolezal as a teenager, Lauer asked the point-blank question on the mind of many: Is Dolezal African-American or Caucasian? Unfortunately, Dolezal didn't have the appropriate response. She should have told Lauer: "I said I identify as black, and your question is meaningless, based on a useless concept of describing human biological variation that doesn't work."

Interestingly, complaints about Dolezal being Native American seem nonexistent, perhaps because her parents confirmed she has a "trace" of Native American heritage. Why does that matter, and is she culturally Native American in any way? And how many drops of ancestral blood get you that tribal ID card? If Dolezal had one great-great-great-grandparent (plus or minus a few greats to clarify your own boundaries) who met our cultural litmus test of being genetically black, would she be in this mess today? Given that all humans have ancestral ties back to Africa, everyone on the planet is African-something, depending on the number of generations you wish to go back.

Dolezal grew up white, according to our cultural standards. But one's racial classification can change depending upon the culture you visit, and in some societies one's cultural identity can be altered frequently throughout life. It is unfortunate that Dolezal felt the need to claim African-American ancestry to validate her identity, and I certainly don't condone deception for personal gain — if that indeed happened. But I fault the overall culture that continues to make this genetically baseless distinction so important. Of greater interest and relevance is what Dolezal has been doing to benefit people, which appears to have been substantial, although of less interest in the media frenzy. I hope she can continue to help others, not as a black or white woman but as a human being.

Later in his NBC interview, Lauer returned to his original line of questioning with: "If I were to ask them (your sons) if you're a black woman or a Caucasian woman, how do you think they'd answer?" Dolezal replied that one of her sons said, "Mom, racially you're human, and culturally you're black."

Exactly. We could all benefit from that perspective.

If I desperately needed a helping hand and could choose between a truly good person who sincerely wants to improve my life or someone I know nothing about other than she belongs to my fictional Caucasian tribe, whom should I choose?

I would feel like a jerk if I focused on the latter.

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