Demystifying Cultural Theories and Practices

Locating Black Immigrant Experiences in Teacher Education Research

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Introduction

The number of immigrants of color residing in the United States reached 13.5 million in March 2005, the highest in U. S. history (Camarota, 2005). By 2010 the number of Black immigrants and their children is estimated to reach five million, and will represent twelve percent of the Black population in the United States (Rong & Brown, 2001, 2002 a & b). To date, the majority of Black immigrants in the United States are from Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, Haiti, and Jamaica, but substantial numbers of immigrants also come from various African countries, including Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa (Rong & Brown, 2001, 2002 a & b). As a result of these demographic trends, educational researchers have increased their focus on how Black immigrant youth fare once in the United States. This scholarly attention is varied, emanating from three primary conceptual perspectives: Cultural Ecological Theory, Culture-Centered Theory, and Critical Race Theory.

Cultural Ecological Theory (CET) explores how culture, identity, and societal forces impact the educational outcomes of minority groups. Culture-Centered Theory (CCT) examines the use of students' cultural backgrounds as a point of reference for preparing those students academically and socially. Critical Race Theory (CRT) explores the sociopolitical consequences of race in educational settings from a progressive legal perspective. While these theories are promising in providing insight into the experiences of Black immigrant youth,

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none of them comprehensively capture the intragroup differences and identity processes that affect Black immigrant youth in social and educational settings.

This article will address this gap in the literature in three ways: (1) it will discuss the extent to which these three theories do contribute understanding of the sociocultural experiences of Black immigrant youth in U. S. schools; (2) it will identify and problematize the shortcomings in these three theories vis-à-vis Black immigrant students; and, finally, (3) it will suggest possibilities for the advancement of a more detailed and otherwise robust theory that more adequately describes the sociocultural experiences of Black immigrant youth and supports their educational development.

It is important to note at the outset of this work that U. S.-based racism has imbedded in the psyche of most people in the world images and associated definitions of "Black American 'culture'" that are, at once, not Black, not Black American, and not culture, much less anything akin to an accurate depiction and/or description of all that is the richness of what is truly Black American culture, and the history from which it emerged and in relationship to which it continues to grow and develop in myriad important ways.

The degree to which Black American culture (along with Black Americans themselves) has been reduced to the inferior and violent imagery perpetuated by corporate mass culture in service to the almighty dollar is nothing short of genocidal, and yet, through the utter resiliency of the Black American spirit, the true culture of Black Americans persists in profoundly robust manners through literature, art, music, science, and mathematics, among many other arenas.

At focus in this article is the manner in which U. S.-based racism has begun to negatively impact the educational experiences of Black immigrant youth largely because of the connections that have developed between these youth and the false, highly destructive, socially constructed view of "Black American 'culture.'" Thus, it is of utmost importance to keep in mind the absolute falseness of this view of Black American culture in seeking effective solutions for improving the academic success of all Black students (Black immigrant and Black American alike) in the United States (Perry et al., 2003).

Problem Statement

Black immigrants are concentrating in central cities throughout the United States. New York, Atlanta, Newark, Jersey City, Detroit, and Houston have some of the largest numbers of Black immigrants, who are diverse not only in terms of national origin, but by ethnic affiliation, cultural tradition, and generational status (Camarota, 2005; Foner, 2001; Rong & Brown, 2001, 2002 a & b). As this population continues to grow, its children have begun to experience American schools in an array of uniquely challenging ways.

While mainstream sociological theories have striven to capture the social and economic experiences of these children (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Waters, 1999), very little is known about their day to day experiences in academic settings, because studies focusing on these types of experiences often statistically group these children with African-American children on the basis of "race" and the data compiled is rarely disaggregated on the basis of any other social identity dimension (Harry & Klingner, 2006). The blanket grouping of these populations creates within both theoretical and practical challenges for researchers and educators alike.

Theoretically, the homogeneous categorization of Blacks ignores the important national, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, political, and even racial differences that exist within the population. In particular,

homogenous descriptions ignore the fact that for many Black immigrant youth, racial and ethnic identities are fluid and complex, thus many do not strictly identify with the rigid and dichotomous Black/White constructs through which racial and ethnic identities are based in the United States (Bailey, 2001; Martinez, 2000). In addition, by presenting members of the African diaspora as a monolithic group, researchers neglect the increasing racial and intraracial strife that affects individual development and academic achievement, as well as school climate (Jackson & Cochran, 2003; Traore & Lukens, 2006).

Practically, the lack of information concerning Black immigrant youth has a significant impact on their educational development. Recent research reveals that many Black immigrant youth are underserved in U. S. schools due to cultural misunderstandings, often related to a lack of familiarity with educational policies and practices domestically and abroad on the part of Black immigrants and U. S school officials, respectively.

Additionally, Black immigrant youth are often erroneously perceived by school personnel as intellectually weak, unintelligent, or academically incapable because of their parents' beliefs regarding English language acquisition (they do not always make it a priority). As a result, many are wrongly placed in special educational courses or lower grade levels (Gopaul-McNicol, 1993; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Lashley, 2000). For example, differences in, or lack of familiarity with, U. S. school systems vis-à-vis international schools, cause many Black immigrant youth to repeat grades upon arrival to the United States when the transfer of previous credits is refused.

Further, some Black immigrant youth perform poorly academically with particular kinds of grading rubrics (especially those requiring significant teacher-student interaction and classroom participation, and/or involving multiple choice tests), which are uncommon in their countries of origin (Mitchell 2005). Still other Black immigrant youth are socially challenged by the circulation of negative, "primitive" and/or "exotic" portrayals of African and Caribbean immigrants in the media (broadly considered), curriculum, and books (Traore & Luken, 2006).

Resultantly, a disproportionate number of Black immigrant youth are dropping out, participating in delinquent acts in schools and communities, and,

consequently, are being imprisoned and/or deported from the United States (Radin, 1999; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006).

The academic difficulties Black immigrant students face are further compounded by the challenges many experience in forming their cultural identity in their very different home and school environments. Many Black immigrant youth experience difficulty in reconciling the expectations placed upon them by their traditional culture (generally found in the home) and those that hail from "American" (or Eurocentric) culture (generally found in school settings). Many Black immigrant youth find that their hybrid home-school cultural identities are not accepted by family members, who often accuse them of being "too American," or by their peers, who question the "authenticity" of their "Blackness."

In an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Moran, et al. (2005) report violent verbal and physical acts being directed towards Black immigrant students by their Black American counterparts who often erroneously perceive their Black immigrant peers' lack of familiarity with so-called "American norms" as intentionally distancing themselves from Black Americans and related anti-Black American arrogance.[1] The report highlights the fact that the tension happening between these groups in schools is part of a larger societal tension fueled by sensationalistic media attention that, absent this attention, would have much less saliency in everyday interactions between these groups.

Clearly, the challenges facing the Black immigrant population in the United States as a whole are many, and few if any are being systematically reconciled. As a result, the emotional, social, and academic health of Black immigrant youth is in even greater peril. This analysis of research seeks to offer a basis for changing these dire realities.

Theoretical Groundings

Three major theoretical frameworks provide the best point of entry into understanding the unique experiences of Black immigrant youth. Cultural Ecological Theory (CET) was the first framework through which theorists undertook comparative study of the sociocultural and academic experiences among different minority groups. Working from a similar lens, Culture-Centered Theory (CCT) has promoted the inclusion of culturally relevant curricular content and pedagogical tools to improve the academic performance

of various groups of minority children. Finally, Critical Race Theory (CRT) has looked at the effects of race and racism on a range of minority populations in different social and institutional structures in the United States. These three theoretical frameworks are the most relevant and best positioned to inform emerging research focusing *specifically* on Black immigrant students.

Cultural Ecological Theory (CET)

Educational anthropologist John Ogbu was instrumental in bringing the concerns of minority immigrants and minority students to the forefront of educational discourse through his development of the Cultural Ecological Theory (CET). One of the groundbreaking aspects of CET is that it was the first theoretical framework to argue against the traditional explanations of cultural differences that emerged only when a minority group was compared to a White counterpart (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Jensen, 1969).

Further, in acknowledging the interplay and, thus, compounded impact of cultural, social, and political forces, CET took social behaviors and academic performance out of the realm of genetics and morality, instead historicizing their development. Resultantly, CET scholars have persuasively shown how several key environmental factors—initial incorporation of minority groups in the United States, treatment of minority groups by White Americans, minority groups' perceptions of opportunity in the United States, and minority identity development (for individuals and groups)—impact the educational performance of minority youth (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Gibson, 1988; Matute-Bianchi, 1986, 1991; Ogbu, 1978, 1983, 1987, 1989, 1991; Suarez-Orozco, 1989, 1991).

CET's primary argument is that individuals' actions and thoughts are guided by their understandings of the societies in which they reside and their roles in these societies. These understandings are highly dependent on the manner in which the "minority groups have been incorporated into their various societies" (Ogbu, 1991, p. 8). CET distinguishes this incorporation through the use of the "involuntary immigrant" and "voluntary immigrant" constructs.

Involuntary immigrants (e.g., African Americans, some Mexicans, some Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans to the extent that they can be considered to be immigrants at all) are peoples who played no part in the decision making that led

to their being in the United States (with respect to Native Americans, the argument can be made that they played no part in having the geographic areas they inhabited becoming known and incorporated as "the United States").

Their presence in the United States is a result of oppressive forces, such as "slavery, conquest, or colonization" (Ogbu, 1991, p. 9), that made them a part of the United States and that forced them to remain here. Ogbu argues that involuntary immigrant students tend to be skeptical and distrustful of schools because they believe that schools seek to stamp out their cultural values and identities and do not offer them the same opportunities as their White counterparts. In response, involuntary immigrant students can develop a secondary cultural system that projects an oppositional stance that rejects the behaviors, characteristics, and values of the White, dominant society.

On the other hand, voluntary immigrants are peoples who left their home country of their own accord in search of social mobility, educational advancement, and/or economic opportunities within the United States. Ogbu explains that voluntary immigrants are more accepting and patient with barriers (e.g., individual and institutional racism) they encounter because they view them as temporary.

In addition, voluntary immigrants have a dual frame of reference, which allows them to compare their experiences in the United States to their previous country, often finding that the social, economic, and/or political situation in the United States, although sometimes harsh, is still better.[2]

Thus, voluntary immigrants are more likely than involuntary immigrants to uncritically abide by the rules established by the dominant culture, including in schools, at the same time that they maintain their own distinct cultures (Gibson, 1988).

Culture-Centered Theory (CCT)

Throughout history, debates in educational discourse have engaged four main questions: What is the purpose of education? Who is entitled to an education? What should be included in the curriculum? And how should the content be delivered? (Gay, 1994; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Historically, though these questions have been answered in varied ways, educational researchers, practitioners, and policymakers continue to struggle to find unanimous responses to each of these questions, responses that

benefit all groups equitably. Of particular challenge in this regard are issues of race and class that often guide, implicitly and explicitly, responses, as well as subsequent reactions, to each question.

While most educational researchers, practitioners, and policymakers agree that education should impart skills that ensure basic functioning in literacy, numeracy, technology, and active citizenship to all students, educational researchers consistently document that minority groups, particularly Blacks, face institutional, curricular, and pedagogical barriers that impede their abilities to succeed academically (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Many of these scholars purport that American education was initially created for and by White, upper middle-class males, and continues to primarily serve this population (Hilliard, 1984). Others report that in most parts of the country, schools with high numbers of minorities lack qualified teachers, are critically underfunded, and remain noticeably segregated in urban centers and away from the more affluent, White, suburban schools (Kozol, 1991).

In order to improve the academic performance of minority youth, many scholars argue that Blacks (as well as other minority groups) have culture-specific educational needs that, understandably, vary significantly from those of their white counterparts, which require that a non-white, or, better, Afrocentric cultural lens be employed to reframe and, ultimately, correct the problems within the educational system that disproportionately negatively impact black students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Latour & Kahn, 1999; Ruiz-de-Velasco et al., 2000).

In sum, CCT aims to combat institutionalized racism and eradicate Eurocentric cultural hegemony that has historically contributed to the poor educational outcomes of minority students. Resultantly, culture-centered theorists highlight how the disconnect between White, dominant school culture and the cultural diversity of racial and ethnic minority students negatively impacts the psychosocial processes, behavior patterns, and academic development of these youth (Gay, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Lee, et al., 1990).

By way of remedy, CCT advocates that education be presented from culturally relevant perspectives, encompass varied bodies of knowledge, and encourage students to learn—about their cultural selves, their cultural communities, and the

world—from their own as well as others' cultural perspectives.

Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogical approach that many culture-centered theorists have adopted to improve the academic engagement and performance of minority youth (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Seen elsewhere as culturally responsive (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Nieto, 2000; Nieto & Bode, 2007) and culturally congruent (Banks, 1999; Hall, 1996; Irvine, 2003) pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogues aim to bridge the disconnect between homes and schools by infusing and incorporating students' cultural experiences in all aspects of learning.

According to Ladson-Billings (1995), the fundamental tenets of culturally relevant teaching require that students: (1) experience academic success; (2) develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and, (3) develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. One of the most important ways that culturally relevant teachers of Black children in particular integrate race into classroom instruction is through the integration of Black cultural interaction styles (call and response, for example), teaching about Black historical figures (like W.E.B. DuBois), and by using texts that include positive Black characters and, thus, that affirm Black identity (Karunugan, 2002).

By consistently including Black research foci and Black cultural representations in the curriculum, scholars and practitioners work against the absence of, as well as the negative depictions of, all historically oppressed and marginalized groups.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

According to Critical Race Theory (CRT), there are two primary types of racism: individual racism and institutional racism. Historically, mainstream U. S. society has viewed and characterized racism only as individually perpetrated acts[3] which cause mental and physical injury, largely through the destruction of property or death (i.e., hate speeches, cross burnings, lynchings, etc.). This type of racism is generally easily viewed by others and can be captured and documented through technological means.

Institutional racism, however, is a more pernicious, often covert form of racism that is generally less visible, but even more destructive of material possessions, as well as human life. However, because institutionalized racism is created and

perpetuated by institutions, it seems like a more anonymous, less concretely tangible point of reference for wrongdoing. As a result of this sense of institutional racism as abstract, it receives less attention in mainstream U. S. society.

With this in mind, CRT provides a theoretical framework through which individually and institutionally motivated racist acts—acts that have in the past impacted and continue in the present to impact the lives of people of color—can be highlighted, critiqued, and corrected. The beginnings of CRT can be traced to the political action taken by law students to put forward their challenges of legal frameworks and interpretations of the law due to the utter lack of attention to race and racism in those traditional frameworks and interpretations (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

These students contested the assumption that laws are colorblind, argued that the Constitution is not objective, and debunked as myth the notion that with hard work alone anyone, regardless of race, can and will necessarily succeed in U. S. society. Instead, these law students promoted recognition of existing, asymmetrical race-consciousness in law and policy. For example, deliberately race-based criminal laws that negatively target only people of color in drug-related offenses on the one hand, and so-called race-neutral civil laws that give unfair and unacknowledged advantage to Whites in employment hiring and educational admissions decisions on the other hand. Subsequently, they called for this consciousness to become unilaterally transparent and, thus, equitable across all areas of societal governance.

Though CRT was, at its inception, a legal construct and instrument, its broad applicability to other areas of human interaction has led to its infusion into other academic disciplines and professional arenas. Educational theorists and practitioners, for instance, have employed CRT as a lens to investigate and critique curriculum development, teaching methodologies, school climate, and PK-12 as well as higher education policies that impact the educational experiences of minority youth (Tate, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, 1999; Tyson, 2003).

Likewise, sociologists have employed CRT as a lens to critique "traditional" sociological thought based on largely Eurocentrically-biased investigations of people of color (Yosso, 2002). The main goal of CRT is to facilitate scholars and activists, and hybrid combinations of both, in developing and implementing ontological, epistemological, and axiomatic constructs through which to impact social, political, economic, and cultural life from a race-based[4] counter-hegemonic location. Though CET recognizes the intersecting and colliding influences of other social identities, such as class and gender, it argues that race should primarily be viewed as an overarching analytic tool to interrogate and critique social inequities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Toward this end, CRT employs four primary tenets:

First, it rejects claims towards neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness, and meritocracy, arguing that these notions systematically devalue Blackness and Brownness by privileging and normalizing Whiteness.

Second it asserts that racism is an embedded and institutionalized facet of U. S. society and, thus, is found at the core of its political, economic, and social structures.

Third, it argues that liberalism has been and always will be, at best, a band-aid type of approach to remedy civil rights-oriented injustices. An oft-cited example of this is a retrospective view of the *Brown* decision—that is has done little to end the educational inequities between Blacks and Whites, and may have even made them worse (Bell, 1993; Freeman, 1995).

Fourth, it uses autobiography and autobiographical narrative, by and/or about people of color, to discuss larger societal issues. In so doing, it contends that the experiences of people of color are absolutely evidencially valid on their face, and should not be discounted in favor of so-called "empirical data" that often has the effect of literally whitewashing history. A classic example of CRT and use of autobiographical narrative is found Bell's *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1993) in which Black Americans' experiences with scapegoating, interracial relationships, and the search for a homeland are used as the basis for exploring and analyzing racism in U. S. policy and law.

Benefits

Cultural Ecological Theory (CET), Culture-Centered Theory (CCT), and Critical Race Theory (CRT) each offer important points of insight for understanding the sociocultural and educational experiences of Black immigrants. Following is an exploration and analysis of those points.

Benefits of CET

By capturing the experiences of immigrant groups in two broad categories, voluntary and involuntary, Cultural Ecological Theory (CET) creates a strong point of entry from which to view the academic achievement and social adaptation patterns of minority youth, particularly Black immigrant youth. According to CET, Black immigrants as a whole have an array of strategic, cognitive, and behavioral options for adjusting to, and succeeding in, the American educational system.

For example, researchers who have used CET to explore the social and academic experiences of Black immigrants and other immigrants of color often point to their use of a "dual frame of reference" (a concept described in a broad range of literature on immigrants, both majority and minority, to the United States as well as to other countries). Dual frame of reference is a cognitive process that allows, in this case, Black immigrant students to view the social and academic barriers they face in the United States through the lens of their experiences in their home countries.

As a result, these students often conclude that, though they may find challenges in the U.S., when they compare these challenges to those in their home countries, they are better off in the United States and, thus, they adjust accordingly (Foster, 2004, Gibson, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999). Similarly, Gibson's work on Punjabi Sikh immigrants has been extended by CET researchers on Black immigrants to illustrate that while many Black immigrants strongly maintain their native culture and values within their homes and in co-ethnic relationships in the United States, they simultaneously master and acclimate to the expected social norms of the dominant culture outside of these contexts, including in schools (Foster, 2004, Gibson, 1988; Valenzuela, 1999).

CET is also useful in furthering understanding of Black immigrant youth's adaptation patterns to Black American culture (and, in this instance, what might arguably be defined as "true" Black American culture). Viewed through the lens of one anthropological concept, "fictive kinship," CET-focused anthropologists describe "kinshiplike relationship between persons not related by blood or marriage in a society, but who have some reciprocal social or economic relationship" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 183).

CET-focused anthropologists argue that fictive kinship's existence in the Black American community is an historically-

contrived result of Whites viewing Blacks as a monolithic group and not allowing them to fully participate in U.S. social and economic systems. Thus, in response, Black Americans use fictive kinship as a tool to transform White-initiated negative assumptions and behaviors and, instead, to build positive community as a highly effective survival mechanism in the context of both indifferent and hostile living and working environments.

Black immigrant youth have added a third dimension to the fictive kinship of Black Americans—using it to mediate their location between Black immigrant family members, Black American peers, and White-dominated society. To understand how Black immigrant youth navigate fictive kinship in this way, it is important to understand that for fictive kinship to work, certain behaviors, namely academic and social ones, must be encouraged and policed by community members.

While not everyone in a Black immigrant youth community may seek to be included in the fictive kinship network being described here, for those who do seek inclusion, fictive kinship manifests itself in very dynamic ways. In the schooling process, for example, Black immigrant youth students are forced to "choose" between the acceptance of their peers (which may mean deliberately thwarting a studious persona), the expectations of adult members of their immediate community (which may demand academic exceptionality with no reference point for such being erroneously socially constructed in some urban communities in the United States as the purview of only White people), and the values and behaviors that they perceive to be sanctioned by the White, dominant society (which often assume and attitudinally communicate to them that their eventual educational failure is a foregone conclusion).

Those who deviate from the peer group-sanctioned expectations, by "acting White" (e.g., achieving academically, using standard English, etc.) in spite of teacher indifference to, or recognition of, their efforts, are denied group membership and are subjected to teasing and ridicule.

It is important to note, here again, that Black American parents, like Black immigrant parents (and, for that matter all other parents of color as well as White parents), have and communicate to their children the expectation that they do well in school. To suggest that these expectations are unique to Black immigrant parents, especially as compared to Black American parents, would be to perpetuate the

erroneous racist view of what constitutes Black American culture discussed previously. That is what makes this research so complex, because it seeks to tease out the unique location and experiences of Black immigrant youth in U. S. schools, without reinforcing stereotypes of Black American youth.

While fictive kinship has traditionally been used to explore the social relationships within the Black American community in the U. S. context (i.e., relative to White Americans) (Stoffle & Shimkin, 1978), clearly, it can also be used as a lens to explore the relationships between and among the increasingly diverse Black population (Black immigrants and Black Americans) in the United States (unrelated to, much less as opposed to, related or unequivocally related to White American as well as White colonial power outside the United States).

While many Black immigrant youth do experience the social and psychological pressures from peers to conform to behaviors that are deemed "Black,"[5] and are often teased and ridiculed if they do not, their parents—first generation Black immigrants—do not have racial identities that are as wrapped up in the underlying anti-white sentiment that drives the "Black enough" litmus testing of their peers. This is because many first generation Black immigrants originate from countries where they are the racial and/or political and economic power majority and, thus, come to the United States with indifference to or ambivalence about or even affinity for the perspectives of Whites. As a result, the perspectives of first generation Black immigrants on Black-White race relations in the United States in particular, are, for the most part, not as negatively charged as might be assumed based on a monolithic view of Black peoples (Dodoo, 1997; Glazer, & Moynihan, 1963; Lewis, 1983; Sowell, 1978).

This is not to say that there have not been Black-White racial divisions in the histories of first generation Black immigrants, as colonialism and colorism did and continues to impact racial (Black vs. White) and, subsequently, intraracial (Black vs. Black) relationships in many African nations and on several Caribbean islands (Bryce-Laporte, 1972; Jackson & Cochran, 2003, Klein, 1993, Silvio, 1995). However, in these histories, hierarchical relationships were not strictly race-based, but also rooted in ethnic distinctions (Bryce-Laporte, 1972) and class relations (Waters, 1994, 1999). Resultantly, many

one-point-five generation[6] and second generation Black immigrants, more similarly to their Black American counterparts, tend to develop racial identities that are connected to anti-White sentiment once they learn about how previous generations of White Americans enslaved or colonized their own ancestors, and/or once they experience the persistent racist sentiments on which those acts were predicated by way of the often subordinate position White Americans (even their age peers) still place them in today simply because of their Blackness (Cross, 1995; Gibson, 1988).

Thus, in the United States, by virtue of their skin color alone, and almost, though not completely, irrespective of generational status, fictive kinship forces many Black immigrant youth to exist in a precarious location that is simultaneously delimited on three fronts.

First, their location is delimited by their often misguided Black American peers who push them to *not* "act White" and, at the same time, to be Black *enough*.[7]

Second, their locations is delimited by their often out-of touch communities of national origin who push them to be *racelessly* academically exceptional (as opposed to defining a uniquely Black—*not* uniquely black immigrant, but rather, decidedly pan-Black—scholarly image as an emphatic, counter-hegemonic challenge to both the "acting White" scholar image and the Black enough anti-scholar image).

Third, their location is delimited by their teachers who push on them—as if it were an addictive drug—the myth of them as racially inferior.[8]

Benefits of CCT

Culture-Centered Theory (CCT) facilitates opportunities for students of color in the United States to develop the affective comfort that allows for cognitive skill building. Students whose cultures are affirmed in school settings are encouraged to learn; as negative images about their cultures are concomitantly diminished or eliminated, they are encouraged to learn more (Lee, et al, 1990).

By placing the cultures of all student of color in the center, as opposed to the margins, of their curricular experiences, CET precludes these students from being made to feel as though their heritages, languages, and cultural traditions are ignored or rejected. Ultimately, CET allows all students to critically engage and analyze dominant society's projection of

their cultures—be those projections overly simplistically constructive and/or destructive, or more robustly and necessarily complex, and thus more accurate.

Benefits of CRT

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an important construct for understanding Black immigrants who have made the United States their home. First, it sheds light on the fact that Black immigrants are racialized as Black in the United States and are, therefore, subjected to the same racial prejudices and discrimination as their native black counterparts.

Several significant news reports that reveal the victimization of Black immigrants, in the same manner of that as Black Americans, substantiate this claim. For example, Sofia Salva, a Sudanese woman in Kansas City, was pulled over during a routine traffic stop (arguably for "driving while Black" [DWB])[9] and subsequently arrested. While in custody, she became medically distressed, repeatedly asked for medical attention which she was denied, and eventually suffered a miscarriage (Radin, 1999). In New York City, Amadou Diallo, a Guinean immigrant, was shot 51 times in front of his home by four police officers who allegedly mistook his wallet for a gun. In 1997, Abner Louima, a Haitian native, was sodomized with a toilet plunger by police officers *while in custody*.

These and numerous other examples reveal the fact that race is more central to how individuals and institutions in the United States in particular address and react to Black immigrants (those racialized as Black despite their varied self-identification on the basis of nationality, ethnicity, language, and other cultural signifiers) *and* Black Americans (those for whom Blackness as an identity signifier has organic significance).

CRT also acts as a vehicle through which the voices of those victimized (as described above) can be heard in a counter-hegemonic fashion. CRT legitimizes the reality of the victimized's oppression by using policy and law to share their experiences with the greater public to elicit outrage and, thus, ultimately, to bring about social change.

Sofia Salva filed a lawsuit against her two arresting officers and the Kansas City Police Department for personal injuries and the wrongful death of her unborn baby. Amadou Diallo's murder spurred the development of an anti-racial profiling policy in New York City. Abner Louima's

rape and torture led to the "Day of Outrage Against Police Brutality and Harassment" demonstration in New York City (Karl & Tyre, 1997) and was cited as an example of institutional human rights violations in the United States in the *1998 Amnesty International Report for Human Rights* (Amnesty International, 2000).

The accumulation of tragic cases such as these has resulted in important dialogue within the Black immigrant population in the United States, and globally, regarding the impact race and racism has on those labeled Black in the United States and, thus, the urgent need for pan-Black solidarity and action to bring about social justice.

Conclusion

Clearly, each of these theories, Cultural Ecological Theory (CET), Culture-Centered Theory (CCT), and Critical Race Theory (CRT), have contributed to the ways in which the social and environmental experiences of Black immigrants in the United States are examined and understood. In sum, CET provides a conceptual grounding from which rich data concerning the social and educational experiences of Black immigrant youth in North America's schools can emerge. CCT urges educational scholars and practicioners to match the curriculum and pedagogy with students' cultures in order to improve educational performance. And, by foregrounding race, CRT reveals the devastating impact racism has on the lives of people of color, especially those raced as Black in the United States.

Limitations

Though Critical Ecological Theory (CET), Culture-Centered Theory (CCT), and Critical Race Theory (CRT) each offer insight into various aspects of Black immigrant life in the United States, they are also limited by the degree to which they have focused on and, thus, can be applied to understand the experiences of Black immigrant youth in U. S. schools. These limitations will now be discussed.

Limitations of CET

While Cultural Ecological Theory (CET) provides a provocative springboard for scholars to discuss minority students' educational experiences, it has also generated a significant body of criticism.

One area of this criticism focuses on the voluntary immigrant and involuntary immigrant constructs. The criticism here argues that these constructs project an

erroneously monolithic view of the groups included in each construct, which has led to the tendency to oversimplify the immigrant and/or minority experiences that subgroup and individual members of both larger groups have had (Bashi & McDaniel, 1997; Foster 2004; Martin, 2000).

Clearly, significant differences exist between all *individuals* in terms of historical trajectories, ages, age at immigration, racial and ethnic identities, cultural traditions, adherence to cultural traditions, socioeconomic class background, gender, gender identity and expression, parents' education level, political affiliation, and amount of social interactions with like and different peers (Lee, et al., 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Waters, 1999). Yet, despite these obvious differences, embedded in the CET framework is an assumption that the construct—voluntary or involuntary—into which a student falls, *determines* how that student (as well as all of the other members of her or his entire construct group) will socially adapt and approach education. These constructs obscure a student's and a group's agency, and discount the capacity of both to resist or adopt the particular attitudes and behaviors associated with each construct (Noguera, 2001).

Another area of criticism related to CET pertains to its lack of attention to interracial and intraracial relations between and among voluntary and involuntary groups as a whole, the minority groups included in both in particular, and its over-attentive focus on these minority groups' relationships to the White majority. While the comparison between the White majority group and the various voluntary and involuntary minority groups can be useful in examining the significant differences each of the latter groups have toward the former one, the comparison does not address the fettering discord that is occurring within and among the latter groups independent of their individual and collective relationship to the former group (Jackson & Cochran, 2003; Waters, 1999).

For example, while the relationship between immigrant Blacks and Black Americans is superficially addressed (and, in so being, is, perhaps, overstated as only contentious) in various academic and political circles (Jackson & Cochran, 2003; Traore & Lukens, 2006), there appears to be a reluctance to deeply characterize this relationship and, more importantly, to develop practical strategies for building pan-Black community in rigorous research communities.

A final area of criticism of CET por-

trays Black immigrants, in contrast to Black Americans, as being more willing to submit to racial stereotypes and to accept substandard societal roles in order to succeed in the United States. But many Black immigrants, and across more than one immigrant generation, have historically fought (and continue today to fight) to challenge inaccurate representations and end especially racial oppression in various parts of the world, including, and perhaps particularly, in the United States (Goff et al., 2008; Karl & Tyre, 1997; Logan & Deane, 2003; Ramasubramanian, 2007; Rogers, 2001; Stepick, 1998; Waters, 1999).

For example, Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican immigrant, advanced and promoted ideas through his political activism for ending the oppression of people of African descent internationally. Shirley Chisholm, the child of a Barbadian mother and a Guyanese father, fought as an elected official to better the conditions of existence of inner-city residents especially by improving and expanding education and social services provision to marginalized groups. Progressive musicians, Bob Marley, from Jamaica, and Fela Kuti, from Nigeria, used their music to bring attention and counter-hegemonic political perspectives to the struggles of Blacks in their home countries and globally.

Limitations of CCT
or Culturally Responsive for Whom?

As previously discussed, Culture-Centered Theory (CCT) articulates the benefits to the social and academic adjustment of Black American students of affirming the cultures from which they come by actively connecting these cultures to the curriculum. While these curricularly-based cultural connections have always been important (*especially* for White students), as student populations become increasingly diverse their importance is amplified several-fold.

Thus, teachers must be highly adept in making the social-culture and academic-culture connections their students need to ensure these students' school success. And this is where the limitations of CCT emerge. Tacit assumptions exist within CCT, inclusive of its culturally relevant pedagogy component, related to the definition of culture and to the delineation of curricularly-responsive cultural affirmation that have huge implications for teachers and students alike.

A first implication comes to the fore when considering the elusive, dynamic, and fluid nature of culture (Yon, 2000).

Thus, in integrating culture-centered frameworks and culturally relevant pedagogical practices into the curriculum the following four questions arise: (1) How is culture defined? (2) By whom is culture defined? (3) How is culture acknowledged within classrooms? and (4) Which cultures, belonging to whom, get classroom acknowledgement?

Many scholars note that culture is viewed and experienced in highly differential ways across varied academic subject matter, and among humans in various generational and geographic contexts (e.g., locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally) (Han, 1996; Yon, 2000). In schools settings, cultural realities, as well as understandings of these realities, vary from student to student, classroom to classroom, and teacher to teacher. Thus, the manner in which the four aforereferenced questions get addressed, if they get consciously addressed at all, in curriculum content and by pedagogical approach, determines, in large measure which and to what degree students are culturally affirmed (Banks, 1999; Gay, 1999, 2005; Irvine, 2003; Ladson-Billings 1994, 1995).

Proponents of CCT need to develop, clearly articulate, and widely disseminate a "working definition" of culture that teachers can adapt to their varied teaching contexts. Equally important, teachers (and, subsequently their students) need to embrace learning about the range of different cultures that exist in their academic communities.

While some of this learning can be done by teachers (who are motivated to do so) on their own, most of it needs to be done in teacher preparation programs and in-service professional development offerings to ensure that, in learning and then teaching about culture and in culturally responsive manners, teachers do not reify or newly acquire and then transmit cultural stereotypes, which can lead to (further) marginalization and disempowerment of students who do not culturally identify with the so-called cultural "norms" being taught about them and/or "culturally relevant" practices being employed to teach them.

A second implication here is that culturally relevant instruction requires educators to approach their teaching as research with their students. A major component of this research must include ongoing teacher critical reflection about their teaching styles (Howard, 2003). This is absolutely necessary in order for educators to become skilled culturally responsive

pedagogists, yet, the expectation that teachers prioritize this places one more responsibility on them in a teaching context in which teachers are already tragically overburdened with large class sizes and administrative responsibilities that, increasingly, are dictated by high stakes testing and curriculum standardization (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Murrell, 2001; Nieto, 2000; Nieto & Bode, 2007).

Further, culturally responsive instruction requires teachers to develop keen understanding of the neocolonial political climate in which most teaching is, unfortunately, taking place today. This has the effect of discouraging teachers from developing robust understandings of the cultural communities and the larger cultural contexts from which their students hail (Nieto & Bode, 2007). Instead, teachers develop so-called cultural sensitivity that is, in truth, based on superficial, oversimplified, and reductionist interpretations of students' cultures ascribed on the basis of student appearance or perceived background (rather than on thoughtful and accurate assessment of students' geographic origin, ethnicity, age, generational status, gender, and other social markers). Engaging in only cultural ascription exacerbates stereotypes that further marginalize and alienate students who are already culturally isolated in schools.

A third implication in this regard is that culturally responsive pedagogy, which purports to provide instructional support for teachers to learn how to affirm students of color so that they can thrive socially and academically, often does so without attention to the sociopolitical context in which this affirmation is taking place (Nieto & Bode, 2007). This is often referred to as a "heroes and holidays" approach to multicultural education. Instead, for culturally responsive instruction to be meaningful and, thus, effective, it must integrate, covertly and overtly, and in age-appropriate and subject-specific ways, understanding of what it means to be a person of color in the context of U. S. racism.

While there is some benefit for all students to having authentic, culturally reflexive curricular components, there is much greater benefit especially to students of color when these components also confront discrimination and related inequities that are embedded within the cultural, social, political, and economic infrastructure in the United States (Nieto 2000; Spring, 2006).

So, how then does CCT prepare teachers to facilitate students to skillfully negotiate the challenges they may

face because of their color, immigration status, language, cultural traditions, and socioeconomic class? What tools does CCT prepare teachers to offer these students to enable them to successfully transect various forms of discrimination?

Further, considering the gross over-representation of White, middle-class, female teachers and White, middle-class, female teacher education students, how comfortable, confident, and capable are these teachers/will these future teachers be in teaching about and, further, in interrogating especially the controversial aspects of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, and other dimensions of cultural identity, especially if they themselves have never been taught in these areas, much less had organic experience managing discrimination on the basis of membership in non-dominant groups in these and other identity categories?

Absent this preparation, teachers, especially White teachers, can not, despite a culturally responsive instructor or multicultural educator label, adequately prepare their students to negotiate their culturally informed academic and professional selves in a politically and economically charged racist society.

Limitations of CRT

The United States was, and continues to be, constructed and organized around race and racism. Resultantly, Critical Race Theory (CRT), as previously discussed, is an extremely useful theoretical framework for examining the influence of race and the effects of racism on the lives of people of color, particularly Blacks, in the United States. To some extent in the past, and continuing today, people identified as Black have been united in their responses to racism in the United States (Rogers, 2006). But, to a larger extent, the manners in which Black Americans, Caribbean Islanders, and Africans experience, understand, and discuss race and racism in the United States are radically different (Brown & Rong, 2002; Waters, 1999).

Although CRT scholars have begun to study and interrogate these differences (Dodoo, 1997; Ogbu, 1991; Waters, 1994), this topic has, to date, received only limited attention. What is needed is ample, focused inquiry about what race and racism mean to Black people within and across Black groups, and contextualized by attention to nationality, immigration status, language, ethnicity, and religion, among other markers of cultural identity.

Focusing inquiry on race alone ignores these other markers that have significant impact on the social, educational, political, and economic experiences of all Blacks, but especially Black immigrants, and, thus, also on how they negotiate the construct of race and the impact of racism in their lives in the United States.

Conclusion

Cultural Ecological Theory (CET), Culture-Centered Theory (CCT), and Critical Race Theory (CRT) all shed light on the sociocultural and educational experiences of black immigrant youth. But there is much more light to be shed and, unfortunately, CET, CCT, and CRT show their illuminatory limitations in a number of ways.

First, these theories operate primarily inside a Black/White paradigmatic view of race. Though this decidedly U. S.-based view is widely influential—having major impact on race relations both historically and continuing today, both inside the United States and beyond its borders due to the influence (for better and for worse) of the United States abroad—focusing strictly on this binary ignores realities of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity and interaction, as well as potential alliances and increasing tensions, between and among people of color (Martinez, 2000; Nieto & Bode, 2007).

Second, these theories project one notion of Blackness, which generally equates Black to African American. While many Black immigrants will experience the same kinds of racial prejudice and discrimination based on the color of their skin that African Americans do, homogenizing Blacks in this way constrains in-depth, sociological investigations of other differences between and among Blacks—it assumes a certain type of homogeneity of thought, experience, and value, thus ignoring or downplaying the unique perspectives, experiences, and needs across the myriad of Black immigrant groups, including African Americans.

These uniquenesses within the race and across ethnicities (which reflect, among other things, differences in language, national origin, and religion to name only a few) have in the past impacted, and continue today to impact, the social, political, and economic mobility (or lack thereof) of Black immigrants prior to and after arrival in the United States (Awokoya, 2004; Rogers, 2001; Silvio, 1995).

Third, gender-related expectations and the "masculinist bias" in many African and Caribbean nations are lost in the discussions these theories put forth. Though CRT makes an effort to address sexism, it does so in a very superficial way as far as its applicability to black immigrants is concerned. For example, CRT provides little insight for understanding how gender interacts with present-day sterilization practices of Black immigrants, or majority female migration from Caribbean countries, or the gendered social and educational experiences of Black immigrant girls and boys (Ho, 1993; Lopez, 2003; Zephir, 2001).

Summation

As the number of Black immigrants continues to rise in the United States, it is important to recognize the impact of their presence in American communities and schools, especially the specific, unique needs of students who come from these populations. Individually, the theories examined herein offer useful insights for understanding the experiences of Black immigrant youth. However, they are not focused enough, nor robust enough, to capture the sociocultural and educational experiences of Black immigrant youth in meaningful ways.

Future theoretical and empirical studies of Black immigrants and their school-aged children must focus on elucidating understandings of the intricacies of Black immigrant ethnic and racial identification. These studies must also explore the strengths and limitations inherent in Black immigrants' strategies for adapting to life in the United States, because such exploration can positively inform the patterns of adaptation that other racialized immigrant groups may choose.

Finally, further research must examine the social and economic positions of Black immigrants in their native countries, focusing on differences that emerge on the bases of national origin, as well as national origin vis-à-vis ethnic identity and gender norms, and then link this research to that seeking explanations of Black immigrant experiences *within* the United States. In this way, U.S.-specific understanding of Black immigrants (and their children's educational needs) will become more nuanced, more thorough (that is, diasporic rather than episodic in orientation), and, ultimately, more accurate both pre and post immigration.

With such understanding in hand, the schooling experiences of Black immigrant youth in particular, but all Black youth in general, can be systematically improved and sustained.

Notes

[1] The perception, real or imagined, that Black Americans often express about Black immigrants is that the latter "think they are better than us."

[2] This is not a unanimously held sentiment among all voluntary immigrants, and to the extent that this sentiment is held it can wear away over time as the dream does not live up to the reality despite immense effort to bring it to fruition. Too, the impact of U. S. racism on voluntary immigrants of color is often unexpected and, thus, difficult to negotiate as it persists. This is one of the critiques of Ogbu's voluntary/involuntary constructs. Other critiques are discussed later in the Limitations section of the article.

[3] This is based on the notion of a "few bad apples spoiling the entire bushel," rather than something being wrong with the entire apple tree. While most U.S. citizens have some awareness of "Civil Rights," the extent to which this awareness connects to an understanding of racism as embedded in the very fabric of U. S. policy and law is, according to CRT, limited.

[4] See Delgado Stefancic (2001) for an in-depth discussion of how race is defined in CRT.

[5] Which may, to some extent, be socioeconomically based as well.

[6] Immigrant youth who move to the United States after birth, but prior to age twelve.

[7] See Fordham & Ogbu (1986) for a more in-depth discussion of the "acting White" and "not Black enough" identity constructs.

[8] This pushing by teachers can occur as a function of both overt (conscious) and covert (sub-conscious and unconscious) individual racism, as well as via institutional manifestations of the same that are embedded in and transmitted through school culture.

[9] While there may have been a legitimate reason for this traffic stop, the lack of action toward this woman's medical distress once she was in custody retrospectively calls whatever legitimacy may have existed into serious question.

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