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Mitsunori Misawa
University of Georgia, Athens

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Queer Race Pedagogy in Adult Higher Education: Dealing with Power Dynamics and Positionality of Gay Students of Color

Mitsunori Misawa
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Abstract: This paper presents a theoretical concept of the intersection of race and sexual orientation and to describe Queer Race Pedagogy (QRP) in adult higher education. This paper provides an overview of racism and heterosexism in adult higher education and the two theories that are utilized to develop QRP.

Introduction

People's positionality, their social positions, greatly influences what things in society they can or cannot access. Martin and Gunten (2002) described the term positionality as "a concept that acknowledges that we are all raced, classed, and gendered, and that these identities are relational, complex, and fluid positions rather than essential qualities" (p. 46). We all live framed by socially constructed positions in society, memberships to which, wanted or not, we belong. Such automatic categorization is embedded in our society and is often at work in higher education.

Marginalization and discrimination are inescapable issues for minorities today. Although people of color obtained many rights through civil rights movements, discrimination towards race has not disappeared from society. Racism has been a discriminatory issue in the United States from its inception. Discrimination based on one's sexual orientation also came to the US from its European roots. From the biases of racism and heterosexism, sexual minorities of color are at least doubly discriminated against (Kumashiro, 2001). Some of them are torn between their racial identity and their sexual identity in today's society.

The purposes of this paper are to present a theoretical concept of the intersection of race and sexual orientation and to describe Queer Race Pedagogy (QRP) in adult higher education. First, the paper provides an overview of racism and heterosexism in adult higher education. It explores how racism and heterosexism influence society and adult higher education. Second, the paper explores two theories that are utilized to develop QRP. Histories and concepts of those theories are briefly introduced. Finally, this paper presents QRP, which is still being developed.

Racism in Adult Higher Education

Hemphill (2001) criticized how the field of adult education has generalized knowledge into practices. As a result, the field of adult education has been dominated by white discourse, and the voices and perspectives of minorities have not often been addressed. He pointed out that the universality and the generalization from the white perspective have perpetuated inequality in American society. The knowledge and the practices in the field of adult education have been primarily from white scholars. He stated two reasons why the dominant group based knowledge that he called universal knowledge is a problem in adult and higher education:

1. These are generalizations that operate hegemonically to marginalize learners and practitioners who do not conform to generalized learning or motivational patterns;

2.   They frustrate adult education practitioners who often care about the needs of those who are culturally, socially, economically, and linguistically marginalized (pp. 15-16). So, universality covers up the invisibilities of minority perspectives and also leads to misunderstandings between teachers and students.

Johnson-Bailey (2002) stated that the field of adult education has valued the universal knowledge of racism. She said that there needs to be more perspectives for adult learners. Since the perspectives of people of color have not appeared much in the literature of adult education, "people of color need to be considered on their own as human subjects" (p. 22) to represent differing aspects of humanity in the field of adult education. Diversity is important in the field and in American society because common knowledge and stereotypes involve racist perspectives. Johnson-Bailey (2002) argued that instead of reexamining universal knowledge to prevent racism, new perspectives that are based on people of color should be created because universality perpetuates racism in society.

Homophobia and Heterosexism in Adult Higher Education

Homophobia and heterosexism create non-inclusive and unwelcoming environments for gay people (Jagose, 1996). Several researchers, like Jagose (1996) Dilley (2002), defined the term *homophobia* as the irrational fear and hatred of gays and lesbians. Heterosexism is the idea that everything is heterosexual; it is superior to any other form of sexual expression, and everything should be heterosexual (Jagose, 1996).

 Bieschke, Eberz, and Wilson (2000) stated that educational programs, pedagogy, and purpose influence how learners perceive homophobic and heterosexist feelings towards their sexual orientation, which in turn oppress learners' lives. Environments that are negative towards gay men discourage them from coming out and may lead to low self-esteem (Dailley, 2002). Even though university faculty and administrators sometimes help guide students who are struggling with their sexuality, Dilley (2002) found that current mainstream universities created a norm of heterosexism in their learning environments, with professors using heterosexist practices in their lecture classes.

Once individuals begin to understand how environmental factors interact with sexual identity, faculty and staff should construct environments that embrace gay students and assist students who wish to define their sexuality. In order to create such environments, faculty and staff in higher education need to be aware and more sensitive of their students' situations. It is important for educators to be more inclusive in their practice in higher education, and they must listen to their learners' voices and understand their students' identities.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is based on the fact that a person's skin color becomes an identifier used to categorize that person by other people of dissimilar skin color. Race is a significant factor in external human development and in social constructions of contemporary society (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), "Critical Race Theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists in society and scholars in education interested in researching and transforming the relationship shared by race, racism, and power" (p. 2). Solorzano (1997) also defined CRT as "a framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of society that maintain the subordination and marginalization of People of Color" (p. 6). Although there is not a single

genetic characteristic possessed by every member of one racial group (Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin, 1984), they do share social characteristics; however, there are huge gaps among racial groups in terms of social privilege in the US. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) singled out six important themes in CRT: (a) Racism is endemic and ordinary; (b) Material determinism—our system of white over color—serves important material and psychological purposes; (c) Race is socially constructed; (d) Different minority groups are racialized at different times depending on economic need (a process known as differential racialization); (e) Individuals do not have unitary identities (a notion known as intersectionality and anti-essentialism); (f) A unique voice of color that exists because of historical and current oppression can communicate stories to white people who are unlikely to know the stories.

Asch (2000) stated, "CRT is skeptical about achieving the kind of social transformation that would enable historically excluded groups to achieve and maintain a valued place in American life" (p. 1). CRT helps people who have been marginalized because of their skin color to articulate their voices in society to obtain a more equal status in society for their "race."

Queer Theory

Queer Theory is a technique for analyzing social texts with an eye to exposing underlying meanings, distinctions, and relations of power in the larger culture which produces the texts. The resulting analyses reveal complicated cultural issues and problems for the regulations of sexual behavior that often result in the oppression of sexual minorities. Queer Theory looks into anything that comes between normative and deviant, particularly sexual activities and identities. Queer Theory is also concerned with the normative behaviors and identities which define the term "queer." Thus, Queer Theory's expansive scope covers all human behaviors. The theory insists that all sexual behaviors, all concepts linking sexual behaviors to sexual identities, and all categories of normative and deviant sexualities, are social constructs (Gamson, 2000). Queer Theory is moving from "explaining the modern homosexual" to questioning the operation of the heterosexual and homosexual binary. That makes it possible for scholars to become aware and more accepting of sexual orientation in contemporary adult education.

Although research in adult education has usually been conducted under a heterocentric lens, Queer Theory became a lasting part of the field's newly opening door toward the diversity of adult learners. Queer Theory complements the sociocultural perspective of adult development and the power relationship studies of Critical Theory. Many adult voices that were silenced are now starting to be heard by contemporary society and will continue to be heard in the future.

Queer Race Pedagogy (QRP) for Inclusive Learning Environments

Queer Race Pedagogy (QRP) is a holistic teaching approach. It is designed specifically for sexual minority students of color who have traditionally been ignored and their existence overlooked by mainstream discourses in higher education. Their needs in education are more complicated than the majority's and other minorities' (Misawa, 2005). QRP is an important tool for adult educators to have when they teach a diverse population where sexual minorities of color may exist.

Adult educators must strive to address as many issues as they can in order to practice QRP. Adult educators need to take into account various positionalities, like physical appearance and race/ethnicity which are easy to consider because they are often visually identifiable (although it is difficult to address racial/ethnic issues). Also, it is significant (but difficult) for adult educators to determine what other positionalities exist in their classroom by investigating

their students internally (e.g. sexual orientation). Sissel and Sheared (2001) stated that "depending upon what people's role in society is, where they are situated in society and how they view themselves will determine whether and in what contexts they are in the margin or center" (p. 4). So, when adult educators develop a lesson plan, they should account for their learners' positionalities.

Educators will likely encounter critical dimensions in contemporary higher education during their practice of QRP. According to Kumashiro (2001), the creation of a democratic educational setting is not easy because the educators need to fight against some forms of oppression, like racism and heterosexism. He also wrote that there are intersections of perspectives concerning race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and culture; some people have more than one minority aspect in the real world. He stated that such intersections put people into specific categories in this society, and those factors often make people invisible to society as well. He calls it *Troubling Intersections*. He stated that if adult educators want to create inclusive learning environments, they must acknowledge and work through these paradoxes and "address the queer student of color and challenge both racism and heterosexism" (p. 2).

In order for adult educators to practice QRP, they must prepare appropriate activities for learners, so they will be able to explore fully pedagogy and classroom dynamics in adult learning. QRP has two components at this point: building a community with counternarratives and examining stereotypes in terms of positionality.

One goal of QRP is to empower sexual minorities of color so that they are able to reflect and think critically about themselves. Counterstorytelling allows sexual minorities of color to explore their life stories. This narrative approach invites students to share their own stories with their colleagues who may have similar experiences. It also helps create a learning community where people feel safe so they can process their learning throughout the semester. It is crucial to create such an environment by practicing QRP from the beginning for sexual minorities of color. This sharing of counterstories helps them connect in class and creates an inclusive environment where they can explore different positionalities, such as race, sexual orientation.

The second component is to examine stereotypes, developing and using critical thinking skills. Fostering reflective critical practitioners is another goal of QRP. One of QRP's strategies is to address various critical dimensions with the perspectives of diversity education, stereotypes, and multicultural education. Because stereotypes are associated with positionality and connote power hierarchy in society (Kumashiro, 2004), this component becomes an important part of QRP. Examining stereotypes requires critical thinking skills to analyze how and why people have stereotypes. By deconstructing positionality's epistemology, people will learn how to use pedagogy and power as educators and learners in more inclusive ways.

QRP participants will use an experiential learning approach, such as sharing personal life stories, to reflect on their lives and learn about themselves. These two main components will help develop participant own voices. All the components of QRP are a continuum of the development of a learning community and the dissection of stereotypes. Historically, marginalized groups were not able to develop their own voices because the dominant ones took the voices of minorities away. It becomes obvious when learners deal with power dynamics in class that society is structured around the dominant ones. Therefore, QRP is designed for sexual minorities of color to critically examine the positionalities of the participants by fostering critical thinkers and nurturing reflective practitioners simultaneously.

Conclusion

In a democratic nation, all people should have equal rights. Adult higher education should be accessible to all people. One reason for that is because education is an important component to becoming successful in American society (Johnson-Bailey, 2002). However, the United States has achieved only superficial equality at this point in time (in 2006). The knowledge base in the mainstream discourse in adult higher-education is still heavily formulated for a white heterosexual male culture (Johnson-Bailey, 2002). In such an environment, the learning process degrades for some learners who have multiple minority perspectives. When a learning environment contains diverse learners, it is crucial for educators to make sure that everyone is included and is treated fairly. Creating a learning environment for queer students of color is an important procedure. In order for educators to create such environments, they first must know how to become more aware of their learners' positionalities and power dynamics (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000). In that sense, a pedagogical perspective about queer race enhances educator awareness on how to make such a learning environment for sexual minorities of color in adult higher education.

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