

# Queer Race Pedagogy for Educators in Higher Education: Dealing with Power Dynamics and Positionality of LGBTQ Students of Color

by  
Mitsunori Misawa

People's *positionality*, the power inherent in their immediate respective social positions, greatly influences the differences in what individuals have access to in society. Maher and Tetreault (2001) stated that positionality is the idea that "people are defined not in terms of fixed identities, but by their location within shifting networks of relationships, which can be analyzed and changed" (p. 164). Similarly, Martin and Gunten (2002) described the term positionality as "a concept that acknowledges that we are all raced, classed, and gendered, and that these identities are relational, complex, and fluid positions rather than essential qualities" (p. 46). In other words, whether we want it or not, all parts of our identities are shaped by socially constructed positions and memberships to which we belong. Such automatic categorization is embedded in our society as a system and is pervasive in education and at the workplace.

Because positionality impacts everyone's daily life, marginalization and discrimination are particularly inescapable issues for minorities in contemporary society. Race is one of the significant components of our identification in society, because people often have predetermined for themselves how a specific racial group will behave in a particular context. This form of social construction is usually described as stereotyping, "an oversimplified picture of the world. . . . It is the oversimplified belief that a certain trait, behavior, or attitude characterizes all members of some identifiable group" (Newman, 2007, p. 151). In the United States, there are still tense relationships among racial and ethnic groups. News media reported various race-based incidents during the presidential election in 2008, like one incident where a woman made a false claim that she was attacked by a six-foot-four Black man (Vargas, 2008), and the racial and ethnic stereotypical (and often incorrect) statements made about President Obama's credibility (he

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was a candidate at that time) in terms of his race and/or ethnic background. From those incidents in 2008, it seems that race persists as a dividing line among racial groups even at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century in the United States. Although People of Color obtained many rights through the Civil Rights Movement, discrimination towards minority races has been a constant issue in the United States from its inception (Johnson-Bailey, 2002). Yet, diversity and inclusion of minorities are emphasized in policies in education and workplaces in general.

In addition to racial issues, sexual orientation has become a societal issue in contemporary American society. Sexuality had been mostly ignored, or at a minimum, has not become an apparent issue until the late 1960s in the United States when the Stonewall riots took place. Despite the fact that there is more acceptance and tolerance toward sexual minorities (marriage equality and legalized domestic partnership in a few states are two examples), discrimination based on sexual orientation still exists across all facets of society in the contemporary United States.

Then there is the much overlooked intersection of racism and homophobia, which sees discrimination based on race and on sexual orientation brought together; sexual minorities of color are at least doubly discriminated against (Kumashiro, 2001). Gay People of Color are torn between their racial identity and their sexual identity in today's society as they move between social groups that focus more on race or more on sexual orientation. For example, very little attention is paid to sexual minorities in racially centered communities, and at the same time there is very little attention paid to racial issues in mainstream lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities (Kumashiro, 2008; McCready & Kumashiro, 2006; Misawa, 2007).

The issues affecting gay People of Color in the general population also play a part in the field of education, as it is a microcosm of our society in which diverse people are cohabiting and negotiating power dynamics. In the field of education's environment, there are People of Color who are LGBTQ, and this paper deals with the pedagogical issues for such doubly-oppressed populations who have been silenced by the majority. An attempt is made to answer the following question: How can educators create an inclusive learning environment for LGBTQ People of Color in higher education in general?

The purpose of this paper is to explore how educators can enrich learning and build stronger learning communities by helping to turn up the volume on the voices of LGBTQ students of color. This paper also provides a theoretical concept of the intersection of race and sexual orientation and describes *Queer Race Pedagogy* (QRP) for educators in higher education. It starts with an overview of racism and heterosexism in higher education, then explores how racism and heterosexism influence society and higher education. Then, two theories, Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory, are introduced along with their histories and pertinent concepts. Finally, I discuss implications for educators who teach diverse populations in contemporary education.

## Racism in Higher Education

At any location in any culture in society, educators and practitioners in education deal with epistemological power issues surrounding the creation and dissemination of knowledge; in the United States, those issues are closely tied to racism (Yosso, 2005). Hemphill (2001) criticized how the field of education has generalized knowledge into practice, which results in the field of education being dominated by white (majority) discourse, the voices and perspectives of minorities left unaddressed all too often. Hemphill (2001) pointed out that the universality of the white perspective, and its generalization, has perpetuated racial inequality in American society. The knowledge and the practices in the field of adult education have been primarily passed on by and for white scholars. Hemphill (2001) stated two reasons why the dominant group based knowledge that he called “universal knowledge” is a problem in adult and higher education: first, these are generalizations that operate hegemonically to marginalize learners and practitioners who do not conform to generalized learning or motivational patterns; and second, these generalizations frustrate adult education practitioners who often care about the needs of those who are culturally, socially, economically, and linguistically marginalized (pp. 15-16). This universality does nothing to make minority perspectives visible, and it also leads to misunderstandings between teachers and students.

Diversity is important in the field and in American society because without it, common knowledge and stereotypes involve racist perspectives. Johnson-Bailey (2002) argued that instead of reexamining universal knowledge to prevent racism, new perspectives that are based on People of Color should be created because universality perpetuates racism in society. Also, Johnson-Bailey (2002) discussed how race and racism influenced knowledge production in the field of adult education. She wrote that there need to be more perspectives for adult learners through more diverse voices in the field of adult education. As the perspectives of People of Color have not appeared much in the literature of adult education, “people of color need to be considered on their own as human subjects” (p. 22) to bring to light the differing aspects of humanity in the field of adult education.

## Homophobia and Heterosexism in Higher Education

Homophobia and heterosexism create non-inclusive and unwelcoming environments for gay people (Jagose, 1996), which translate into oppressive learning in higher education for those without heterosexual privilege. *Homophobia* has been defined as the irrational fear and hatred of gays and lesbians (Dilley, 2002; Jagose, 1996; Rhoads, 1994). *Heterosexism* is the uncritical assumption that everything is heterosexual, that heterosexuality is superior to any other form of sexual expression, and that everything should be heterosexual (Jagose, 1996). Bieschke, Eberz, and Wilson (2000) found that educational programs, pedagogy, and feel-

ings of purpose influence how learners perceive homophobia and heterosexism. Even though university faculty and administrators sometimes help guide students who are struggling with their sexuality, Dilley (2002) found that current mainstream universities inadvertently created a norm of heterosexism in their learning environments that entailed professors using heterosexist practices in their lecture classes, and environments that are negative towards gay men discourage them from coming out and may lead to low self-esteem.

Once individuals begin to understand how environmental factors interact with facts and assumptions about sexual orientation, faculty and staff can construct environments that embrace gay students and assist students who wish to share their sexual orientation. In order to create such environments, faculty and staff in higher education need to be aware of and more sensitive to their students' situations. It is important for educators to be more inclusive in their practices in higher education, and they must listen to their learners' voices and understand their students' identities.

## Critical Race Theory

Critical Race theorists argue that race matters because it creates hierarchical categories that influence power relations among different racial groups (Lawrence, Matsuda, Delgado, Crenshaw, 1993). In that kind of environment, power relations depend on a person's skin color, which becomes an identifier utilized to categorize that person by other people of dissimilar skin color. Ladson-Billings (2002) also argued that race is an important aspect in social constructions of today's society and in external human development.

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) described how Critical Race Theory was developed and used in academia. They explained that the "Critical Race Theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists in society and scholars in education interested in researching and transforming the relationship shared by race, racism, and power" (p. 2). Solorzano (1997) also defined CRT as "a framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of society that maintain the subordination and marginalization of people of color" (p. 6). Although there is not a single genetic characteristic possessed by every member of one racial group (Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin, 1984), there are huge gaps between racial groups in terms of social privilege in the United States. Scholars of CRT such as Delgado and Stefancic (2001), Lawrence, Matsuda, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993) singled out six important themes in CRT:

1. Critical Race Theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life;
2. Critical Race Theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy;

3. Critical Race Theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law;
4. Critical Race Theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and their communities of origin in analyzing law and society;
5. Critical Race Theory is interdisciplinary and eclectic. It borrows from several traditions, including liberalism, law and society, feminism, Marxism, poststructuralism, critical legal theory, pragmatism, and nationalism; and
6. Critical Race Theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (Lawrence, Matsuda, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993, p. 6)

Asch (2000) stated, "CRT is skeptical about achieving the kind of social transformation that would enable historically excluded groups to achieve and maintain a valued place in American life" (p. 1). Individuals do not have unitary identities, which is a notion known as intersectionality and anti-essentialism. A unique voice of color that exists because of historical and current oppression can communicate stories to white people who are unlikely to know the stories. CRT helps people who have been marginalized because of their skin color to articulate their voices in society to obtain a more equal status in society for their race.

## Queer Theory

Scholars who focus on gay and lesbian studies and queer theory have utilized Queer Theory as an analytical technique for social texts, which requires examination with an eye to exposing underlying meanings, distinctions, and relations of power in the larger culture which produces the texts (Dilley, 2002; Gamson, 2000). The resulting analyses reveal complicated cultural issues and problems for the regulations of sexual behavior that often result in the oppression of sexual minorities. Queer Theory looks into anything that comes between normative and deviant, particularly sexual activities and identities (Jagose, 1996; Morland & Willox, 2005).

Queer Theory is also concerned with the normative behaviors and identities which define the term *queer* (Dilley, 2002; Talburt, 2000). Thus, Queer Theory's expansive scope covers all human behaviors. The theory insists that all sexual behaviors, all concepts linking sexual behaviors to sexual identities, and all categories of normative and deviant sexualities are social constructs (Gamson, 2000). Queer Theory is moving from explaining the modern homosexual to questioning the operation of the heterosexual and homosexual binary. That makes it possible for scholars to become aware and more accepting of sexual orientation in contemporary adult education.

Although research in education has usually been conducted under a heterocentric lens, Queer Theory became a lasting part of the field's newly opening

door toward the diversity of learners. Queer Theory complements the sociocultural perspective of human development and the power relationship studies of critical theory. Many minority people's voices that were silenced are now slowly beginning to be heard by contemporary society and will continue to be heard in the future through education.

## Queer Race Pedagogy (QRP) for Inclusive Learning Environments

Queer Race Pedagogy (QRP) is a holistic teaching approach. It is designed specifically for sexual minority students of color who have traditionally been ignored and overlooked by mainstream discourses in higher education. Often, conventional pedagogy is ineffective for sexual minorities of color because their educational needs may be different from and more complicated than those of majorities and other minorities (Misawa, in press). QRP is an important tool for educators to have when they teach a diverse population where sexual minorities of color may exist. In short, by utilizing a more inclusive and holistic approach than conventional pedagogy, one that includes the intersection of race and sexual orientation in pedagogical practice, educators will be able to create a learning environment not only for sexual minority students of color but also LGBT or racial minority students and other minority students. In such an environment, students will feel more comfortable being who they are, which may increase their learning and motivation.

QRP is demanding of educators in that they must strive to address as many issues related to racial identities and sexual orientation, sociocultural issues, power dynamics, and equality among diverse populations as they can in their practice. Educators have to make sure that they include relevant materials to address racial issues and sexual orientation in class. Discussing race and sexual orientation and their intersection in class is likely to be challenging because of the subjects' statuses as cultural taboos for civil discussions. Hence, educators need to be prepared in how they can teach such topics. They should bring relevant literature on race, sexual orientation, other identity-oriented publications, and intersections of various identities to their classes for discussion.

Practicing QRP also requires that educators approach these issues and learners' identities with sensitivity. Educators need to take into account various aspects of positionality, which means that they must examine how identities intertwine in the classroom, and they need to understand how identities operate in power structures. In other words, it is important for educators to know how various identities influence the way people interact with each other.

One way to take into account various aspects of positionality is to observe classroom culture before introducing QRP. Educators can then gauge who people are associated with and with which students the leadership centers of the classroom reside. For example, which students raise their hands and spontaneously

give their opinions more frequently than others. Through observation, educators can get a feel for how students might interact with each other and who feels comfortable with whom based on the amount of time spent with others.

Because it is important (but often difficult) for educators to determine what positional power dynamics exist in their classroom, educators need to implement at least two levels of investigation: external and internal investigations. At the external level, educators perceive students' physical appearance, race, and ethnicity. They should understand students' backgrounds prior to coming to class. Also, educators need to understand students' identities that are invisible (e.g., sexual orientation). This information may not be available to educators because such information can be very personal; as a result, educators need to be sensitive to their students' identity. Sissel and Sheard (2001) stated, "depending upon what people's role in society is, where they are situated in society and how they view themselves will determine whether and in what contexts they are in the margin or center" (p. 4). So, educators should be extra careful when educators develop a lesson plan because they do not want to push their students to the margin. Educators should take into account their learners' positionalities by implementing an activity or discussion that involves a sharing aspect dealing with cultural sensitivity and diversity issues.

Educators will likely encounter challenges in contemporary higher education during their practice of QRP. According to Kumashiro (2001), the creation of a democratic educational setting is not easy because educators need to fight against some forms of oppression, like racism and heterosexism. He further argued that there are intersections of perspectives concerning race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and culture; some people have more than one minority aspect in the real world. Such intersections put people into specific categories in this society, and those factors often make people invisible to society as well. Kumashiro calls it *Troubling Intersections*. He stated that if educators want to create inclusive learning environments, they must acknowledge and work through these paradoxes and "address the queer student of color and challenge both racism and heterosexism" (p. 2).

There are two appropriate activities that educators must practice for QRP. These activities will allow learners to fully explore pedagogy and classroom dynamics in adult learning. QRP's two major pedagogical activities are drawn from Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory: building a community with counter-narratives and examining stereotypes in terms of positionality.

"Counterstorytelling" allows sexual minorities of color to explore their life stories with a narrative approach that invites students to share their own stories with peers who may have similar experiences. It also helps create a learning community where people feel safe so they can process their learning throughout the semester. It is crucial to create such an environment by practicing QRP from the beginning for sexual minorities of color. One goal of QRP is to empower LGBTQ students of color so that they are able to reflect and think critically about them-

selves. This sharing of counterstories helps them to connect in class and creates an inclusive environment where they can explore different positionalities, such as race and sexual orientation.

The second component is to examine stereotypes by developing and using critical thinking skills. Fostering reflective critical practitioners is another goal of QRP. One of QRP's strategies is to address various critical dimensions with the perspectives of diversity education, stereotypes, and multicultural education. Because stereotypes are associated with positionality and connote power hierarchy in society (Kumashiro, 2004), this component becomes an important part of QRP. Examining stereotypes requires critical thinking skills to analyze how and why people have stereotypes. By deconstructing positionality's epistemology, people will learn how to use pedagogy and power as educators and learners in more inclusive ways.

QRP participants will use an experiential learning approach, such as sharing personal life stories, to reflect on their lives and learn about themselves. These two main components will help each participant develop their own voice. All the components of QRP are a continuum of the development of a learning community and the dissection of stereotypes. Historically, marginalized groups were not able to develop their own voices because the dominant ones took the voices of minorities away. It becomes obvious when learners deal with power dynamics in class that society is structured around the dominant ones. Therefore, QRP is designed for sexual minorities of color to critically examine the positionalities of the participants by fostering critical thinkers and nurturing reflective practitioners simultaneously.

## Conclusion

In a democratic nation, all people should have equal rights, so education should be accessible to all people. This is a fundamental human right. One reason for that is because education is an important component of becoming successful in American society (Johnson-Bailey, 2002). However, the United States has achieved only superficial equality at this point in time. The knowledge base in the mainstream discourse in education in general is still heavily formulated for a white heterosexual male culture (Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Shore, 2001). In such an environment, the learning process degrades for some learners who have multiple minority perspectives. When a learning environment contains diverse learners, it is crucial for educators to make sure that everyone is included and is treated fairly. It is the responsibility of educators to create learning environments appropriate for LG-BTQ students of color. In order for educators to create such environments, they first must know how to become more aware of their learners' positionalities and power dynamics (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000, Ladson-Billings, 1999). In that sense, a pedagogical perspective about queer race enhances educator aware-



ness on how to establish such a learning environment for LGBTQ People of Color in education.

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