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## Parts of a Whole: Reframing Identity Development Theory as a Queer and Trans Person of Color

Em Chih-Rou Huang

*In the field of higher education and student affairs, identity development theory is an integral part of understanding how students develop and the ways their experiences are shaped by their understanding of themselves (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quayle, 2016; Renn & Reason, 2013; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). This article incorporates Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality to examine the impact of racism, heterosexism, and cissexism in understanding the identity development narrative of the author, a queer and trans Chinese Vietnamese American graduate student. To recognize the impact of conflicting values among a student's families and communities, this article focuses on the importance of incorporating intersectional understandings of privilege and oppression to inform student-centered theoretical conceptions of the identity development of queer and trans students of Color.*

In today's shifting social and political climate, identity salience is becoming increasingly prominent in students' experiences (Ethier & Deaux, 1994). For student affairs professionals, this shift necessitates an engagement with identity development theory to develop an understanding of student experiences and inform student support. Although theories that focus on racial, gender, or sexual identity development can provide significant insight into the experiences of students with these identities, they were not developed with an intersectional lens to address multiple marginalized identities. For queer and trans students of Color, a siloed identity development approach does not acknowledge the ever-changing connections and tensions between different aspects of identity. The result is two disparate and seemingly incompatible theoretical narratives: one for queer and trans students and another for students of Color.

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Theories serve as compelling tools for examining the systems of power, privilege, and oppression shaping students' experiences, and contexts they develop in. I have experienced the ability of identity development theories to validate marginalized students' personal identities and experiences. However, theories explore marginalized identities largely in isolation, without consideration for intersectionality. Theories of sexual or gender identity development are centered around Whiteness, while racial identity development theories assume that students are cisgender and straight. Though these theories work to better understand individual identities, they reduce identity development to a set of single stories with disparate narratives that are often incongruent. Students who hold multiple marginalized identities must choose pieces of different theories to build a theoretical representation of their experiences; such demands by theory fail to honor students' holistic selves.

To support students in their holistic identity development, it is necessary to utilize an intersectional lens to critique and understand identity development as an individual experience affected by all systemic issues of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). To ground my work, I seek first to authentically situate and understand my narrative and epistemology in this approach. This article attempts to connect theory to practice by critiquing stage-based student identity development models using a reflective, intersectional, and critical-constructivist approach.

## Theoretical Grounding

### Dimensions of Student Identity Development

Early iterations of student identity development theories sought to explain intrapersonal psychosocial identity development for college students. Originally seen as applicable to all students, student identity development theories were later criticized for focusing on homogenous populations of students with dominant identities, specifically cisgender straight White men (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). By assuming that all students follow the same path of development, these theories neglected to acknowledge how systems of power and privilege shape the experiences of students with different social identities. Scholars later began to explore social identities as distinct aspects of a student's identity (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Theories examining specific identities such as race, gender, or sexual orientation became part of the literature, resulting in explorations of student identity development seeking to understand how differences in social identity could create differences in experience.

**Racial identity development.** Theories of racial identity development examine the role that race plays in an individual's sense of self through self-identification,

identification through the perceptions of others, and the experiences derived from that identity. Racial identities are experienced as dominant or subordinate, which is reflected in racism and White supremacy (Patton et al., 2016). As situated in the context of the U.S., Black, Latinx, Asian, Native/Indigenous, and multiracial identities are considered as marginalized racial and ethnic identities, while White identity is considered as dominant.

Current racial identity development models are predominantly stage-based. The foundations for many of these models were developed from the Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1979, 1989, 1993, 1998) minority identity development model, which was revised by Sue and Sue (2003) as the racial and cultural identity development (RCID) model. The RCID model describes the racial identity development of people of Color in five stages. The first stage, *conformity*, describes an identification with White culture along with a rejection of one's cultural heritage, and is often connected with internalized racism. *Dissonance*, the second stage, describes the conflict experienced when one's experiences do not fit with their White worldview, which leads to questioning dominant culture and developing an interest in one's own racial/ethnic group. Third, *resistance and immersion* consist of the conscious rejection of White culture in favor of exploring an individual's racial/ethnic identity, which the individual begins to see as their own. *Introspection*, the fourth stage, describes the individual's attempts to find balance between White culture and their own racial/ethnic identity and culture, and explores how these shape the individual's identity. The fifth and final stage, *synergistic articulation and awareness*, describes the individual's integration of knowledge and experience into a holistic understanding of their racial/ethnic identity, the role that it plays with other aspects of their identity, and the ways that the individual exists in conjunction with other racial/ethnic groups.

**Sexual identity development.** Theories on sexual identity development focus on the ways that individuals experience and come into an endless combination of identities pertaining to different aspects of sexuality, including attraction, desire, and behavior. As social identities, sexual identities are also understood as dominant or subordinate based on the system of heterosexism and homophobia (Patton et al., 2016). In the context of the United States, sexual identities that involve same-gender attraction or sexual behavior, such as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, are most often viewed as subordinate identities. However, these identities are only a few of those that fall under the umbrella term queer, which includes other identities such as pansexual, asexual, demisexual, skoliosexual, polysexual, same gender loving, kink, polyamorous, and others. Because queer identity serves to describe sexual identities that do not conform to the dominant identity of heterosexual monogamy without strictly defining them, the identities and experiences encompassed by the term queer are as numerous and diverse as the individuals who hold them.

Sexual identity development theories have predominantly focused only on the development of gay, lesbian, or bisexual identities, neglecting to address the existence of other queer identities. Cass's (1979) theory of homosexual identity formation was developed from a study of gay men and described as a linear psychosocial model through which an individual experiences conflict, internalization, and synthesis of a homosexual identity. The model involves a linear progression through six stages: 1) identity confusion, involving questioning of the individual's self-perception as heterosexual; 2) identity comparison, involving feelings of social isolation and alienation from former assumptions and heterosexual people; 3) identity tolerance, involving acknowledgment of a gay or lesbian identity and seeking out other gay and lesbian people; 4) identity acceptance, involving increasing interaction with gay and lesbian culture and selective disclosure of a gay or lesbian identity; 5) identity pride, involving immersion into gay and lesbian culture and rejection of heterosexual values, institutions, and communities; and 6) identity synthesis, involving integration of the individual's sexual orientation into their identity as a whole. Cass's model became one of the most widely disseminated theories regarding sexual identity development, but has been criticized for its rigid linear approach and focus on coming out, identity disclosure, and engagement in the queer community as necessary for the completion of identity development (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

In contrast to stage-based models of queer identity development, D'Augelli (1994) presented a lifespan model for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identity development that involved six processes that did not have to occur in a particular order. These identity development processes included exiting heterosexuality, developing a personal LGB identity, developing an LGB social identity, becoming an LGB offspring, developing an LGB intimacy status, and entering an LGB community. While D'Augelli's model addresses some of the prominent critiques about stage-based models, its scope is still limited, failing to address experiences beyond sexual orientation and sexual orientation identity for LGB identities.

**Gender identity development.** Theories on gender identity development focus on the way an individual experiences and develops an understanding of their identity, expression, and role as related to gender. An individual's expression and internalization of their identity may or may not be congruent with dominant social gender constraints (Patton et al., 2016). Gender as a social identity is understood as dominant and subordinate in relation to two systems of oppression: sexism and cissexism. Sexism, as encountered through patriarchy, situates women, genderqueer, and nonbinary identities as subordinate, while men's identities are considered dominant. Cissexism focuses on the oppression experienced by trans, genderqueer, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people whose identities are considered subordinate, while cisgender identities are dominant. While sexism

and cissexism are two distinct systems, gender identity is connected to and impacted by both. As this article focuses on queer and trans students of Color, trans identity development theory will be prioritized.

In contrast to the earlier theories and models developed to explain queer identity development, trans identity development models have been scarce. Lev's (2004) stage-based model uses a counseling perspective to understand transgender emergence. Criticisms of Lev's model are similar to those of stage-based queer identity development models, specifically that while a range of gender identities are acknowledged, the focus is on a narrow definition of transition, either from male to female (MTF) or female to male (FTM). Furthermore, Lev (2004) discusses sexual orientation only in terms of heterosexual or homosexual, defined by gender identity and sex changes. This can be attributed at least in part to the influence of the medical and psychiatric framework of the counseling perspective. In doing so, the model erases the identity of trans, genderqueer, and nonbinary people who experience transition and sexual identity beyond these linear and binary ways.

### **Intersectionality**

First developed by Crenshaw (1991) to explain the marginalization of Black women at the intersections of their identities through a legal lens, intersectionality has become a framework to explore the impact of the interconnected systems of privilege and oppression. The framework builds from critical scholarship around the intersection of marginalized identities first explored by Black feminist perspectives (Collins, 2002), seeking to encompass the myriad of socio-political identities held by an individual and the experiences that are connected with them holistically. Acknowledging the ways intersecting identities shape each other, it examines how individuals are part of systems of inequality and how they experience privilege and oppression at the same time (Crenshaw, 1991). While intersectionality is not a student development theory, it provides a framework to analyze the contexts influencing identity development. Its focus on an individual's existence in relation to power inequities and the resulting experiences allows for a critical examination of student development theory and its applications to the development of complex, multidimensional identities (Renn & Reason, 2013).

### **Parts of a Whole**

Reflecting on my experiences of identity development and my own understandings of their significance, I juxtapose prescribed narratives from identity development theories with stories from my narrative that are connected to my holistic identity as a queer, trans, Chinese Vietnamese American student. By examining my lived experiences through this intersectional lens, I hope to depict my process that has

allowed me to move beyond narratives of individual identities to construct an understanding of my whole self.

### **I Am Chinese Vietnamese American**

I was Chinese before I was Asian  
 the language spoken, the food eaten, the holidays celebrated at home  
 all Chinese  
 and nothing else.

Except we ate pho once a week  
 my dad born and raised in Vietnam  
 but he always reminded me that he was Chinese  
 which meant that we were a Chinese family  
 which meant that I was  
 Chinese and Vietnamese  
 no, Chinese not Vietnamese  
 and nothing else.

The first year of elementary school  
 I learned the difference between Chinese, Korean, and Japanese  
 different outfits worn to World Cultures Day  
 different ways we said hello  
 we ate fried rice, kimchi, and sushi to match.  
 All of this, my teacher said, is Asian food.  
 But each felt so different and not the same at all  
 just as the names of Hwang and Hanamoto  
 so different from Huang.

The first day of middle school  
 I learned that there are other kinds of Asian  
 some with brown skin and names like Castillo and Pascual with lumpia in  
 lunchboxes  
 some with brown skin and names like Bhakta and Shah bringing samosas to  
 school

All of you, the teachers said, are Asian.  
 But we looked at each other and shrugged  
 we were each so different and not the same at all.  
 But we lived in America  
 we recited the Pledge of Allegiance every day  
 I asked my dad why I was  
 Chinese American  
 instead of  
 American Chinese  
 he said, because that is how people see us.  
 I shrugged and said, okay.

The first week of college  
I passed by the Chinese American Student Association  
the table with the red tablecloth  
the people that looked like me  
I went to the table with the rainbow flag instead  
the people that felt like me  
In the color-filled queer community  
each so different and not the same at all  
they understood  
when my dad said, you know it's a choice.  
I couldn't just shrug and say, okay.  
The third week of graduate school  
someone told me, you attempt to assimilate into whiteness.  
Did you know a white man told me to  
"Go back to Thailand, bitch"  
I have never been white  
enough to shrug and say, I'm just American.  
I am too queer  
to go home to my Asian family  
so different and not the same at all.

According to Sue and Sue's (2003) RCID model, as an Asian American student, I would have begun my racial identity development in conformity with an identification with White culture, rejection of my own culture, and experiencing internalized racism in an attempt to assimilate into whiteness. Instead, I grew up strongly identifying with my ethnicity and nationality as Chinese American, and my racial identification was secondary to this. Rather than experiencing dissonance from a realization that my experiences did not fit the White-centric worldview I held, I found that my queerness and transness prohibited me from fitting the Chinese American worldview created by my family. This stems from the homophobia and transphobia that exist in my family, both of which are connected to the expectations they had of me as a Chinese and Christian girl. Because my queer and trans narrative does not align with the prescribed narrative of a person of Color, I must claim my racial and ethnic identity as one that is made unique by the intersection of my Chinese Vietnamese culture, American culture, and queer culture.

## I Am Queer

The first time I see two women kiss on Grey's Anatomy

I can't stop thinking about it.

wanting.

imagining.

being?

no, not being

I am not blonde.

there is always one that is blonde.

so I must be the brunette

except my last name is not Torres or Fitch or Lopez or Porter

it is Huang

but it's okay I can make believe

that my skin looks like that

that my hair looks like that

that my eyes look like that

that...

no.

that's not me.

The first time my parents see me watching Grey's Anatomy

they can't stop thinking about it.

agonizing.

praying.

fixing?

no, not fixing

I am not broken.

they were always told I was broken.

so I must be fine

but they don't say they love me no matter what or reject me entirely

they wait in silence

but it's okay I can deal with it

I can turn my back

they are dead to me

they don't care about me

they are still there...

still family.

According to Cass's (1979) theory of homosexual identity formation, sexual identity development is considered to be representative of identity pride, in which the individual is immersed in gay and lesbian culture and rejects heterosexual values, institutions, and communities before being followed by identity synthesis, in which sexual identity has been integrated into the individual's holistic identity. However, this does not align with my experiences, in which my identity as a person of Color shapes the type of queer culture that I connect to. While the queer community is racially and ethnically diverse, visible queer culture is overwhelmingly White. Racism is rampant in the queer community, with people of Color often deemed as lesser than their White counterparts or, conversely, fetishized. Cissexism determines the palatability of queerness, with depictions defaulting either to flamboyant, gay men who are not depicted as sexual, or cis, femme, lesbian women with long hair and long nails who are hypersexualized and objectified.

Furthermore, the two most distinct queer narratives in media are portrayed in a dualistic manner. Either an individual receives unending support or is rejected and cut off by one's family. D'Augelli's (1994) notion of becoming an LGB offspring focuses on this coming out aspect, and does not account for the complicated relationship of a family who does not accept the individual's queerness and yet does not cut them off. I do not see myself in these depictions of queer people. Without reflections of my experiences, I struggle to find pride in the culture and values of a community that does not seem to be built for me, and instead must seek identity synthesis by acknowledging the validity of my own existence.

## I Am Trans

Genderfluid.

like Ruby Rose, I can still wear normal girl clothes

(translation: like Ruby Rose, I can still look like a girl)

Genderqueer.

I don't need hormones

(translation: I don't want to be a boy)

Nonbinary.

I still don't need hormones

(translation: I don't want to be a girl either)

Dysphoria.

I can't breathe

(translation: I need help)

Trans.

I'm changing

(translation: I'm terrified)

Dysphoria.

I'm afraid

(translation: It's still bad)

Nonbinary.

At least nobody's looking at me

(translation: It's easier to get home safe)

Genderqueer.

I don't have to talk about hormones

(translation: I'm not sure if I can do this)

Genderfluid.

My grandmother needs me to be a girl

(translation: I'm not a girl any more)

Genderqueer, genderfluid, and nonbinary trans.

Who am I?

(translation: It changes every day)

According to Lev's (2004) model of transgender emergence, trans identity development involves consecutive stages of exploration. The exploration of identity and self-labeling comes first, followed by the exploration of transition issues and possible body modification. The final stage is integration, in which an individual experiences acceptance and deals with post-transition issues. This model relies on identities, labels, transition issues, and body modification as available and accessible in a linear fashion to a trans person to reach acceptance and integration of a trans identity. However, this assumes that there is only one possible progression through trans identity development and transition.

As I have experienced changes in my body from hormone therapy, I have shifted the labels I identify with. As a trans person of Color, I think about the ways that transitioning and passing are tied to safety. Knowing that trans people of Color, specifically Black trans women, experience more violence than White trans people, thoughts about safety shape the way that I may attempt to pass as opposed to asking for my identity to be recognized. As an Asian transmasculine person, however, I also experience less violence than many transfeminine people due to the ways that androgyny and femininity are already ascribed to Asian people. This assigned androgyny allows me to adapt my gender expression with less fear. Finally, my relationships with my family play a substantial role in shaping the way I identify or approach physical expression of my transness because of their expectations around gender and how I present myself. These expectations are situated in transphobia, and influence the way I express my gender around my family. Lev's approach does not account for these constantly shifting contexts of environment, which are necessary to understand not only how the individual wants to experience their gender but also how others want them to experience and portray their gender.

### **Implications for Practice**

Student affairs professionals must move away from rigid applications and interpretations of identity development theories. While theories can provide important points of reference for experiences or processes of identity development, utilizing them in isolation oversimplifies the complexity of identity development, especially for students with multiple marginalized identities. Though the experiences connected to identity development examined in this article are limited, centering the use of an intersectional lens shows that relying solely on identity development theories focused on one aspect of identity is not enough.

To best understand the experiences of queer and trans students of Color, there must be space for nuanced discussions of the myriad systems of privilege and oppression that interplay to shape each aspect of the student's identity. However,

making assumptions based only on one's knowledge of systems of privilege and oppression disregards a student's experiences that may resonate in some ways with an identity development model, connect to an intersectional understanding of how a theory applies, or not connect at all. Although this article focuses on the intersections of racial, sexual, and gender identity for queer and trans students of Color, other identities may hold more salience for the student. Student affairs practitioners should continue to familiarize themselves with the contexts of other identities and how they may be experienced.

Most importantly, identity development theory cannot be the sole source used to understand students. Rather, a student's own narrative and experiences must be the driving factor. Utilizing a critical understanding of a student's context to provide guidance to co-construct an understanding of their narrative and experiences creates a student-centered process that validates and appreciates each unique story.

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