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Critical race theory can be an important tool for developing a deeper understanding of the experiences of specific Asian American ethnic groups and individuals.

Contextualizing Asian American Education Through Critical Race Theory: An Example of U.S. Pilipino College Student Experiences

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According to the 2000 Census, approximately 11.9 million Asian Americans live in the United States, comprising 3.6 percent of the total U.S. population. This reflects an increase in the Asian American population of over 50 percent since 1990 (Asian Pacific American Legal Center, 2003). In the context of American higher education, this group represents a growing portion of the college student population. Indeed, from 1976 to 2000, the Asian and Pacific Islander student population within higher education has more than tripled (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). However, little attention has been given to the diversity of this racial group in the context of higher education research.

Although scholarly research on Asian Americans in education has increased significantly in the past twenty years (Hune, 1995), important issues facing Asian Americans have been masked by their treatment in educational research and policy. While Asian Americans have been included in debates about racial and ethnic minority representation in American colleges and universities since the 1980s, they have mostly been used to legitimate or devalue the experiences of other racial and ethnic groups (Takagi,

1992). Rarely have Asian American experiences and perspectives been given attention in and of themselves.

The increasing presence of Asian Americans in higher education is often exaggerated to perpetuate the perception that they are a model minority. The model minority stereotype suggests that Asian Americans are a monolithic group that enjoys overwhelming success in the education sector, even when there is empirical evidence to the contrary (see Chapter One, this volume; Museus, 2009; Suzuki, 2002). As a result of this myth, important issues facing Asian Americans have been obscured in educational research and policy. In this chapter, we argue for the application of critical race theory (CRT) to examine Asian Americans in college. We maintain that CRT challenges educational discourse that often is ahistorical and perpetuates the model minority paradigm.

In the following sections, we offer a CRT perspective of the prevailing representation of Asian Americans in higher education research and acknowledge the importance of recent studies that have begun to challenge notions of a monolithic Asian American educational experience through an examination of differences among Asian American subpopulations (for example, Chang and others, 2007; College Board, 2008). We assert that CRT can help move the discourse regarding Asian Americans beyond these critiques of the model minority stereotype to a deeper understanding of their unique experiences in higher education.

We use Pilipino Americans as an example because of their unique history of American colonization in the Philippines. Drawing from the research of coauthor Buenavista, we illustrate how CRT can be used to provide a holistic account of Asian American students' experiences—in this case, Pilipino college students' experiences. We conclude by advocating for the application of a CRT paradigm to qualitative or quantitative research in higher education to emphasize sociohistorical and contemporary contexts of race in the United States. In doing so, researchers are less likely to reproduce the dominant racial discourse and more likely to better understand and honor the diverse educational experiences of Asian American students in higher education.

A Critical Race Perspective of Research on Asian Americans

Asian Americans are often noted for their overrepresentation in colleges and universities due to the large presence of East Asian ethnic groups (for example, Chinese or Koreans) at many selective institutions (Hune and Chan, 2000; Nakanishi and Nishida, 1995). This notion of overrepresentation shapes the ways in which Asian Americans are racially constructed as model minorities. The model minority myth supports the idea that racial and ethnic communities can overcome challenges associated with minority status and persevere despite inequalities in America (Takagi, 1992). The concept of the model minority, however, does not take into account the ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of Asian Americans. Rather, the model minority

myth is a social construct that aggregates the experiences of all Asian Americans, even though the community is one that is composed of over twenty-five different ethnic groups with diverse histories, immigration patterns, and cultures (Siu, 1996; Escueta and O'Brien, 1995). Using a CRT framework, Buenavista (2007) has asserted that this stereotype and generalization of Asian Americans is a manifestation of a larger racial agenda that serves to maintain the dominance of whites in the United States.

While scholars in the field of Asian American studies have conducted research that historically has challenged and continues to challenge the model minority stereotype (see Chapter One, this volume), the authentic and diverse experiences of Asian Americans remain marginalized in education discourse. The pervasive aggregation of all Asian and Asian American ethnic subgroups causes the inappropriate standardization of their realities into one monolithic experience, which most often reflects common stories of success (Hune and Chan, 2000). This aggregation and standardization has a detrimental effect on the experiences and success of Asian ethnic groups that are underrepresented in higher education, such as Hmong, Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, and Pilipinos (Okamura and Agbayani, 1997; Teranishi and others, 2004). The model minority myth often causes these groups to be overlooked in higher education research that specifically focuses on minority students (Museus, 2009).

Researchers in the field of higher education have recently focused on how the racialization of Asian American students as model minorities often obscures the racial and ethnic disparities in socioeconomic status and educational attainment from which some Asian American subpopulations suffer (Museus, 2009; Teranishi, 2007). In fact, some Southeast Asian subpopulations hold college degrees at lower rates than all other racial and ethnic groups in the nation (see Chapter One, this volume). Moreover, contrary to popular assumptions about the overrepresentation of Asian Americans at selective institutions, research reveals that they are widely spread across institutional types (Chang and others, 2007). Southeast Asians and Pilipinos, in particular, are overrepresented in two-year and lower-tier four-year colleges (Teranishi and others, 2004). While these analyses of disaggregated data have underscored the diversity of Asian American students' backgrounds and educational experiences, missing from higher education is discussion of the sociohistorical context of such groups.

The Tenets of Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory is an evolving methodological, conceptual, and theoretical construct that attempts to disrupt racism and dominant racial paradigms in education (Solórzano, 1998). Its origins are in the field of law, where CRT was used to demonstrate how the legal system serves as a mechanism for sustaining the dominance of whites in American society (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw, 1993). Within education, CRT

continues its tradition of challenging and dismantling prevalent notions of fairness, meritocracy, color-blindness, and neutrality in the education of racial minorities (Parker, Deyhle, and Villenas, 1999). We posit that CRT is a useful framework for moving beyond the critiques of the model minority stereotype and toward a deeper understanding of the sociohistorical contexts of how Asian Americans are racialized in the United States and how consequent racial constructs often shape their educational experiences and outcomes of Asian American college students.

CRT scholars anchor analyses of educational structures in five primary tenets: (1) the intersectionality of racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of oppression in schools; (2) the challenge to dominant ideologies that often claim objectivity and neutrality in educational research; (3) the commitment to social justice through the critical examination and transformation of education discourse and practices that perpetuate subordination; (4) the validity of experiential knowledge and offering counter-storytelling, or highlighting the stories of often marginalized voices, as a credible methodological tool; and (5) the utility of interdisciplinary perspectives from fields such as women's studies and ethnic studies into education research to better understand various manifestations of discrimination (Smith-Maddox and Solórzano, 2002; Solórzano and Yosso, 2001). Together these tenets of CRT provide a framework for scholars to examine the historical and contemporary marginalization of Asian Americans in higher education, and the ways in which these issues may be addressed.

Intersectionality of Race and Racism. CRT scholars posit that issues related to socioeconomic status, gender, and sexuality, as well as their intersections with race, are important considerations (Solórzano, 1997; West, 1991). They also assert that race is central in examining issues of inequality that people of color experience. They note that race is a social construct, and racism occurs implicitly and explicitly at micro- (individual) and macro- (societal) levels (Solórzano, 1997), and they characterize racism as endemic to American life. Thus, race and racism are critical factors in defining and explaining the experiences of people of color.

Challenge to Dominant Ideology. As race is the essential component to the framework, CRT refutes claims of a neutral and objective educational system. In other words, CRT assumes that race matters and disparities can be attributed to how people of color differentially experience education. Thus, this tenet challenges notions of neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness, and meritocracy because it highlights how such ideas are inapplicable to explaining racial differences. Furthermore, this tenet highlights how such ideas are actually conceptions of the dominant group in the United States and are created to obscure white self-interest, power, and privilege.

Commitment to Social Justice. The ability to recognize how dominant ideologies help perpetuate unequal structures of power has stimulated CRT scholars to work toward eliminating racism in the United States. Whereas the goal of CRT is to dismantle institutions that perpetuate and

maintain racist ideologies, the commitment to social justice must be seen in the context of a larger goal of ending all forms of subordination (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Accordingly, the larger goal of social justice can be pursued through critical educational research, as well as the dissemination of it. Such research is necessary for the establishment of transformative educational practices that challenge those that perpetuate educational inequalities.

Centrality of Experiential Knowledge. Crucial to advancing a social justice agenda, CRT centralizes the voices and experiences of people of color to inform research and practice. Considering that marginalized voices have been excluded from dominant narratives, the historically omitted experiences and voices of people of color are critical in understanding racism. Not only is the experiential knowledge that people of color possess a legitimate and appropriate source of information, it is necessary in developing critical analyses regarding the ways in which racism is endemic. As such, CRT scholars often rely on research techniques that centralize the voices of people, such as interview narratives, oral history, and counter-storytelling.

Interdisciplinary Perspective. Although CRT functions to eradicate racial injustices, CRT scholars assert that researchers must draw from a multitude of disciplines and methodologies to holistically address issues of racism. This tenet assumes that while racism and racial constructs manifest distinctly in contemporary contexts, they are not ahistorical. Therefore, it is important to understand race and racism in both historical and contemporary contexts, and interdisciplinarity might be useful in bringing attention to the relationship between historical and contemporary experiences. CRT frameworks draw from an interdisciplinary knowledge base that includes disciplines such as ethnic studies and gender studies to fully understand race and racism in the education system through the lens of a person of color (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002).

Critical Race Theory in Research on Asian Americans in Higher Education

Critical race theory is concerned with the deconstruction of oppressive structures and the construction of liberatory educational practices, which include curricula and pedagogy designed to focus explicitly on race and racism (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Some have argued that higher education, as it is currently structured, subordinates minority groups, whether those groups' minority status is defined according to sexual orientation, gender, race, or ethnicity (Rhoads, 1995; Bensimon, 1995; Solórzano, 1998). In the case of Asian Americans, CRT permits the conceptualization of how the notion of this group as a model minority is more than just a myth; it is also a pervasive paradigm that has been used in educational research to perpetuate white, middle-class, hegemonic notions of merit and dismiss the educational disparities and overall educational experiences of Asian Americans. In this context, CRT proponents assume that the model minority paradigm

constitutes a racial project that is used to maintain an existing system of racial hierarchy in education where white, middle-, and upper-income students experience educational opportunities at the expense of students of color.

Critical Race Theory and Pilipino American Students' Experiences

Critical race theory provides the tools to examine the educational experiences of Asian Americans in order to centralize their voices in higher education discourse. It also encourages the consideration of the social, political, and historical role that education has played in the contemporary experiences of particular ethnic subpopulations within discussions of college access and success.

Many college-educated parents of second-generation Pilipino students have received a college education in the Philippines that is similar to the education received in technical schools in the United States. Thus, many of those parents lack a working knowledge of the American four-year college system. Consequently, it has been asserted that second-generation Pilipino students should be considered 1.5 generation students (Buenavista, 2007). Buenavista applied CRT and a qualitative case study approach to examine the access and retention of Pilipino 1.5-generation college students at a large selective university involved in the Pilipino Recruitment and Retention Center (PRRC), one of the first Pilipino student-initiated organizations in the nation. Using CRT, she conducted three waves of in-depth interviews with twelve Pilipino college student activists in the PRRC. She determined that Pilipino students' experiences were characterized by a context of contradictions that were shaped by their 1.5 generation status. Those students' experiences were similar to the experiences of underrepresented students of color, although Pilipinos were considered liminal students of color. Moreover, those responded to their liminal status through student-initiated strategies that centralized their unique sociocultural contexts. Those Pilipino student-initiated activities included culturally affirming educational experiences, such as discussions around Pilipino immigration and family dynamics related to college choice, multilingual events, and a Pilipino graduation ceremony. In the following sections, we provide a glimpse of this analysis to highlight the power of CRT to contribute to the examination of Asian American students' experiences in a sociohistorical context. In doing so, we underscore how Pilipino educational experiences are shaped by these contexts, a point that educational discourse has failed to consider thus far.

Sociohistorical Considerations. Similar to other Asian American ethnic subpopulations, Pilipino American students' experiences in higher education have been shaped by a unique history often excluded from higher education research and discourse. In the case of Pilipino students, it is a history of American colonialism in the Philippines. Although the Philippines was a formal colony of the United States from 1898 to 1946, scholars have

argued that it remains a neocolony due to its social and economic dependence on American industries (San Juan, 1998; Tiongson, Gutierrez, and Gutierrez, 2006).

Liminality of Pilipinos. The term *liminal* refers to the literal and figurative position of being between two states that are characterized by ambiguity. We use the term to describe liminality in the historical positioning of Pilipinos between status as foreigners and colonial subjects, being second-generation college students but not having the benefits of parents who understand how to navigate the U.S. educational system, and status as racialized people of color who are often marginalized by other people of color and whites. Ignacio, de la Cruz, Emmanuel, and Toribio (2004) and Omi and Winant (1994) argue that the American colonization of the Philippines was very much a racist project. Others suggest that in efforts to validate imperialist expansion at the turn of the century, the United States portrayed Pilipinos as racially inferior through both the popular press and governmental policies regarding Pilipino immigration (Ignacio, de la Cruz, Emmanuel, and Toribio, 2004). Under formal colonial status, Pilipinos immigrated to the United States freely as American “nationals,” a liminal position in which they were not considered aliens or citizens. With this government status, Pilipinos were not subject to immigration restrictions. Such a unique status was beneficial to American agricultural and service industries, which came to rely on Pilipinos as cheap labor during a time when xenophobia prevented the immigration of other racial minorities to the United States.

American colonization of the Philippines sparked national debate in the United States regarding whether such expansion represented the democratic ideals that typified the nation (Ignacio, de la Cruz, Emmanuel, and Toribio, 2004). A decreased dependence on Pilipinos as labor and worldwide critique of American colonialism facilitated formal Philippine independence. As we discuss in the next section, what resulted from independence was a shift regarding the way in which Pilipinos were racially constructed in the United States.

Invisibility of Pilipinos. As a result of independence, Pilipinos no longer occupied a liminal government status; rather, they became “alien.” This shift in status led to Pilipino immigrants becoming racialized as simply “Asian,” a categorization that decontextualized the colonial relationship that initially facilitated their presence in the nation. The racialization of Pilipinos as Asian rather than as unique colonial subjects facilitated a historical amnesia that obscures any trace of American imperialism in the Philippines, thereby maintaining the notion of the United States as a democratic entity. Pilipinos who immigrate to the United States for various socioeconomic opportunities are treated as voluntary immigrants, and the colonial relationship between the United States and the Philippines continues to be absent from discourse examining Pilipino Americans’ experiences. However, this sociohistorical context is highlighted with the application of CRT in examination of Pilipino issues.

CRT scholars assert that race and racism are endemic to American life, so an understanding of the experiences of people of color requires a comprehension of how their racialization has shaped their experiences. Although previous research has demonstrated that Pilipinos differentially experience college access and retention issues compared to other Asian groups, they continue to be racialized as Asian model minorities in higher education (Okamura and Agbayani, 1997; Suzuki, 2002; Museus, 2009). As Asians, Pilipinos are liminal people of color: honorary whites and model racial minorities. Their issues thus remain largely invisible to higher education researchers and in the United States at large (Root, 1997).

In the next section, we discuss how CRT can be used to uncover how Pilipino racial constructions in education parallel the racial construction of Pilipinos during American colonization of the Philippines. In other words, CRT assumes that the ways in which the (neo)colonial relationship between the United States and the Philippines has historically contributed to Pilipino racialization continue to manifest in the contemporary educational and everyday lives of Pilipino Americans. We share data from the case study of Pilipino students within the PRRC to illustrate this point and support our assertion about the value added in applying CRT to analyzing the experiences of Asian Americans in higher education. Specifically, we provide two representative quotations that speak to the ways in which Pilipinos remain liminal and invisible and discuss how such data can be understood within the sociohistorical and racialized contexts of the actors involved.

Liminality and Invisibility Perpetuated. The Pilipino population is characterized by a variety of immigration histories, citizenship status, class differences, generational status, and language and regional distinctions; nevertheless, colleges and universities homogeneously racialize Pilipinos as Asian Americans. Because Asian Americans are often constructed as model minorities, they are assumed to be undeserving of institutional support in the form of targeted outreach and retention services. This is apparent in the exclusion of Pilipinos from many support programs in higher education. Moreover, as one of the first communities of color to be removed from affirmative action protection in California during the 1980s, Pilipinos went from being “underrepresented minorities” to liminal students of color in higher education.

Pilipino students were no longer considered racial minorities in terms of institutional practices pertaining to access and retention, but at the same time they experienced similar barriers as students of color. It can be argued that this marginalization of Pilipinos was representative of the historical legacy of invisibility created by the Philippine-U.S. relationship and thus positioned Pilipinos in the middle of the racial spectrum in education: not given full consideration as people of color but also not benefiting from the historical and current privileges enjoyed by whites. As the following quotation demonstrates, the racially liminal positioning of Asian Americans in

general, and Pilipinos in particular, was consistently expressed by participants in the case study as a major barrier to college access and retention: “It’s hard being on this campus, being a minority on this campus, being an invisible minority on this campus. Because we’re Asian, we don’t count as minorities and so we’re not eligible for university help. . . . I think that’s a big issue that’s happening right now . . . that’s affecting a lot of people here.”

The social construction of Asian Americans as liminal students of color has contributed to a limited understanding of their college choice processes (Buenavista, 2007). This is problematic considering that studies of college choice have been particularly useful in describing the factors that contribute to or prevent college-going processes for students of color, and they consequently have been used by many institutions, including more selective ones, to implement programs and initiatives for increasing minority student representation. Therefore, underrepresented Asian American students are excluded from such programs and efforts due to the lack of research on their college choice process that can be drawn on for such diversity initiatives.

A CRT examination of the factors influencing Pilipino American college students reveals that they continue to be constructed as liminal students of color, while their experiences are similar to those of underrepresented students of color. For example, cost and affordability, location and distance from home, and institutional reputation—compounded by familial expectations and obligations, as well as students’ desire to feel a sense of belonging—worked together to shape Pilipino students’ college choice processes. Moreover, as with other students of color, the factor most prominent in all twelve students’ decision-making processes regarding search and choice was cost and affordability. Both middle- and working-class students took into consideration their perceived understanding of their families’ socioeconomic situation to make decisions about where to apply, the number of institutions to which they would apply, and where they would attend college. For the four students who considered themselves working class, community college was considered an option, while middle-income students indicated that the cost of applications and potential expenses were more of a consideration than institutional type.

In addition to demonstrating liminality, the quotation highlights how being categorized as Asian leads to being invisible minorities. Indeed, Pilipino American students and their issues in higher education are subject to such invisibility. Pilipino American college students face similar retention issues as other students of color, but their experiences remain obscure, and postsecondary institutions consequently fail to provide the recognition and invest the resources to address their concerns. Moreover, the Pilipino American students in the study expressed feelings of invisibility as a result of the disconnection between the students’ and university’s sociocultural contexts. One student stated: “The university, truthfully, I don’t think really knows what Filipinos go through, not just with school, but with organizations we might be involved with, relationships that we have, stress factors at

home. . . . I think that their programs are more for the ideal student that only studies, which really doesn't apply to some students that are heavily involved or have larger commitments at home."

We argue that historically, colleges and universities have catered to traditional students—white, middle class, eighteen to twenty-four years old—while ignoring the diversity of students' experiences across campus. Even with the shifting demographics of the college-going population, higher education institutions continue to reflect the culture of the dominant majority. Based on the conditions created by the conflicts between students of color and predominantly white institutional cultures, students of color are still subject to issues related to their persistence in higher education. While colleges and universities have made attempts to establish support programs and services focused on increasing the retention of college students of color, what of those students who remain unrecognized by their respective institutions?

Pilipino American participants experienced similar retention issues and marginalization to what other students of color have reported. Many had little to no grasp of college culture and had difficulties balancing family and school obligations. In addition, they were affected by the lack of ethnic and racial diversity on the campus and the lack of university recognition for their position as students of color in need of academic support. Consequently Pilipino issues in higher education were virtually unknown by those in the institution, with the exception of the students themselves, who felt the impact of invisibility. The belief that there was a lack of institutional support directed toward the community fostered students' perceptions of a negative campus racial climate for Pilipinos and affected students' persistence and attitudes toward higher education. Thus, students felt an overall lack of attention to and support for their educational well-being.

CRT Revisited. By drawing from a case study of Pilipino college students, we provide an example for researchers of how CRT and attention to sociohistorical contexts can lead to a more nuanced and more accurate portrayal of Asian American student experiences. As noted, Pilipino racial constructions in education reproduce a pattern of behavior that originates from American colonization of the Philippines. Historically, the colonial relationship between the United States and the Philippines facilitated the racialization of Pilipinos as liminal and invisible. In a contemporary educational context, Pilipinos are similarly racialized. A CRT analysis recognizes the salience of this oppression and draws attention to the perpetuation of such racial constructions in their current realities.

In addition, not only does CRT shape researchers' decisions about who to study, how to study them, and what questions to examine, but also calls for a more holistic interpretation of the results. The students quoted in this chapter articulated feelings of liminality and invisibility. Their voices, which represented the sentiment of most participants, provide a glimpse of the problematic effects of how these students are currently racialized in educational research and policy discussions. Therefore, in addition to understand-

ing and appreciating student experiences, a CRT analysis allows us to recognize how racial constructions do not occur in isolation; rather they represent a larger pattern of sociohistorical and institutionalized practices that have led, among other things, to the reproduction of Pilipino marginalization. Thus, CRT offers a meaningful and appropriate avenue for researchers to expand the dearth of empirical knowledge on Asian American subgroups of students beyond the model minority vacuum, through historicizing contemporary experiences.

Conclusion

Historically, Asian Americans have either been left out or misrepresented in mainstream higher education research (Museus, 2009). This misrepresentation stems from assumptions about Asian Americans as overwhelmingly successful at educational institutions and in need of little attention or few resources. In addition, educational researchers have often positioned Asian Americans with or in opposition to whites to support their arguments (Takagi, 1992). Other researchers have ignored the experiences of Asian Americans altogether and identified them as nonminorities (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin, 2005). Thus, from a CRT standpoint, prevailing representations of Asian Americans in educational research and policy have often been used to perpetuate notions of this group as a model minority in the service of a larger racial agenda that promotes white dominance.

Researchers have begun to draw on the tenets of CRT to challenge the dominant discourse regarding Asian Americans in educational research (Teranishi, 2007). This is an important line of inquiry, given the abundance of research that uses comparative racial frameworks to assert misguided representations of Asian Americans as a model minority. A broader application of CRT can help move beyond the model minority paradigm. Thus, researchers should use CRT to analyze the actual experiences of diverse individuals and subgroups within the Asian American population as valid points of interest in and of themselves. Indeed, it is critical that research challenges the dominant paradigm and honors the unique individual and group experiences within the Asian American population. CRT is a valuable tool to underscore and excavate those diverse within-race individual and group realities.

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