Chapter 6
Race as a Learned Identity: My Educational Journey to the West

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ABSTRACT

The chapter focuses on the concept of race as a learned identity based on lived experiences of the story teller. Her experience carried her through academic learning in two higher learning institutions in the United States in the south. Besides her learning of academic knowledge, her discovery of relationships on race in education was something not expected before her journey to the west in the US. The journey is a process of rediscovery of herself and her search for knowledge. The repositioning of herself in a racially diverse society such as the US sheds light on the complex issues on race, academic learning and issues on the support and structure of academic learning and professional development for marginalized populations in higher learning institutions. The finding revealed the question of what race is: it is not the knowledge that matters the most, it is the process of finding one’s self in diversity that speaks louder on one’s growth and development professionally and personally. It is the process of discovering one’s race that matters.
INTRODUCTION

Race is a new concept for new comers to countries with rich diversity such as the US. Racial identity has been an ongoing research topic in the academia. I moved to the US to continue my education about 15 years ago and did not have a clear clue what the majority was and what a minority was. I learned my lessons quickly within a week of my arrival in the US. I grew up in China within a main culture framework that respects knowledge, education, and intellectuals. Being part of the Han nationality, I never truly thought about race/ethnicity from a majority/minority perspective. Up till the point of the first day of my arrival in the US, I had known I was one of the billions and did not have distinct needs or differences from others in the main culture of China. As one of the Asian individuals, I found myself overwhelmed by the visual effects of human beings in the new country that I was presented with. I did not see the typical people I normally saw and I did not have the leisure of speaking Chinese anywhere I went. It was an uncertain adventure to start interaction with others un-encountered in the past.

Spring (2014) pointed out that race is a legal and social construct. I tried hard to understand the concept and it took longer than I thought. Since my first day of arriving in the country, I got so much paper work that I needed to fill out. I never had to bubble a racial category before but from that first day on I had to bubble a box on race/ethnicity for my travel documents. Those were important legal documents. Starting from the first day of my arrival in the US, I started the quest of what race was all about.

For those who came to the country new, the meaning of race could be a lifetime course to learning. This chapter focuses on my lived experiences of that learning process. My discovery and search for knowledge took me through doubt, disillusion, and self-discovery, and then back to a new self of whom I ought to be. That process took me almost two decades of attempts, triumphs, and failures. Gnanadass (2014) discussed four findings based on the racial interaction of Asians in the US and specifically on the challenges that Asian American encounter: (a) race is not a tangible, objective phenomenon, but rather a learned social construct open to varying attributions and interpretations; (b) the Asian American racial identity challenges the Black-White binary by adding a third racial category; and (c) religion may be treated as an attribute of race. As an Asian American, my experiences attest to those areas of findings.

As a distinctive person who emigrated to the South in the US, I tried hard to find myself in the South. The adjustment was more than expected. However, in the largely defined black and white binary system, I found myself nowhere. As a distinctive race category, I did not seem to find the true meaning of Asian as a race choice and the meaning of checking the boxes on the paperwork that I had to fill...
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