

# Understanding the African–American Student Experience in Higher Education through a Relational Dialectics Perspective

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# Diversity and Inclusion Efforts in Higher Education

- ▶ Types of Diversity Programs
- ▶ Student Affairs
- ▶ Campus Initiatives
- ▶ Challenges for Predominately White Institutions

# Theoretical Orientation

- ▶ Intercultural Communication
- ▶ Relational Dialectics Theory (Baxter 2011)
  - Understanding Tensions (Black–White)
  - Individual/Personal Experience
  - Group/Social Experience

# Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) Defined

- ▶ “RDT is a theory of relational meaning making—that is how meaning surrounding individual and relationship identities are constructed through language use” and how these meanings are constructed from utterances that are part of “competing, often contradictory, discourses” (Baxter, 2011, p. 2).

# Research Focus: African–American Student Experience

- ▶ Ontological Perspective:
  - What is the African–American Student experience like?
  - Focus on students perspectives
  - Consideration of Student Audiences (e.g., Hispanic, First Generation, Native–American, GLBTQ)

# Research Questions

- ▶ RQ1: How, if at all, do African–American students experience internal intra–individual dialectical tensions within the university setting?
- ▶ RQ2: How, if at all, do African–American students experience an external inter–group dialectical tension within the university setting?

# Methodology

- ▶ Qualitative/Critical Tradition
- ▶ Interviews (28 students interviewed)
- ▶ Focus Groups (6, two at each university)
- ▶ Study was conducted through the assistance of African-American students attending three separate universities in three parts of the country. predominantly white, research institutions

# Results

- ▶ Three Intra-individual dialectical tension categories and two Inter-group dialectical tension categories were derived from the focus group and interview transcripts. In the slides that follow, each category is examined through representative excerpts from the focus group discussion and individual interview transcripts.

# Intra-Individual Dialectical Tensions

- ▶ Intra-individual dialectics highlight the internal forces representing the inherent contradictions between one's personal identity and the social expectations the individual feels. Intra-individual dialectics focus on an African-American student's internal tension.

# Blackness–Whiteness

- ▶ A specific struggle that emerged from the data was a battle within the African–American student between her or his “blackness” and the perceived “whiteness” of his or her university. The dialectical pull occurred within the subjects as they struggled to be proud of themselves and their “blackness,” and at the same time, they struggled to learn and adapt to the “whiteness” of their schools.

# Example 1

- ▶ “There is a war going on inside of me between my blackness and your whiteness. When I see myself in the mirror, I see a competent, talented black woman. Then I go to class, look around, and realize that I need more. My blackness seems too . . . um . . . black, like I need to be more than who I am, I need what you [as a white person] have. I need an understanding of how things work, you know, politically. My blackness, my personhood isn't enough. I need to whiten myself to succeed.”

# Example 2

- ▶ “I grew up in an all black neighborhood and school. I had never seen so many white people in a classroom before. Suddenly, I was the minority and I did not feel comfortable speaking out in class. I had this idea that blacks and white had two different languages.”

# Talking-Silence

- ▶ Whether in an academic, social, or professional setting, African-American students struggled between talking with others, especially about their culture, or maintaining silence around others, especially concerning their culture.

# Example 1

- ▶ “We read a book by Toni Morrison. The professor discussed the importance of the book for African–Americans. I wanted to stand up and talk about Morrison's writing and how it really resonates within the African–American community. At the same time, I did not want to perpetuate stereotypes or draw attention to myself as a black man trying to explain a black writer to a white audience.”

# Example 2

- ▶ “The only time I am asked to speak is if an issue about slavery or the ghettos enters the realm of conversation. I wasn't around for slavery. I don't live in a ghetto. I have other thoughts, but they don't seem important to anyone else. So why bother to talk at all?”

# Past–Future

- ▶ Internally, African–American students struggled with the dialectical pull between their past and their future. The past could be defined as the relationships students had with their families, friends, and communities before attending their universities. Loyalty to family, friends, and the community— to one’s roots—is a strong part of African–American culture.

# Example

- ▶ “We had a family reunion this summer and I sat in the middle of these people who were connected to me through blood, and I just wanted to scream. I didn't fit any longer. We share a family, but we share nothing else in life. I want to make it and have a job-- they keep asking why I'm not married. I don't even bother explaining the idea that I am preparing myself for law school.”

# Inter-Group Dialectical Tensions

- ▶ Inter-group dialectical tensions highlight the external forces that represent the inherent contradictions between the social values of the dominant white university culture and those ideologies of smaller co-cultures.

# Integration–Segregation

- ▶ Inter–group dialectical tensions highlight the external forces that represent the inherent contradictions between the social values of the dominant white university culture and those ideologies of smaller co–cultures.

# Example

- ▶ Student 1: As a group, we do not need the university to recognize us. We can make it on our own.
- ▶ Student 2: No, we don't need them, but still, if we want an education, if we want financial aid, we can't piss 'em off. We have to extend the hand.
- ▶ Student 1: But is it worth selling ourselves out in order to be a part of this university? We should be able to achieve it on our own.
- ▶ Student 3: Saying we should do it on our own is like you think everybody who belongs to a group or ethnicity shouldn't give or receive help from anyone else. That's the problem with our culture. We don't know when to stand up and fight and when to join hands in unity.
- ▶ Student 2: Its just hard to know when to "play the game" and when to assert yourselves.
- ▶ Student 3: Its not about getting help, it is about being apart of the university, this community. Do we want to be or not?
- ▶ Student 1: Sure, we want to be recognized, to be a part. But, how? Life is just easier when I'm just with my [African-American peers].

# Revelation–Concealment

- ▶ Similar to the Intra–individual dialectic of Talking–Silence, African–American students, as a group, experienced a dialectical tension of Revelation–Concealment. African–American students wanted to educate university members about the African–American culture. Simultaneously, African–American students wanted to protect their culture from other in the university. These students fluctuated between the desire to conceal themselves from the very people for whom they want to reveal themselves.

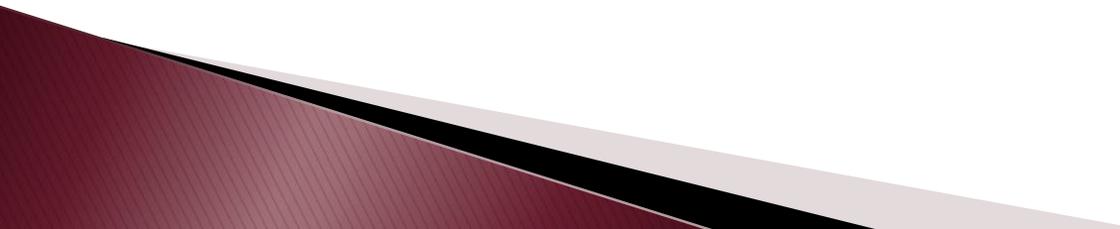
# Example 1

- ▶ “The first meeting we had this big argument over who our target audience was with the performances we were planning. At first, we thought that the performances should just be for our African-American peers because we wanted to give something to them and we knew they'd be supportive. On the other hand, we thought that these performances would be a great opportunity to share the merits of black literature, that is ignored in English classes, with our white peers. We felt we could share our culture with them. It could serve instructional and inspirational purposes. But, you are never sure if they would show up and if they did, would they appreciate it?”

# Example 2

- ▶ Student: I fall into the group of African–Americans who thinks enough is enough. No, I don't want to educate white people about my experiences. They don't really care, if they did every time they were told about the injustices of Rosa Parks they would have done something. Every time they saw the life of our brothers and sisters in the projects they would have done something. Every time they saw the effects of drugs on our people, they would have stopped selling them to us. White people haven't demonstrated a willingness to change. Education isn't the answer.
- ▶ Interviewer: why did you agree to talk with me [a white person] if you don't believe in [laughing]
- ▶ Student: [laughing] I guess because I'm not as radical as I hoped. I want things to be different.
- ▶ Interviewer: Do you think sharing with me will help?
- ▶ Student: I don't think people care how African–Americans survive in college as long as they can say every year that one percent of their students are black.

# Policy and Curriculum Implications

- ▶ Academia must implement curricular and administrative changes to foster a more positive university experience for African-American students.
  - ▶ Predominantly white universities must act as relational partners with African-American students to create a more intellectually and culturally rich experience for students, faculty, and administrators.
  - ▶ Colleges and universities should encourage white students and students of color to jointly develop multicultural programs that aim to improve understanding between different ethnicities and races.
  - ▶ Colleges and universities must make a commitment to provide instructors with training on cultural diversity inclusion and ways to address racial tensions.
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# Resources / References / Questions

- ▶ <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/07/18/study-highlights-inner-struggles-african-american-students#sthash.bMr9WF5F.dpbs>
- ▶ [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/23/black-students-white-colleges-cultural-identity\\_n\\_3640749.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/23/black-students-white-colleges-cultural-identity_n_3640749.html)
- ▶ **Wahl, S.T.** (with Simmons, J., Lowry-Hart., R., & McBride, M.C.) (2013). Understanding the African-American Student Experience in Higher Education through a Relational Dialectics Perspective. *Communication Education*, 62, 376-394.
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