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Disrupting Racialized Practice in a Post-Pandemic Context

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This article prompts a new examination of advising practice. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted normal modes of operation, it presents a unique opportunity to determine new approaches that address the equity gap in student degree attainment. A specific theory of racialized organizations is used as a lens for examining advising practice and for critiquing how our advising practice either reinforces or disrupts systemic racial inequities in higher education. Reflective questions also provided a way to think about and question our practice from an organizational perspective. This paper proposes treating the COVID-19 pandemic as a catalyst for broadening the discussion of advisement beyond individual advisor actions and toward advising organizations that are more oriented toward social justice.

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Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has presented advising practitioners with tremendous new challenges (Brooks & Grajeck, 2020; Floyd, 2021; Weissman, 2020). For instance, as an advising practitioner with a caseload of 200 students, I had to adapt to a new reality at the start of the pandemic. Many of my students withdrew from their spring 2020 classes because they did not have a home computer or Internet access. Others withdrew because they lost their jobs. This phenomenon was not unique to my institution. Weissman (2020) noted that migrating curriculum and content online exacerbated economic disparities between students. As colleges and universities struggle with how to respond to COVID and post-pandemic realities, advisors must consider how their institutions have met recent challenges and how such challenges have impacted the diverse students they serve (Harper, 2020).

I propose that advisors ought to think more deeply about the ways in which advising theory has become operationalized and how it may need to shift from pandemic operations to Covid-endemic contexts. The challenges of the 2020 pandemic and post-pandemic present provide us a unique opportunity to examine our methods and determine how new models and approaches might address the equity gap in student degree attainment and the ways that advising practice may reinforce or disrupt this gap.

Examining the advising literature published in the *NACADA Journal* between 2004 and 2018, Alvarado and Olson (2020) reported a lack of research that focused specifically on underserved student populations. To address this lacuna, I employed Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations as a holistic model to examine advising practice. Using such an approach focuses specifically on underserved students and encourages advising practitioners to consider how our institutional practices either reinforce or disrupt systemic racial inequities. I use a critical organizational theory to expand our thinking from advisement as an individual-to-individual action to a holistic examination of advisement as an institution. Additionally, a critical organizational perspective allows us to think more broadly about our institutional practices and the norms of whiteness embedded within them.

Unlike approaches that examine practice from an advisor perspective (i.e., actions an individual advisor can take to impact an individual student's success), a racialized organizational approach focuses on how service delivery conforms to norms of whiteness. Rooted in social justice principles, critical organizational theory uncovers underlying organizational power dynamics. Using Ray's (2019) reflective questions, I provide a new way to think about and expand beyond individual-oriented practices to include an examination of advisement from a broader organizational perspective. A racialized organizational perspective also encourages practitioners to consider students as individuals who are embedded in

larger communities that are differentially impacted by advisement practice.

Literature Review

Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations addressed the move from passive awareness to actively thinking about our own advising practice from a social justice perspective. The theory provided tenets through which current advising practice can be understood and interrogated within a critical organizational framework. Approaching our practice from such a frame allows us to better understand how our practice either replicates or resists oppressive structures. A critical perspective proposes that if we are not actively resisting racist structures, then we are replicating the ones that exist. A critical examination of our practice through a broader lens is essential if we are to substantively address racism in our institutions.

Ray (2019) discussed how organizations tended to see themselves as race-neutral and treated race as merely a personal identity rather than a contextualized and highly individual experience rooted in systemic white supremacy. Adding an organizational theory like this to our traditional one-on-one developmental approach may better address structural inequities between groups of students as well as white supremacy embedded within advising practice and institutions.

Understanding and identifying structural inequities and white supremacy in operation has important implications for student success. Lee (2018) pointed to the importance of understanding race and racism in higher education institutions. In an article on the use of critical race theory in advising practice, she discussed the ways in which advising was and continues to be problematic, particularly for Black students. Lee (2018) explored the ways in which racialized experiences affect one's views on the world and how one works with students. She wrote, "for example, an academic advisor may say, 'I am not racist, I care deeply for my Black students, … true, but Marable's definition that a person need not 'be racist' to engage in or perpetuate a racist system" (2019, p. 80). In her book about race on campus, Park (2018) also discussed how the trend of focusing on racial *inclusion* in higher education is important but fell short without continued attention to broader commitments to address inequality and racism.

While advisors have been wrestling with the racial opportunity gap for some time now, COVID-related challenges continue to disproportionately impact students from the most underserved communities. Thus, racial and ethnic minorities, women, and nonbinary students all experience a higher level of challenges resulting in decreased retention as a result of COVID (Haskett et al., 2020). Unfortunately, because most studies do not present data from an intersectional view (looking at the intersections of race/gender/sexuality/class, etc.), it is difficult to ascertain how students of color with other underserved identities are faring. However, we can assume that those at the intersections of such identities are cumulatively and negatively impacted by structural barriers (Crenshaw, 1988). Although not all the statistics indicate race as a factor (because they are not always identified by race), we can assume that those most affected inside other at-risk categories are those students of color. As an example, the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (2021) reported that 44% of 2-year college students said they lost their jobs because of the pandemic and the highest percentage of food insecurity was found among African American students. Haskett et al. (2020) reported that within the Hispanic student group, 15.5% experienced homelessness as compared to 9.3% of non-Hispanic/Latino students. Additionally, women and nonbinary persons were more likely to experience food insecurity and homelessness (Haskett et al., 2020). While Ray's (2019) theory focused specifically on race as the primary variable, it is likely that students with multiple minoritized identities are even more at risk; however, at present, it is difficult to compare white and Black LGBTQ students because data is rarely disaggregated to examine cross-categorical identities. Although I focus here on race and Ray's (2019) racialized organizational theory, addressing systemic issues related to race will likely improve outcomes for all at-risk students.

Examining Advising Practice in the Literature

My research into COVID-related impacts on students prompted a few questions about how advising practice serves students during and after a global pandemic. Are such practices equipped to robustly challenge structures that continue to disenfranchise students in underserved communities? One current advising practice is intrusive advising, where advisors are encouraged to assist

students by structuring "student intervention at the first indication of academic difficulty in order to motivate a student to seek help" (Earl, 1988, p. 28). Further guidance emphasizes the importance of well-trained professionals advising students toward degree attainment. The practice is designed to help students access resources early in their academic career with intentional advisor interventions (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Giroir & Schwehm, 2014). Intrusive advising strategies help students set goals, self-advocate, explore past experiences, and understand their motivations for learning more deeply.

While helpful in many ways, this model, along with other developmental approaches advisors use to help students better adapt, does not address how the practice may or may not differentially impact groups of students. For example, many college expectations tend to be white-normed and oriented toward middle-class standards. By teaching students to adapt to such norms, we may be giving differential advantages to white students who likely grow up with these norms or are at least more exposed to them. Particularly, conceptions of motivation, confidence, and interpretations of experience are understood differently depending on one's community of origin (Archambault, 2016).

Drawing from my own experience as a white middle-class woman, my values are oriented around a particular work ethic that supports a middle-class lifestyle and allows me to operate independently of other concerns. For instance, I demonstrate my motivation to other white, middle-class professionals by showing up to an appointment on time. However, is this professional norm relatable to a 19-year-old student who is the child of a single mother working two jobs, has to babysit a younger brother, and also shares the family car? How is race embedded in this way of thinking about time management and the prioritization of tasks? Does such a rigid approach to the notion of "on-time" disadvantage students who come from other cultural and class contexts? How do advisors both understand and communicate with their students about race and how higher education structures (as well as their concurrent concepts of commitment, persistence, resilience, etc.) impact students of color?

These are salient questions not only because we see the disproportionate impact of COVID on Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color but also because the advising profession tends to be dominated by white, middle-class women. According to a 2019 midyear membership report, NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising reported that of nearly 14,000 members, 67.2% were female and 57.8% identified as white.

Student development theories and the instruments and surveys based on these theories, which assess college students' engagement and experiences, have not always captured elements that are specific to underserved students. These theories were developed primarily by white, male researchers and validated on mostly white, middle-class, male students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Perry, 1968, as cited in Marroquín, 2020). Developmental theorists, Abes et al. (2007) wrote:

> While a wide array of student development theories is available to student affairs professionals to understand students and guide practice (McEwen, 2003), most theories fall within one of the families of psychosocial, cognitive, and social identity development theories. Few models or theories exist to understand the holistic development of college students. (p. 16)

They discussed how students are not well equipped to understand how their social identities are continuously shaped by systems of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Their recommendation was that advising practitioners become aware of their campus culture and how this culture shapes students' representation and the development of students' multiple identities.

While these two actions are a good first step, there is no guidance on how advisors and advising centers should challenge structural barriers for underserved students. Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations is one lens through which to examine identities from a holistic, institutional perspective and dig into how systems impact individual students' lived experiences. Once we understand how our organizations are racialized, we can start to challenge them and demonstrate resistance to racialized norms as opportunities for learning for our students.

Theory of Racialized Organizations

Ray (2019) offered four tenets that amplify how race inequities are entwined within institutional structures, which (a) enhance the agency of

some groups and diminish the agency of others, (b) legitimize an unequal distribution of resources, (c) treat whiteness as a credential, and (d) racialize through the decoupling of formal rules from organization practice. The four tenets describe how organizations are racialized and how the racialization process functions to change individual actors within the organization. Ray (2019) argued that "racialization theory must account for how both state policy and individual attitudes are filtered through—and changed by—organizations" (p. 26). Organizations tend to see themselves and their processes as race-neutral and race itself is operationalized as a personal identity (Ray, 2019). Racist ideologies endow actors with differential forms of agency (Ray, 2019). In the advising world, such ideologies might be projected through the meaning that practitioners attribute to the idea of "professionalism" and whose cultural norms that word embodies.

Organizational theory moves beyond an individualized, microlevel approach to a macro and systemic examination of an organization's practices. In other words, an organizational lens requires the exploration of how advising practices and operations impact communities and not just individual students. Ray (2019) stated:

> Race theory typically focuses on the state (Feagin & Elias, 2013), individual animus, or ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 1997) as primary loci of racial processes, downplaying the role of organizations in the production of racial ideologies and the social construction of race itself. (p. 30)

Ray (2019) then discussed how racial ideologies endow actors with differential forms of agency. As an advisor, this suggests to me that advising practitioners ought to reconsider how concepts such as motivation and self-confidence might shift when they consider racial or class identities. Practitioners might even consider whether these very concepts are a product of a particular racial or class identity and, if so, whose? Practitioners might reflect on their advising center or departmental operations and how those translate in online and remote environments. If these practices are predicated on racist ideology, how do they further disenfranchise students from underserved groups in online environments? Departmental or faculty advisors might consider how their department policies, such as requiring online students to visit campus to take in-person exams, might differentially impact students.

Organizational theory provides a comprehensive model for examining campus climate and culture, particularly when applied to microclimates like advising centers or academic departments. Racialized organizational theory provides a frame for understanding campus culture in terms of race as a structure rather than an identity. This frame is important because "racist incidents tend to be individualized and perpetrators on college campuses are viewed as a 'few bad apples' instead of a predictable outcome of two issues" (Cabrera, 2018, p. 19). Those two issues are systemic racism and educators' collective unwillingness to address racism as an oppressive social force (Cabrera, 2018). Moreover, Cabrera (2018) described how universities are spaces for educating the elite while aspiring to be spheres of democracy; he pointed out that racial inequality and the structures behind it remain uninterrogated in day-to-day interactions. By examining how Ray's (2019) four tenets show up in advising centers, advising practitioners can begin to address systemic barriers for underserved students. When specific advising center organizational practices are examined through these four tenets, we can understand how practices of "professionalism" promote whiteness as a credential, how limiting service hours unevenly distributes resources, and how values such as self-advocacy are linked to social capital and whiteness.

Implications for Advising

Briefs and recommendations for advisors during COVID were initially based on earlier research on online advising practice, and so the recommendations often focused on student agency and aptitude (see Finley & Chapman, 2011; Ohrablo, 2016). However, as advising centers and academic departments have shifted operations to more hybrid models or returned to "normal" on-campus operations, advising practitioners have an opportunity to examine their practices more holistically and from an institutional perspective.

Using technology provides us with an opportunity to examine some of Ray's (2019) tenets. For example, how is agency enhanced or diminished through our practices? One of my students, who has five children at home, held our Zoom meetings from his garage, as it was the only quiet space he had available. Advisors

sometimes ask students to turn on their camera so they can communicate with them better; however, students may have roommates or chaotic living environments that they are anxious about revealing to outsiders. I have also heard from several students that they have been told that they should avoid having their children present during appointments because it is distracting. Parent shaming disproportionately impacts women, particularly women of color (Cabellero et al., 2019; Collins, 1994; Glenn, 1994). In some on-campus contexts, parents are not allowed to bring children to campus at all, and institutions that provide childcare are becoming increasingly rare (Castañeda & Isgro, 2013; Kruvelis et al., 2017). Whose interests do these practices serve and are we enhancing or diminishing agency through such practices and policies? Do these practices lead to increased or diminished access to resources across identities?

With COVID continuing to shift our content delivery as we seek more flexible options, additional problems arise, illustrating how technology-based solutions do not necessarily address structural barriers for students. According to a survey of 13 Colorado community colleges in the fall of 2020, 45% of respondents reported assuming caregiving duties while also attending class, 37% reported having to help children in their home with schooling while attending class, 49% of students reported missing work or class because of a lack of childcare, and 76% of student parents had children at home while attending classes (Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021). Although COVID-related illnesses are no longer forcing mass closures, many caregivers were differentially impacted before COVID with daycare shutdowns and having to keep sick children at home. As more students of color are also parents (Hensly et al., 2021) and the majority of them are single women, we can start to understand how race and gender become risk factors in an environment that is rigidly scheduled and unsupportive of the students who are providing full or part-time care to others. A lack of attention to how caregiving has impacted communities of color both before, definitely during, and now in post-pandemic time is serving to reinforce whiteness as a credential.

Recommendations

By applying Ray's (2019) organizational theory, advisors can start to examine how both online and in-person advising practice favors some students and creates institutional barriers for others. Although I am wrestling with how to challenge systemic racism and how to empower my students to do so, I pose some questions that might help move us toward uncovering, examining, and finally addressing systemic whiteness. I use Ray's (2019) tenets to examine modes of operation and to think more deeply about the structures that support a racialized climate.

Advisors can begin by envisioning new approaches to policy and practice that shape the subjective sense of future possibility. In other words, how does the use of technology, the 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. work schedule, and academic jargon, as well as expectations about institutional literacy and application to selective programs, segregate students into particular tracks? Who gets accepted into competitive programs and how is the process limiting agency and the distribution of resources? Who can access advising (either online or in-person) and who cannot? Does such access privilege white middle-class norms? Do terms such as time-management, professionalism, and success reinforce whiteness and punish students who do not conform? Which cultural norms reinforce white, middle-class values and thereby exclude other forms of being and other types of knowing? Examining our assumptions about student behavior and how professionalism and whiteness are linked together is a way advisors can identify and then challenge systemic racism.

How do we move our advising practice from focusing on teaching the student to be an advocate for themselves in a system that does not support them (Kelley, 2016) to one that teaches all students to ask critical questions about the system itself and their role or place within it? Collectively, students have some power to demand change. However, one-on-one there are power dynamics between professors and students that make it very hard for them to challenge a professor's policy or practice. While some students may have the option to leave and attend a different institution, many students do not; therefore, self-advocacy becomes risky. Advisors advocate for students challenging systemic policies or practices that disenfranchise them, and faculty advisors can examine and challenge departmental policies while encouraging their colleagues to do the same.

As privilege is often unseen by those who hold it, one way to address systemic whiteness is to create more space for colleagues of color as

advising professionals. As Ray (2019) proposed, advisors and administrators should consider what white, group-based solidarity networks exist that remain unseen to white professionals yet are clearly seen by those who do not possess the "white credential." How do hiring committees privilege whiteness, particularly the language, nonverbal cues, speech patterns, humor, dress, and norms about time and spaces of whiteness? Recently, as a member of a hiring committee, I witnessed a woman of color (who made it to the final round of interviews) express what I perceived to be an appropriate level of frustration about the difficulty of communicating with a higher-level administrator. During deliberations, a man on the committee remarked, "she seems like an angry woman" in response to the committee's chair (a white man) asking us to gauge her fit for the job. Such comments are based on stereotypes of gender and race and who is allowed to verbally express anger (i.e., not women) and what the appropriate volume of anger should be in a professional setting like a job interview.

In addition to questioning and challenging norms regarding whose behavior is considered appropriate in professional contexts, Ray's (2019) tenets ask us to consider some immediate actions that might begin to dismantle racialized and inequitable structures. For example, how might technologies provide opportunities for translating advising instructions into a student's or parent's first language? Could information be presented in multiple modalities for students with disabilities? Advising syllabi could adopt similar universal design features (see Rogers-Shaw et al., 2017). As a previous example noted, the limited access to advising centers from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. is a common barrier for students who work. Another common advising practice involves teaching our students to engage in "professional behavior" such as arriving to appointments on time and looking (or even smelling) a particular way. Rather than expect students to change to fit white middle-class cultural norms, advisors should understand the norms of diverse student communities. Speaking out as advocates to administrators or decision-makers is another way to confront systemic racism.

As a final example, there is a vigorous debate about cheating because of COVID-related changes designed to create more flexibility for students. Because students have been given more options for taking tests and turning in assignments, there is a perception that students are cheating now more than ever before. Much of the conversation has focused on how to mitigate cheating; little has focused on why students cheat and how strategies like timed, high-stakes testing increases anxiety for students and differentially impacts minoritized students. Rethinking how we approach content delivery and hold students accountable is central to these discussions. Advisors, who often get to peek inside students' personal lives, are uniquely positioned to contribute new ideas. Such conversations can move advising practice beyond a focus on individual identity and toward a community and social justice-based approach.

In addition to considering the questions above, advisors ought to have conversations with students to help them understand the system and how to recognize when the system no longer serves them. Advising practitioners should work to encourage and empower students to recognize and speak up when they experience systemic oppression (if it is safe for them to do so) to help advisors better recognize and address racialized barriers for students. Flynn (2015) stated:

> Typically, they [students] have acquired such understandings [of race and identity] as a result of successful promotion of racial "tolerance" discourses prevalent in liberal media, popular culture, and schooling. What these understandings lack are the underpinnings of systemic and institutional racism and how those forms of racism directly impact the ways in which people are socialized to adopt racist worldviews. (p. 116)

In other words, students are socialized (as are advisors) to be color-blind or to think that racism is a personal action rather than a systemic, organizational structure. Therefore, both students and advisors do not question the practices in which they are embedded. Advisors should help students learn to understand and then question these structures.

Limitations

One of the limitations of Ray's (2019) theory is that it does not address an intersectional perspective in terms of how organizations favor some identities over others. While race is the focus, as noted in the example of single parents above, race, gender, and class often work together in ways that maintain privilege and power.

Additionally, ability, sexuality, and other underserved identities are not addressed.

While Ray's (2019) theory provides us with a lens, it does not provide concrete actions or best practices, specifically in relation to advising. It does not provide a blueprint for how to be an advising advocate in a racialized organization. However, in some ways, this is also a strength. I recently heard a colleague mention that there is no *best* practice, there is only *better* practice. This notion speaks to the idea that we are in a state of evolution and that there are no quick or easy solutions to something as complicated as systemic racism. However, it is important that we begin to see the systemic racism in our midst and that is where Ray (2019) provides us with a lens to begin. It is up to us to use that lens to start conversations and advocate for and with our students. While developmental and other advising practices continue to be important, Ray's (2019) theory is another tool that challenges us to think creatively about what advising practice might reveal in terms of privilege and power in our advising organizations and departments.

Conclusion

I conclude with a final thought from Tuck and Yang (2018), in which they explicate a new way of thinking about education. They wrote that "social justice education is a way to refer to all research and practice within the domains of education which are a departure from behavioral or cognitive or developmental approaches" (Tuck & Yang, 2018, p. 5) and conclude that education is not legitimate if it cannot meaningfully attend to social context and the historical and contemporary structures of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and antiblackness. Tuck and Yang (2018) emphasized that "social justice is not the catchall, it is the all" (p. 5). Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations provides a lens through which we may examine advising practice and how it supports a racialized organizational structure. An organizational approach allows us to move from individually based developmental models to a larger and more inclusive institutional focus. While many advising practices have helped advisors reach individual students and help them toward success, organizational theory adds another dimension to our practice. The theory prompts us to ask critical questions of our modes of operation and how those modes impact *communities* of students. Acknowledging that advising centers and academic departments are racialized organizations moves us from looking at incidents of racial inequities as the responsibility of individual actors to a more systemic and social-justice-oriented practice.

Finally, it is important that advisors and institutions move from understanding race as an individual identity to understanding it as a system embedded within our institutions, which has very different consequences that depend on how one is situated within the intersection of race, gender, class, etc. (Ray, 2019). Using Ray's (2019) four tenets, we can question how our practices and policies enhance the agency of some groups and diminish the agency of others, legitimize an unequal distribution of resources, treat whiteness as a credential, and racialize through the decoupling of formal rules from organization practice.

There is ample evidence that higher education institutions operate within a racialized organizational framework, so we ought to move beyond asking whether it is and begin asking how it is. Therein lies the opportunity to critically shift old modes of thinking and repurpose entrenched systems of power and oppression. It is an opportunity to start to re-envision advisors as advocates and advising practice as one oriented toward social justice.

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Author's Note

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