Chapter 4

Making Meaning of Race and Racialization in the Lives of Five International Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

The author examines the ways in which race and privilege operate on a global scale through the experiences of international students studying in the United States. Specifically, the researcher explores how meanings attached to terms such as “Black” and “White” shift but do not collapse when making sense of students’ experiences with race and racial classification in both the U.S. and in the contexts of their home countries. The researcher provides insight into international students’ experiences with and understandings of race in both their home countries and in the United States within the broader context of student mobility. Furthermore, student narratives promote an understanding of the ways in which race is socially constructed, historically constituted, and geographically situated. Finally, the study will reveal the dominance of a reductionist “Black and White” portrayal of race in U.S. racial discourse and the ways in which that discourse is damaging to international students.

INTRODUCTION

Students are migrating around the globe for higher education in increasingly large numbers, with more than 2.1 million students worldwide currently enrolled in institutions outside of their home countries. A large proportion of this migration has been in the direction of Europe and the United States. In fact, around 20% of all international students worldwide are studying in the U.S. (Institute of International Education, 2014). During the 2013-2014 school year, the number of international students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities reached a record of 886,052 (Institute of International Education, 2014).

In recent years, international students in the U.S. have been the focus of much discussion in both popular media and the field of higher education. Though widely discussed, much of the discourse on and around international students has focused on the economic benefits that the U.S. derives from student...
Making Meaning of Race and Racialization

Migration (Rhee & Sagaria, 2004), or on international students’ process of acculturation in institutions of higher education (Church, 1982; Kono, 1999; Malarcher, 2004; Wang, 2004; Wang, 2009). Though public discourse around international students and their place in U.S. society has increased in the past decade, there has been little exploration of the potential shifts in identity that international students may experience during their time in the United States (Hegarty, 2015; Kaye, 2006; Park, 2006; Rhee & Sagaria, 2004). Despite a large number of studies on “the international student experience,” few scholars have focused specifically on the ways in which international students may experience identity issues throughout their studies in the U.S.

One key aspect of international student identities that is likely to become complicated during their time here is their racial identity. Though it functions differently around the world, race is a powerful, global construct with political, economic, and cultural causes and consequences (Lake & Reynolds, 2008; Ong, 1999; Winant, 2001). The shifting dynamics of race are situated in continental, national, and local contexts (Mukhopadhyay, Henze, & Moses 2007; Taylor, 2004). Globally, multiple physical markers associated with the notion of race (including the color of one’s skin) serve as determinants of group belonging as well as one’s social and economic location within societal structures. This chapter examines international graduate students’ experiences with race and with processes of racialization at home and at educational institutions in the United States.

BACKGROUND

Acknowledging the difficulty and complexity of defining race around the globe, Chavez & Guido-Dibrito (1999) offer a broad understanding of racial identity. They argue that racial identity and its close but not identical counterpart, ethnic identity, are “critical parts of the overall framework of individual and collective identity” (p. 39). They assert that “ethnic and racial identity development models provide a theoretical structure for understanding individuals’ negotiation of their own and other cultures” (p. 41). Further, they state that connections based on racial and/or ethnic identity “allow individuals to make sense of the world around them and to find pride in who they are” (p. 41).

Much of the theoretical work on racial identity in the U.S. is focused on a model-based framework, presupposing that individuals move through stages of development if provided an opportunity to grow into their racial identity. Helms (1993) is one of the most prominent and well-cited theorists of racial identity. She has offered two major racial identity development models: a White racial identity model and a Black racial identity model. Each model offers a progressive movement through stages of identity, with the highest stage being an individual who is aware of racial inequality but is not paralyzed by or resistant to the existence of those inequalities (Helms, 1993). A prominent model of racial identity pre-dating that of Helms is Cross (1978). Cross’s model (1978) of Black identity development asserted that if one accepted one’s identity as Black, it would have an overall positive influence on a person’s mental health. Racial identity theorists following Cross have followed in this assumption.

Although others models of identity outside of the Black/White paradigm have been developed (see Kim, 1981; Ruiz, 1990), they have been peripheral to the overall conversation about racial identity in the U.S. In the cases of both Kim’s (1981) and Ruiz’s (1990) work, both Latino American and Asian American identities are defined almost exclusively in terms of the extent to which one identifies with White culture. The more prominent models, particularly those introduced by Helms (1993) and by Cross (1978), are very much based around the U.S. binary racial paradigm. Since race is one of the primary