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Personal Narrative as a Frame for Contextualizing Research

Last summer as I rifled through some old boxes of materials from my undergraduate years, I came upon a newspaper clipping. The article concerned the 1995 hunger strike that took place on campus by students who were demanding the creation of an Asian American studies department. This happened during my sophomore year and as I quickly read through the article, overwhelming feelings of dismay and humor washed over me. I was disappointed because I, an Asian American minority, had given a quote to the campus newspaper during the strike that dismissed the need for an Asian American studies program and suggested that the students were being silly for striking. At the same time, I could not stop laughing because seeing sentiments in black and white that I had long ago forgotten reminded me of how much I have changed and how different my perspectives are now.

Recently I caught myself nearly regressing to the same attitude I had over a decade ago. As I walked toward the Charles E. Young Research Library, I saw a student with a "UCLA" jacket that spelled out "University of Caucasians Lost among Asians." I was initially amused, but then quickly reflected that it would be more accurate to say "University of students of Color Lost among Asians." However, I then instinctively realized that Asians *are* students of color so my version of the acronym was just as misleading. Although at UCLA there is a large representation of Asian American undergraduates—38.6% average enrollment in 2007-08 compared to 34.4% White non-Hispanic students—the numbers for graduate students are less startling—19.5% Asian Americans versus 40.2% White non-Hispanics (UCLA Office of Analysis and Information Management, 2008). Overall for the latest year that numbers are available, 2005, Asian Americans only comprised 6.5% of the total fall enrollment in postsecondary degree-granting institutions compared to 65.7% White non-Hispanics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). Therefore, despite the solid representation and seeming sea of Asian Americans on the UCLA campus, it would be remiss not to consider the experiences and challenges of Asian Americans as students of color, particularly in discussions of educational diversity.

Although the debate about the merits of diversity continues, I believe there is substantial empirical research that evidences the benefits of it (Antonio, Chang, Hakuta, Kenny, Levin, & Milem, 2004; Chang, 1999; Gurin, 1999; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Milem, 2003; Pike & Kuh, 2006; Smith et al., 1997) and I feel confident in taking the position that diversity in all its forms—structural, classroom, and interactional—is a worthwhile endeavor that higher education institutions should pursue. What I hope to contribute to the area of diversity research is in extending our understanding of campus racial dynamics. In particular, I am interested in exploring some of the educational perspectives of critical race theory and how it pertains to Asian Americans and higher education.[1] In this review, I incorporate my personal narrative into the discussion as a way of enriching and contextualizing the issues. I choose to focus on this topic perhaps as an act of contrition to the students I scorned during my years as a dismissive undergraduate, but mainly because as an Asian American woman, it provides an opportunity to situate my own experience within the boundaries of academic research.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

With roots in legal studies, CRT developed in the 1970s in response to the failures of civil rights litigation to generate significant racial reform. CRT privileges the experience of people of color in opposition to normative White standards and generally speaks to six primary tenets: 1) racism is commonplace rather than out of the ordinary, 2) the dominant ideology promotes the interest convergence or material determinism of Whites over people of color, 3) race is socially constructed, 4) minorities are differentially racialized as a matter of convenience, 5) understanding the intersectionality and anti-essentialism of identity, and 6) recognizing voices-of-color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Originally employed within a Black/White binary, CRT has since spawned descendants that incorporate other racial identities including Latina/os (LatCrit), American Indians (TribalCrit), and Asian Americans (AsianCrit).

Emerging from legal studies and branching into fields such as education, CRT challenges normative White values in a tradition of oppositional scholarship. Through storytelling and personal as well as counter-narratives, CRT advances the subjective perspectives of people of color in order to counter negative stereotypes and hegemonic White viewpoints and to further a deeper and more complex understanding of racial dynamics. By empowering the voices and lived experiences of people of color, CRT scholarship can begin to combat issues of racial inequality, oppression, and exclusion (Taylor, 1998).

As it extends to education, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define CRT as “a framework or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom” (p. 25). As methodology for educational research, they define it as a “theoretically grounded approach” that follows five essential principles. First, race and racism are at the forefront of the research process.[2] Though race and racism are primary, CRT also features the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. Second, CRT methodology disputes the common paradigms, texts, and theories (e.g. deficit theory) that have traditionally been used to describe and analyze the experiences of students of color. Third, aims to undermine race, class, and gender subordination by providing liberatory and transformative solutions are essential. In this regard, the elimination of racism and social justice remain paramount goals. Fourth, CRT methodology privileges experiential knowledge, particularly as it pertains to race, gender, and class. Students' direct experiences offer strength and authenticity for addressing the problem at hand. Finally, drawing upon multiple disciplines such as ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, humanities, and law, is key. This foundation of interdisciplinarity therefore enables more robust conceptual frameworks for research.

A prominent method of CRT research is the counter-story, which involves conveying the stories of those on society's margins whose experiences are infrequently told. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), "The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (p. 32). Three common forms of counter-storytelling include personal, other, and composite stories or narratives. Assuming the personal approach allows the author to incorporate autobiographical reflections into the CRT analysis; telling other people's stories provides third person perspectives to enhance the analysis; and creating composite narratives enables researchers to draw from various data sources to socio-historically and socio-politically situate the analysis. In this paper, I offer some of my own personal reflections to help situate my developing recognition of the significance of CRT.

Extending the construct of CRT to further racial specificity, Chang (1993) advances a framework for Asian critical race theory (AsianCrit). Though he develops AsianCrit for Asian American legal scholarship, elements of it can likewise be applied to educational research. Specifically, the concepts of nativistic racism and model minority that inform AsianCrit are also important to the realm of education. Furthermore, the three stages of AsianCrit deployment—denial, affirmation, and liberation—also translate to research on education theory and practice.

As "informal mechanisms of oppression" (Chang, 1993, p. 1287), the magnification of a racial hierarchy through the model minority myth, as well as the nativistic-minded violence and discrimination against Asian Americans, demonstrate the necessity of foregrounding race and racism when addressing issues that impact Asian Americans. Chang (1993) invokes the cases of fatal violence against Asian Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,[3] and the derision of Japanese business interests in America during the 1990s as examples of deeply rooted anti-Asian sentiments that arouse nativistic racism. At the core, the persistent view of Asian Americans as "foreigners" fans the flames of nativistic racism.

According to Chang (1993), responding to oppression involves three stages. The first stage is “denial of difference” (p. 1316). In stage one denial, assimilation is the preferred solution to discrimination. However, the problem that surfaces in this stage is that people quickly become conscious of the intrinsic contradictions to assimilating. For example, an Asian individual who is a citizen of the United States may want to simply be identified as “American,” but regardless of that desire, the person will still look Asian and therefore find it difficult to escape the identity of “Asian American.” I was recently reminded of this paradox during a year of graduate studies in England. When I met new people, one of the first questions I was often asked was where I was from. I generally responded that I was from the U.S. and the reaction was frequently, “Oh, I thought you were from China.” This reaffirmed to me that my Asian heritage will inevitably always precede my American identity.

The contradictions of assimilation may then lead to the second stage of “affirmation of difference” (Chang, 1993, p. 1316). In this stage, difference is accepted and affirmed. An Asian American identity becomes a tool for empowerment and rather than assimilation, “pluralistic integration” is the goal (p. 1318). Recognizing that Asian Americans cannot be denied formal equality, stage two emphasizes difference to achieve it. Chang (1993) cautions, however, that the danger in accepting difference is that it can then function as a source for discrimination. For instance, colleges and universities may strive to admit Asian American students for the purpose of achieving structural diversity, yet when the numbers of Asian American students reach a critical mass so that they become “overrepresented,” the racial difference can lead to admission denials (Chan & Wang, 1991; Hsia, 1988).

Affirmation of difference is still situated vis-à-vis the dominant group, which then calls for a third stage of “liberation from difference” (Chang, 1993, p. 1316). This is a more abstract stage involving post-structuralism and deconstruction, but the main ideas are emancipation and liberation from dominant ideology and constructs. Through “contextual situatedness” and “multiple consciousness” (p. 1322), Asian Americans can better struggle against and remove oppression. Though somewhat difficult to grasp in practice, this stage calls for critiques and challenges to the status quo, thereby beginning to change the rules of the game. In higher education, for example, this may involve the interrogation and confrontation of White privilege through legacy admits.

AsianCrit and Higher Education

CRT and AsianCrit frameworks foster research that considers the centrality of race and racism, along with gender and class from individual and subjective perspectives. One facet of the critical approach has been to contest the model minority stereotype, which suggests that Asian Americans are collectively viewed as an ideal minority group that has overcome significant obstacles to achieve economic and educational parity with Whites (Shih, 1988; Suzuki, 1989).

Recent critiques of the model minority stereotype continue to question the political motivations of such a construct as well as the pernicious effects of it (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007; Suzuki, 2002; Yu, 2006). In revisiting his original challenge to the notion of a model minority from two decades ago, Suzuki (2002) notes that today the media are less likely to promote this stereotype and contemporary social scientists who study Asian Americans are less apt to invoke it. Although a widespread perception that Asian Americans no longer face racial discrimination and are nowadays even more successful than Whites still persists, Suzuki notes that studies continue to conclude that despite being well-educated and gaining access to entry-level jobs, full equality and participation in American society is still elusive for Asian Americans. Inequities in income and upward job mobility continue to exist (Segal, Kilty, & Kim, 2002). Therefore, Suzuki believes that although the model minority stereotype is "less flaunted by the media," it is still "alive and well" and may be "more insidious because it has become an almost unconscious image embedded in the minds of the public, subliminally influencing their perceptions" (p. 25). Furthermore, Suzuki suggests there has been a re-emergence of the "perfidious foreigner stereotype" that continues to negatively impact attitudes towards Asian Americans (p. 24).

Yu (2006) casts his challenge to the model minority stereotype from a political angle. According to Yu, "The model minority stereotype emphasizes individual values and efforts while trivializing social problems and educational equity. It functions as a device of political control to maintain the marginalization of minorities and the dominance of powerful groups" (p. 332). Embracing Apple's (1996) notion that there has been a "conservative restoration" of American society, Yu (2006) suggests that this has led to the reaffirmation of Asian Americans as a model minority for the purposes of silencing the protests of racial minorities and maintaining the dominant structure of race and power relations. Power elites' misrepresentation and over-emphasis of Asian American success has enabled a veneer of equal opportunity, thereby skirting issues of racism and structural inequalities that continue to plague minority groups. The model minority stereotype, in tandem with the meritocracy myth, play into the hands of neoconservatives and their agenda of "accountability, standards, competition, and individual choice" (p. 325). Yu notes that most egregiously, the model minority rhetoric over-generalizes about the extremely diverse Asian American population and ignores its multiple voices. Furthermore, it pits Asian American minorities against other minorities, such as African Americans and Latinos, thereby serving the socio-political interests of White elites and their larger purpose of maintaining a racial hierarchy. The perception of model minority success also tends to render Asian Americans invisible because of the misguided belief that it is somehow unnecessary to consider their educational needs or issues.

Ng, Lee, and Pak (2007) further contest the model minority stereotype through their critical review of literature on Asian Americans in education. They suggest that the bimodal performance (achievement above and below the norm) of Asian American students indicates there can be no monolithic truths to Asian American success, especially because of the great diversity of ethnicities that are aggregated into the Asian American label. In fact, the research they review reveals wide variability in the experiences, needs, and outcomes of Asian American students. The literature likewise details the complexities of interpreting and negotiating the racial and cultural demands of identity development, family relations, college access and retention, campus racial climate, and invisibility in education policies. Like Yu (2006), Ng, Lee, and Pak (2007) agree that hegemonic narratives of Asian American successes are "highly political and manufactured" for ideological purposes and that such representation ultimately undermines the diversity of Asian American experiences (p. 119). Additionally, using educational parity as a measure for lack of discrimination can be misleading and harmful to the interests of Asian Americans. As Ng, Lee, and Pak (2007) state, "More nuanced understandings of race and racializations in education are needed to see the real experiences of Asian American students as they negotiate inequitable and discriminatory social structural conditions. This understanding is critical to seeing Asian Americans in their full complexity and diversity and to avoid essentialist notions of culture that feed into an Othering discourse" (p. 122).

In my undergraduate experience, an awareness of my own racialization probably affected my identity development. Because I was coming from a high school with a significant Asian American population, most of my friends were Asian. Therefore, when I went to college I made a conscious choice not to actively seek out new Asian friends. Far from avoiding Asian students altogether, I simply elected not to join any racial/ethnic organizations and given that I was a film major, there were few Asian students for me to meet anyway. In my interactions with my college friends, I did become aware of a sense of "otherness" that if I had felt prior to college, was subliminal. In hindsight, a couple of my other non-White friends and I were probably the reason my circle of college friends could declare that they had cross-racial friendships. We were their diversity. I was therefore grateful that I did have plenty of Asian friends back home that I could lament to, but whether our shared understanding was because we were Asian or because we grew up together is indeterminate.

The demographic diversity of the Asian American student population extends vastly across ethnicity, immigration, socioeconomic status (SES), generation, language proficiency, gender, and geography and their various intersections (Hune, 2002; Lee, 2006). One study from the higher education realm takes a disaggregated approach to examining Asian American students' postsecondary opportunities and outcomes. In their analysis of the college choice process for Asian Americans, Teranishi, Ceja, Antonio, Allen, and McDonough (2004) break down the student population by ethnicity, SES, and institutional selectivity. Their findings confirm that there are differential participation rates among the Asian subpopulations. More important, the study illustrates the complexity of considering context for the Asian American population. The authors of this study take care to focus on college access from a disaggregated perspective, yet because of the immense heterogeneity of Asian American students, their educational experiences can perhaps never be fully captured in broad studies.

Teranishi et al. (2004) find that some ethnic subpopulations (e.g. Chinese Americans) had a higher likelihood of attending selective campuses than others (e.g. Southeast Asian Americans). However, the picture is complicated by SES even within the disaggregated subpopulation. For example, high-SES Chinese had the highest rates of attending private institutions, but low-SES Chinese had the lowest rates of enrollment in private institutions among all low-SES students. When I consider my own ethnic and SES background and those of my Asian friends, the differential patterns of higher education participation are apparent. In essence, the Teranishi et al. study merely testifies to what I have already empirically experienced. Their findings also affirm the CRT intersectionality of race and class, though not gender, which could be explored in future studies.

In a study that more explicitly employs a CRT framework, Teranishi (2002) examines high school racial climate and its impact on students' postsecondary educational aspirations, planning, and opportunities. His aim is to address how students are "stereotyped and stigmatized" because of their race or ethnicity as it relates to their postsecondary educational processes, social relationships, and school performance (p. 144). In using a CRT perspective, the study deconstructs the conventionally simplified ideas of Asian Americans by exposing the divergent educational and social conditions of Chinese and Filipino students' experiences.

Regarding the influence of race and ethnicity in shaping the students' navigational process for developing and realizing their aspirations, Teranishi (2002) finds that both ethnic subgroups expressed being victims of overt and covert racial stereotyping. Chinese students were stereotyped as model minorities, whereas Filipino students were stereotyped as delinquents or failures. As a result, Chinese students were likely to be tracked into high achieving, college preparatory programs and given college counseling guidance and support, while Filipino students found their teachers to be "uncaring or discouraging" about college aspirations and opportunities (p. 149). Teranishi concludes, "The racialized experiences of Chinese and Filipino youth resulted in different postsecondary information, knowledge, and opportunity" (p. 152). Teranishi stresses that educational researchers, policy analysts, and practitioners therefore need to be attentive to the contextual social and institutional realities that students negotiate because those realities can lead to differential experiences and educational outcomes for Asian American students.

A CRT framework provides a situational context for exploring the impact of race and ethnicity on students' self-image and interactions with others, which is fundamental to better understanding Asian Americans' educational experiences. Recognizing the salience of race, ethnicity, and racism in daily life is a key component of what Osajima (2007) describes as developing an Asian American critical consciousness, which he notes is similar to the Freirean notion of "conscientization" (p. 61). In his study, Osajima finds that the process of developing critical consciousness is a transformative one "where knowledge of and commitment to Asian American concerns represented a significant change from earlier views [students] had held in their lives" (p. 63). For the students interviewed, conscientization was a social process that involved discovering greater meaning of their lives as Asian Americans within larger historical and social conditions, connecting their own experiences to a larger collective identity, and transforming their deeper self-understanding into practice and activism.

Osajima's (2007) findings reminded me of my own critical journey when I found that old newspaper clipping last year. As the strike took place, one of my dormmates who wrote for the student newspaper asked me to comment on the situation. Still under the influence of growing up in a very Republican enclave in California, I made a conservative remark chalking up the strike to meaningless racial politicking. The student interviewing me looked as if he had hit the jackpot with the quote I gave him. Seeing his reaction, I noted to him that it must seem unusual for me to have that perspective since I am a female and racial minority. However, once those words left my mouth and the instant I heard myself verbalize the fact of my oppressed identity to the male, White student journalist, something switched in my mind that made me realize I ought to snap into the social and institutional realities beyond the bubble where I was raised. In that moment, I believe I had begun the process of conscientization. Though I am ashamed to say that I did not end up joining my fellow compadres in the hunger strike, I am grateful that there were activist students who took up the worthy cause. Even though it still took another four years before an Asian American studies minor was finally established at my alma mater, it took much less time for me to begin developing and embracing my Asian American critical consciousness.

Conclusion

CRT and AsianCrit empower researchers to critically engage in a discussion about racial issues. Doing so is an imperative for working toward eliminating racism and proceeding in the direction of social justice. From the issues explored in this paper, two key themes emerged: 1) Asian Americans should not be considered as one monolithic group, but rather their educational experiences and outcomes should be disaggregated and 2) issues of race and racism, particularly as it challenges the model minority stereotype, should be addressed openly. Disaggregating the data is important for achieving more thoughtful understanding of the issues facing Asian Americans, but at the same time the danger this renders is the loss of a collective political voice. Indeed, individual ethnic subgroups may not have the political power necessary to combat racism and inequality. Nevertheless, recognizing that Asian Americans are not one uniform model minority is essential for better understanding this population. By exploring the intersection of critical race theory, Asian Americans, and higher education and supplementing the discussion with a bit of my own personal narrative, I hope I have contributed in some manner to extending that understanding. At the very least, this paper has helped to deepen my own conscientization.

Notes

[1] In this paper I use the term "Asian American," but I remain cognizant of the variation of terms, such as "Asian American," "Asian Pacific American," and "Asian American and Pacific Islander," used in the literature and the risk of marginalizing the Pacific Islander population when solely using "Asian American."

[2] For the purposes of this paper, racism is defined as "the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance" (Lorde, 1992, p. 496, as cited in Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 24) and "a system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians, and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color" (Marable, 1992, p. 5, as cited in Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 24).

[3] Chang refers specifically to the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin in Detroit, the 1987 murder of Navroze Mody in Jersey City, the 1877 murders of four Chinese in Chico, California's Chinatown, and the 1885 Chinese Massacre in Rock Springs, Wyoming, as examples of nineteenth and twentieth century violence against Asian Americans.

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