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RACIAL SPACES:

Exploring the Myth of Diversity and the Dynamics of Racial Identities

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Denison University Summer Scholars Project 2020

Abstract

Many contemporary American colleges celebrate diversity as a key component of their educational mission. Learning to engage with others from different racial, class, geographic, and cultural backgrounds is regarded as good preparation for participating in a rapidly diversifying world. A core component of diversity work in the US institutional settings is race, a social and cultural construct reproduced over time through various institutional and individual practices. As a social construct, race reflects learned cultural values that impact peoples' ways of thinking about race and their own racial identity, which is vulnerable to change according to shifting daily human encounters and interactions in different locations and social environments. My research explores this flexibility of race and its effects on a specific international demographic group in a North American college setting as they navigate diversity and racial identity politics on campus. It focuses on understanding the pre-existing racial binarism of Black and white within the US, examining the close link between race and culture, and using this knowledge to further understand the social and internal mechanisms of the international student body experience on an American college campus. Using published research about ethnographic perspectives on race and socio-racial spaces, this research highlights diversity ideals within North American colleges, racial frames within the US, and their association with international students. It points out how certain ways of thinking about group and group differences have become a common part of daily experience in the US, and how those predetermined categorizations affect international students' identity politics within the limited spectrum of a North American college campus. This

understanding opened up a possibility for further research in this area, including studying and comparing region-specific cases of experience with racial identity shift.

Introduction

My interest in the dynamics of racial identity was sparked by personal experiences while immersing myself in distinct societies and social groups in six countries. Crossing country borders frequently, my racial identity and experiences varied significantly depending on the affiliated geographical and social settings. My ethnic status as a South Korean female disqualified me from accessing certain social circles in New Zealand, worked as a privilege in the dilapidated neighborhood of the Philippines, and turned me into a sexualized object in the Nepal ghettos. Connecting with people from diverse life paths and experiences, I thought that most misconceptions among various social groups are caused by the immense gaps between the environments exposed to those people. In that sense, when I started my studies at Denison University and immersed myself in the liberal arts philosophy of a North American college, I naturally regarded the liberal ideology of “diversity experience” emphasized all across the campus to be one solution to closing such gaps and connecting varied groups of people. As an international student, I wondered about the meaning and implications of diversity, and how it affected specific demographic groups on campus, especially the international student population.

My summer project helped me understand the historical formation of racial binarism and its significance within the US, ethnographic approaches to interpreting race as a cultural product, the interconnection of race and culture, and social dynamics and cultural factors behind ethnic

segregation in an American college landscape. The research was conducted through a survey of existing academic texts examining race through a sociocultural lens, an ethnography probing how Chicagoland-centered Korean American students navigate the racial landscape of a midwestern university, and a review of a comprehensive project on race chronicling the history of Western Europe and the US to better comprehend how the idea of race emerged and how it impacted social institutions and cultural practices. I came away from the research with an understanding that race is a social construct that has been reproduced over time through institutions, social practices, and even daily human interactions, and these variables can shape how specific demographic groups navigate different social spaces. The impact of such cultural, social, and political variables involved in how race is experienced is more complex than I had originally imagined, even with a limited focus on the international student body in a North American college setting.

Project Methodology and Materials

I began my research with an extensive literature review of scholarly texts about ethnographic perspectives on race and pre-existing racial relations within the United States. To connect this information with the experiences of international students in the US, I organized and analyzed published research on socio-racial spaces, diversity ideals within the North American college setting, and pre-existing racial frames within the US. I also explored a web-organized project on race to understand historical details and take a comprehensive look at how certain ways of thinking about groups and group differences have become a common part of the daily

language in the US (Understandingrace, n.d.). I then compared collected information to better understand the intersection of existing social labels on race and how those predetermined categorizations affect international students' identities within the limited spectrum of a North American college campus. As one of the research components, I worked with the Office of Global Programs to write an article regarding the research topic to be published in their blog, Bridging Borders.

Experiencing Different People

At the center of this research lies the myth and celebration of diversity in many contemporary American colleges. Diversity as an educational mission promotes learning to engage with others from different racial, class, geographic, and cultural backgrounds as this is regarded as good preparation for participating in a rapidly diversifying world. However, one detail that is often overlooked within celebrations of diversity is that it is a complex issue with multiple facets that can result in uncertain consequences. I wondered how factors like diversity and shifting racial identity affect international students as they struggle to establish their sense of belonging within a pre-existing racial frame in a North American college setting.

My analysis of the liberal ideologies of colleges and campus segregation showed that diversity is highly valued by US colleges as a pathway to greater self-awareness and improvement, yet there is a lack of consideration for how specific demographic groups on campus experience diversity. Embracing diversity requires students to step out of their ethnic or cultural comfort zones as it is believed that such experience with difference promotes academic

and personal growth. However, diversity is not a monolithic experience for the entire student body, and there is a lack of consideration for how specific demographic groups on campus experience diversity. What might work positively for domestic students could be more complicated when considered from the perspective of international students. For example, international students have to acclimate not only to the linguistic and cultural differences of a new country, but also face the challenge of figuring out how they fit into the racial landscape of identity politics on campus. This includes the treatment of the entire international student body as a homogeneous group, which disregards its multiplicity of racial and cultural dynamics, and the expectation of international students to be an addition of color to the campus landscape and offer the ideal college experience of difference to segregated cohorts (Abelmann 2009, 2). Due to a lack of connection to the historical and racial formation of the US as a nation, international students struggle to navigate racial identity and fit within pre-existing American racial binarism. On the other hand, there are also challenges concerning substantial racial labor within the internal dynamics of the international student body such as purposeful othering of oneself from one's ethnic group or racial stereotypes to establish a sense of belonging with the surrounding society, whether it be a friend circle, college campus or American society at large (Abelmann 2009, 161). These are some of the challenges that international students face while having to interpret the flexibility of one's racial identity and privileges due to changes in geographic locations and developments in those social spheres.

Role of Race in Diversity

At the core of diversity experience in the US college landscape is race, a social construct that is closely linked with culture, which Hartigan defines in his book *Race in the 21st Century: Ethnographic Approaches* as a human analytical perspective that makes sense of the world through categorization, and thus shapes our ways and views of interpreting the world (2010, 3). When cultural categorization is applied to race, it entails a system of classifying people into different kinds or groups that are divided into ranks in terms of superiority and inferiority within a racial hierarchy (Hartigan 2010, 10). These ranks then not only translate into social advantage and disadvantage, but also carry a cultural meaning that is maintained and strengthened through institutional practices and our habitual performance of race through daily social interactions and dialogues that give social significance to those racial categories (Hartigan 2010, 24). The latter type of daily performed racialization is pervasive and taken for granted within the society, which makes grasping social meaning attached to race or the process of racialization especially difficult for those who are advantaged by such a category and thus often are not as cognizant of their race. Due to the connection between race and culture, it is important that we see underlying cultural dynamics and racial identities performed by different categories of people in order to understand the impact of race on individuals' lives and its social implications.

One of the ways that race is performed other than being limited to skin color, social privileges, or conflicts is that it serves as a cultural category that affects the way we view or interact with the world. Before any Person of Color or white person is considered under individual terms, they are identified according to the meaning assigned to their race in the culture at large; they are interpreted as a member of the group they belong to (Hartigan 2010, 7). Racial

identities together with culture shape personal experiences and perception, while also depending on social spaces and locations as people interpret their race in relation to the context of their place and establish their racial sense of belonging accordingly. However, as race reflects embedded cultural values and social significance, international students face conflicting ways of thinking about race and their racial identity in the pre-existing racial binarism in the US. For example, it is not a rare occurrence where international students representing the majority population back in their home country identify with white students on campus rather than viewing themselves under the new minority status given in the US. On the other hand, some international students may grasp the racial dynamics on campus through a wide network of relationships and identify with the People of Color community.

Diversity and Human Growth

There are multiple sociocultural variables at play in how international students understand race and the impact of race on their lives, and the emphasis on diversity experience might give impetus to such racial labor, which can lead to both negative and positive outcomes. On a North American college campus, the international student body is often seen as a population that offers diversity to the college landscape whereas such experience is in fact a mutual experience among different student groups that require institutional and individual effort. Furthermore, lumping international students together as a homogenous group and overlooking the possibility of diversity experience within the group itself puts them under great pressure to step out of their ethnic zones and connect with racial others. One reason why this happens is the

widespread idea under the diversity mission where comfort zones, in this case the cultural comfort zone, is viewed as an obstacle hindering personal growth (Abelmann 2009, 5).

Celebration of diversity teaches students to step out of their familiar social circles and seek connections with others who do not share many life similarities with them.

As international students are expected to bring diversity to campus, they often seek group belongingness within segregated cohorts while navigating the experience with difference, which often leads to extra racial labor or racialized challenges. For instance, while immersing themselves into a foreign culture, international students could constantly self-examine whether they are keeping up with the liberal ideals of personal growth through diversity, and link their assessment with self-worth. Diversity asks its participants to examine whether one is acting and interacting with one's social space in a certain approved or qualified way that fulfills the standards for human growth through experience of difference on a US college campus. While struggling to prove one's worthiness through self-examination of diversity, international students can be faced by "intraethnic othering," a term that Abelmann uses to define constant efforts made by minorities to avoid one's given racial stereotype by disassociating oneself from one's own ethnic group (2009, 161-162). Ironically, pressure coming from the celebration of diversity to step out of one's cultural comfort zone can lead to a positive outcome that promotes individual growth and expand one's horizons, but it often becomes a source of racial burden for international students as they constantly make decisions and seek ways to participate in work for diversity on a US college campus. To eliminate the negative outcomes of challenges regarding diversity, colleges need to facilitate such experiences by providing tools to help both international and domestic students understand their different backgrounds or orientations and

developing a campus environment that promotes mutual efforts to interact between segregated student groups.

Discussion

This research was an attempt to study the history of racial formation in the US and how race works in modern American society, specifically on college campuses, to understand what is lacking from the liberal mission of diversity that promotes yet often fails to deliver integration between segregated racial student bodies. Through this experience, I have come to understand that prior to focusing on achieving the liberal mission of diversity, it is necessary to understand how students' backgrounds or social categories make a difference to how they negotiate racial identity politics on campus. Findings in this research point out that there is room for institutional work to be done in American colleges using diversity as its core educational mission to not only emphasize the importance of connecting students with different life paths and particularities, but also integrate specific demographics on campus, especially international students, into campus diversity initiatives.

While analyzing published ethnographic research, I encountered terminology created by researchers to describe their findings regarding race and its complex effects. Approaching various conceptual frameworks of race helped me realize that researching race does not have a specific template or guideline, which makes the role of personal analysis and data interpretation even more important. This 5-week project has been a build-up for my future ethnographic research on shifting privileges depending on racial identities in different locations of the world.

My work this summer has outlined a more organic way of thinking about "race" that is sensitive to the variables involved, has helped me understand how and why race matters in American social schemes and hierarchies, and sparked my interest in the flexibility of racial identity. This understanding opened up a possibility for further research in this area, including studying and comparing region-specific cases of experience with racial identity shifts. That research could be an ethnographic project where I include personal experiences regarding changes in my own racial identity living in and immersing myself in six different countries' unique social settings. I could then compare and describe such experiences with similar evidence found in scholarly literature, and invent and utilize ethnographic terms and language to address such findings.

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