Micro-cultures and the Limits of Multicultural Education

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Abstract

This essay puts forth an argument for why multicultural education in the United States is constrained in its important work to increase educational and social equity by the continuing prevalence and use of ethno-racial categories. Though differing forces are at work in other countries, these considerations for the U. S. are important because of its international influences. The core of the argument is that five essentialized categories in the U. S. context that are accepted as primary racial/ethnic identities do not reflect the fluid range of lived experiences of people in this country and around the globe. It is further argued that a concept of "micro-cultures" provides a framework that helps to circumvent these constraints and their implications for multicultural education. Micro-cultural identities and affinities reveal distinctive individual and group positions, prerogatives, practices, and perspectives that often are not reflective of specific ethno-racial categories. This essay reports literature to support its argument and also provides a clear example from a digitally mediated discourse community to illuminate how micro-cultural identities and affinities of individuals are often enabled and enacted via new media. Micro-cultures contribute a new conceptual lens for multicultural education research and practice by offering more complex and nuanced understandings of individual and group cultural practices beyond ascribed categories of race and ethnicity.

Keywords: multicultural education, racial/ethnic identities, micro-cultures.

Micro-culturas y los límites de la Educación Multicultural
Resumen

En este artículo se presenta una discusión sobre por qué la educación multicultural en los Estados Unidos se ve limitada en su importante labor para aumentar la equidad educativa y social por la persistencia y el uso de categorías étnico-raciales. Aunque diferentes aspectos cobran relevancia en otros países, estas consideraciones para la U. S. son importantes debido a sus influencias internacionales. El núcleo del argumento es que cinco categorías esencializadas en el contexto de los Estados Unidos, aceptadas como identidades étnicas/raciales primarias, no reflejan la fluida variedad de las vivencias de personas en este país y en todo el mundo. Se argumenta, además, que el concepto de "micro-culturas" proporciona un marco que ayuda a evitar estas limitaciones y sus implicaciones para la educación multicultural. Identidades micro-culturales y afinidades revelan posiciones distintivas individuales y de grupo, prerrogativas, prácticas y perspectivas que a menudo no son un reflejo de categorías étnico-raciales

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específicas. El artículo presenta un revisión de la literatura para apoyar su argumento y también proporciona un claro ejemplo de una comunidad de discurso mediada digitalmente para aclarar cómo las identidades micro-culturales y afinidades de los individuos a menudo están habilitadas y promulgadas a través de los nuevos medios. El concepto de micro-culturas aporta una nueva lente conceptual para la investigación de la educación multicultural y la práctica, ofreciendo interpretaciones más complejas y matizadas de las prácticas culturales individuales y grupales más allá de las categorías adscritas a la raza y la etnia.

Palabras clave: Educación multicultural, Identidad étnica/racial, micro-culturas

Limits of Multicultural Education

Banks and Banks (2007) have extensively described how multicultural education in the United States attempts to create equitable educational opportunities and vital life skills and perspectives for diverse students to be life-long learners who function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society. It's clear, however, that while working toward progressive goals, multicultural education primarily operates within racial categories defined and sustained by ideological, social, political, and economic forces and practices stemming from the system of white supremacy. A number of scholars have made cogent calls for more nuanced and complex analyses of race and ethnicity in response to ways that educational research, policies, and practices have addressed cultural differences, yet there is a continuing prevalence and use of what Brodkin (1998) has called "assigned" racial categories.

On the other hand, we have found that participation in many online communities reveals the workings of micro-cultural identities and affinities that reflect more complex understandings of individual and group positioning, prerogatives, practices, and perspectives beyond the assigned categories of ethnicity and race. Consequently, we feel that micro-cultures contribute a new conceptual lens for seeing and understanding diversity that is needed to more fully address the goals of multicultural education in the context of the United States. After exploring research and scholarship that attempts to provide more nuanced and complex understandings of ethnicity and race, we describe one online community, *DramaCrazy*, to exemplify how micro-cultural identities and affinities are both enabled and embodied in digital interactions and activities that are not easily captured by constraining definitions of ethnicity and race.

Emergence of Multicultural Education Perspectives

Early on foundational scholars of multicultural education challenged and transformed curriculum and pedagogy that privileged the cultural practices of people defined as white. For example, J. A. Banks and C. A. McGee Banks developed five specific dimensions of multicultural education (2004). Nieto (1992) discussed multicultural education as having a number of dimensions and outlined seven that were key. Earlier, Sleeter and Grant (1987) earlier discussed five distinct approaches to multicultural education. As fundamental frameworks for multicultural education, all these dimensions and approaches address shortcomings and discriminatory practices in education and in school curriculums specifically. Work of other scholars (e.g. Ball 2000, 2006; Darling-Hammond 2002; Gay 2010; Ladson-Billings 1995, 1997, 2009; Lee 1993, 2007, Mahiri 1998; Paris 2012; Tate 1995, Sleeter 2013) who explored definitive ways to extend these frameworks and principles into schooling with culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies is also discussed.

Having emerged, in part, in response to assimilationist models for addressing diversity, multicultural educational theories and approaches were developed to be culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings 2009), culturally responsive (Gay 2010), and eventually culturally sustaining (Paris 2012) in efforts to achieve more equitable learning and life outcomes. Hanley and Noblit (2009) reviewed findings of 146 studies on culturally responsive pedagogy and summarized a number of ways that these approaches had

positive effects on students' learning, resilience, and development. In attempting to explore racial identity as an asset, their review of these studies discussed students according to four racial categories. They used the acronym "ALANA" to stand for African, Latina/o, Asian, and Native Americans. Because their focus was on "minority" students, the category of European American was not included. An important consideration is that these racialized categories remain central to formulations of multicultural education and their continuing use contributes to the inequitable hierarchy of race.

More Nuanced Understandings of Race/Ethnicity

Lee (2003) framed a special theme issue of *Educational Researcher* (*ER*) around re-thinking race and ethnicity as a fundamental challenge for educational research. The challenge was to conceptualize "the varied struggles faced by large proportions of African American, Latinos/as, Native Americans, many Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and European Americans who face persistent intergenerational poverty" (4). Two aspects of this challenge were to capture the range of developmental tasks across the life span and the additional threats people grapple with due to racism and other societal forces. The other two were to capture "the range of diversity within ethnic groups" and "the context-dependent nature of displays of competence" (4). Lee's introduction and articles by Lee, Spencer and Harpalani, (2003), Nasir and Saxe (2003), Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003), and Orellana and Bowman (2003) addressed these challenges from a range of disciplinary perspectives.

Lee, Spencer, and Harpalani (2003) utilized the Phenomenological Variant of Ecology Systems Theory and the Cultural Modeling Framework to explore how youth live culturally in family systems, peer social networks, and within larger institutional, societal, and historical systems. Focusing on African Americans, they showed how marginalized adolescents face additional sources of stress as they move across this range of settings.

This article negated misconceptions regarding diversity like notions of a normative pathway for development and learning (based on studies of white youth) and that deviance from this pathway was fundamentally pathological. It also exposed misconceptions that "racial and ethnic minorities are, on the whole, homogenous and fundamentally different from the majority" (6). Further mitigation of these misconceptions, they note, depended on better conceptual and methodological tools "that consolidate understanding how people live, learn, and develop culturally" (11). This article and others we reviewed over the past decade, however, did not specifically address how cultural practices were also mediated by how we live, learn, and develop digitally.

Nasir and Saxe (2003) addressed the theme issue's challenge by exploring the intersection of ethnic and academic identities and how they shift as individuals position themselves in local interactions, in development over time, and in social history. In other words, identities are not located in the individual, but negotiated in social interactions and are tied to cultural capital. They showed how identities also shift as individuals participate in the same practices in new ways or as they become participants in new practices (16). Using a cultural-historical framework, Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) also argued against assumptions that general individual traits are static and attributable to ethnic group membership. Instead, they suggested closer attention to specific individuals' and groups' histories of engagement in cultural practices to better understand both similar and different forms of engagement. They suggested this approach could move research and practice beyond attempts to simply match perceived cultural or learning styles of students to particular schooling experiences.

Orellana and Bowman (2003) foregrounded conceptual and methodological limitations of social science researchers' tendencies "to treat race, ethnicity, culture, and social class as fixed and often essentialized categories rather than as multifaceted, situated, and socially constructed processes" (26) and to analyze single levels rather than looking across levels to link individual and local experiences to larger structural practices. They suggested researchers treat culture as a dynamic set of toolkits in which people's cultural skills develop through varied experiences over time. Viewing the cultural characteristics of individuals

and groups as dynamic, contextualized, and shaped by historical experiences was central to the scholarship just reviewed.

What this scholarship does not reflect is significant ways that digital mediation of cultural practices can further contribute to understandings of people's personal/cultural positionings. This limitation can be addressed in part by exploring the play of micro-cultures in people's lives. Digitally mediated cultural practices include multisensory, multidimensional, interactive cyber experiences with nearly an infinite range of written, audio, visual, video, animated, and virtual texts. People don't just consume and respond to digitally accessed messages and images, they also produce and propagate meanings and representations of their own that can challenge or counter the defining power of other societal institutions. The re-mixing practices characteristic of digital production allow experimenting, analyzing, and performing different realities and identities, and these experiences that often take place on-line are pervasive for most Americans.

Micro-cultures On-line

Discussions of multiculturalism in the United States often introspectively revolve around America's history of racism. The examples we present to illustrate our view of multiculturalism is not completely contained to a U.S. context, however, because the Internet is simultaneously local and global. As demographic changes from immigration and increasing numbers of inter-racial, inter-ethnic children complicate identities, so too do changes from the proliferation of online cultural practices. People are no longer limited to cultural communities and the exercise of context specific competencies in local settings as they go online to engage in cultural practices that include exercising personal prerogatives and developing perspectives. We believe the play of "micro-cultures" in people's lives works toward deconstructing racial hierarchies. We define micro-cultures as the distinctive cultural positioning, perceptions, practices, prerogatives, and perspectives that reflect personal identities and interest group affinities. These identities and affinities are often (though not entirely) enabled and enacted via digital media. We feel that an investigation of micro-cultural practices provides a compelling framework for understanding the diversity of individuals and groups.

The term micro-cultures refers to the distinct components that make up the entire set of cultural positions, practices, perceptions, prerogatives, and perspectives engaged in and enacted by each individual in society (Author, 2015). At any moment in time, the vertical axes of these nearly limitless combinations – like fingerprints – reflect and define the uniqueness of individuals. On multiple horizontal axes, alignments of these components also reflect similarities of individuals to others in shared or connected experiences within histories and geographies – within time and space. Unlike fingerprints, the components and combinations of micro-cultural practices are dynamic and constantly changing.

In this section we discuss one website among a plethora from which similar considerations could be drawn. We use two of Gee's (2003) 36 principles for learning via digital media to illuminate micro-cultural identities and affinities. One is the Affinity Group Principle: "Learners constitute an 'affinity group,' that is, a group that is bonded primarily through shared endeavors, goals, and practices and not shared race, gender, nation, ethnicity, or culture" (212). The second is the Identity Principle:

Learning involves taking on and playing with identities in such a way that the learner has real choices (in developing virtual identities) and ample opportunity to mediate on the relationship between new identities and old ones. There is a tripartite play of identities as learners relate, and reflect on, their multiple real-world identities, a virtual identity, and a projective identity (208).

The *DramaCrazy* website included fan forums devoted to anime as well as Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese, and Chinese dramas. It reflected and shaped participants' identities through micro-cultural practices, prerogatives, and perspectives mediated and developed as participants posted, watched and discussed the site's content. The example we present is drawn from a study focused on the Korean dramas forum.

The multinational, multiethnic composition of DramaCrazy's Korean dramas forum illustrates Gee's affinity group principle. Forum participants bonded primarily through their shared endeavors, goals, and practices rather than a shared race, gender, nation, ethnicity, or culture. Quantcast.com was used to estimate the website's traffic and document its demographic landscape (*DramaCrazy.net* retrieved, May 5, 2013). In the month prior to beginning the study, over 1.8 million people visited DramaCrazy. At the start of data collection, the site had over 17,500 registered members. An initial observation was that the participants were from diverse backgrounds and locations. Despite the focus on Korean dramas, the Philippines, the United States, Malaysia, and Indonesia were DramaCrazy's top four traffic sources,. Data on race and ethnicity of its U.S. users indicated heavy overrepresentation of African Americans and Hispanics as well as Asians with respect to the amount of general Internet use by these groups. African Americans represented 16% of the site's U.S. users, but only 9% of U.S. Internet users. Hispanics represented 41% of the sites U.S. users, but only 9% of U.S. Internet users. Asians represented 22% of the site's U.S. users, but only 4% of U.S. Internet users. In contrast, Caucasians represented only 18% of DramaCrazy's U.S. users, but 77% of U.S. Internet users.

Although ostensibly devoted to Korean dramas, the study revealed that *DramaCrazy's* forum challenged notions of identity and learning within specific racial and cultural groups. Just as Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) proposed *repertoires of practice* to understand individuals as participants in cultural communities, the practices of DramaCrazy's diverse participants highlighted the dynamic and multi-faceted make-up of these individual's cultural identities and practices. For example, the following three discussion thread comments made by DramaCrazy members reveal the limits of race and ethnicity for determining cultural relevance.

kawaiiBLK-GRL, a female student living in Virginia who described herself as "not yet in her 20s," posted:

> do they think it's stupid and silly? my parents do, but i actually got my dad to watch episode 1 of boys over flowers with me and he LAUGHED!! my mom still thinks it's stupid, they are actually just judging because it's asian and not in english. But my dad's been to South Korea so he bared with me and actually watched, i know he enjoyed it when he denies that he enjoyed it.

kawaiiBLK-GRL recognized a presumption that Korea-produced entertainment would be "stupid" or "silly" for her to watch, yet getting her dad to watch an episode suggested her comfort in participating in this affinity group. In the same discussion thread, nagato yuuki commented, "my parents don't watch tv, my sister is in love with Justin Bieber and my friends only watch western us tv show. i feel so lonely." Similar to kawaiiBLK-GRL, nagato yuuki echoed awareness of how her interest in Korean media diverges from the cultural norms of her immediate offline setting. In response to nagato yuuki's comment, BlueCrystal from London, wrote, "Dont be lonely!! You can chat with us here 😁." Consistent with the affinity group principle, kawaiiBLK-GRL, nagato yuuki, and BlueCrystal bonded through their shared enthusiasm for Korean dramas, micro-cultural practices and prerogatives not defined by assigned categories of race or ethnicity.

In a discussion thread titled, "parents and your asian dramas," sarahkhins explained her engagement with Korean dramas:

> My dad comes into my room and goes
>
> "LING LONG TING TONG"
>
> And mutters a bunch of other stuff that doesn't even sound like a language especially when it's a heated moment in the drama. Usually ruins the mood and I just pause it and wait for him to leave, haha.
>
> Don't get me wrong my parents support my interest but they love to make fun of me and don't get how I can watch with subtitles and they "speak so fast" and so forth.

Despite her parents' humorous jabs, Sarahkhins a self-described sixteen-year old girl in Sydney, Australia, was fascinated by Korean dramas. She noted that she was learning Korean. She had posted over 330 times on DramaCrazy's Korean dramas forum. Like Sarahkins, many members participating in the forum engaged in learning Korean (Author 2, in press). User-generated discussion threads like "Let's learn Korean," and "Korean words u learn," suggest the context-dependent nature of displays of Korean language knowledge.

Within the micro-cultural practices of DramaCrazy, members like [kawaiiBLK-GRL](#), nagato yuuki, and sarahkhins enacted their interest in Korean dramas beyond the constraints of their local contexts. In other words, as Nasir and Saxe (2003) indicated, identities are not located in the individual, but negotiated in social interactions that take shape in cultural spaces; in the case of *DramaCrazy,* these are mediated digitally. Through their practices within the site, participants demonstrated more flexible perspectives of individual and group identities than those defined by race or ethnicity (Author 2, 2015).

Analysis of participants' profiles as well as written and visual posts revealed the "tripartite play" that Gee (2003) described in his identity principle. In addition to the forum's profile template, which included an "about me" tab, members could write a biography, name their location, create signatures and avatars, attach animations, and post videos to represent themselves. Composing practices such as these revealed multiple modes of self-representation that included virtual and projective identities in addition to "real-world" ones. For example, in one of shun_nee's posts, she explained, "I am Australian. I am part of the korean community here, because I am a part of the korean church here..." Although she chose a romanized name, it was one typically associated with Asian (and, more specifically, Japanese) descent. In these choices and through her posts, shun_nee never explicitly stated her ethnicity or race. Although she offered information about a real-world identity, her virtual and projective identities revolved around her interest in and knowledge of Korean dramas, which did not require identifying herself ethnically or racially.

(Arnoud), who stated that he lived in the Netherlands and that Dutch was his primary language, represented his virtual identity with a blonde, blue-eyed avatar. He wrote his name in hangul, and signaled his belonging in the DramaCrazy community through these and other signs of his affinity for Korea, such as providing detailed directions to a French restaurant in Korea.

Though shun-nee and Arnoud exercised different written and visual prerogatives for their self-representations on DramaCrazy, being Korean or Asian was not a determinant of entry, engagement, or belonging in this online community. Instead, as illustrated by the examples described above, they and other forum members constructed a micro-culture through their practices, prerogatives, and perspectives.

Conclusion

The scholars reviewed in this article have challenged researchers to provide more complex and nuanced explorations of race and ethnicity. People's cultural positioning and practices are more dynamic, contextualized, and shaped by historical experiences than is captured in significant formulations of multicultural education research and practice. These scholars, however, did not offer significant critiques of ways that digital mediation of cultural practices could move us beyond the relatively static categories of race and ethnicity ascribed by the system of white supremacy.

This article has addressed these limitations by exploring the play of micro-cultures in people's lives as revealed in a study of the *DramaCrazy* on-line community. This study shows how people's cultural practices, prerogatives, and perspectives in this online space reflect distinctive personal identities and elective group affinities that constitute a shift away from race and ethnicity as core identifications. Since

a key goal of multicultural education is to value and build upon diverse cultures, giving greater attention to micro-cultural practices is increasingly important for evolving its research and practices.

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