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Theories of Understanding - Inequality, Positionality, & Change

Inequality: Inaccessibility of Resources for Asian/Asian American Students regarding Humanities Subjects

Born and raised in a monoracial environment back in Hong Kong, rarely had I introspected my identity as an Asian woman. What drew all my attention then, was that I was ‘the’ humanities person, instead of a science person. Remembering in my middle school, every student treated mathematics, and science subjects as the keys to a bright, successful future, since these subjects imply higher-paying professional careers. Almost everyone wanted to get into the higher-level science (and mathematics) classes entering high school. And I, who chose world history due to the lack of humanities subjects options, was seen as one of the incompetent students who were unable to handle science/math. Compared to the 80 students in three newly renovated laboratories, we only had 7 history students in an unused classroom. Statements and questions asked by the science/mathematics peers,

“What are you planning to do with history? Are you going to be a history teacher?”

“Trust me, being a teacher does not grant you a flourishing future.”

“Have you thought about what to do in the future?” always struck me.

Though my parents have been supportive of my love for humanities, they would be consistently asking about my future. They always shared that they could see me being a teacher and I should consider that. Hearing that reminded me of the way I was disparaged as a failure if I ended up being a teacher. Hence, I laughed, remained silent, and walked back to my room.

Coming to America for the first time and having been at Clark for about three years now, this fear of being ‘the’ humanities person seldom emerges. I am very much encouraged to embrace my passion for education alongside my peers and faculty’s support. Nevertheless,

in this predominantly white institution (PWI) and racialized country, my racial identity as an Asian has become more and more visible. I have begun to make some sense of my previous and ongoing experiences as an Asian, from my Asian/Asian American peers and my research. Yet, as much as I have been able to engage and relate my lived experiences with my peers and on my own, I long for faculty members (as guiding figures) who would be “position[ing] themselves as insiders” (Herr and Anderson, 2014, p. 47) and be aligned with us to “generate important knowledge to be shared” (Herr and Anderson, 2014, p. 34), especially regarding Asian/Asian American identities and histories. Here at Clark, it is undeniable that we lack this resource that enables us, as Asian/Asian Americans, to grapple with our very own identities, our histories, our struggles, and our lived experiences within an academic context.

In Spring 2023, I enrolled in an English seminar that focuses on discussing Asian/Asian American identities through fiction written by Asian/Asian American novelists. A friend (who also took the class) and I, despite noticing that this seminar does not count towards any of our major/college requirements, insisted on taking it. That was one of the few classes about Asian/Asian American identities and histories. We did not want to lose this scarce opportunity. The struggle was real. We needed a space in which we could reflect upon and share with others regarding our lived experiences. Yet, this space is not provided consistently. And there has to be the sacrifice to engage ourselves with the knowledge. The knowledge that we should not need to give up certain things to attain.

Out of curiosity, I did some digging into Clark’s provision of Asian/Asian American academic spaces. As of Spring 2023, Clark offered 21 Asian Studies-related courses, with more than half as language courses (Japanese and Mandarin). For the remaining seven courses, four courses cover Asian histories, politics, and philosophy, with only one English fictional class about Asian/Asian American identities. Specifically, with seven Asian Studies courses provided, three instructors are white. On the contrary, when we look into STEM,

finance, and economics courses at Clark, we see more Asian faculty members in these professional fields as compared to humanities. From my middle school experiences up till college at this moment, what I have been encountering as consistent issues is that there is this lack of humanities learning space and the lack of instructors that could enable students to be seen and understood. Yet, it is indisputable that there has been research on how “Asian Americans are more likely to major in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), while they are less likely to pursue lower-paying professional fields such as education, journalism, public health, or social work.” (Xie & Goyette 2003, Goyette & Mullen 2006, Kim & Sakamoto 2008b, as cited in Sakamoto, Goyotte, and Kim, 2009, p. 262) Indeed, there is a significant trend regarding most Asian/Asian American students opting for STEM and finance-related fields in college. This then seemingly explains the reason why there is a lack of resources (faculty members and courses) offered relating to humanities subjects and even more specifically about Asian/Asian American histories and identities. Nevertheless, that does not indicate that Asian/Asian American students who are interested in related fields should simply leave our interests and curiosity aside or rely on the absorption of knowledge from ourselves. With guiding figures, the insiders, “(...) we see more of ourselves in our professors, it ‘makes dreams plausible’.” (Centeno, 2021) Students need the resources to feel authentic about the work that we do, followed by the reassurance of our pursuit and goals in the humanities fields.

Clearly, with the social norm of all Asian/Asian American college students opting for STEM-related professional fields and the actual situation of a lot of Asian/Asian American students choosing STEM majors in college, it is effortless to generalize that the number of Asian/Asian American students who are interested in humanities and even specific courses related to identities, race, and histories is low. These students may not need as much

guidance. Yet, this generalization should not remain unchallenged and has left students who are left behind lost and helpless.

My Positionalities

Growing up in a monoracial environment, I never really needed to think of race, ethnicity, and other identities of mine. Because of this upbringing, I never contemplated how my social identities impact the way I live, in various contexts. It is only through the differences I have been witnessing between the way I was treated back home and the way I have been treated as I am exposed to predominantly-white cities and institutions, I have then only begun to make sense of my lived experiences.

Before coming to the US, I was in Switzerland for about a year for a college program. That was also the time when COVID-19 was exposed all over Europe. In late February 2020, my parents wanted me to leave the country and go home. Yet, there was no flight ticket available till late March. Hence, my parents mailed me a gigantic package of masks, gloves, and hand sanitizers that could last for a month. They urged me to wear my mask every day, and sanitize my hands and my belongings whenever I returned to the dorm. Noticing the severity of the virus, I wore my mask every single day. On a Saturday afternoon, I went to get groceries myself. I walked to the market. As I was walking on the pedestrian road, there was a couple - white, without masks, walking towards me. As they were approaching, I saw the man pulling his partner away, far away from me. Instead of walking on the pedestrian road, they remained very distant from me by walking on the empty carriageway. They looked at me as if I was the virus. They looked disgusted by my existence. As I continued to walk to the market, loads of thoughts struck my head. If I did not wear my mask, would I have been treated like that? Did I do anything wrong on my part which contributed to the way I was treated? Was it because of my race? Why did I feel ashamed of myself? What was this

discomfort? I did not know why and how I had these feelings, nor did I know how to vocalize these emotions.

Wrapping up the last bit of my freshman year online and taking a gap year back in Hong Kong, I embarked on a new journey to the US to continue my education. And for the past two years at Clark, I was gradually able to identify each of my previous individual experiences as racism, microaggression, xenophobia, positive stereotypes of being the model minority, classism, or even sexism. Nevertheless, as an international, Asian student in a predominantly white institution, I remained frequently frustrated about not knowing how to situate myself within this community. There were experiences of mine that I did not know how to frame. Not growing up in America nor having gone through the American education system, I oftentimes cannot comprehend or relate to what most of my peers (who experienced the same social system) are sharing. It is also disconcerting that when I share with others about my personal experiences, they may not understand and would remain silent afterward. In addition, as a low-income, international student, it is distressing to face this assumption that international students are financially stable. Especially when my other international peers are economically stable and do not understand my financial struggle. On the other hand, as an Asian who has encountered microaggressions, and racism, Asian American peers may resonate with my lived experiences. Nevertheless, due to the very different backgrounds growing up, there has always been a barrier to understanding both parties fully. This complexity of my unique lived experience as a low-income, international, Asian student was “piling up like a spider web in which problems overlap too fiercely that I am starting to neglect it. I am becoming numb by internalizing the issues.” (Yau, 2022)

Last semester, I was expressing my incapability of framing my issues to one of my professors. She urged me to take a look at Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality. I searched the word, ‘intersectionality’ on Google and clicked into one of the TedTalk she was

giving in 2016 about intersectionality. She stated, “(...) where there’s no name for a problem, you can’t see a problem, and when you can’t see a problem, you pretty much can’t solve it.” (Crenshaw, 2016) Listening to this clicked with me instantly. Though I was gradually able to theorize each of my previous lived experiences, whenever the experiences that multiple of my identities collide, I failed to compartmentalize. “Without frames that allow us to see how social problems impact all the members of a targeted group, many will fall through the cracks of our movements, left to suffer in virtual isolation.” (Crenshaw, 2016) All these frameless experiences of mine made me silent. My experiences of being oppressed as an Asian overlap with my other Asian American peers. Yet, the inexperience of the American culture growing up has left me behind, not finding other common grounds with Asian American peers. The truth of my suffering from oppression as an Asian yet not fully associated with Asian Americans leaves me out of the category. My partial identities are somewhere, like every other, but nowhere to conclude exactly. The theory of intersectionality has not only allowed me to frame the complexities of my different identities. Furthermore, it validates my in-between struggles and endorses how my personal experiences (without concrete frames) are visible. And this validation has provided me a sense of comfort and healing, in which the power of theory has allowed me to articulate my story to the audience who may experience similar struggles.

Nonetheless, though intersectionality has given me the power to theorize my own lived experiences, there is still an issue that this theory does not fully tackle, and I am still struggling to form - the solidarity beyond the theorization of individual lived experiences. Shawn Wilson, whose expertise focuses on research epistemology and methodology utilized by indigenous people, emphasizes the principle of relationality. He states, “[f]inding this common ground is one of the struggles for cross-cultural communication. Yet it is necessary so that both sides can understand the same thing.” (Wilson, 2008) Wilson highlights the

significance of building a relationship among people, especially when it comes to tackling social injustice issues. Without understanding more about marginalized communities and their aspects, it is easy to simply choose not to acknowledge the power dynamics by the oppressors and not take further actions. However, what is even more sophisticated here is that not only cross-cultural understanding is difficult. Relationality may not necessarily happen even if two parties uphold common identities. In June Jordan's piece, *Report from the Bahamas, 1982*, she recalled a South African student, Sokutu, who asked for help due to his alcoholic husband. (Jordan, 2003) Jordan asked for help from another student of hers, an Irish woman, Cathy. She wrote,

I walked behind them, the young Irish woman and the young South African, and I saw them walking as sisters walk, hugging each other, and whispering and sure of each other and I felt how it was not who they were but what they both know and what they were both preparing to do about what they know that was going to make them both free at last.' (Jordan, 2003, p. 16)

Jordan and Sokutu are both African women (common identity), but their distinct lived experiences have not allowed Jordan to feel related to Sokutu. Whereas Cathy, who does not share the same socially constructed identity as Sokutu, understands the fear, and pain that Sokutu feels, since both share similar lived experiences. Hence, it is crucial to recognize how relationality does not automatically come from people who share common social identities, nor people who do not devote themselves to building a relationship to look for a common ground between parties. It is hard to discover relationality, given how distinctive each individual's lived experiences differ from others.

The obstacles of forming relationality seem to have diminished the thread of commonality when it comes to the socially constructed, common identity. I think that it is crucial to also recognize this thread, though relationality may not necessarily exist within this

thread of connection. Just like June Jordan's piece, though she may not have resonated with Sokutu's lived experience of being abused, Jordan managed to connect Cathy with Sokutu and enabled both parties to further build a relationship with each other. In my theory, it was the trust, and faith, that Sokutu had perceived from Jordan that motivated Sokutu to reach out for help. It is the racial solidarity that Sokutu believes in and Jordan stands for. Indeed, this racial solidarity and thread of commonality may not uphold the same level of relationality and understanding of one's actual lived experiences. But without this common thread, it is harder to survive in this racialized, predominantly white society.

Identities are nuanced and complex. As a low-income, Asian, international student, I have come across a lot of individuals who may have some of the common identities as I do, but never the exact same. Though I am able to attribute my own lived experiences to intersectionality now, I have come to a realization that I am not on my own. I live in a community which requires healing, solidarity with others. Yet, I am still on my journey in discovering how to construct this relationship with others while not entirely being able to feel related to others nor have encountered the exact same lived experiences as others. If unable to, could I actually have myself stand in solidarity with others?

Change - Who Am I as A Social Agent?

That being said, I believe in the power of relationship-building and community. Having engaged myself in classes and spaces at Clark that allows me to understand the power of collectivism in combating injustice, I seek to actively integrate these elements in any work that I do. Having been through times when I felt hopeless and alienating as I did not know what was going on around myself and my community, I have noticed the significance of having someone besides me, talk about it, struggle with, reflect upon the problems, and brainstorm what could be the actions we can do moving forward. And that is definitely

something I did not grow up learning until I am here at Clark. People at Clark around me have demonstrated to me that they care, and how there is reciprocated care and trust within a community. In particular, having been in Difficult Dialogue (DD) for more than a year now, I notice what community love and hope are, even if crisis and racial injustice keep happening. Being in DD definitely has motivated me to want to cultivate spaces and community where not only I feel comfortable in, but also spaces where other folx who need the space and long for it as well.

As mentioned earlier, coming to Clark realizing that there is limited space for Asian/Asian American folx on campus, it forced me to think about what I wanted as a person who longed for a space and others who might also want an environment and community to live, learn, grow, and reimagine altogether. Having created a space with a dear friend of mine, I hoped I cultivated a community where members felt safe to embrace their narratives, felt comfortable with others within a space where we were able to foster some sort of relationships, and hold a community where everyone felt supported. Having explored and grappled with the impacts of the affinity space in my praxis paper, looking forward, I am excited to engage myself in classrooms with elementary children upon graduation as I enter MAT with elementary students where we can co-create a safe, and open community together. And I will not stop engaging in consistent praxis where I do self-reflections and actions in the future. There is more growing as I move onto the next steps of my life, and I definitely feel more equipped and excited to learn coming out of the praxis journey.

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