Critical Race Perspectives on Theory in Student Affairs

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Student development theory has been used to make sense of attitudes, behaviors, norms, and outcomes among college students since the late 1970s. In addition, educators, administrators, and researchers rely on theories of retention and student success, organizational development, learning, and campus environments in their efforts to understand diverse groups of students (McEwen, 2003, Torres, Howard-Hamilton, and Cooper, 2003). Although these theories contribute substantially to higher education and student affairs work, they are limited in their use of language about race and considerations of the roles of racism in students’ development and learning.

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, we highlight the value, role, and uses of theory in higher education and student affairs, as well as the omission of race, racism, and racial realities in the theories commonly used in the profession. Second, we introduce critical race theory as a framework for not only understanding our use of theories but also for guiding practice on college and university campuses. Third, we address the intersection of race with other identities (Jones and McEwen, 2000; Abes, Jones, and McEwen, 2007; Robinson and Howard-Hamilton, 2000) and offer recommendations for practice.
The Role of Theory in Student Affairs

Theory provides a strong basis for knowledge, expertise, and practice and serves as a foundation for the student affairs profession (McEwen, 2003). Without theory, professionals may informally attempt to make sense of observations and phenomena. However, this version of sense making tends to be less cohesive and less consistent than theory-based approaches to understanding students. Theories provide an overarching perspective about a certain trend or set of phenomena. Moreover, they offer ways to communicate about students among other professionals and provide a “common language” within a “community of scholars” (Knefelkamp, 1982, p. 380) that enables educators to talk with students about salient developmental issues.

In addition to providing a foundation for practice, theories help professionals consider the relationships among elements we observe and often serve “to simplify the complex—to connect what appears to be random and to organize what appears to be chaotic” (McEwen, 2003, p. 154). Theory by its very nature tends to be reductionistic, as it focuses on specific dimensions of a set of phenomena and how these dimensions fit together into an integrated and complex whole. Professionals rely on theory “to make the many complex facets of experience manageable, understandable, meaningful, and consistent rather than random” (McEwen, 2003, p. 154). Overall, however, race, racism, and racial realities have been generally ignored among the interrelationships and phenomena incorporated in theories pertaining to students and their development (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, and Cooper, 2003).

What has been lacking in the knowledge and use of theory by higher education and student affairs professionals is a critical examination of theories: the research base, the perspective of the theorists, the research generated, and how theories evolve. Furthermore, the teaching of theory in graduate preparation programs is mostly focused on knowing the theories and their various stages. It is also important, however, that educators using a theory know themselves and recognize how their lenses or perspectives inform their interpretations and critiques. In order to use theory to inform and then transform practice, as Hall suggested (cited in Apple, 1993), it is essential that higher education and student affairs professionals engage in a critical examination of theories and of themselves as users of theory. One such way is through exploring the often disregarded roles of race and racism.

Racelessness in Student Development Theory

Unfortunately, except for racial identity development theories and race as one social identity in Jones and McEwen’s (2000) and Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s (2007) models of multiple identities, little attention has been devoted to incorporating race into the theories most widely used in the profession. In fact, many seem to replicate Erikson’s (1968) minimal and patronizing attention to race in his characterization of the lost, confused, and “surrendered identity” contained in the writings of Black authors such as W.E.B. DuBois, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison. Although it is noteworthy that Erikson wrote an entire chapter in his book on the identities of Black Americans, his writings clearly indicate a struggle with how race related to identity, and the chapter comes across as presenting African Americans as developmentally deficient. Most student affairs educators are probably more familiar with Erikson’s life span theory of human development and have not been exposed to what he wrote about the identity of African Americans. This is somewhat ironic given that many theories used today, particularly psychosocial, are grounded in Erikson’s work.

Let us briefly examine a sample of three theories in student development and how race and racism were ignored by the theorists. Chickering and Reisser (1993) offered a revision of Chickering’s original model (1969). Although Chickering and Reisser state that “reflecting on one’s family of origin and ethnic heritage” (p. 49) is one part of developing identity and references are made to Cross’s Black racial identity model (1971) and Atkinson, Morten, and Sue’s minority identity model (1983), Chickering and Reisser do not directly discuss race and racism and how they may influence identity development. Furthermore, they offer no discussion of how race and racism may intersect with the seven vectors, even though racial identity development theory, research on racial identities, and research about the psychological aspects of racism were available in the literature when their revised model was published.
In a second example, Baxter Magolda (1992) has contributed significantly to research and literature with her model of the epistemological development of college students. However, she indicated that only 3 of the 101 students in her original study were from “nondominant populations” and that all three students from “underrepresented groups” “were unreachable by Year 10 [of her study] due to changing addresses” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 342). Thus, participants remain racially homogeneous in Baxter Magolda’s longitudinal study (1992, 2001) of epistemological development and self-authorship.

In a third example, Kohlberg (1975) is credited with creating a theory of moral development and reasoning. The theory has six stages through which individuals move toward reaching a universal level of moral reasoning. Kohlberg acknowledged justice and autonomy as key values that guide moral development but did not account for racial or cultural experiences of people of color in his theory. And there is no indication that he considered the role of race in how societal laws and rules are established, who shapes these decisions, and how people of color might negatively interpret or be affected by such decisions. Consequently, there is little discourse on the experiences of students of color, the moral dilemmas they face in responding to institutional structures constructed by race, or the implications of these dilemmas in their moral development.

**Illuminating Racial Omissions in Theory**

To examine the role of race in theories, several strategies should be used. First, one should consider the base for a theory: (1) whether the theory is empirical; (2) if the theory is empirical, what is known about the participants in the study (or studies) on which the theory is based; and (3) what is known about the theorist, including assumptions informed by her or his academic background and race/ethnicity. Second, the roles of race and racism, as well as power and privilege, within a theory should be considered (Brown, Hinton, and Howard-Hamilton, 2007). Another strategy is to engage in research to examine how well a theory applies to the experiences of a specific racial group of students (Howard-Hamilton, 1997).

Another means of compensating for the omission or minimal attention to race and racism in contemporary theories is through research studies that examine the intersection of one or more of the theories with race and racial identity (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, and Cooper, 2003). Several studies have focused on the intersection of psychosocial development and racial identity for students of different races (Pope, 1998, 2000; Taub, 1995, 1997; Taub and McEwen, 1991, 1992). In their 2004 qualitative study, Torres and Baxter Magolda addressed the role of cognitive development in the ethnic identity development of Latino college students.

A fifth strategy is to examine the theoretical and research literature to develop models that more effectively address race and racism in student development. Two examples exist related to psychosocial theory. For exam-
ple, McEwen, Roper, Bryant, and Langa (1990) critiqued the appropriateness of Chickering's theory for African American students. In response, they identified nine additional psychosocial tasks that had been previously overlooked, including developing spiritually, developing racial identity, and developing social responsibility. In another example, Kodama, McEwen, Liang, and Lee (2001, 2002) identified psychosocial issues for Asian American students and offered a modification of Chickering's model, taking into account racism, Asian cultural values, and research about Asian American college students. Howard-Hamilton (1997, 2003) connected student development theories and the social learning model to identity issues that African American women and men face. In addition to these approaches, a critical race perspective is warranted and explained more fully in the next section.

**Race-Based Theories and Their Applicability in Higher Education**

A critical race perspective entails recognition that racism is a normal and common aspect that shapes society. Race is deeply embedded in social, cultural, and political structures, thus making it difficult to recognize and address (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1999). Furthermore, race is socially constructed, with historical interpretations that marginalize people of color (Morfin and others, 2006). Another assumption is that the voices and experiences of people of color are central, legitimate, and relevant in contextualizing race and racial realities (Solórzano, 1998). Such voices serve as counterstories that challenge universality and conventional interpretations of the educational experience. Also, color-blind racism and racial indifference must consistently be challenged through exposing the manner in which racial advances often come at the cost of promoting or feeding into White self-interests. Forman (2004) noted that color-blind ideologies ignore the systemic nature of race, excuse accountability for racial injustices, and promote apathetic, covert acts of racism, which ultimately place power and privilege with the dominant group.

In 1999, Gloria Ladson-Billings argued that critical race theory (CRT) could be helpful in “unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations” (p. 12) within education. This strategy should be applied to student development theories and other theoretical models used to inform practice and research in higher education. In this section, we introduce CRT as a framework in which issues of race and social and educational inequities are foregrounded. CRT was created by Black, Latino, and Asian legal scholars as they sought to better understand societal issues such as the failure of civil rights legislation and the relationship between race and the law. Taylor (2000) indicated that CRT has been extended to apply not only to legal issues but also to areas in education and women’s studies. CRT is interdisciplinary in its approach because it incorporates various intellectual traditions that promote racial justice (Lawrence, Matsuda, Delgado, and
Crenshaw, 1993) and includes an activist dimension that makes known how society is organized around race in order to transform structures that have long perpetuated racial injustice (Delgado and Stefanie, 1999; Solórzano, Villalpando and Oseguera, 2005). As such, elements of CRT could be employed in higher education and student affairs to illuminate racial inequities and hierarchies and to transform colleges and universities.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced the critical race theory of education, which seeks to create a critical perspective that is analogous to that of CRT in the legal arena. Although some might suggest that feminist and class theories have been and could continue to be employed to highlight gender and racial inequities, Ladson-Billings and Tate underscore that race continues to be undertheorized and underused as a mode for understanding educational inequality. Furthermore, they point out that class- and gender-based theories are useful only to a point and are unable to account for all differences in educational achievement. They conceptualize a critical race theory of education with three propositions:

1. Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States.
2. U.S. society is based on property rights.
3. The intersection of race and property creates an analytical tool through which inequities can be understood.

**Race and the Maintenance of Educational Inequities.** Under the first proposition, Ladson-Billings and Tate argue that race continues to be a significant factor in producing inequities in society and educational institutions. For example, it has been well documented that the educational achievement of students of color lags behind that of their White counterparts. Low-income students of color are more likely to drop out of high school, be suspended, or be incarcerated. They are also more likely to attend resource-poor schools, tracked away from academic programs that lead to college, and placed in vocational programs. Accordingly, students of color often have difficulties enrolling in college because of previous deficiencies created by an educational system where inequities between the rich and the poor persist (Gándara, 2005; Rendón, Garcia, and Person, 2004).

How is this first proposition related to student affairs and services in higher education? It is important for educators and administrators on college and university campuses to understand how race produces inequities. For example, racism could be said to be at the core of a curriculum that focuses exclusively on White, Western viewpoints that render students of color invisible in what is learned and discussed in class. This is particularly true of the many developmental theories that are used in student affairs and higher education graduate programs. For example, in a graduate course on environmental theory, students should be engaged in conversations that allow them to critically examine how students of color experience the var-
ious aspects of campus environments (physical, constructed, organizational, human aggregate) and the implications these experiences have for student success. The phrase “theory to practice” is frequently promoted as a method of encouraging students to use theory to guide practice. However, if the theories that guide practice fail to take race into consideration, a huge disservice is ultimately done to the racially diverse student populations with whom future professionals will work.

As Harper and Hurtado note in Chapter One of this volume, race is also an issue in institutions where students of color are significantly underrepresented because they often experience isolation and marginalization. Race is especially evident when students of color experience cultural assaults such as discrimination and stereotyping. Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) described such assaults as “racial microaggressions” or “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (p. 60). Race is also a reality when students of color do not feel safe, welcome, or comfortable in an institutional environment that marginalizes them.

What this means is that in order to transform higher education, student affairs and higher education programs and professionals should incorporate an inclusive curriculum that incorporates a dialogue of race. Ethnic culture centers could also be offered as places where students from specific racial groups can meet, share strategies for resistance, and form communities (Rendón, García, and Person, 2004). These centers might also be viewed as counterspaces where students can retreat from harsh campus racial climates and microaggressions, that is, subtle verbal, nonverbal, or visual insults (Patton, 2006).

Race and Property Rights on College Campuses. Under the second proposition, that U.S. society is based on property rights, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) indicate that the history of the United States is replete with examples of tensions and struggles over property: acquiring land belonging to American Indians and Mexicans, viewing Africans as property, and the concept of possessing one’s own property, for example. As such, social benefits are placed in the hands of property owners.

Higher education administrators and student affairs educators who use a critical race lens should be cognizant that property differences manifest themselves in various ways on college and university campuses. For example, professors “own” the curriculum in their classrooms and design it according to their own ontological and epistemological assumptions, which may work against students of color. Some faculty subscribe to monocultural, color-blind paradigms that validate Western structures of knowledge: individual achievement, rationality, exclusivity, and the subjugation of knowledge created by indigenous people and people of color. An African American or Latino faculty member with a social justice philosophy is likely to teach U.S. history in a very different way from a White colleague who is not interested in or knowledgeable about issues of race.
There are also racial inequities that cannot be ignored with regard to institutional leadership (King and Howard-Hamilton, 2003). For instance, whoever is in power on the college campus “owns” the right to make final decisions and move the institution in a particular way. Women and people of color often possess limited power on many campuses. Although they may be more represented in student affairs divisions, the greatest political power for the most part continues to reside in academic affairs, where fewer women and people of color are found. Faculty and academic administrators such as provosts, vice presidents of academic affairs, deans of academic units, and department chairs are typically considered more politically influential than their colleagues in student affairs. As such, tensions between student and academic affairs exist.

A new vision of institutional leadership should focus on finding the connections that exist between both units and distributing power and influence more equitably across university organizational structures. It is also important to note that issues related to organizational leadership are often addressed in graduate preparation program courses. Thus, faculty who use a critical race perspective can engage newcomers to the profession in a way that challenges them to think about the ways race and racism are embedded in the organization and functions of higher education.

**Understanding White Property, Privilege, and Advantage.** In the third proposition, the intersection of race and property as a tool for understanding inequity, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) contend that the “construction of Whiteness as the ultimate property” (p. 58) is essentially what is most harmful to racial minorities. Accordingly, this notion legitimizes the idea that only what Whites own is “real property.” This includes rights to dispose of property; rights to use and enjoy property, reputational, and status capital; and rights to exclude. In education, Ladson-Billings and Tate contended that White property is legitimized when students are rewarded for conformity to White norms, such as speech patterns, dress, and behaviors. Moreover, the nation’s most affluent schools are located in predominantly White communities, where children enjoy privileges such as better libraries, exemplary teachers, smaller classes, a fuller range of college-prep courses, and well-trained counselors who know how to get students into college. Whites can also be confident that their identities normally carry more prestige and that they will be not be embarrassed for speaking English, “their language.” The White right to exclude is exemplified in the creation and maintenance of separate schools for Whites and Blacks and by resegregation through tracking (that is, placing Black and Hispanic youth in nonacademic programs of study that do not lead to college).

In the light of Ladson-Billings and Tate’s third proposition, higher education and student affairs professionals using a critical race perspective should understand that in the college setting, Whites are given agency in a number of ways. For example, the fact that the overwhelming majority of college faculty and senior academic administrators such as presidents, provosts, vice presidents, and deans are White translates to the notion that
being White carries more status and power than being of color. When students of color sit together in the cafeteria or in the library, they are usually viewed as segregating themselves, while Whites who exhibit this behavior are considered to be hanging out with their friends (Tatum, 1997). Moreover, students of color who dress with clothes representing their culture and speak a language other than English could experience cultural assaults in the form of discrimination and stereotypes.

It is essential that educators and administrators become more cognizant of the numerous ways in which the experiences, languages, and cultures of students of color are minimized in higher education and seek to transform perceptions, practices, and policies that privilege some students at the expense of others. A critical race lens should also be demonstrated in the preparation of new professionals to help them understand the complex dynamics of how race is constructed to grant agency to one group while disadvantaging and stifling the progress of another.

**Intersections of Race and Other Social Identities**

Thus far, this chapter has highlighted theory and the importance of recognizing race in the use of theory. In addition to being used as a lens to understand race and issues of racism that are relevant in student affairs practice and the preparation of newcomers to the profession, CRT can be expanded to understand the intersections of multiple social identities. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), “intersections” in this context refers to “the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings” (p. 51). We add that identities focusing on culture, ethnicity, ability, religion, and faith also are important aspects that must be considered in the multifaceted identities that comprise student populations (Robinson and Howard-Hamilton, 2000). Higher education and student affairs professionals should be knowledgeable about and aware of how their own racial identities influence their decisions and interactions with others (King and Howard-Hamilton, 2003). An awareness of their attitudes toward diversity and multiple identities can empower or thwart the developmental experiences of the students they encounter. Not adhering to the dominant value structure and embracing the critical race theoretical perspective is an important step in creating spaces for safe dialogue, reducing microaggressions on campus, and moving one step further toward understanding the intricacies of multiple identities, including race.

It is important to recognize the multiple identities that make up one’s entire persona. Specifically, addressing issues of race only and ignoring the fact that an individual is a woman, lesbian, and from a low socioeconomic status is oppressive because parts of her are pushed to the margins. As Crenshaw (1995) stated, “Ignoring differences within groups contributes to tension among groups” (p. 357). Therefore, it is important to expand the
critical race framework to include the intersections of race, gender, sexual orientation, and other characteristics deemed salient by each individual.

The concept of salience is defined as the degree of significance that race or racial identity has in a person’s approach to life, which can range from low to high in importance (Vandiver, 2001). Therefore, seeing an African American woman from a unitary lens of race only, and not taking into account gender or class, “obscures the identities and submerges the perspectives of women who differ from the norm” (Delgado, 2000, p. 253). If the multiple identities are nullified, a microaggression has occurred, which is antithetical to the critical race theoretical framework. That is why the concept of intersectionality has been introduced in CRT to explain the convergence of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation and the hidden implications regarding interconnecting forms of social oppression (Su and Yamamoto, 2002). When the multiple identities of individuals are recognized and it is understood that salience transcends race, then educators and administrators in higher education can create interventions that are inclusive rather than delimited based on a monolithic perspective of race. For example, a Latina lesbian may not feel that her needs are being met in a counterspace with women who are discussing traditional relationship issues. Thus, an alternative intervention could be a space for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) allies of color to relax, discuss, and share culturally empowering and supportive stories.

CRT moves beyond an individualistic focus, is respectful of the socio-political realities of marginalized groups, and does not reinforce the power structures in society. Moving diverse individuals from the margin to the center of discourses, programs, interventions, and theories may create campuses in which everyone feels validated for their differences (hooks, 2000). Advancing dialogues about the multiple dimensions of identities could increase levels of critical consciousness among students of color as well. It is often felt that if there is disagreement within a racial/ethnic group, there would be a disruption of racial bonding and solidarity (hooks, 2000). Through counterstories and a deeper understanding of the intersections of multiple identities, diverse perspectives can be aired for a progressive political struggle that is serious about transformation (hooks, 1990). “Engaging in intellectual exchange where people hear a diversity of viewpoints enables them to witness first hand solidarity that grows stronger in a context of productive critical exchange and confrontation” (hooks, 1990, p. 6).

Recommendations and Conclusions

We conclude with five recommendations that we believe are crucial in guiding higher education and student affairs professionals toward greater recognition, understanding, and action in relation to informing and transforming practice.

First, we encourage educators and administrators to challenge, question, and critique traditional theoretical perspectives. Many of the theories
used to guide practice give little, if any, attention to race. Therefore, we must continuously engage in critical examinations that provide an accurate context of the theorists’ backgrounds, identities, and assumptions; the population on which the theory was based; how sociopolitical and historical contexts, privilege, and power may have shaped the theory; and the applicability of the theory to various student populations.

Second, we encourage higher education and student affairs professionals to be open to moving beyond the status quo and recognizing the entrenchment of race in educational settings, including programs and services offered through student affairs divisions. Too often professionals perpetuate the status quo, or one group’s construction of what is “normal,” without having looked more deeply at the role of race. Consistently ignoring race and its systemic complexities further disadvantages students of color. When professionals recognize the complicity of their actions in maintaining campus environments that oppress nondominant populations, they can move toward realizing the goals of social justice.

Roithmayr (1999) asserted, “The classroom—where knowledge is constructed, organized, produced, and distributed—is a central site for the construction of social and racial power” (p. 5). Therefore, our third recommendation is that faculty who teach in higher education and student affairs graduate programs become more knowledgeable and aware of the power of the classroom environment in preparing future professionals. In essence, professors must be cognizant of the factors that guide decisions on the curriculum, particularly what will and will not be taught and how the material will be presented. Faculty should reflect on how often racial perspectives are incorporated into reading materials, class discussions, and assignments. They should be mindful of the roles that race, power, and privilege play in classroom dynamics, particularly in predominantly White settings, where few students of color are represented. Faculty might consider whose voices are heard and valued in the classroom, as well as the ways courses can be restructured to address race and racial realities.

Actively incorporating a critical race perspective in daily practice is our fourth recommendation. In this way, professionals approach their work with an awareness of the existence of race and the different ways that people experience racial realities. They also are clear about the ways in which race continues to produce societal inequities. Last, they understand how the intersection of race with other social identities presents a clearer picture that is necessary for working with individual students.

Our final recommendation is that higher education and student affairs professionals be knowledgeable about and aware of their own racial identities, honestly evaluate themselves in terms of their understanding of race and racism, and recognize how their knowledge, awareness, and racial identity influence their decisions, policies, and interactions with students from diverse backgrounds.
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NEW DIRECTIONS FOR STUDENT SERVICES • DOI: 10.1002/ss


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