

Critical Race Theory and Hmong American Education

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Abstract

Critical race theory (CRT) in education provides important conceptual tools in analyses of Hmong American education. CRT in education centers race and racism in relation to other axes of oppression, thereby locating educational inequities that Hmong American youth experience within appropriate historical, social, and institutional contexts. These contexts support deeper analyses that consider the sociopolitical and intersectional factors that affect Hmong American youth and their families. Importantly, these analyses provide Hmong American students with the concepts needed to name and validate their experiences as part of the development of critical race consciousness.

Keywords: Critical race theory, Hmong American education

INTRODUCTION

Critical race theory (CRT) in education centers race and racism in relation to other axes of oppression, thereby providing necessary conceptual tools for the interrogation of educational inequities that Hmong American youth experience. The causes of these inequities are systemic and historically situated, located within the deeply embedded racism and White supremacy of U.S. society and its institutions (Tate IV, 1997), and should be considered within that context.

In using CRT in education to examine Hmong American educational experiences and outcomes, researchers and educators can avoid the victim blaming of decontextualized deficit-oriented analyses that include culture but not race (DePouw, 2012; Ngo, 2008). Instead, CRT in

education supports deeper analyses that consider the sociopolitical, historicized, and intersectional factors that affect Hmong American youth and their families. Importantly, these deeper analyses provide Hmong American students with the concepts needed to name and validate their experiences (Carter, 2008; Carter-Andrews, 2012; Graves, 2014; Poon, 2013). In turn, this validation and contextualization of experience supports the development of critical race consciousness – analyses of race and racism that lead to collective social justice activism and increased academic resilience.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN EDUCATION

Critical race theory (CRT) in education locates experiences of racial inequity within the intersection of race and property rights (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) in order to reveal the power dynamics and dominant interests at work. These power dynamics and dominant interests are outgrowths of the longer history of legal, political, social, and economic White supremacy in the United States. When using the term *White supremacy*, it is important to note that in CRT this term means something different than is commonly understood. Mainstream discourse often uses *White supremacy* to refer to crude forms of race hatred expressed by far-right extremists such as neo-Nazis or White nationalists. In CRT, *White supremacy* refers instead to “a regime of assumptions and practices that constantly privilege the interests of White people but are so deeply rooted that they appear *normal* to most people in the culture” (Gillborn, 2010, p.2; emphasis in original). Generally, CRT concepts work to de-naturalize and expose the workings of White supremacy and racism in relation to other axes of oppression (Gillborn, 2010).

An outgrowth of Critical Legal Studies (CLS), CRT examines the relationships between race and the law (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). Within education, CRT exposes the ways in which race impacts and is insinuated within various aspects of education, including material inequities, policy, and lived experiences of students and teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1998). While there is much theoretical diversity within CRT, Dixon and Rousseau (2006) have identified six major unifying themes within CRT:

- 1) Recognition that race is endemic to American life, including its institutions;
- 2) Skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy, which is often articulated as a critique of liberalism;
- 3) Challenges to ahistoricism and insists on contextual and historical analyses of the law;
- 4) Recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and communities of origin in analyzing law and society;
- 5) The need for interdisciplinary scholarship; and
- 6) Activist work toward the elimination of racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression.

Together, these unifying themes provide the tools necessary to expose institutional racism in a colorblind era (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) and validate the experiential knowledge of communities of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Critical race theory (CRT) in education applies the tenets of CRT to the study of education. CRT in education examines the intersection of race and property and calls for scholars

to connect their analyses to policy and other mechanisms of substantive change (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2013). CRT in education is an important conceptual tool in analyzing the context of PWIs for Hmong American students because it centers race and racism and locates student experiences within a historically situated, institutional context. In particular, CRT encourages a systemic and institutional analysis that focuses on macro-level causes of inequity rather than deficit frameworks that focus on the “failings” of students or communities of color. It is the macro-level analysis that provides the context in which to validate and listen to the micro-level experiences of students of color at PWIs (Kwan, 2015).

Given the ongoing stereotypes that surround Asian American student achievement (Teranishi, Behringer, Grey, & Parker, 2009; Pak, Maramba, & Hernandez, 2014), an analysis that focuses on the centrality of race and challenges dominant discourse is essential. In studying Hmong American education, an area of study that is often dominated by decontextualized “cultural difference” or “culture clash” explanations (Moua & Vang, 2015; Ngo, 2008), CRT is an important analytical tool that places the “educational experiences of students of color in broader social, institutional, legal, and historical contexts” (Teranishi et al, 2009, p. 58). By centering race and insisting on contextualized and situated analyses, CRT helps to avoid victim-blaming and cultural deficit explanations of inequalities (Ngo, 2008).

Whiteness as Property

As mentioned earlier, CRT in education uses the intersection of race and property as a tool of analysis for educational inequity. Naming Whiteness as a form of property is “rooted in the notion that race and property rights have been inextricably intertwined since the creation of

the United States” (DeCuir-Gunby, 2006, p. 101). Harris (1993) first theorized the relationship between Whiteness and property, arguing that Whiteness historically had been afforded legal protection in ways that were similar to property, and that this protection of Whiteness made it a powerful resource and form of protection under the law.

The concept of Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) is an important aspect of that intersection, both in material and psychological terms (DuBois, 1935). As Leonardo & Broderick (2011) argue, Whiteness exists solely for the purpose of stratification. The naturalization of the social construction of Whiteness, then, serves to naturalize stratification through the explanatory power of race ideology (Smedley & Smedley, 2012). Through CRT in education, it is possible to expose the deeply entrenched nature of race and racism in U.S. society and its institutions (including schools) and the ways in which race intersects with property rights to produce racially inequitable outcomes for students and families of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) – a resource and form of protection - has been affirmed through law and social practice since the inception of the United States. Citizenship, voting, and even the ability to own oneself have depended on being legally and socially validated as White for long periods of our nation’s history (Harris, 1993). Housing and school segregation (Anderson, 2004; Y.S. Xiong, 2012), school funding (Baker & Corcoran, 2012), having supportive and qualified teachers of the same racial/cultural background (Sleeter, Neal, & Kumashiro, 2014), and being substantively represented in curricular content and worldview (Sleeter, 2017; Tintiangco-Cubales, Kohli, Sacramento, Henning, Agarwal-Rangnath, & Sleeter, 2015) are other forms of educational Whiteness as property.

Beyond concrete rights and protections, Whiteness has also been an important form of ideological and epistemological property in schools. In this case, “Whiteness” signifies the ways in which the social construction of race is connected to dominant worldviews, values, ways of knowing and being, teaching and learning that justify and maintain the hegemony of Whiteness in a White supremacist patriarchal society (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Sleeter, 2017). For example, Eurocentric, White majoritarian curricula and school cultures negatively affect the racial and cultural identity development of Hmong American and other students of color by encouraging internalized racism (DePouw, 2016; Kohli, 2014; Poon, 2013). In this sense, being positively reflected in curricula and treated as full human beings within institutional settings is a ‘property right’ of Whiteness (Sleeter, 2017).

CRT in education recognizes that race, racism, and other forms of oppression are deeply embedded within institutional (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Frederickson, 2015; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ngai, 2014; Omi & Winant, 2014; Smedley & Smedley, 2012; Tate IV, 1997) and interpersonal life (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012; Kwan, 2015; Smith, Kohli, & Solórzano, 2006) in the United States. For students of color attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs), this racial reality means navigating and negotiating daily experiences of White institutional exclusion, hypervisibility or invisibility (Kwan, 2015; Sleeter, 2017; Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2006), and other forms of racial inequity (DePouw, 2012; Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2006; Xiong, 2012) while also concentrating on the more mundane aspects of successfully completing a university degree program (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013).

Research on students of color attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs) indicates that many students of color experience their campus climate differently than their White counterparts (Harwood, et al, 2012; Yosso et al, 2009), often in a more negative and less welcoming way. While higher education institutions may have become more diverse demographically in recent years, this does not necessarily mean that the campuses have worked substantively to improve the cultures of their institutions to reflect these demographic shifts (Harwood et.al, 2012). Studies on racial microaggressions, for instance, reveal that many students of color experience daily forms of racial hostility, subtle insults, and unequal treatment in classrooms, residence halls, and other campus spaces at PWIs (Harwood et al, 2012; Kwan, 2015; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Yosso et al, 2009). Because of the pervasive nature of racial microaggressions at PWIs, students of color may experience racial battle fatigue (Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2006), or the negative emotional, physical, and mental impact of accumulative stress related to racism. Racial microaggressions and the accompanying racial battle fatigue can lead to decreased feelings of well-being, safety, and lowered academic performance. In the case of Hmong American students, racial microaggressions also had a cumulative impact on their cultural identities and willingness to speak Hmong in public spaces and even among Hmong American peers (Kwan, 2015).

While the negative impact of racial microaggressions on academic performance is a real concern, Minikel-Lacocque (2013) reminds us that students' emotional and mental well-being should also be of primary concern:

Many times, the college experience for underrepresented students is reduced to

“success” or “failure” based on grades and graduation rates alone. If a student graduates, there is a collective pat on the back and the student’s college experience is moved to the “success” column on a spreadsheet. But, if that student was unhappy during her entire college career, if she left campus every chance she got, and if she couldn’t wait to simply finish her degree, deeming her college experience a straightforward success is missing much of the story. (p. 159)

Students in this study support Minikel-Lacocque (2013) in her findings that students of color may maintain academic success in a hostile environment, which then calls for deeper and more complex analyses of the impact of racism on students of color at PWIs. The resilience of students of color at PWIs also carries important lessons for institutions. By examining the experiences of students of color and their successful navigational strategies at PWIs, we can understand better the subtle and overt ways in which these institutions still are focused on and designed for White student populations.

Critical Race Consciousness

Research has identified critical race consciousness as key to the survival and success of many students of color at PWIs and other institutions (Carter-Andrews, 2012; Romero, Arce, & Cammarota, 2009; Stovall, 2006). Surviving and resisting institutional racism and White supremacy require critical race analyses of the ways in which institutional racism and other systems of oppression function, as well as the empowerment to act to dismantle all forms of oppression (Romero, Arce, & Cammarota, 2009; Stovall, 2006). Critical race consciousness is the use of CRT to foster critical race analysis and recognition of community cultural wealth

(Yosso, 2005) toward the goal of active transformation (Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017; Romero, et al, 2009).

Students of color often are inundated with negative messages about race and culture that encourage the internalization of racial deficit discourses (Museus & Park, 2015; Poon, 2013; Romero et al, 2009). Through pedagogy that centers race and critical consciousness within rigorous academic experiences, educators can foster a deeper awareness of and value for culture, language, and community that prior educational and social experiences had undermined (Poon, 2013). Critical race consciousness also supports healthy student personal and academic identity development (Romero et al, 2009). In IHS, many students reported increased academic engagement, including more vocal challenges to course material in class, as a result of critical race consciousness. Duncan-Andrade & Morrell (2008) and Stovall (2006) have made similar connections between critical race pedagogy and activism, arguing that supporting students' development of critical race analyses increases students' sense of personal and academic efficacy and persistence (Sleeter, 2011). By supporting youth in their development of critical race consciousness and strong academic experiences, programs can help students avoid internalizing the racism they experience and simultaneously equip them to analyze and act against social injustice.

METHODOLOGY

This project uses critical race methodology based on the relationships between me, a White faculty member at Riverview¹ University at the time of the study, and a selected group of

¹ Name of university is a pseudonym

Hmong American undergraduate students interested in studying racism and other systems of oppression. Critical race methodology is a purposeful effort to utilize research to expose and take action against institutional racism in the specific context of the research participants' educational lives (Hylton, 2012; Kohli, 2014; Parker & Castro, 2013). As our relationships gained more trust and confidence, we began to have more in-depth conversations about race, culture, and identity. Students often struggled to find the vocabulary to name their experiences or describe the feelings that accompanied them. At the same time, they recognized that their ability to verbalize and validate their experiences was not only necessary for them individually but also was a means of moving toward substantive institutional remedies to racism.

Based on the students' articulated needs within our conversations, I initiated this research project to create an academic source that analyzed Hmong American undergraduate experiences through a critical race theory lens. By centering race and racism rather than "cultural difference" alone (DePouw, 2012; Ngo, 2008), this project works to make institutional and social inequities explicit and to name race and racism as key factors in how Hmong American students experience PWIs.

The research participants were not sampled randomly but instead are a selected group of fifteen Hmong American undergraduate students who were identified by me as student leaders. This identification was based on research participants' leadership roles in student organizations and ongoing social justice activism. I conducted eight individual and two group semi-structured interviews during the 2012-2013 academic school year; students were provided the option to be interviewed individually or with another research participant.

Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. Interviews were held in locations chosen by students – sometimes a reserved room on their university campus, a restaurant, or a familiar coffee shop. Interview questions were developed after informal conversations with students about their experiences on campus and were also based on my observations of Hmong American students at the PWI. For example, the questions about religion and spiritual practice came from my observations of tensions between Hmong American students on campus – in my opinion, some students who were raised in a more traditional Hmong household were often more critical of institutional racism. Since this was an anecdotal observation on my part, I included the question in the interviews to explore the idea further.

Sample interview questions include:

- What do you perceive to be the greatest challenges and/or needs for Hmong American communities today?
- What do you perceive to be the greatest strengths that Hmong American students and families have in relation to their families, communities, and/or cultural backgrounds?
- What role, in your opinion, does Hmong language and traditional culture play in the lives of young Hmong Americans today?
- Do you have a spiritual practice? If so, do you practice traditional Hmong spirituality, Christianity, a blend of the two, or something else? Please discuss.
- What role, in your opinion, does US public education play in the maintenance or undermining of Hmong language and traditional culture in the lives of young Hmong Americans today?
- Do you think that racism has been an issue for you as a Hmong American? Please discuss.

In addition to individual and group interviews in 2012-2013, three Hmong American

undergraduates and I collected survey data and conducted focus group interviews with larger groups of Hmong American undergraduates at Riverview University to get a sense of Hmong American student attitudes about Hmong Studies, their university experiences, and the racial campus climate. The second round of data collection used snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) to recruit focus group participants. There were fifteen focus groups in total and most met one time with an average time of ninety minutes; four groups met a second time for expansion and clarification of the first conversation. Focus group questions were the same as the interview questions listed above.

We sent the online survey to members of the campus Hmong American student organization, which constituted approximately 55% of the campus population of Hmong American students. Survey questions included:

- Do you think it is important to offer Hmong-related courses at the university level? (Yes / No / Not Sure)
- Please explain why you do or do not think offering Hmong-related courses at the university level is important.
- Have you had any ongoing opportunities in your K-12 education experiences to learn more about Hmong American history, culture or language? (Yes / No / Not Sure)
- Do you feel that your non-Hmong peers generally have an appropriate level of understanding in relation to Hmong American history, culture and/or language? (Yes / No / Not Sure)

We sent out 78 surveys and received 25 responses, indicating a response rate of 32%.

ANALYSIS

All interview and focus group data were coded with *values coding*, which is used to

capture and label subjective perspectives (Saldaña, 2009). After an initial coding in which general impressions were recorded, data were coded a second time and organized into elements that were analyzed independently for non-contextual meaning (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Denzin, 1989). These elements then were organized into major themes and subthemes. Next, the major themes and subthemes were analyzed through critical race theory in order to compare and contrast data themes with the original hypothesis that race and racism were important factors in Hmong American students' educational experiences. Surveys were disseminated through Qualtrics survey software and analyzed using Qualtrics data analysis functions. Major themes and subthemes from survey data were then analyzed through critical race theory and compared to the interview and focus group data. Finally, member checking was used by providing interview and focus group participants with a manuscript copy and asking them for feedback on the major themes identified from their data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

FINDINGS

In the data, three major themes emerged: a) Cultural invisibility through devaluation of Hmong language and culture, b) racial hypervisibility, and c) objectification as an exotic Other. These findings are similar to Kwan's (2015) study of racial microaggressions and Hmong American students in which she found that racial microaggressions toward Hmong American students took the form of assumed inadequacy or objectification.

Hmong American undergraduates at Riverview reported consistent feelings of hypervisibility or marginalization due to being a racial minority at a PWI. Students also reported more coded forms of cultural racism in relation to non-Hmong perceptions of Hmong culture or

language. The overwhelming Whiteness of Riverview, a PWI whose population was 95% White at the time of the study, combined with ignorance about Hmong and Hmong American communities to create a racialized and sometimes dehumanizing environment (Museus & Vue, 2013; Vue, 2013).

For instance, 100% of survey respondents responded “no” when asked: *Do you feel that your non-Hmong peers generally have an appropriate level of understanding in relation to Hmong American history, culture and/or language?* Similarly, when survey participants were asked if they felt that their *non-Hmong teachers or university instructors have an appropriate level of understanding in relation to Hmong American history, culture, and/or language*, 55% of respondents responded that a minority of their teachers or university instructors possess this knowledge, 40% responded that their non-Hmong teachers or university instructors do not possess this knowledge, and 5% responded that they were not sure.

When we asked survey participants if they had ever experienced racial or cultural discrimination at Riverview, students responded:

I am reluctant to share cultural knowledge with my non-Hmong peers because they often find it amusing. Non-Hmong strangers interact with me less often and less easily than Hmong strangers; at times, I am blatantly avoided by people. Faculty/staff/students are less tolerant of a loud gathering of Hmong students compared to white students.

Encounter few groups who've racially mimicked the Asian accent.

A PROFESSOR at the University has caused great discrimination against me and another Asian girl as we were going up the elevator in [academic building]. I am very disappointed and angry at him. I confronted him after his lecturing but he PRETENDED not to remember anything that had happened even though he is a HISTORY professor! I am still angry with him. (capitalization in original)

It is important to recognize the multiple and overlapping areas in which students felt

marginalized, excluded, or negatively racialized on campus. Students specifically named racial discrimination by instructors in class, ongoing racial harassment in residence halls, and casual conversations with non-Hmong peers as sites of racism and exclusion.

Research participants clearly connected these racial experiences to the demographics of the university and surrounding area, and the ways in which an overwhelmingly White population treated these spaces as their exclusive property (Harris, 1993). For instance, when asked what the campus climate was like, Hmong American students shared:

It is awkward and weird because the mass majority here is white people. Nothing against white people but they make it seem like we don't deserve to come to college because we are a different color. We as in not just the Hmong, but minorities are looked down upon in classes, at sports and even when we have jobs on campus. It is like people here pity us for being a minority. I believe by educating the campus about our backgrounds, the climate may change for the better.

From my experience, it has been fine. Hearing others' experiences, it has not been. We are looked at differently, whether it's good or bad.

It's not diverse at all. You still see segregation when in class and in [student union]. Whites just prefer to hang out with white. People of color still prefer to hang out with people of color. Nobody seems to want to step out of the box. I feel that a lot of white people on campus are like that because they came from a small town that doesn't have any diversity. They've never seen an Asian person before! So they don't know to talk to students of color and have a lot of stereotypes about them.

I do not live on campus, for which I am grateful, because the experiences which Hmong Americans students face in the residence halls are shameful. I think if most students knew what the experience would be like on this campus, they wouldn't have come here. I often here students thinking of transferring to UW-Madison where there is more diversity, but they are doubtful because more diversity in Madison may be accompanied by more (instead of less) racism. However, the large and intimate Asian community there is attractive to them.

Importantly, the experiences of other Hmong American students impacted research participants' sense of campus climate even when those experiences were not their own. Their sense of

welcome and safety came from their perception of collective treatment, not only their individual treatment.

Research participants were consistent in drawing connections between an unwelcoming or racist campus climate and the extent to which their White instructors and peers were familiar with Hmong Americans and their histories, culture, and language. Institutional invalidation of Hmong knowledge, culture, and language not only resulted in White invalidation of Hmong Americans. It also placed Hmong American students at a disadvantage in terms of the clear distinction between “Hmong” knowledge being “personal” or family knowledge and academic [read: White normative] knowledge as “public” or institutional. One Hmong American female student shared:

I feel like as I got older, I realized that I was never taught this stuff. So I didn't really know as much about the Hmong history as, like, a White person knows about European history. And so I feel like I have to spend time and energy outside of my coursework to learn more about my own heritage. And I feel like in a sense it's unfair, you know, for somebody to have to go outside and find out more information, do research on their own, when other people are getting taught this stuff in class...I just think it would be better if I could have just learned it and didn't have to go outside to find this stuff. And, you know, some of the stuff I find isn't even accurate because there's not that much out there anyways on it.

The majority of research participants reported similar feelings of unfairness and of wanting more academic experiences related to Hmong history, culture, and language. Several students stated

that they attended Hmong language or culture classes at Hmong mutual assistance associations during the summer when they were in middle or high school, but that these were limited in scope.

While Hmong American research participants were aware of racist experiences and felt marginalized in majority-White settings, they stated that they often lacked the knowledge or vocabulary necessary to name their experiences because they never formally learned about institutional racism. Instead, students often adopted a colorblind lens, individualizing or minimizing experiences with racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). One Hmong American male participant describes how he minimized race and adhered to White normativity when he was younger: “I was basically... a White kid in an Asian kid's body. Well, I became that over time because that's what, that's kind of what my school and my town and I guess society made me into.” Having grown up in an overwhelmingly White rural environment, this student had been taught a colorblind approach to race and racism, which to him meant teaching him to be a “White kid in an Asian kid’s body.”

For many research participants, ignoring or minimizing racism became more difficult as they experienced consistent overt and subtle racism at Riverview. During the time of data collection, several research participants were also part of a living/learning community in one of the residence halls where a highly public racial incident occurred. Many research participants discussed the incident as part of their interviews and referred to it as an example of White institutional racism on campus.

The context of the incident was ongoing racial harassment of Hmong American students

in the living/learning community. The focus of the living/learning community was Hmong American studies, and most of the students who elected to participate were Hmong American. This meant that there was a racially identifiable Hmong American space within the residence hall. Administrators and staff in the residence hall did not engage in programming or other preparation for White residents to be the numerical minority. As a result, many White residents were deeply uncomfortable with a critical mass of Hmong American students in the shared living space and responded with ongoing racial harassment of Hmong Americans. In other words, it became a racialized struggle over space and property rights.

The public incident of racial harassment targeted Hmong American female students. Two White female residents posted a flyer in public bathrooms in the female wing of the residence hall, criticizing Hmong American students for “stinky food” and other racialized stereotypes of Hmong cultural behaviors. Hmong American students brought the flyer to the attention of residence hall and university administrators and posted the flyer to social media. The insistence of university administrators to treat the incident as two abhorrent individuals rather than an indicator of campus culture, as well as the consistent use of “insensitive” instead of “racial” to describe the flyer, left many Hmong American students frustrated and distrustful of the university’s commitment to support and protect them.

While highly public, the flyer incident in the residence hall was not an individual or isolated incident. Instead, it was the most well-known of many racial aggressions that took place against Hmong American students on campus. For instance, two Hmong American female undergraduates recounted an experience in the residence hall showers during their interview:

Me and [another Hmong American female student] were having a conversation while taking a shower and we were speaking in Hmong...These White girls walked in and they just kind of (clears throat) with loud voices like “I’m here”, you know, so we could hear them and everything, and then [we] just stopped talking...I felt like the girls were right outside of my shower curtain...And we could hear them...I don’t know, it sounded like they were making fun of us because of our language. What I heard was, “we’re gonna open their shower curtains.” With that, just knowing that they were that close to me, I really felt like they were gonna open it. So I just turned off my shower, wrapped myself with my towel and I just got out. I didn’t even look at them because I just felt so embarrassed already because we were talking in our own language and when the moment when they came in, we totally hushed. We did not have any more conversations after that. I just got out.

From these students’ experiences, they felt threatened when speaking Hmong language in public areas of the residence hall. The behavior of their White peers indicated that they did not respect Hmong language and, in fact, that hostile White students focused on Hmong language as a hypervisible racial marker (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Carter-Andrews, 2012).

DISCUSSION

Within the major themes of the study, research participants indicated that racism affected their academic experiences in multiple and overlapping ways. The three major areas of impact were a) Cultural invisibility through devaluation of Hmong language and culture, b) racial hypervisibility, and c) objectification as an exotic Other. While these processes of racism

negatively impacted Hmong American students, many students also resisted their racialization and developed forms of resilience. Their shift in perspective toward a more critical and race-centered analysis is the basis of critical race consciousness.

Critical race consciousness is the recognition of race and racism as endemic to US society and as salient factors in the experiences of people of color, along with a sense of connectedness to racial and cultural communities (D.J. Carter, 2008; Graves, 2014). For the Hmong American students in this study, their development of critical race consciousness strengthened significantly their resilience in a PWI environment. In particular, students stated that having the concepts and vocabulary necessary to name their experiences within the context of White supremacy and institutional racism was crucial. This allowed them to recognize that racial hostility was not due to personal or cultural deficits but instead rooted within larger contexts of ongoing racial oppression. The ability to engage in critical institutional and historical analyses, therefore, were important coping and resistance strategies.

Cultural Invisibility

In 2010, several undergraduate Hmong American students began to organize themselves as a way to contest campus culture and create space for themselves. I worked with these students to create a small organization for students enrolled in a Hmong language class that initially focused on practicing Hmong language skills. The idea quickly shifted into an organization that focused on Hmong history, culture, contemporary concerns, and issues of oppression and social justice. The shift occurred, in part, because students in the original group realized that their

internalized racism around Hmong language made them all reluctant to practice Hmong language with one another. Once they examined this further, they decided on a process of self-education and decolonization as a way to build the identities necessary for healthy engagement with Hmong culture and language.

Students took the step of creating their own self-education organization because the information they sought was not available in formal coursework on campus. Instead, the campus-level curricula most often reflected the property rights of Whiteness and knowledge (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011) in which White majority students were able to learn about themselves in formal academic contexts while Hmong American students had to seek out information about themselves in addition to regular classes.

A dominant theme in the data was that Hmong curricular invisibility communicated to everyone that Hmong histories, language, and culture were only appropriate for private or for home use, while English language and White-dominant knowledge and cultural norms were valid and public. Therefore, it is significant that Hmong American study participants challenged the racialized dichotomy of public/private by speaking more Hmong language in public spaces on campus and by collectively pushing the campus to create a Hmong Studies program through an Initiative for Hmong Studies (IHS). Their activism focused on two interrelated ideas: to creating institutional and curricular space for Hmong Studies and to teach and research Hmong Studies through epistemologies, values, and ways of being as determined by Hmong American communities rather than non-Hmong academics or administrators. While IHS students eventually succeeded in obtaining a new Hmong Studies tenure-track faculty line in 2016, the

struggles for institutional validation of Hmong knowledge systems, values, and ways of being continue.

Racial Hypervisibility

Prior to developing a critical race consciousness, many Hmong American undergraduates reported awareness of overt racism and subtle feelings of marginalization and invisibility. These students overwhelmingly grew up in predominantly White communities where most people were ignorant about basic facts of Hmong history or culture. Therefore, Hmong Americans were simultaneously hypervisible racially and invisible culturally (Kwan, 2015). Non-Hmong people saw them as “Asian” and knew little about Hmong Americans.

One Hmong American female student whose White peers tried to intimidate her for speaking Hmong in public talked about how important her development of critical race consciousness was in navigating racial hypervisibility. While her initial responses to racial microaggressions included silence or avoidance, she later developed an analysis of institutional racism that allowed her to name the experience as racism and to feel proud of her Hmong identity. This analysis developed through relationships with fellow students and collective racial/cultural education projects directed by students. For instance, she and several other students wrote a grant for undergraduate research abroad so that they could study Hmong people in China. The students had to find faculty members willing to act as mentors and travel companions and worked hard to build the project through independent research. Their research was complicated by the fact that there were only one or two faculty members on campus with the disciplinary knowledge and community relationships necessary to advance their research project.

After spending time with her Hmong American peers, learning more about institutional racism as well as Hmong history and culture, this student reflected, “I just notice how little I appreciated myself until I got to college. I know now that I do have support and I do have people who understand me. That’s when I started to explore myself on the other end of not my American identity but my Hmong identity.” While this student didn’t have opportunities to learn about Hmong history or culture in formal educational settings, her relationships with other Hmong American students helped her to pursue this knowledge on her own and to develop independent academic experiences that were relevant to her.

Other Hmong American students responded to campus racism by writing letters to the campus newspaper and sending emails to administrators. After the public incident of racism in a residence hall, the Hmong American student organization² and two Hmong American resident assistants who were connected to the residence hall issued a statement in which they named institutional racism as the cause of the incident:

The writing of these posters [with anti-Hmong racist comments] is not what is problematic; it is the racist ideologies and practices that were present in the posters that we need to address. We need to think critically about where these ideas have stemmed from. We must recognize the institutional contributions to the problem so that we can correct it.

² This name is a pseudonym.

The authors of the statement named the broader institutional and campus culture as the root cause of the incident in the residence halls – an incident that many administrators and academic staff wanted to individualize.

The day-to-day experiences of Hmong American students who participated in the study indicate that “racial spotlighting” – unwanted hypervisibility – was coupled with “racial ignoring” (Carter Andrews, 2012), or racial invisibility when students wanted to be visible:

Definitely, in my science classes, I have the spotlighting thing happen. You know, when I first got onto campus, I was expecting to have White friends because, in high school, I had White friends...I thought I would be able to connect to other White students the way I had in the past and then I realized that, no matter how...I didn't really understand why, but no matter how hard I tried, it didn't work. And, I was like, why is it that I can't connect with White students the way I did in high school? So, there was that sense of alienation.

For the Hmong American research participant, being able to name her experiences as racial spotlighting - a racial microaggression - was important. Through her engagement with IHS and peer study of CRT and ethnic studies, she had the academic knowledge to analyze and the language to name her experiences through a CRT lens. This allowed her to reflect on her experiences of alienation within institutional context instead of internalizing negative racial messages about who she is and what she deserves.

Although in a White-dominant and racist campus climate, critical race academic knowledge and vocabulary provided Hmong American students with the tools needed to

continue developing critical race consciousness and to engage their experiences in productive ways. One Hmong American student, for example, discussed how important it has been for her to have the vocabulary to validate her experiences, particularly when the subtlety of racism usually results in invalidation of her experiences by others:

Those terms really helped, being able to...like, the definition being offered about racism, where it wasn't just "hate" but a system of privilege and advantage and disadvantage. That made a lot of sense to me. Like, if you feel something but you can't make any sense of it and it feels like it doesn't make any sense, given what you know, then you feel like it's wrong or invalid. So, being able to have those terms and to understand how I feel in those terms is really helpful because then I feel like my experience is valid. So if someone closes the elevator door before I get to it, knowing that I'm coming to the elevator, like I said, I know that that's a microaggression. Even though she didn't say "I don't want you in the elevator with me."

The student was describing an actual incident in which a White undergraduate student hurried to shut the elevator door before the Hmong American student could enter.

When the Hmong American student shared this experience with others, many of them Hmong American, she initially received a lot of criticism that she was overreacting or that it was not a racist incident. However, because she knew that invalidation of a racial experience is part of racial microaggressions (Yosso et al, 2009), she trusted her own analysis in the face of others who attempted to minimize race in this situation.

When asked if confronting racism is harder when that racism is in the form of

microaggressions, another student responded,

It definitely is harder, even in terms of other minority or other Hmong students...I feel like because we have some of the tools to understand it so we can say that it is, whereas other people don't (have those tools) so they don't see it as racist. One of the things, in my own defense, that I feel makes me see it is how you feel, you know. If it makes you feel uncomfortable or if it makes you feel like this because of...and you start to wonder why you feel like that and you see patterns. Once you see patterns you can start to say that it's racist. But when, for a lot of students, a lot of minority students, they feel it but they're taught to ignore it and move on because it's not going to do anything even if they confront it.

In general, Hmong American student participants consistently identified their development of critical race consciousness as key to their ability to recognize and name institutional racism and Whiteness as property in their educational experiences.

Prior to learning more about race and racism, the cumulative impact of a racist environment had led many research participants to doubt their intellectual abilities and to feel like unwelcome guests rather than full members of their academic communities. Some of the students also shared that, prior to developing critical race consciousness, they had more faith in the institution's good intentions. After experiencing inadequate, ineffective, and often reluctant responses from faculty and administrators, students said that they no longer had confidence that the institution would change without pressure from students like them. Therefore, critical race consciousness became key to student resilience in the face of institutional racism and motivated

them to take action against institutionalized Whiteness as property.

Objectification as an Exotic “Other”

As the largest racial minority at a PWI whose population was approximately 95% White, Hmong American students were frequently asked by faculty to serve on classroom panels, to act as research subjects for other students, and to lead discussions on Hmong history or culture in classes and in workshops on campus. Hmong American research participants reflected on the pressure they felt to comply with these requests to perform their culture for the “use and enjoyment” of White people on campus. Students stated that, while they preferred not to participate, they often did because they sensed that a refusal would result in exclusion or marginalization by White faculty or peers (Harris, 1993).

Research participants indicated that they resisted these requests in part because they did not wish to be racially spotlighted. However, many also stated that they felt not only discomfort but also shame when these requests were made of them. The reason for their discomfort and shame was the reality that most Hmong American students had not had formal academic opportunities to learn about Hmong history or culture; therefore, they were being asked to provide something for White students that they had been denied in their own schooling. Sometimes, Hmong American students did not know the topic they were asked to discuss and had to state that to the White faculty or peer who wished to use them as a Native informant (Carter Andrews, 2012). Students then felt less as if they were viewed as less “authentic” or as deficient for not possessing this knowledge.

Through ongoing development of critical race consciousness, students began to problematize the power dynamics of these requests and to recognize the ways in which curriculum was a form of Whiteness as property. The requests to serve as Native informants (Carter Andrews, 2012) to their peers positioned Hmong American students as objects to be consumed for the use and enjoyment of their White faculty and peers. At the same time, to the extent that students provided this unpaid labor, they also provided a rationale for why formal Hmong Studies were not needed since Hmong American students were doing this work for free - often at the expense of their own academics.

Research participants named many instances of objectification of Hmong language and culture. One participant pointed out that this phenomenon has been a consistent part of her formal schooling experience. She reflected that, while there is an almost complete absence of formal Hmong-related curricula, teachers often ask Hmong American students to do the work the teachers should be doing:

I remember that in elementary school,...I was probably in 4th grade or so, and we had a change in the way we were going to do stuff and we did a heritage day. Different teachers would take on a different heritage and talk about it. And then there was a class, and then the teacher asked us to come dressed in Hmong clothes and do a Hmong dance. And again, it was this idea of us teaching them...If you really think about it critically, I didn't get anything out of it. And, again, it was just for the benefit of others.

This student recognized the devaluation of Hmong culture at the root of this approach to teaching about Hmong Americans. She also locates herself in that process of devaluation by naming the

way in which her teacher objectified her and other Hmong American students as another cultural artifact for the enjoyment of her non-Hmong peers. In other words, the way in which the institution chose to perform multiculturalism solidified Whiteness as property by focusing on the learning of White students at the expense of Hmong Americans. This happened in two ways: first, Hmong American students were assumed to already know their history, language, and culture and so were not taught it. Second, Hmong American students were expected to do the work of the institution by providing instruction to their non-Hmong peers, which positioned Hmong American students as objects for White “use and enjoyment” (Harris, 1993).

CONCLUSION

Scholars have long argued that resilience for students of color is related to the development of a critical race consciousness, a healthy cultural identity, and a sense of self-efficacy to solve problems facing their communities (Cammarota & Romero, 2014; Romero et al, 2009; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Tintiango-Cubales et al, 2015). The feeling of being empowered to act is tied to an understanding of how institutional racism and other forms of oppression work, what strategies are effective, knowing how to research and examine these issues, and being part of a collective that will act together. Further, students need to feel a sense of ownership and engagement with the issue; they need to feel invested in the campus and believe they have the right to influence it.

While the Hmong American undergraduates in this study were able to access educational experiences that provided the foundation for critical race consciousness, many other students were not. As recent research indicates, many Hmong American students rarely if ever have

access to Hmong-focused curriculum (DePouw, 2016; Kwan, 2015; Xiong, 2012). When Hmong or Hmong American communities are included, it typically is for a short amount of time and only in relation to the Vietnam War (Kwan, 2015). This means that many Hmong American students do not have institutional support to develop healthy cultural or racial identities; that they may not have had opportunities to name or analyze internalized racism as something that affects how they experience the world around them.

Many of the Hmong American students in this study were able to reflect on their identities prior to critical race-focused academic experiences and recognized the confusion, pain, and silence of their internalized racism. Their internalized racism resulted in deep shame about and avoidance of almost everything related to Hmong language and culture (Kohli, 2014). The majority of the study participants grew up in predominantly White communities, were often one of the few students of color in their schools, and learned to blend into these environments as a survival strategy. Research participants largely went to school in contexts in which they were often either rendered invisible in school or treated as Native informants for their White teachers and peers (Carter-Andrews, 2012; Kwan, 2015). Many Hmong American students recalled their prior belief that their only option for addressing racial and cultural difference was to try to blend into their majority-White schools and communities through the adoption of perceived White cultural norms, including anti-Black racism.

The White institutional pressure to blend in and avoid being publicly Hmong (i.e., speaking Hmong language or engaging in traditional cultural practices) were communicated to Hmong American students through years of school, peer, and community socialization in which

they were targeted by cultural racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Kwan, 2015) - racism that focused on cultural markers such as language, religious practice, or food in addition to phenotypical markers. The consistent message that public displays of Hmong language or culture were inappropriate led students to treat Hmong language and culture as “private” and White-normative language and behavior as “public”. There were some indications that students’ prior knowledge of Hmong language and traditions influenced their interpretation of race and racism, but these results were not conclusive. More research is needed to explore the relationships between racial, cultural, linguistic, and religious identities in Hmong American youth.

A turning point for many of the research participants was a formal academic opportunity to learn more about institutional racism and related concepts. Most of the Hmong American participants either took a class on critical race theory (CRT) or engaged in self-education through peer discussion, conference attendance, and other educational opportunities focused on race. The students’ new knowledge of CRT provided the foundation for critical race consciousness, which in turn became the key to naming their experiences and imposed racial identities as *racial* rather than as “cultural difference” or “culture clash” (Ngo, 2008). This shift from viewing their experiences through a cultural deficit lens and into a critical understanding of race and racism proved transformative for these youth (Carter, 2008; Carter-Andrews, 2012; DePouw, 2012, 2016).

Students’ shift into critical race consciousness helped them to resist internalized racism as well as institutional exploitation. Students worked to develop navigational skills to take ownership over important university/public spaces. Further, students reported that they also felt

empowered to push for substantive Hmong history, culture, and language representation in university curricula. Critical race consciousness, then, served two functions: First, students were better able to name and process their experiences within historical and institutional context. Second, because of a more critical contextualization of experience, students were able to work through internalized racism and actively embraced Hmong histories, language, and culture as well as social justice and anti-racist activism.

To paraphrase Delgado-Bernal & Alemán (2017), what I have attempted to do in this article is to provide examples of what critical race consciousness and critical race theory in education look like, rather than offer a prescription that says, “This is the model for doing critical race theory in education.” (94). CRT calls for interdisciplinary and contextualized analyses; therefore, approaches will look different depending on situation and those involved. What is consistent across context is the need to center race and racism within analyses, to recognize the relationship between critical race analysis and the development of resilience and empowerment in students, and to substantively locate these analyses and supports within our educational institutions.

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