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The Life Story of President Barack Obama: Using Critical Race Theory to Analyze Life Experience

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Abstract: Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a lens and interest convergence and color-blind ideology as foci to explore the life experience of President Barack Obama, this study provides a framework for using CRT as a lens for examining life experience.

Introduction

Where better to begin a journey of new learning than an examination of our life experience? Adult education often begins with an exploration of life experience. And personal narratives or autobiographies often serve as the foundation for that exploration and for the potential learning each may gain as a result. While simply recalling experience allows for some amount of learning, deep learning comes when experience is examined through a critical lens. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a lens and interest convergence and color-blind ideology as foci to explore the life experience of President Barack Obama, this study provides a framework for using CRT as a lens for examining life experience.

In *Dreams from Our Fathers* (Obama, 2004) his personal narrative, Barack Obama examines how he made sense of his life experience as a biracial child growing up in the United States in the generation immediately following Civil Rights. Throughout the book he describes racialized experiences that served as transitional learning points. Obama's personal narratives provide an opportunity to explore the specific impact of color-blind ideology and interest convergence on daily life experience. And because of his public prominence today and willingness to discuss race, Obama's narrative, in combination with his current comments in the context of his inauguration as President of the United States, provides an opportunity to look at racialized experience in the aggregate.

Premises guiding our work:

1. We can use CRT to gain a deeper understanding of experience with race in the United States.
2. The possibility exists for interest convergence to serve a positive role in a society where racism is considered endemic.
3. We can reexamine color-blind ideology to explicate its role in a society where racism is considered endemic.

Critical Race Theory, Interest Convergence and Color-blind Ideology

Fundamental tenets of CRT begin with the notion that racism, rather than being a reflection of aberrant behavior, is actually a reflection of normal life in this country. We are being intentional about using Critical Race Theory as an analytical lens because we believe that race

had a significant impact on the shaping of Obama's life and in bringing him to the position he now holds, President of the United States of America.

An outgrowth of both Critical Legal Studies of the 1960s and the limited progressivism resulting from the Civil Rights Movement, Critical Race Theory evolved as a separate legal study in which the law was held accountable for its complicity in upholding the root cause of discrimination and oppression, which was racism. Derrick Bell, one of the architects of CRT, developed the theory as a lens to look at legal policy and decisions. He and others unpacked decisions, such as *Brown v. Board of Education* so that their true nature, from a critical racialized perspective, was exposed. By exploring the ways in which both whites and blacks might benefit from *Brown v. Board*, Bell demonstrated that the implementation of the law meant that black students would remain at a disadvantage.

Interest convergence, another basic tenet of CRT suggests that whites, or members of the privileged group, will only support anti-racist movements when there is benefit to whites (Bell, 2005). Supreme Court cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education* "cannot be understood without some consideration of the...value to whites...the economic and political advances at home and abroad that would follow abandonment of segregation" (Bell, 1995, p. 22-23).

As an outgrowth of the Civil Rights Movement, the concept of color-blindness, the notion that in decision-making matters, color should not matter, also gained strength. Although it began and grew as a liberal or progressive concept, color-blindness, today, works in the opposite as a "dangerously conservative approach" (Yanow, 2007, p. 41). In addition to its wholesale lack of recognition of the historical impact of race on experience, "color-blindness...allows us to ignore the racial construction of Whiteness and reinforces its privilege and oppressive power" (Taylor, 1999, p. 184). As a result, color-blindness can serve as an example of interest convergence.

Research Paradigm and Methodology; Analytical Lens and Instructional Strategy

As a framework for educational equity, CRT is a research paradigm as well as a research methodology; it is an analytical lens and an instructional strategy. As a research paradigm, CRT allows for a view of experience through a racialized lens. Beginning with the recognition that bias exists, i.e. racism is a normal reflection of our society, opens the door for more complex analysis of seemingly neutral experiences. The methodology or narrative analysis is in the reading of personal narratives such as autobiographies or life histories. CRT becomes an analytical lens when it is used to identify and explicate racialized experiences and it is an instructional strategy when adult learners, for example, are invited to create, and critically reflect upon, the stories which make up their life experiences. Writing stories based upon life experience can be a powerful tool for drawing out racialized and other, oppressive, themes.

Personal narratives can be the basis of an empirical study because they are the "truth," a representation of the teller's life from his/her perspective. Whether or not our experiences could be contested is not really the point. We recount our lives through the telling of our story; we do not analyze the story. So our life stories are always retrospective, but it is the analysis of narrative that brings them into the present where we can learn from them.

Four Scenarios from *Dreams from My Father*

#1) Wishing to complete the fieldwork for her graduate studies, Obama's mother decides to move back to Indonesia, allowing him to stay in Hawaii with his grandparents.

More than that, I'd arrived at an unspoken pact with my grandparents: I could live with them and they'd leave me alone so long as I kept my trouble out of sight. The arrangement suited my purpose, a purpose that I could barely articulate to myself, much less to them. Away from my mother, away from my grandparents, I was engaged in a fitful interior struggle. I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant. (Obama, 2004 p. 75-76)

#2) Frank is a friend of Obama's grandfather. He is an elderly, well educated, poet. He is an African American man. The bar that Obama visits along with his grandfather is frequented, primarily, by African American men.

I was intrigued by old Frank, with his books and whiskey breath and the hint of hard-earned knowledge behind the hooded eyes. The visits to his house always left me feeling vaguely uncomfortable, though as if I were witnessing some complicated transaction between the two men, a transaction I couldn't fully understand. The same thing I felt whenever Gramps took me downtown to one of his bars, in Honolulu's red-light district...Don't tell your grandmother, he would say with a wink, and we'd walk past hard-faced, soft-bodied streetwalkers into a small, dark bar with a jukebox and a couple of pool tables. Nobody seemed to mind that Gramps was the only white man in the place, or that I was the only eleven or twelve year old...Yet even then, as young as I was, I had already begun to sense that most of the people in the bar weren't there out of choice, that what my grandfather sought there was the company of people who could help him forget his own troubles, people who he believed would not judge him...Our presence there felt forced... (Obama, 2004, p.77-78)

#3) Ray is an African American friend from High School in Hawaii.

I had begun to see a new map of the world, one that was frightening in its simplicity, suffocating in its implications. We were always playing on the white man's court, Ray had told me, by the white man's rules. If the principal, or the coach, or a teacher, or Kurt, wanted to spit in your face, he could, because he had power and you didn't. If he decided not to, if he treated you like a man or came to your defense, it was because he knew that the words you spoke, the clothes you wore, the books you read, your ambitions and desires, were already his. Whatever he decided to do, it was his decision to make, not yours, and because of that fundamental power he held over you, because it preceded and would outlast his individual motives and inclinations, any distinction between good and bad whites held negligible meaning. (Obama, 2004, p.85)

#4) Frank is the elderly poet and friend of Obama's grandfather, mentioned above.

What had Frank called college? An advanced degree in compromise. You're just like the rest of these young cats out here. All you know is that college is the next thing you're supposed to do...they're just so happy to see you in there that they won't tell you the truth. The real price of admission...And what's that? ...Understand something, boy. You're not going to college to get educated. You're going there to get trained. They'll train you to

want what you don't need. They'll train you to manipulate words so they don't mean anything anymore. They'll train you to forget what it is that you already know. They'll train you so good, you'll start believing what they tell you about equal opportunity and the American way and all that s—t. They'll give you a corner office and invite you to fancy dinners, and tell you you're a credit to your race. Until you want to actually start running things, and then they'll yank on your chain and let you know that you may be a well-trained, well-paid nigger, but you're a nigger just the same. (Obama, 2004, p. 97)

Findings

Each of these four scenarios is first and foremost an example of the ordinariness of racism as experienced, every day, by people of color. Added to that, each scenario is a demonstration of the power and inescapability of color-blind ideology as well as the often accompanying myth of equality as seen in examples of interest convergence. In the first scenario, and as a young man, Obama (1995) didn't have the freedom to experience the color-blind society that his mother experienced and might have even believed existed for him. He never mentions her talking to him about growing up black and what that might mean to him; she appears to be raising him to be a "man." And he doesn't talk with her about growing up black either. How do you deal with color-blindness once you realize it isn't real?

Scenario two is both an example of color-blindness and interest convergence. As a white man, Obama's grandfather can pretend that color is of no consequence when he takes his grandson to the all-black bar. Having a black grandson allows him a more comfortable entrance to the bar and once inside he benefits from his perceived friendship with people he assumes will not judge him. Although a young Obama does seem to recognize that people may likely be judging them, suggesting that to his grandfather, would, among other things, make real the absence of color-blindness, inequality and racism suggested by that scenario.

Scenarios three and four reflect a growing understanding on Obama's (1995) part about the incessant yet ordinariness of racism. Having grown up in an environment in which color-blindness was the explicit ideology and racism much more implicit, he is beginning to realize what it means not to be white. In scenario three, Obama seems to recognize that color-blindness is a privilege of being white. And Frank's explanation of college education as an experience in compromise, in scenario four, is a clear example of interest convergence along with an expression of his own deep understanding of both the impossibility of color-blindness and the realities of racism. Frank recognizes that in order for any black to really take on an equal role would require a willingness on the part of whites to let go of some control. The impossibility of that happening suggests that blacks get ahead only as that movement benefits whites.

Critical Race Theory and Experiential Learning: a Model for Teaching and Learning

The process employed above, much like the one employed by Bell (1995) when he unpacked legal decisions such as *Brown*, is one of unpacking experience and filtering it through a CRT lens. The connection between legal decision making and life experience is one, we believe, of influence. People make decisions and people create policy and it is their life experience that informs both the decisions made and the policies created. By looking at each experience as a racialized experience, certain themes begin to emerge.

Racism is a regular and ordinary experience for people of color in this country. When Obama (1995) talks about recognizing the world in a both simplistic and frightening way, i.e.

whites hold all the power, he seems to be acknowledging something he hadn't before been willing to recognize. And when he recalls Frank's insights about going off to college, he seems to recognize, perhaps more clearly, that while he may be making decisions about his life, those decisions are made within a context – not of his making.

Color-blindness is a privilege of being white. When Obama (1995) talks about raising himself to be a black man in America, one wonders whether sufficient effort was made to find him black male role models to emulate. Perhaps his being black was not of much concern in a liberal white family post Civil Rights. And when Obama's grandfather makes himself comfortable both in the home of his black friend, Frank and, similarly, in the all black bar, he seems to be the one benefitting from color-blindness. And as a white man with a black grandchild, he further benefits in feeling the freedom to go to these places.

Conclusion

This study, presented as a model for teaching and learning, offers the opportunity to learn more about the art of learning from experience. CRT was first introduced to adult education in 1999 with the suggestion that African American students needed a vehicle to speak from their own experiences (Peterson, 1999). With a focus on interest convergence and color-blind ideology for this study, CRT provides us that vehicle as well. In an effort to create a framework for critically analyzing life experience, we used Critical Race Theory as an analytical lens and interest convergence and color-blind ideology as foci to explore the life experience of President Barack Obama.

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