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Mitsunori Misawa

University of Georgia, USA

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The Intersection of Race and Sexual Orientation in Adult and Higher Education

Mitsunori Misawa
University of Georgia, USA

Abstract: *This study examined the intersection of race and sexual orientation in adult and higher education by looking into the experiences of seven gay men of color to see how their identities impacted their learning and their lives on campus; and to see how education was serving them.*

Introduction

When researchers of adult education explore sociocultural factors of development, they find “ways in which hegemony has constructed learning environments and limited the participation of some people because of their language, sexual orientation, race, gender, [and] class” (Sissel & Sheard, 2001, p. 3). Such findings have led to changes in how learning environments are shaped for adult learners, an example being the equalizing of power between teachers and students in classrooms.

These changes have been especially important for sexual minorities of color, who are doubly discriminated against (Kumashiro, 2001). Some of them are torn between their racial/ethnic identity and their sexual identity in today’s learning environments. In the United States, the dominant male population is white and heterosexual. Discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation doubly oppresses sexual minorities of color everyday (Russell & Truong, 2001). To eliminate the oppression in contemporary higher education, educators provide their students with equal access to opportunities and create inclusive learning environments (Elias & Merriam, 1995).

This study explored how the racial/ethnic and sexual identities of gay men of color emerged and developed in a college environment, how those two identities intersected each other, and how the learning environment impacted those specific identities. The primary question that drove this study was: How and in what ways does the intersection of race and sexual orientation impact gay men of color in higher education?

Theoretical Framework

Several theories and models were used in this study to examine the intersection of race and sexual orientation in higher education. The racial identity development models (Cross, 1991, 1995) were utilized to look at how people develop their racial identity, and Critical Race Theory (Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2002) was employed to look at factors that have oppressed people of color. Sexual identity models were employed to look at how people develop their sexual identity, and Queer Theory was used to interpret how sexual minorities viewed campus life. Then, the Multidimensional Identity Model (Reynolds & Pope, 1991) was applied to examine each individual’s racial identity with that person’s gay identity.

Research Design/Methodology

This qualitative study examined the intersection of race and sexual orientation in higher education using two methods: document analysis by conducting extensive literature review on race, sexual orientation, and the combination of race and sexual orientation; and semi-structured interviews of seven gay male college students of color between the ages of 20 and 30. The

research interviews were designed to elicit information from the participants about their experiences at a northwestern university of the United States as gay men of color. An open and supportive atmosphere was created for these interviews so that the participants could communicate their experiences freely even though the topic was private and emotional. The interviews were structured to remain focused on the research topic and were recorded. The recorded data was then transcribed and coded. Questions asked of the subjects in this study related to demographics and experiences both in classrooms and on campus.

Findings and Discussion

The interviews were designed to get the participants to share their experiences for use in a qualitative study. The words used in the descriptions and in the quotes are the words used by the participants themselves. The words of a qualitative study are its most important elements (Merriam, 1998), as they provide clues to the non-selected identities held by the participants (those other than the two being studied, race and sexual orientation).

Sociocultural Intersection of Race and Sexual Orientation

As for the intersection of race and sexual orientation in the participants' sociocultural lives, although the participants ultimately identified themselves as gay men of color in this study, they each identified themselves in a slightly different light. The self-identification of the participants included intersections of race and sexual orientation. Self-identification is an important factor in human life because it makes a person feel whole (Kumashiro, 2001). It requires self-acknowledgement and the integration of one's identities (Russell & Truong, 2001). The participants referred to their sexual orientation and racial identities separately when they described themselves. However, the acknowledgement of their sexual orientation was usually direct. Jim, who identifies himself as a gay Mexican, stated confidently,

Well, I know who I am. I know what I am. I am a gay man, but I don't carry it. Well, I don't know. It depends on what people think, you know? It's not what I act. When the classmates found out I was gay, they were like, "Oh, wow, really?" They did not know, because I just act the way I am.

Self acknowledgement is important for Jim as a gay person, in a way that is typical of Queer Theory. His gay identity does not extend to a gay communal identity. In other words, he is a unique gay person whose identity concerns only himself, and he is confident about himself as Jim. He does not present himself to others as a "gay person" but his core identity is a gay man. He accepts himself as a gay person, too, so he does not hide his sexual orientation when people ask him about it.

Matt who is a 28-year-old male who identified himself as a gay Black man conveyed that his sexual orientation was more apparent to himself than his racial identity. He commented,

I'm definitely gay. It's my main identity. I wasn't trying to hide it. But, how do you look gay? You know what I'm saying? I wasn't hiding it. I wasn't in the closet or anything; it's just no one knew. I wasn't that close to anyone.

He confessed that he is open about his sexual orientation to anyone. Matt's comfortableness of expressing his sexual orientation is natural to his whole identity. He meant something similar to Jim when he said, "being gay." Matt also centered on his gay identity rather than his black identity.

Both Jim and Matt's inner identification, a gay man, emerged explicitly, and their racial identities did too but not as importantly. Self-identification of their racial background was not as blunt. Most participants, in fact, talked about their racial identity after stating their sexual

orientation. This indicated three possibilities: 1) that they thought their sexual identity had more of an impact on their lives, 2) that self-acknowledgement of racial identity occurred much earlier than self-acknowledgement of sexual identity so that racial identity was less prominent in their minds (Piaget, 1970; Erikson, 1980), or 3) that it was more uncomfortable initially to talk about racial identity than it was to talk about sexual identity. The participants described their racial identities in specific ways. Government documents use categories such as Asian, Black, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Hispanic, and Multiracial; the participants did not categorize their race in that way.

Gary who was a 25-year-old gay man expressed his struggle of identifying his racial identity because of his multiracial perspective and his white looks. He stated,

I define my racial background as mixed, with an emphasis on the Russian and Aleut sides, which are part of my identity as an Alaskan Native. I do not look colored, but I am sensitive to racism because I have an ancestral lineage that is colored. One of my ancestors is Alaskan Native, and it is the one I am most involved with, so it makes up a larger part of my identity than the others, which are Norwegian, Scottish, German, and Russian.

He was aware of his own culture and his racial identity. Unlike the situation in Reynolds and Pope's (1991) model where multiply oppressed people, such as mixed race people, tend to identify with the least oppressed group, Gary accepted himself as an Alaskan Native person. Even though his mixed racial elements consist of "white European", he tends to center himself as an Alaskan Native, which emphasizes his racial perspective. Critical Race Theory applies to Gary's comment because he is proud of being an Alaskan Native, and he centralizes on that when he looks at society or is confronted with racism.

Dan, a 29-year-old Native Alaskan, made a strong comment about his identity development from his junior year in college.

Being [Dan] is the most important thing! And being a student and being involved with student government and being Yupik and being all these other things, and gay was there and it was important, I mean it was very important, but I chose not to define myself as gay. I defined myself as [Dan]. And being gay was a part of who I was, and being Yupik was a part of who that was, and being Alaskan was a part of who that was.

Dan said he comes first, followed by his identities. It is important, he said, to keep your core identity. While that could mean that minority perspectives are suppressed by Dan, it might indicate, instead, that he does not want to deal with the burden of minority perspectives. His attitude could also stem from his cultural perspective, one in which Native people try not to categorize things around them. Some Native Americans have a unique identity perspective called two-spirit or free-spirit, which is different from the rigid Western way of categorizing everything in clearly separated binary ways (Lang, 1997). Dan said that he is his most important priority. Dan seems to accept himself well.

On the other hand, Bob, a 27-year-old gay Filipino American, has always taken into account his gay identity and his Asian identity because of his relationship with his family. Bob said that he was raised in the Filipino culture and he liked how society worked in the Filipino community. The culture he is from has strong family connections—in fact the community he grew up in consisted of mostly small Filipino families. However, there was very little acceptance of homosexuality there because community members wanted to increase the population of Filipinos in Bob's community. Family is an important perspective in his culture, but traditional

family relationships often trouble the intersection of race and sexual orientation (Kumashiro, 2001).

Most of the participants held racial and sexual identities as modeled by Reynolds and Pope (1991) under the multidimensional identity model (MIM). Their identities were “multiple aspects of self in a segmented fashion” (p. 179). This is an option that allows an individual to change his identity depending on how things are in each community of people. Such a person’s identities appear as multi-identities, e.g. gay and person of color, but the individual is able to change the status at any time. In other words, the individual deals with his identities separately, one after the other. Six of the participants described their racial and sexual identities separately. If they had integrated their sexual and racial identities, they would have been able to identify in a combined aspect.

Intersection of Race and Sexual Orientation in the Campus Environment

As for how campus life was related to the intersection of race and sexual orientation, the external influence of interpersonal relationships varied but was often measured in how much trust was perceived by the participant between himself and others, and by the words and actions of others. For the participants, words from other people could be extremely powerful in both positive and negative ways. Ed, a 20-year-old Latino gay man, expressed how his program let him be whoever he wanted. He commented,

The dance program here allows me to grow not only as a dancer but as a person. But the way it does it is not just by telling me...I feel like I have a lot of freedom to explore dance...and it makes me feel included.

Ed is satisfied with the program that he is currently in because it emphasizes human growth, which urges him to express both his sexual orientation and his race in his practice. That positive perspective motivates Ed. Also, Sam, a 28-year-old Latino gay man, commented that the act of others positively accepting diverse lifestyles in the learning environment helps him stay in college. He said, “I have been very comfortable, especially in my department. People were just loving and caring...I’ve often found...artsy people are usually very accepting of different lifestyles.” His comments identified that the English Literature department was supportive of his racial and sexual identities, like the dance department was for Ed.

Although some participants described positive and welcoming experiences on campus, Gary mentioned that he felt marginalized in the classroom environment. He pointed out that minority perspectives in classrooms and instructional materials did not fully acknowledge and did not even usually include diverse perspectives. However, it depended on what class it was and how the instructor included other perspectives besides white-perspectives. Gary, an Alaskan Native, described his struggle of not being able to integrate the materials in most classes with his background. He said,

I never really felt included as a gay man of color in any classroom, at least not in a public manner. Math classes get too deep into the subject to become personalized, but there is absolutely NO mention made in those classes about non-white contributions to mathematics.

His struggle might not be with only the course contents in mathematics classes, but also with the Eurocentric learning materials that do not take any multicultural considerations. Gary continued to talk,

I have always felt that being gay was something to hide, and I always get gawked at when I tell people I am part Native Alaskan. I think those two things are kept hidden. My

science classes are the worst for the anti-gay comments. Lots of the men in those classes use *gay* to mean *not good*.

Gary felt that he needed to conceal his identities when he was on campus because he often felt that the environment on campus was not one where it would be comfortable for him to express his racial and sexual identities. Jim also felt that there was negativity toward people who are gay, color, and both. He stated, "I feel that people don't understand our lifestyle. Because, people are aware that our lifestyle exists [but]...they haven't been exposed to it outside of what a negative connotation carries."

The college environment is an important place for college students, and the environment influences students' learning because it is a part of the students' lives (Dilley, 2002). The participants even mentioned that the relationship among themselves and their professors and colleagues influenced their campus lives. Knowles (1970) stated that the learning process is enhanced when a learner feels comfortable being in a learning environment. Most participants mentioned that professors were very supportive and made them feel welcomed. This indicated that professors were actually creating inclusive classroom environments for gay men of color.

The participants mentioned that non-science classes were more open to diversity. In fact, those who were teaching non-science classes even tried to address issues like sexual orientation and other cultures in the contents of the classes and in their practice. However, science classes made Gary feel uncomfortable because of homophobic comments from the students and the course content that contained Eurocentric perspectives. One participant mentioned that there needs to be an attempt in education to address the various perspectives in human cultures.

The participants perceived that their racial identities were more welcomed and accepted in society than their sexual identities. They knew that sexual orientation was able to be hidden. If they did not tell anything about their sexuality, no one would really know their sexuality. In other words, they could be treated as just people of color in the classroom if they did not tell anyone about their sexuality. They were able to use that and switch to their racial identities to avoid having difficulty dealing with their double minority perspectives, and that then silently marginalized them. If they mentioned only one obvious perspective (the racial perspective), they would not *feel* doubly marginalized (Kumashiro, 2001). Many of the participants said they wanted to be treated the same as other students in classroom environments.

In conclusion, this study found that men who have both racial and sexual minority perspectives (1) were aware of being alienated in classrooms and on campus, (2) formed their impression of the campus climate from interactions with professors, colleagues, and staff in classrooms and on campus, and (3) felt that there should be facilities on campus provided for people like themselves.

Implications for Adult and Higher Education

The objectives of adult and higher education are to include all students in the curricula and programs and to create inclusive environments that ensure learning occurs for all those participating in an educational experience (Tisdell, 1995). Contemporary post-secondary education especially needs to address the multiplicity of learner-identities in order to incorporate learner-needs. Yet, mainstream education for adult learners in the United States has not thoroughly reached that goal because educators and administrators in the educational institutions have overlooked the identity intersection of race and sexual orientation (Kumashiro, 2001).

It is important for adult educators to take into account such identity intersections when making an inclusive educational environment for their learners. Without awareness of the racial

and sexual orientation factors of the classroom, it is difficult for adult educators to democratize the classroom. Adult educators will benefit along with learners by hearing not only the voices of sexual minorities of color but also the voices of other oppressed positionalities, so they can explore how to develop more inclusive classrooms and environments in higher education. Adult educators must ensure learners' rights. In other words, creating an inclusive classroom is reliant on educators acknowledging as many aspects as possible about their adult learners so that learners who are minorities can feel equally comfortable and included as those who have the dominant sociocultural identity.

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