Educator Q&A
Equity Minded Competence in Higher Education
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What underlying mechanisms of equity make it more likely than diversity to achieve social justice, and why does it matter to minoritized students?

Social work doctoral student Lalaine (Lainey) Sevillano shares her reflections on how dismantling her ecology of inequalities requires equity across macro, meso and micro levels.

Resisting the Ecology of Inequality as a Filipinx Woman, First Generation, Immigrant, Student, and Mother

Three sisters were walking by the river when they noticed babies floating downstream. The first sister quickly jumped into the river and began to scoop the babies out. The second sister also jumped in and began to teach the babies how to swim. The third sister did not jump in but instead began to walk upstream to investigate the cause of this phenomenon. They often teach this parable in social work to highlight the various ways to intervene on the micro, meso, and macro levels. Initially, I used this parable as a metaphor to describe my professional goals. By earning my doctorate and becoming a professor, I will simultaneously embody all three sisters: jumping in to assist vulnerable populations, teaching others how to effect change, and investigating social issues to inform policy and practice. However, the more I progress toward my goal the more I realize that there is a different meaning to this parable. Drawing from Carter's (2018) ecology of inequality and intersectionality theory (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw 1991), I reflect on my path to pursuing a doctorate and how micro, meso, and macro level inequalities affected my educational journey.

Who Am I and What Grounds Me?

I am an immigrant from the Philippines, a cisgender woman of color, and a first-generation college student from a lower socioeconomic status. At the start of my doctorate program, I have added mother to my collection of social identities. These identities and the lived experiences associated with them have provided me with a critical lens to approach research with a commitment to social justice. I see research as a path to resist oppression and to challenge power hierarchies. My research agenda and goals for equity are guided by

intersectionality theory, which posits critiquing, reflecting, and transforming systemic inequality as experienced by those with multiple marginalized identities.

Intersectionality allows me to focus on the "interactive, mutually constitutive relationship among these categories" (Hancock, 2007, p. 67) and how these relationships intersect with actors in the micro, meso, and macro levels. Carter (2018) describes the three levels as follows: (1) micro level consists of "the interactions among people in schools and communities and the ideas to which we subscribe and adhere"; (2) the meso level encompasses the "categorization tools" used by our communities, including schools and families that "reinforce exclusion, segregation, and discrimination"; and (3) the macro level constitutes the "sociohistorical and sociopolitical phenomena" that have "accumulated material consequences" (p. 2).

Part 1 of this reflection focuses on how the micro, meso, and macro systems have worked and continue to work together to impede my education. Part 2 offers a framework for disrupting these systems. By critically reflecting on my own educational journey, I aim to identify opportunities to intervene at each ecological level, limiting the systemic inequality facing students with multiply burdened social identities.

Part I: My Ecology of Inequality

Micro Inequalities

The micro system was (is) constantly socializing me to believe that higher education is not for me. In the Filipino culture, girls are traditionally expected to prioritize household chores over educational tasks. I fought this tradition and became the first in my family to attend college. When I was applying to doctoral programs, a program director asked, "Were you born here?" When I answered in the negative, she proceeded to tell me that I must take the Test of English as a Foreign Language as part of my admission application. To her credit, she did add, "But, I think you speak English pretty well." Unfortunately, this perpetual foreigner stereotype (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007) occurs repeatedly throughout my educational journey.

Meso Inequalities

My high school had 5,000 students, but only one college counselor. That one college counselor advised me to take as many advanced placement (AP) courses as possible to be competitive in the college admissions game. Due to the overcrowding, the school was on a multitrack schedule instead of the traditional schedule. Research shows that multitrack schedules negatively affect academic performance (Graves, 2010). The

multitrack schedule made it challenging to take AP courses because they were dispersed across the three tracks. One such challenge occurred when the AP English language and composition teacher did not allow me to enroll in her class, claiming that the course was specifically designed for students in the Academy of Performing Arts. She became irate when she discovered I had signed up to take the AP exam anyway, foregoing her class and her permission. I later realized that she did not want me to take the exam in fear of lowering her pass rate. Despite this concerted effort by the micro and meso systems, I increased her pass rate.

Macro Inequalities

The Asian model minority myth perpetuates the idea that as a Filipinx, I fall under the umbrella of Asian and thus do not need support to access, persist, and achieve. Filipinx issues, experiences, and voices in academia are silenced. The Asians that you hear about with high SAT scores, tons of extracurricular activities, and consequently high admittance rates are usually not Filipinx. Instead, Filipinx high school students have higher attrition rates (Okamura & Agbayani, 1997; Posadas, 1999) and lower rates of admission and retention than East Asians (Okamura, 1998).

My primary struggles as an undergraduate student are great examples of the macro system at work. An introductory course in education taught me that education disparities not only exist, but that the gaps also widen throughout the P-20 pipeline. I remember feeling ashamed to learn that I fit the characteristics of a student who was not college-bound (i.e., immigrant, low socioeconomic status, first generation). I began to believe the data and became a self-fulfilling prophecy (Steele & Aronson, 1995) with internal dialogues such as "since I attended a high school with low academic performance rankings, I am ill-prepared for the rigor of college academia, thus explaining my low grades."

There are only 113 tenured/tenure-track Filipinx American professors in social sciences, education, and humanities across the United States (Nadal, 2016). According to the United States Department of Education (2014), only 2% of full-time professors at postsecondary institutions are Asian women. Consequently, the actual percentage of Filipinx women professors is even lower. Filipinx grad students noted that being the only Filipinx American student in their programs was a major challenge, and that there was a lack of faculty support/mentorship because there were no Filipinx faculty mentors at their universities (Nadal, Pituc, Johnston, & Esparrago, 2010).

The higher I have scaled the education ladder, the lonelier I have become. Yes, there are Asians in higher education, but when I look around the classroom, I am usually the only Filipinx. This loneliness also leads to shame. I dealt with body dysmorphic disorder, anxiety, and depression silently for years because nobody else in the community was talking about mental health. Yes, there are students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, but when I look around the classroom, I am usually the only one in the room supporting parents financially to the extent of providing them with a roof over their heads. Yes, there are women on campus, but when I look around the classroom, I am usually the only mother in the room. I am silently dealing with sleep deprivation, the frustration of not being able to perform at a level I was accustomed to, and the guilt of not having a typical 9-to-5 job that allows me to earn a livable wage not have to bring work home.

Part II: Framework for Disrupting the Micro, Meso, and Macro Systems

I do not offer these comparisons to perpetuate the perils of identity politics (i.e., Oppression Olympics [Yuval-Davis, 2012]), but instead to paint a picture of the ecology of inequality that I live in as shaped by my identity intersections. Collectively, my experiences illustrate the challenges created by the micro, meso, and macro systems and how difficult it is to persist amidst this ecology of inequality.

Dismantling the ecologies of inequality and creating educational journeys that facilitate access, retention, and achievement of people who hold multiple-burdened social identities requires multidimensional solutions (Carter, 2018). Garces and Gordon da Cruz (2017) offered a strategic framework for doing this equity work, specifically outlining how to intervene on the micro, meso, or macro levels: "1) attending to the dynamic relationship among race, power, and identities, 2) actively naming and addressing hidden contributors to inequity and 3) generating power among marginalized communities toward transformative policies" (p.10).

On a micro level, Carter (2018) stated that educators must learn how to engage students in difficult conversations about identities and power. I agree but would like to add that educators must also start with themselves. My own examples have shown that educators are not immune to biases. The Center for Urban Education states that to become equity-minded, we must critically reflect and work on ourselves by challenging biases and stereotypes, recognizing when change is needed and becoming more accountable for reducing disparities. By examining those biases educators can begin to actively name and address inequities (second tenet of the Garces and Gordon de Cruz framework). By addressing these inequities, educators can then move to the third goal of admitting, retaining, and supporting marginalized students (as well as faculty

members) in hopes of developing a critical mass for transformation. For example, that program director who assumed I was an international student probably was never taught about the effects of microaggressions. Now that the program director is sitting in a position of power such biases discourage students like myself from applying to that program. Consequently, that person's bias limits the collective power of marginalized students to transform inequitable policies and practices.

The Resistance Continues

Diversity is typically viewed from a race-ethnicity lens. Moving beyond this unidimensional perspective, I wonder how many of the Asian women who currently represent the 2% of full-time professors are immigrants? Are first generation college students? Are from low socioeconomic status backgrounds? Are mothers? Higher education continues to develop various initiatives to increase diversity because it is believed to be a panacea for educational disparities. Yet diversity is not enough to transform inequitable policies and practices, because it merely celebrates the increase in numbers. Instead we must shift our goals from making higher education more diverse to making it more equitable (Stewart, 2017) to truly revise the abusive systems and to increase support for the people we are supposed to be celebrating. Support from higher education institutions needs to reach minoritized students long before students fill out college applications and solutions must also be multidimensional (Carter, 2018). The ecology of inequalities that minoritized students like myself have to navigate just to access higher education is disheartening—and once we are here, persistence is not guaranteed. Dismantling ecologies of inequalities is a continuous process, but the first step is becoming equity-minded.

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