

Exploring Identities and Interactions of African American and Asian American College Students: Interdisciplinary Approach

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Abstract

Marginalized racial minorities such as Asian American and African American students who attend a majority White university, find it difficult to associate with individuals outside of their race. The college campus environment is the place, in which deep questions of identity may be challenged, strengthened or changed, depending on the social setting or individuals present. This study explored the ethnic identity and social identity of Asian American and African American college students at a predominately White Catholic university in the Midwest analyzing qualitative data collected through fourteen face-to-face interviews. The study explored the externalization and internalization of ethnic identity within the framework of these groups of students' social identity and group membership. Other themes, such as code switching, liminality and identity performance also emerged from data analyses. Some implications regarding integration of racial minority groups on campus are offered.

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Individual identity is comprised of multiple dimensions including personality traits, ethical character, as well as social and cultural roles that intersect among a wide range for college students from various racial backgrounds (Abes, et al., 2007). College life provides students with the opportunity to live in an unfamiliar environment where they can interact and socialize with people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Stewart (2009) stated that the college environment is a place in which deep questions of identity may be presented, strengthened or changed. Students involved in activities and experiences with unfamiliar groups and identities develop a stronger sense of self. King (2011) has also confirmed the existence of more than one dimension of identity suggesting that students hold public and private identities depending on the social setting or other individuals present.

While the college experience can be positive for an individual's personal and social development, being introduced to a new cultural milieu where one becomes an ethnic minority can also be a rather stressful experience that requires some level of adjustment. Both African Americans and Asian Americans are minority groups who have experienced disenfranchisement in America, but in different ways (Sue et al., 2007; Pieterse & Carter, 2007). Asian Americans are considered middleman minorities while African Americans as a community have yet to fully gain positions of power and wealth (Choi, 2004). The present research aimed to explore the ethnic identity performances among Asian American and African American college students at a predominately White university. The main goal was to investigate the underlying processes of racial/ethnic development among these two marginalized group in this contextual setting.

For several decades psychologists, educators and sociologists have examined all aspects of identity, particularly social identity and ethnic identity. Specifically they have studied social identity and ethnic identity in terms of its influence on college students' identities in general. The entrance into college is a time in which individuals' question, and broaden their identity, which may influence social group memberships (Stewart, 2009); practice using labels, become involved in activities and experience unfamiliar groups and identities to develop a stronger sense of self (King, 2011).

Identity is commonly understood to be socially constructed through individual's sense of self and beliefs about one's own social group, such as race, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation (Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009).

Social identity is also constructed through interactions within the larger social contexts, including university settings where aspects of dominant cultural capital may dictate norms and expectations. Social identity is known as the self-concept of individuals which derives from their understanding and the value of their social group membership (McEwen, 2003).

Racial and ethnic identity heavily influences social group membership. According to Phinney (2005) racial and ethnic identity which is an essential aspect of an minority's identity can be defined as "a self-constructed understanding of oneself in terms of one's cultural and ethnic background and attitudes and feelings associated with that background" (p. 189). Social groups provide individuals with valuable truths about their existence. Social groups also play a significant role of intergroup relations in identity construction, including ethnic identity (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Group affiliation can determine the attitudes and behaviors of its members as played out by social norms, shared values, and cultural traditions. As children, ethnic minorities often receive beliefs about their ethnic identity and social identity from their parents. These messages are what social scientists refer to as ethnic-racial socialization. This is a central component for ethnic-minority families. Ethnic-minority parents from various ethnic groups convey messages to their children regarding ethnicity and race and the meaning of their group membership (Hughes, 2009). These messages may consist of a range of issues containing ethnic pride, group history and traditions, awareness of discrimination, intergroup caution and mistrust, and appreciation of diversity and equality across groups or other ethnicities (Brown & Krishnakumar, 2007; Hughes et al., 2006; Umana-Taylor & Fine, 2004; Hughes et al., 2009).

Ethnic-racial socialization is a contributing factor for African Americans and Asian Americans internalization and externalization of identity. Culturally, African Americans and Asian Americans are both considered to value a collective identity over an individualistic identity (Vargas & Kimmelmeir, 2013; Carson, 2009) which is an element of ethnic-racial socialization. However, Asians tend to value in-group membership relationships over out-group memberships (Vargas & Kimmelmeir, 2013). Research shows that African Americans reported more cultural socialization, on average than did their White counterparts, most likely because African American parents are more likely than White parents to anticipate their children's exposure to discrimination (Hughes et al., 2008; Hughes et al., 2009).

Historically and currently African Americans lack essential resources and employment, subordinating their position in social, political and economic realms (Fernandez & Greenberg, 2013). For Asian Americans, ethnic-racial socialization has been the framework for establishing status of wealth in America as well as overcoming disenfranchisement. Asian Americans utilized their religion and culture of collectivism to work together to obtain social and economic mobility and freedom (Vargas & Kemmelmeir, 2013). For example, Asians tapped into business markets to serve their community but also other communities by catering specifically to each culture's needs, boosting their socioeconomic equality (Valdez, 2008). These two minority groups are both historically and socially marginalized but in different ways and have different levels of success which is a component of their social group membership and influential of societal stereotypes.

Minority students who attend predominately White universities may face challenges such as racial identity development and negotiating interactions with the dominant culture within the university settings (Cole & Yip, 2008). The social climate of predominately White universities poses challenges for minority students beyond the normative transitional difficulties to young adulthood. These students may find it more challenging to create new social networks with students of the majority outgroup. The attitudes of minority students towards other racial groups may be an influential factor in one's social identity in societal settings such as universities (Oysermen et al., 2007). Ethnic minorities are aware of societal stereotypes and may experience anxiety and discomfort arising from the sense that their group is undervalued and perhaps only grudgingly accepted (Purdie-Vaughns, 2004). Research demonstrates that ethnic minorities who strongly identify with a group that is stigmatized in society or at an institution can increase the threat surrounding such stigmatization, leading to a devaluing of and disengagement from core institutional goals such as academic achievement as well as student involvement (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005).

Research shows that African American students reported less comfort generally in dealing with members of other racial/ethnic groups compared with White or Hispanic students (Rollock & Vrana, 2005). First-year African American college students who exhibited high intergroup anxiety had more ingroup and fewer outgroup friends during the two subsequent years at university (Levin et al., 2003).

According to Oyserman et al., 2007 African American students who displayed low outgroup comfort and attended a predominately White institution, race was likely to be salient in most academic settings, creating a context similar to a stereotype threat or token manipulation status. Other studies show that students who belong to minority groups who exhibited intergroup anxiety was related to low levels of contact with and negative attitudes towards outgroup members. African American students who reported a less secure and less tolerant racial identity also reported more discomfort with White students (Rollock & Vrana, 2005).

Pinel, Warner and Chua (2005) reported that stigma consciousness of stereotypes was associated with lowered academic performance and disengagement among African American male college students but was related to lower self-esteem among African American females. However, similar studies found such relationships to be present among African American males and not African American females (Cole & Yip, 2008). Typically, predominately White universities enroll more African American females than African American males, with studies reporting that African American females display better adjustment to discrimination than African American males (Engle, 2005). However, other studies found no gender differences between this demographic in terms of outgroup discomfort (Cole & Yip, 2008).

Although Asian American students generally have the highest in United States college graduation rate (Reeves & Bennet, 2004), this minority group still struggles with the dominant culture present at predominately White universities. Asian Americans may deal with different issues than African American college students such as acculturation which is when non-dominant groups adapt to the social-cultural system of a dominant group (Kohatsu, 2005). Asian immigrants who come to reside in America as youth may encounter multiple challenges growing up in the United States because of differences in cultural demands from the United States and their native culture, such as valuing collectivism over individualism (Deng et al., 2010).

Studies show that the accumulation of daily verbal, behavior and social settings directly affects minority students' perceptions of campus climate, participation as well as academic performance (Byars-Winston et al., 2010). Research also shows that Asian American college students that strongly identify with and endorse American ideals felt less adversely affected towards discrimination they experienced on campus (Park et al., 2012).

However, one study found that when minority students participated in racially and ethnically affirming organizations such as Asian Student Associations or Black Student Alliance, this reinforced their ethnic identity and helped counteract negative campus climate experiences (Negy & Lunt, 2008). Similarly, research shows that Asian American student's civic engagement with ethnically affirming organizations, while attending a predominately White institution, led these students to exhibit a stronger ethnic identity. Participation and association with pan-Asian student organizations at the university were related to a heightened sense of racial identity (Chang, 2011). These ingroup activities allowed students to create friendships, networks and be an active member of the university student body. However, Asian American college students from this study also reported that extra-curricular activities were perceived as too much exposure to American culture. Others studies show that Southeast Asian American, STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) college students whom are comfortable with interactions with members of the outgroup received social support from members outside of their race, which positively contributed and diversified the experiences of the members of the outgroup and the ingroup (Byars-Winston et al., 2010).

We explored the social identity and ethnic identity of Asian American and African American college students who attended a predominately White university in this present study. These two groups were chosen because they are both marginalized minority groups in America who have experienced institutionalized racism but economically and socially are at different. By taking an interdisciplinary approach, utilizing grounded theory method, the process of ethnic identity development was explored among these two groups. It was also explored how these students' ethnic identity influenced their social identity. Lastly, the interactions and associations with peer groups of same and different racial groups than the participants were explored and how external factors influenced their ethnic identity. Taking all these aspects into account, we developed four research questions:

1. What is the main process that influences the development of internal ethnic identity among Asian American and African American students?
2. What degree of Asian American and African American students' external ethnic identity development is influenced by social experiences with racial/ ethnic groups?
3. Will both groups discuss being the most comfortable behaving closest to their authentic social identity with other students from the same racial category?

4. Will Asian and African American students be the most aware of their minority ethnic identities in predominantly White settings?

Method

We utilized a grounded theory method approach to explore peer interaction and ethnic identity. The purpose of grounded theory method is to construct a theory based on the data collected (Creswell, 2007). This detailed process provides many layers of data collections and categories. By incorporating grounded theory method, comparisons of data from the two groups will enhance the similarities and differences of information gathered.

We utilized a criterion sampling method, which allowed us to screen potential participants based on a specific criteria. Then we used a convenience sampling for those participants who met the criteria. We obtained written permission from the student organization coordinators to obtain listservs at Central Midwestern University (pseudonym) from student organizations specifically identified for Asian American and African American students (e.g. African American Male Scholars, Black Student Alliance, Filipino Student Association and Asian American Association). A recruitment email was sent out to those student organizations.

We initially interviewed ten undergraduate students from Central Midwestern University. The majority of students at Central Midwestern University are Whites, thus there was not enough pool of potential subjects. Indeed, this lack of diversity was the primary reason why we chose the current topic. From the participants, four identified as African American, four identified as Asian Americans, and two identified as African American and Asian American.

To complete the grounded theory method, we later interviewed four of the same participants, two Asian American females and one African American male and one African American and Asian American male, to probe emerging themes further and to ensure internal validity. The sampling criteria included participants who were Central Midwestern University undergraduate students, ages 18-24 and who identified as African American or Asian American. The sample was assembled on a first come first serve basis as a response to the email prompt asking for participants in the study.

The data collection began when the first participant responded to the recruitment email continued when the sample size reached ten participants and ended when we re-interviewed four of the same participants six months later. The recruitment email stated that the research project was looking for African American and Asian American students to be interviewed for research taking place in a class, Sociology 575, Intermediate Qualitative Analysis: Grounded Theory Method. The email instructed the students to contact the primary investigator by email if they were interested in participating. With every participant interest email received, the primary investigator emailed each researcher so that we could contact the potential participant directly to arrange a date and time for the interview. The interview time was based on the availability of both the researcher and the participant. This was done until the sample size reached ten and all interviews had been completed. Each of the five researchers was assigned two participants to interview. To complete the second round of interviews, the administrative contact emailed one African American participant, one African American and Asian American participant and two Asian American participants to inquire their participation in a second interview. Once all four participants confirmed participation, the administrative contact set up an interview time with each participant.

All interviews took place in campus offices of the researchers, which allowed for a one-to-one, confidential interview space for the interviewer and participant. The interviews ranged from 15-45 minutes, began with an introduction informing participants of the study and contact information of the primary investigator through reading the cover letter and introductory script. Eleven primary interview questions were asked, along with follow up questions. We debriefed each participant upon completion of the interview.

We audio recorded the interviews and de-identified each interview by assigning an ID number. A master sheet of ID numbers and names were kept separate from the recordings at all times. The master sheet was kept electronically in a password-protected location and hard copies produced were kept in the file cabinet of the locked office of the primary investigator. After the interview, each investigator transcribed their interviews. Once audio-recorded material was transcribed, each researcher immediately destroyed the recording. Each transcribed document had only ID numbers. Only the primary investigator and key personnel of this study had access to the transcriptions. We gave pseudonyms to each participant to ensure anonymity.

The data analysis began after the first round of data collection and ended when all the transcripts were coded and analyzed for emerging themes. Open, axial, and selective coding was used to discern themes and patterns of ideas (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2009). In the open coding process, each researcher read through his or her own transcripts looking for *in vivo* codes and other segments that seem to be of particular importance. In the axial coding process, these segments were numbered and placed in categories. The categories were the ideas that different segments had in common. For the selective coding process, the categories were grouped into larger, more abstract themes that encompassed a wider variety of answers. During selective coding the researchers began to collaborate in developing themes. We combined themes into core categories and discussed similarities and dissimilarities from the raw data. Finally, these themes were used to create a dynamic visual theory (Figure 1) of how the different themes or constructs connected to each other. For the second round of interviews, the administrative contact interviewed, transcribed, open coded, axial coded and selective coded the four interviews. Once coding was complete, the administrative contact compared the categories from the interviews conducted in the first round of interviews with the categories made from the second round of interviews to complete the grounded theory method.

Results

The participants' stories emphasized the importance of understanding identity in the context of social group membership, environment and self-identity positionality. Each participant articulated their own level of awareness about their behavior in various environments.

Since the participants were mainly recruited through involvement in ethnic identity-based organizations, the majority of the participants displayed high levels of awareness of social identity, ethnic identity, self-exploration and social surroundings.

Several main influencing aspects affected each participant's identity performance: contextual identity influences, internal identity, external identity, and liminality. Contextual identity influences held significant influence over the meaning-making of identity and perception of self-identity. Second, participants spoke to aspects of their internal identity, characteristics and values as they had come to understand themselves.

Participants also spoke of their external identity, the characteristics and values they espoused to others through verbalization or actions. Finally, participants discussed living in liminality between their internal and external identity and/or ethnic and social identity, enacted by their behavior and awareness.

Contextual Influences of Identity

Aligning with the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Abes, Jones & McEwen, 2007), multiple factors were found that influence participants' identity such as group membership, peer opinions, stereotypes, values, societal norms, and family expectations. These influences played a significant role in the identity development and understanding of identity for the participants. Participants articulated both positive and negative aspects of these identity influences. For example, part of ethnic racial socialization from families is influential to identity. Ty, a sophomore Asian male who was born in China but moved to the United States at a very young age, spoke to his values being different from his family. Ty's family still valued collectivism over individualism, leading Ty to discuss feelings of being overwhelmed dealing with acculturation. Many first generation individuals have to deal with acculturation, which can cause stress especially when coming from collectivist societies. Ty struggled with balancing his family's ethnic racial socialization and the dominant culture present on campus. On the other hand, Javon a sophomore Black male specifically described his family's expectations and values and how both aspects shaped his identity:

I've always had parents who are like go for your dreams; go for the stars basically...so you can make it into something of a successful type of African American.

That's kinda what they wanna see, like an African American person, who's well-educated, who dresses professionally, but also can educate other African Americans as well. I've always had that, I guess, that positive enlightenment.

Although, Ty struggled with the familial influence and Javon thrived with it; identity, family and ethnic racial socialization played a role in how they identified themselves.

For multiple participants, stereotypes also influenced the lens through which they viewed identity. Stereotypes aligned with racial and gender groups were the most salient examples when participants dealt with contextual identity influences. Darrell, a freshman African American male stated, "I don't want to snap and seem like an angry black man." Being both Black and male, Darrell had to deal with negative associations of those groups. His statement begins to highlight some of the behavioral shifts for participants, also demonstrating double consciousness or holding dual identities on how they perceive themselves and how others perceive them. These perceptions had an influence on participants' behavior and speech on campus. Ty articulated coping strategies when dealing with stereotypes, "You have to put up like a wall in order to protect yourself against other people." Stereotypes for some groups had good connotations but still may have had negative influences on identity. For example, many of the Asian American participants mentioned dealing with the stereotype that all Asians excel at math. Emily an Asian American junior described dealing with that stereotype, mentioning several occasions where she explained to other students that "Yeah, maybe I am good at math, but I'm good at other subjects too."

Participants articulated multiple influences whether consciously aware or subconsciously collude to shape their identities that were pervasive in their experiences as people of color. For some participants the influences were therefore filtered to shape a more aware self. Nevertheless, the influences still have positive and negative outcomes for identity development.

Internal Identity

Participants stated differences in how they portrayed themselves in different environments based on the context clues, which leads to the concepts of internal identity and external identity.

Participants spoke to this idea of having two identities that at times were in harmony and at times were in conflict. Participants expressed the idea of having an internal identity, how one sees themselves and the multiple dimensions of identity. Participants described the active examination of self as it relates to internal identity and the shaping influences. Sarah an Asian American freshman stated very clearly, "I think that [perception affecting identity] kinda makes me think about...is this really part of who I am or am I making this part of who I am."

She had a clear filter for how influences can affect her internal identity and actively examine those aspects. Statements such as this demonstrate how minority students assimilated or adjusted their identities to fit in with the dominant culture on university campus. This also demonstrated how dominant culture can influence minorities' identity, leading them to question their internal identity.

Two participants spoke to the saliency of race as a dimension of their internal identity. Simone an African American senior articulated, "I think [race is] very strong, like very, very strong. I'm almost like pro-black but I'm not...but it's like I have preferential treatment for African Americans." Since race is an integral part of many ethnic minority families, especially marginalized racial groups, often many individuals who identify with that race become empowered by the disenfranchisement, influencing internal identity. While Darrell an African American freshman mentioned in an above section grew up in a predominately White community in the Midwest and mainly associated with White students; attending a predominately White university was not a troubling transition for him. He stated, "When I first got to campus I only hung out with White people, who were like similar to me." However, while interacting with White students on campus, he encountered uncomfortable situations, such as students making racial jokes that perpetuated stereotypes leading race to become more salient, influencing him to become more involved in ethnic based organizations. Darrell stated, "But now I hang out in the Black Student Alliance office more and hang with more Black people."

Racial saliency with peer interactions of a different race led Darrell to find commonality with same race individuals, shifting his internal identity by revealing his ethnic identity. For each of these participants' racial saliency varied in terms of where the influence derived from. For Simone her family influenced her internal identity whereas Darrell peer interactions influenced his internal identity. Inextricably internal identity also influences external actions and behavior. This adds a new aspect to the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Identity Dimensions (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007).

Continuing with the theme of peer interactions, internal identity comfort was the presence of in-group membership or identity based networks. Participants identified the importance of in-group support systems for inclusion and solidarity. Sarah made note of contextual factors stating that, "It's easier for me to just be with like...be in my own culture rather than, um...just feeling like any other person in the class, or in the group."

Racial group membership was an important aspect, especially while attending a predominately White university while race was salient. Both Asian American and African American participants mentioned the importance of finding same race students. However, two of the participants were racially mixed of Asian American and African American heritage, which often led these students to deal with stereotypes and identities of both racial groups, signifying the importance of group membership on campus.

Kevin a junior who was half Asian American and half African American, communicated sentiments about the importance of same group membership relationships. "But when I'm with my African American friends I have... I know a lot of Black students here. And when we all get together we have a good time. We have a lot in common...I feel comfortable like I'm at home or with ...you know my friends from back at home." The participants' comments illuminated marginalization of racial and ethnic minorities in society. The participants expressed the importance of creating space most authentic to their internal identity on campus.

External Identity

Participants described the experience of projecting their identity when they were on campus around students not of their race. Both Asian American and African American students were cognizant of their race and how others perceived their racial group, which was an important aspect of their external identity. Since race is the most visible identifier, being a minority on a predominately White campus, skin color automatically separates these individuals from the majority. These individuals had to deal with stereotypes associated with their racial group and how they thought others perceived them; all of these aspects influenced their behaviors on campus.

For example, Ty stated, "Yeah. To be honest, I try to not do anything wrong. Because if they see me doing wrong things, then like 'Oh that Asian guy is doing something wrong'." Ty described in detail several situations during which he is the minority and he is hyper aware of his behavior. He described his behavior as he enacts it but also the larger implications his behavior has for his group identity. Comments such as this signify the stereotype threat creating the token status for an individual's race. Many participants articulated not wanting to be the 'spokesperson' or representative of their race, expressing that their race is not monolithic.

Similarly, Darrell an African American freshman also discussed the expectations he held as it related to his group membership and how his identity appeared to others, "We [African Americans] have to work two times as hard and be two times as smart to make sure people don't think that negative[ly]." Although Darrell did not want to be the 'representative for his race, he understood that the implications of his actions were not just reflective of him or of his external identity but of African Americans as well. He consciously behaved in ways that he deemed were socially acceptable for the dominant culture on campus. Javon an African American male sophomore also articulated how he adjusts his behavior to fit the environment:

See that's another thing... that's probably the reason I talk the way I do now because...I feel like those are the... those are people [White] who I'm gonna interact more in life...so it's like one of those things where I've progressively have...had to teach myself in a way to just maintain that same tone, mannerisms and everything...to kinda talk just like that you know, just good wholesome English... to give off that persona that I'm just a regular guy. In a way just not to show that I'm part of this culture of what you think of me from.

In this section, all three participants are hyper aware of their race, group membership and the stereotypes that are associated with their race. All in all, race was very salient; participants did not want to behave in ways that made them more noticeable. Participants altered their behaviors to try to blend in on campus to just be a student not a Black student or Asian student. By constantly adjusting their behaviors they regulated their external identity, trying to influence the way others viewed them and the way others perceived their racial group.

Code-Switching

Participants expressed the conscious and subconscious ideas of code switching. For several of participants code-switching was directly related to language use. In the truest sense of code-switching, participants spoke about changing accents or vernacular depending on the environment and who they were speaking with. For both Asian American and African American participants code switching was a daily occurrence. Darrell a Black freshman, who mainly associated with White students when first arriving on campus, discussed how code switching was just a natural part of his identity and he does not think that it means he was inauthentic.

He stated that “Yeah. It just happens. But I don’t purposely do it. It just happens in conversation. You just need it to fit into the [conversation] and to relate to other people.” This was a great example, of how minority students attending a majority White university navigate in social and academic settings on campus. For many participants, code switching also meant utilizing slang words, discussions of popular culture and music and other aspects of nondominant culture.

For other participants code-switching began to take on a broader meaning with a shift toward external identity clarity. Kevin, a junior who was Asian American and African American explained:

I think it’s from the fact that I’m Filipino...comes from subconscious to conscious. If it’s not in my immediate consciousness, then it’s not something that I’m thinking about often. Because I’m surrounded by another culture (dominant culture). I’m not a resident of that culture (dominant culture) and I don’t think about that often...it’s more of like an internal conscious light switch.

The cultural implications Kevin spoke to, demonstrate that code-switching is not simply a language based practice, but also impacts the internal and external identity of a person. He notes that he is a member of both marginalized racial groups. He was cognizant that he will never be a part of dominant culture. His understanding of this influences all aspects of his identity. Since Kevin identified as Asian American and African American and had to deal with stigmas from both groups, he also had to navigate both of those ethnic identities in a predominately White setting. Kevin was highly aware of his external identity so he relied on code switching to become a success in college, create friendships and social networks.

Liminality

Participants either due to a mixed ethnic identity or due to the external identity influences expressed living in a position of liminality. In terms of identity, liminality was the phase or the stage in which the individual’s different aspect of their identity was in conflict. The ambiguity of these different aspects of their identities challenged the identity of several participants in how to understand their identity, present themselves and adjust their behavior.

Participants lived in a position of liminality between their ethnic identities and their social identities or between their internal identity and external identity.

Chelsea spoke about identifying as mainly African American due to how people in society perceive her based on her physical appearance. However, Chelsea also identified as Filipino; when she returned to the Philippines she encountered difficulties because her family still treated her and perceived her as Black. "When I meet Filipino people they are like 'Oh she is Black'. And then I'll be like Oh I'm Panois. What up'. And they are like 'Oh my god! You are Panois!' That right there, I just wish that I didn't have to always say that to my own people." Chelsea lives in a place of liminality due to her mixed race and mixed ethnic identity. She struggled to be fully accepted in each space. Additionally, Chelsea had to grapple with her internal identity and external identity being in conflict due to the influences of peers and group membership. These interacting layers demonstrated that identity was more than an internal sense of self or a simple external act of identity.

Ty stated his challenges with identifying as Asian American, "There's times when I feel like more Asian and there's times when I feel more Asian American and like times when I feel American." Ty emphasized the challenges of living in identity ambiguity. All of Ty's identities were authentic and core to him. Yet he had to speak about this space of isolating identities and living in all the spaces between the multiple 'boxes' of identity.

Identity Performance

Identity performance can encompass a wide range of how a person's identity was understood and enacted. The reciprocal determinism of the person, environment/context and behavior are all key components of the process. Identity formation does not remain in one stagnant position.

Rather, a person constantly moves along the axis of identity performance. Additionally, each individual negotiated the relationship between internal and external identity. This included living in an ambiguous state for many, as identity had been boxed and categorized for an extended period of time. Liminality was experienced in all the infinite spaces of identity along the axis.

Simone, an African American senior summarized her experience of identity performance and how context or environmental setting was important in terms of revealing or performing certain aspects of her identity. "I think it's more so me trying to acclimate to whatever environment I'm in.... so it's like I change depending who I'm around, what the type of environment I'm in, what I feel would be like the appropriate behavior, the appropriate way to speak at the time." Simone highlighted the concepts of personal identity, behavior and context to determine how she represented herself in a given situation. Similarly, Javon a sophomore African American male described the thought process of how he was cognizant of the context, the situation and his behavior and what he must do or say to make his race less salient.

It basically comes to a point where you're just like you know where you're at and it's just like instinct basically that you switch on the dot because you know if I don't switch, like subconscious thinking, these are the kind of people I'm around, this who I'm talking with, and I gotta switch because if you don't switch you'll be looked at differently so you're like these people... it's kinda like you're adapting to your surroundings in a way.

Participants explained their experiences in adapting to perform identity based on a level of fully aware or not aware to subconscious thinking scale. Identity performance was the summary of the experiences these minority participants go through on a day to day basis to navigate through higher education, create social capital and try to relate with dominant culture on campus. These students must do this all while staying authentic to their internal identity and ethnic identity, while consciously making choice behaviors or revealing certain aspects of their identity to defy stereotypes and lessen stigmas of their racial group membership.

Conclusion

We developed a model of how the constructs and themes of identity interact, which was done visually to enhance systemic understanding of the dynamics of the identity performance of Asian American and African American college students at a predominately White institution. Figure 1. Theory of Liminality for Ethnic and Social Identity- Axes of Identity Performance (Appendix F) illustrates the model that represents the data most strongly.

The two dimensions of identity performance are identity location and behavioral awareness. The point of liminality is the point where the individual is living in the 'space' between multiple identities. The arrows coming out from the influencing factors box are illustrating the pushing to where an individual's identity performance is located on the plane. Movement from one space on the plane to another would be the change of identity performance from one context to another, determined by the factors. The aspect of identity data grew out of the questions asked. Participants discussed their identities in myriad ways indicating that identity is a very complex, nuanced and contextual construct. The strongest dimension of identity pervading the data is internal identity vs. external identity which substantially demonstrates ethnic identity vs. social identity. This is conceptualized as a continuum instead of separate constructs since the students having experiences that implied that both internal and external had levels of potency, as well as reporting that their understandings of internal and external identities are often connected in their lives. Another strong theme that was drawn from the data was behavioral awareness. When asking about how students performed their identity, it became evident that some made changes in behavior by choice and others did it unconsciously. This too is conceptualized as a continuum due to the varying degrees and overlap participants.

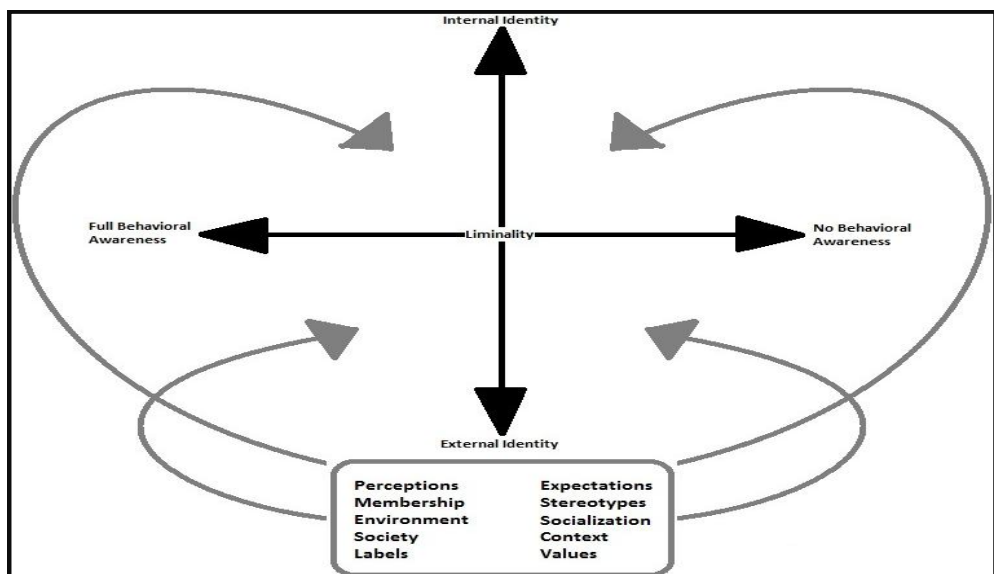


Figure 1: Theory of Liminality for Ethnic and Social Identity-Axes of Identity Performance

The box in the bottom of the theoretical model has several words that imply different factors that influence identity performance. These different cues apparently give the students instructions – albeit often unspoken or even unknown – in a way that led to know ‘how to act’ in a particular context. This is the essence of identity performance: ‘what is it about how my identity and my current context that is telling me how to behave?’ The factors of influence can be positive and negative and induce a person’s position around on the plane of the graph. This positive and negative aspect of the influences can potentially be a third dimension of the theory, transforming the theory ‘plane’ to a theory ‘cube.’ Further study and advanced design software is needed to determine if and how this might be represented visually.

Identity performance is the point on the axes, representing the self-concept in action for a given situation. Change in identity performance, or an identity-level version of code-switching, would be looking at how individuals’ self-concept moves on the plane depending on the context. While this theoretical model certainly does not actualize all the nuances of the participants, it seems to represent the greatest dynamic of what the participants’ experiences have in common.

Discussion

On the whole, African American and Asian American undergraduate college students did not mention experiencing racism overtly; although both groups did mention experiencing stereotype threat when surrounded by individuals not of the same race (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005). Ethnic racial socialization plays a role in students’ internal identity; however African Americans endorsed the messages of cultural traditions from their families, while Asian American students struggled with fully endorsing those messages from their family while still taking on values of the dominant culture (Park et al., 2012).

Participants note that their internal identities and external identities are influenced by their ethnic identity and are linked but also separate, holding dual-identities or double consciousness. Contextual factors play a role in this dual-identity leading participants to code-switch (Guiffrida, 2003), to assimilate with individuals and to assimilate to the values of dominant cultural capital. Code-switching occurs naturally for both groups of participants and is also an instance where they can perform different facets of their identity, especially their ethnic identity.

African American and Asian American participants both reveal being the most comfortable around peers of same race and a little less comfort around peers of different races (Levin et al., 2003). However, both groups stated being the most uncomfortable in social settings around students of a different race whom they did not know. This is an interesting insight indicating that personal relationships can buffer stereotype threat and token status leading ethnic minority groups to perform parts of their internal identity and ethnic identity in their social identity.

Identity in conflict, which we term as liminality, is another reoccurring theme from the interviews. Participants describe a conflict with their identities, struggling to perform their internal identity without the fear of stereotypes associated with their group membership and ethnic identity. Combining all these aspects of identity, behavior or code switching and context, identity performance demonstrates how these two ethnic minority groups deal with valuing nondominant culture and dominant culture in a predominately White setting (Carter, 2005; Kohatsu, 2005). It also demonstrates how African Americans' and Asian Americans' social identity is not fully displayed at all times, concluding that social identity depends on the context and same race or different race individuals in the environment (Byars-Winston et al., 2010).

Implications

The implications for this and future research is applicable to the university context. University campus climate could benefit from the findings of this study to help promote a greater sense of awareness among students, faculty and staff noting that identity is performed due to influencing factors, such as context and stereotypes. The assumption here is that awareness leads to greater levels of choice and therefore freedom. Since much of the Western institution of education is based on a similar premise implementation of a training module of the Theory of Liminality for Ethnic and Social Identity-Axes of Identity Performance should not be difficult to incorporate institutionally at universities. Since Central Midwest University is a Catholic Jesuit college, all the aspects of this theory are connected to the university's espoused values, allowing for applicability. Multiple participants reported that one of the reasons they came to the university was that they were informed of its increasing commitment to international students and honoring diversity (i.e. African American Male Scholars and Asian American Alliance).

Suppose a university were to acknowledge institutionally and explicitly that all identities are contextually understood and performed; if this were communicated effectively to potential students, then it may attract growth-oriented students of all aspects of diversity, essentially creating a more inclusive campus environment.

Another way to utilize the findings would be in faculty training. Professors are often under-informed about the personal state of their students (Krentel, 2007). Many of them also do not view the classroom as an opportunity or responsibility to participate in identity development, even though the reality is that identity formation is occurring in classrooms whether or not it is acknowledged (Evans, et al., 2010). By assisting faculty's awareness that identity perceived in class is just one contextually-determined self-concept and that students often express being stuck in the liminal space between identities, provides the rationale of the importance of implementation of training faculty. Initially guiding teaching at universities to become inclusive and supportive for minority students while they navigate through the struggles of identity performance.

Students who experience strong or sudden shifts in identity performance are often at risk for depression, anxiety, and even reduced physical health due to stress and poor self-care (Elion et al., 2012; Kim, 2012).

Since the root of this problem is conceptually around identity awareness and behavior, mental health therapy for students could promote healthier universities. Increased awareness of therapy and its reduced stigma should be carried out on campuses, especially in places where people gather like dining halls, residence halls, and libraries. Additionally, increased training and even funding for therapists should be increased. Many therapists connected with universities may be aware of existential issues around identity development, but the interplay between identity location and behavioral awareness may be less understood.

Limitations and Future Research

Grounded theory method does not claim universal generalizability, but rather generalizability to very similar situations (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2009). Similarly to what this study determined, context is everything.

The demographics of Central Midwestern University are unique and may not be generalizable to other college campuses. Additionally, one of the concerns with the sample was the loose criteria for selecting who could be interviewed. While all participants identified as primarily either Asian American or African American, several were racially mixed. Two students were both African American and Asian American. Others identified more with the nationality of their origin (Filipino American or Pano) rather than the broader term of Asian American, although grounded theory does support diversity in the sample. Furthermore, the five researchers were of different ethnicities (two White, two African American, one Asian American) from each other and from the participants. If ethnic identity is conceptualized to be performed differently in each context, then it must be acknowledged that the context and details of the interview setting itself influenced the responses given.

The avenue for future research would be to conduct a similar study with a larger sample size. This would be a strong step toward theoretical saturation of the concept of identity performance of these races at a majority White university. Exploring other races or ethnicities, including White Americans could greatly add to the richness and verifiability of this theoretical model. It is also recommended that exploring the nature of how influences are both positive and negative will further the understanding of the process and development of identity performance. Lastly, it is possible that the patterns of identity performance around race and ethnicity found in this study are similar to patterns around other forms of diversity.

Exploring more cultural and identity differences would broaden the scope of the theoretical model, affording applicability in terms of race and race relations, particularly in university settings.

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