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Hakujin: A narrative of multiraciality and student development theory in the U.S.

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Multiracial college students are a rapidly increasing population in the U.S. who must navigate through a monoracist society which upholds White supremacy. In both social and educational contexts, student affairs practitioners and higher education administrators need to be able to support multiracial students through their identity development. Renn's (2003) ecological theory of mixed race development is currently one of the most prominent multiracial identity development theories. Using this framework, the author explores contextual influences within their identity development as well as emerging trends such as MultiCrit, an adaptation of critical race theory built to better serve the needs of multiracial students and their intersecting identities, histories, and cultures.

Multiracial students, students who identify as more than one race or ethnicity, are an increasing population on American college campuses (Sax, Hurtado, Lindholm, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 2004; Schmidt, 1997), and yet student development theory and student services are slow to reflect this change (Renn, 2000, 2003). This lack of theoretical evolution is a disservice to multiracial students on college campuses. As with all marginalized identities and populations, student affairs professionals, higher education researchers, and faculty have a duty to analyze, interrogate, and disrupt dominant narratives that oppress our students (Abes, 2016). From a lack of representation on demographic surveys, to not knowing which affinity spaces to choose or which cultural organization, if any, is the right fit, multiracial college students can face alienation, confusion, and grief, alongside joy and discovery throughout their identity development. Using Renn's (2003) ecological theory of mixed race identity development as my map, I will explore my identity as a Biracial-Japanese-American-Woman-of-Color in college through each of the four external contexts of identity development and provide insights and hopes for the evolution of multiracial identity development studies within higher education and student affairs.

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My experiences as a *hakujin*, an outsider, in a society that is unsure what to do with bi- and multiracial individuals is the impetus for this scholarly work, and thus cannot be separated from this piece of literature. I utilized a critical-constructivist paradigm, which combines aspects of critical theory and co-constructivism. Critical theory focused my research on multiracial identities, with the acknowledgement of an oppressive system allowing for the restructuring of discourse so that it reclaims the histories and narratives of oppressed individuals and holds social justice at the center (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). My co-constructivist paradigm influences my opinion that truth cannot be found without consulting the community, which is a tenet of critical theory (Patton et al., 2016), and influences the type of research I consume.

Within the academy and mainstream culture, there is no consensus of language among multiracial communities (Harris, 2016; Renn, 2003); for the purposes of this paper, the term *multiracial* will be used when discussing the larger population of biracial, multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural people. During narrative-based sections of this paper, I will be utilizing *biracial* to indicate my own experiences and identity as a Biracial-Japanese-American-Woman-of-Color.

Biracial and Mixed Racial Identity Development Theory

Differing theories of multiracial identity development have emerged as higher education researchers, psychologists, and sociologists begin to better understand racial minority identities and experiences. A critical mass of these works is based in monoracial identity development and are inadequate tools for understanding multiracial experiences (Harris, 2016; Nuttgens, 2010; Renn, 2000). Among these initial theories, "racially mixed individuals were cast as deviant" (Collins, 2000, p. 116). This "problem approach" (Collins, 2000, p. 117) argues that multiracial individuals are unable to reconcile their multiple heritages, and reflects legal stances that argue it is in the best interests of children for multiracial unions be made illegal (Harris, 2016; Hollinger, 2003). In my experience of race within the White, monoracist, dominant context, it is not the individual, but the external, monoracial population that cannot reconcile the existence, validity, and truth of multiracial people. Intolerance of multiracial individuals is known as *monoracism*, whereby the erasure of multiracial experiences is undertaken to preserve monoraciality, and in turn perpetuates White supremacist discourse (Harris, 2016).

Multiracial student identity development exploration began in the 1990s, with Root's (1990) theory of positive multiracial identity development which rejected the problem approach of early models (Renn, 2000). This first theoretical approach considered the identity development of biracial students as different from monoracial student experiences and does not follow a stage-based progressive development (Renn, 2000). The next major wave of multiracial identity

development scholarship occurred when Renn (2003) developed an ecological theory of mixed race identity development by combining the pioneering work of Root (1990) with Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993, 1995) ecological model.

Renn's Ecological Theory of Mixed Race Identity

Renn applied Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) ecological approach to situate time and place within multiracial identity development, which was missing from Root's (1990) original theory (Renn, 2003). Using the *person* (experience and characteristics), *process* (how an individual engages in development), *context* (levels of environmental analysis), and *time* (cumulative effects over time) (PPCT) framework of Bronfenbrenner, Renn discusses the permeability of boundaries surrounding racial identity and the identity congruence experienced by biracial individuals in different contexts "to minimize to the extent possible the textual representation of racial categories as immutable entities" (Renn, 2003, p. 383).

It is important to note that Renn's ecological approach to multiracial identity provides a framework for examining an individual's identity at a specific time and does not predict factors of identity development (Patton et al., 2016; Renn, 2003). Renn's (2003) ecological theory of mixed-race identity focuses on how interactions, which take place in each context, influence identity development. These contexts are the *microsystem* (e.g. daily encounters that compile into an experience), *mesosystem* (e.g. when two or more microsystems interact), *exosystem* (influences beyond a student's control), and *macrosystem* (e.g. overarching patterns that affect all other systems). Combined, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem serve as contextual boundaries of development in an ecological model (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1993; Renn, 2003).

I undertook an exploration of my development as a Biracial Woman of Color by studying the macrosystem through the social context of the U.S., the exosystem as the institution of higher education, the mesosystem through peer culture and belonging, and the microsystem via personal reflection. It is important to note that the experiences of each multiracial individual can be vastly different due to intersecting identities, and my account of my development is a limited experience of multiraciality in the U.S.

Macrosystems: Social Context in the United States

Multiracial students house the future trajectory and goals of their identity and community within the macrosystem (Renn, 2003). Within this context, students grapple with questions of ethos, such as the social structure of race, the positionality of multiracial individuals within the racial system, and how they would have lived in previous generations (Renn, 2003). Underpinning the macrosys-

tem of multiracial students is the understanding that racism is an operational system in the U.S. which defines their experiences as "other" (Renn, 2003; Harris, 2016). This othering is perpetuated and upheld by privileging monoraciality and Whiteness through political acts, social waves, and language.

Monoraciality as Privilege

In the U.S., monoracial identity is privileged over multiracial identities (Nuttgens, 2010; Renn, 2000, 2003, 2008). Until the 2000 U.S. Census, multiracial was not a response option on the racial demographic section (Jones & Bullock, 2012) even though legal action was first taken against this community in 1662 (Stephenson, 1910). Growing up, my mother walked into the office of my elementary school principal each year and asked where it would be most helpful, in terms of reporting purposes, for my brother and I to be tallied in the census. Within the social context of the U.S., multiracial people have been positioned as fringe communities, existing on the margins of research, assessment, pop culture, and the law (Harris, 2016; Renn, 2003).

U.S. Demographics

Though multiracial unions occurred long before the Supreme Court ruled that anti-miscegenation laws were unconstitutional in *Loving v. Virginia*, (1969), this case serves as the legal validity for interracial marriages and any multiracial offspring (Harris, 2016; Toledo, 2016), including my own existence and biracial identity. When the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in favor of Mildred and Richard Loving in their suit against Virginia's anti-miscegenation law, the Supreme Court struck down several state laws prohibiting interracial unions. Since 1967, the multiracial population transitioned from an unrecognized subpopulation (Harris, 2016) to a demographic experiencing exponential growth (Jones & Bullock, 2012).

Between the 2000 and the 2010 U.S. Census, the population of "two or more races" (Jones & Bullock, 2012, p. 1) grew from 6.9 million to 9 million people. Individuals with Black and White racial heritage account for 20.4% of the multiracial population; Asian and White individuals constitute 18% of the population, and American Indian or Alaskan Native individuals comprise 15.9% of the population. Large portions of the multiracial population are found in the Southern and Pacific-West regions of the U.S. (Jones & Bullock, 2012).

This geographic trend should serve as a call for expedited services, information, and competency for institutions and professionals working in these regions. In all regions, multiracial students navigate through exosystems rooted in monoracism. For multiracial individuals attending college, higher education is a system which affects them more intimately than the macrosystem of the U.S. and yet is large

enough to withstand turbulence in the meso- and microsystems (Renn, 2003). Due to the scale of exosystems, higher education is often slow to change and meet the needs of its ever-changing population.

Exosystems: Multiraciality and Higher Education

The population of multiracial students is growing on college campuses (Renn, 2000), and in the general population (Jones & Bullock, 2012). In 1997, before the population boom, multiracial students comprised 1-2% of the college student population (Schmidt, 1997); by 2004, 5.4% of U.S. college students identified as multiracial (Sax et. al, 2004). This population's presence on college campuses will continue to increase based on the 2000 census, which reported that 25.7% of the population under 18 years of age identify as multiracial (US Census Bureau, 2001).

With the incoming influx of multiracial individuals on campuses, higher education administrators, student affairs practitioners, and faculty must be better prepared to serve the complex needs of these students (Renn, 2000, 2003, 2008). As many institutions push for more racially and ethnically inclusive practices and recruitment of Students of Color, multiracial students exist in a liminal space and are subject to discrimination and prejudice from both White communities and Communities of Color (Greig, 2013; Harris, 2016; Renn, 2000). In regards to recruitment, applications, and other collectors of demographic information, institutions of higher education should be careful to expand answer options to include multiracial identities or provide students with the opportunity to self-identify (Renn, 2003).

Policies and organizations that exist within the exosystem can have an influential effect on the development of multiracial students (Renn, 2003). For myself, the Department of Housing and Residential Education (HRE) at the University of Utah served as the exosystem where I safely explored my biracial identity. HRE requires intensive training on identities, intersectionality, power, and privilege for their student leaders. This policy of HRE created an exosystem where I felt comfortable to explore my identity and supported by my peers and the professional staff. The system and policies of HRE valued the exploration of race, the presence and contributions of People of Color, and in turn, attracted and molded professionals who shaped my meso- and microsystems during my undergraduate years.

Mesosystem: The Multiracial Student Experience is a Question of Fit

Renn (2003) found that the mesosystem was just as influential in a student's identity development as the more immediate microsystems of friends, family, and media. This is the context in which multiracial students develop an understanding of the permeability of their identity and which affinity spaces they can and cannot

claim (Renn, 2003). On college campuses, peer groups, cultural affinity centers, and student leadership positions shape the mesosystem of multiracial students (Patton et. al., 2016; Renn, 2000, 2003).

Although cultural centers can play a vitally positive role in the development of a multiracial student's identity, they can also be places of harm and exclusion. Multiracial students are often pressured to "choose to affiliate with monoracial student cultures," and "are often rejected if they express their multiraciality" (Renn, 2000, p. 402). The experience of being forced to "choose a side" or "check one box only" (Renn, 2003, p. 395) is a hallmark of multiracial students' experiences on college campuses (Renn, 2000, 2003, 2008). I am well acquainted with rejection based on my biracial identity. During the first six weeks of my graduate program, I processed through the complex feelings of loss, pain, and confusion that I felt my entire life because of my biracial identity and heritage. While I was processing my experince with my cohort, two Men of Color interrupted me and told me that I had to choose between being White or being a Person of Color. They strongly asserted that a biracial identity was not acceptable. These individuals acted in accordance with a society that privileges monoraciality and Whiteness, and as Men of Color, perpetuated White supremacy by denying my biracial identity (Harris, 2016).

As the contexts move closer to the individual, trends and disturbances become more influential and intimate. What happens in the mesosystem can have strong repercussions and lasting effects within the microsystem, where individuals grapple with their own individuality, thoughts, and self-concept (Renn, 2003). Even though the above incident occurred more than a year ago, I relive that experience whenever I engage in discussions of race. My microsystem and self-awareness were drastically altered by that encounter.

Microsystem: Permeability as a Strength and Weakness

Within the microsystem, peers inform the ways in which multiracial individuals perceive and navigate their identity development (Renn, 2003) on an intimate and personal level. The microsystem exists within personal conceptualizations of racial identity, salient experiences in which racial identity was held in question, or internalized messages an individual tells themselves about their racial identity (Renn, 2003). Face-to-face interactions with family, friends, and peer groups constitute the learning mechanisms of this context.

Individuals and peer cultures that allow and encourage permeability throughout their own microspheres often offer the greatest support for multiracial students (Renn, 2003). In my own microsphere, permeability is of the utmost importance in my relationships, activities, and values. I find great strength in the fluidity of my identity through code-switching and as I participate in border-crossing, "the

ability to move freely between and among academic and social microsystems" (Renn, 2003, p. 400). As a half-Japanese and half-White woman, the need for permeability and code-switching as a form of resilience can be isolating. My Whiteness does not dominate my skin, my hair, or my eyes, and yet it is present as I walk through White spaces, often untouched, but seen and monitored with a proprietary glance and the question of, "What are you?" lingering in the eyes of passersby. It is present when I visit affinity spaces for Communities of Color, where I am too light-skinned and perceived to never have experienced racism because of my light brown skin. As more of the population identifies or is forced to encounter issues of multiraciality, student development theory must evolve to help students reconcile their experiences, identities, and communities. One way that this can be achieved is to move towards a post-structural approach to multiracial identity development, in which there is no norm at all.

Theoretical Future: Beyond Aggregated Theory and Into Post-structuralism

In her landmark theory, Renn (2003) concluded that the notion that "postmodern theory is over their heads," (p. 399) which is a disservice to multiracial students. The integration of postmodern and critical theory into the lives of multiracial students appears to me an extension of the ways in which multiracial students are forced to navigate the world. To be *hakujin* is to live in the "borderland worlds of ethnic communities and academies… those of us left out or pushed out…" (Anzaldúa, 1990, pp. xxv-xxvi).

Though Renn incorporated Bronfenbrenner's ecological model into multiracial identity development because it provided "the need for flexibility without sacrificing its powerful heuristic properties for examining identity development" (Renn, 2003, p. 386), the fixed time constraint of the ecological model does not allow for meaning making of decades or centuries of systematic oppression. Beyond ecological models, critical processes and the five tenets of critical theory provide both the flexibility and structure needed to deeply investigate the systematic influences of racial identity development (Harris, 2016).

Developing a Critical Multiracial Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is a burgeoning theoretical framework in which higher education and student affairs scholars and researchers approach race relations and identity (Abes, 2016; Harris, 2016). CRT was originally used to examine and disrupt White supremacy in legal arenas and has since been adopted by many different theoretical approaches, including student development (Abes, 2016; Patton et al., 2016). To strengthen and diversify the utility of CRT, adaptations such as TribalCrit and AsianCrit have evolved to meet the needs and complexities of different intersecting identities (Abes, 2016; Harris, 2016; Patton et al., 2016).

Based on this pre-established flexibility of critical race theory, MultiCrit offers a diversified solution that allows the original framework of CRT to better disrupt and agitate systematic oppression (Harris, 2016).

MultiCrit expands on the original tenets of CRT from four to eight to better reflect the lived experiences of multiracial individuals (Harris, 2016). Though useful for disrupting White supremacy, "CRT was originally developed to address the Civil Rights issues of African American people. As such, it is oriented toward an articulation of race issues along a 'black-white' binary" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429). A Black-White binary inherently implies that races should be separate and goes against the lived experiences of multiracial students. Though these tenets work towards developing a more equitable understanding of multiracial experiences, all racial identities benefit from these expansions (Harris, 2016). To form a MultiCrit approach, the following goals must be incorporated into practice and thought: expose structural determinism, address racism, monoracism, and colorism, adopt micro-differential racialization, and examine the influence of racial heritage.

A critical, post-structural approach to all racial identity development is supported by the experiences and mindsets of multiracial students who chose to "opt out of racial identities altogether by deconstructing them" (Renn, 2003, p. 385). Students felt the best way to represent their identity was to divest of preconceived notions of race (Renn, 2003); such thoughts of liberation are deeply rooted in critical race theory (Abes, 2016; Harris, 2016; Patton et al., 2016). Of all the articles and theories reviewed for this paper, Harris' (2016) attempt to build a theoretical foundation for MultiCrit best exemplified the experiences of monoracism, colorism, consequences of racial heritage, and structural determinism present in my own narrative.

Conclusion

The future of the U.S. population and higher education is multiracial (Harris, 2016; Renn, 2004; Jones & Bullock, 2012). To better serve the exponentially growing population on college campuses, student affairs professionals and higher education faculty and administrators must work to better understand the systemic and theoretical barriers facing multiracial students. This goal can be achieved by studying the sociohistorical and legal contexts of multiraciality within the United States, understanding established multiracial identity development theory, and exploring emerging theory and race within post-structural contexts. It is not enough to assume that all racial justice measures account for the lived experiences of multiracial communities. Student affairs and higher education professionals must investigate and disrupt the dominant narratives of monoraciality in higher education, law, and society to better serve both multi- and monoracial students.

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