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Literacy and Racial Experiences

Race is a sensitive social issue that affects the world society in many aspects. Since there is no scientific or empirical evidence that race and ethnicity exist, the phenomena are perceptions nurtured by different environments in which different communities reside. Despite the fact that race is a mere illusion in the modern society, it wields power to determine people's attitudes towards each other (Lusca 2). I accepted the reality of this perspective through my experience as a Chinese student in America. Apart from the use of colour as the distinguishing characteristic of races, other distinct factors define race. Various aspects of culture affect race as much as it is defined by skin colour. Furthermore, language is the major aspect of culture. People associate different races with different cultures, and thus different languages. The ability of an individual to understand spoken or written messages in a certain language will influence the society's opinion on the ethnicity and race of the person. This is evidenced by my experiences in the interaction with different races within the United States.

My first experience on entry into the United States was the rejection of my native language. One would be considered semi-illiterate because he or she had rudimentary English skills. The issue of race arose because English is traditionally a language for Caucasian whites. When I first started my studies in the college, it seemed unacceptable in social circles and in class, that I was not as fluent in English as American nationals were. Class participation is important for students studying in the United States since it determines the grade a student gets regardless of his or her mastery of other disciplines (Yuan146). In the

first few months of study, I observed that foreign students faced the same problem, particularly those who were from countries that did not speak any European language. It was evident that race was a major determinant of who was literate and who was not in college.

I observed that people who could speak any Caucasian language were considered more capable of learning, regardless of whether they understood English or not. The prejudice in the society that makes language and race a sensitive issue in college is a result of the society's tendency to acknowledge existence of races that speak different languages. The fact that one spoke Chinese made people label one a foreign oriental student. My Chinese colleagues who could hear and speak English well were considered Americans based on the English literacy skills. For example, in the beginning of studies, college professors were often concerned that Chinese students may not grasp whatever he or she taught, but they were not equally concerned for the plight of Italian or French speaking students. The tutor's concern may be genuine, but the failure to express concern for the French-speaking students indicated that knowledge of Caucasian languages was standard informal parameter for literacy.

Another experience as an international student in an American college is poor performance due to inability to express myself clearly in English. English itself is a broad and complex language that requires years of study for one to speak and write with perfection. Since English grammar is necessary to express answers in the examination in a comprehensible manner, language was always a setback for foreign students. I had to spare time to study English as a necessary step towards communicating properly with tutors and other students. However, lack of practice and proper orientation would not allow me to match my English literacy skills to those of the native English-speaking students. I usually performed worse than I would expect in assignments and exams since tutors would find it difficult to understand whatever I wanted to illustrate in writing. My colleagues and I would perform poorly compared to native English speakers because of their inability to understand

English and express themselves clearly in the language. In turn, the poor performance would further cement the idea that we, the international students who could not speak proper English, were intellectually poor. The dogma of necessity of English literacy strengthens people's perception of race and the superiority of English-speaking students. Gradually the society has accepted the notion that English is a language for a superior race, and thus, anyone who does not have advanced literacy skills in English is of lesser intellectual ability (Yuan 151). The lesser English skills one has in the United States, the lower the society ranks one in regard to racial perfection (Stevens 6). An imbalance exists on how languages are appreciated in the academic field. Students in countries where English is not spoken perform well despite having their courses defined in other languages. This makes the perceived necessity of English literacy a feeling rather than a realistic deduction. Ethnicity and race is closely associated with language because of the society's perception (Lusca 3). As I continued studying English and learning how to express myself in written and spoken English, I was slowly accepted as a student who spoke the desired language. However, the same experience awaits those foreign students who will seek further education in an English speaking society in future since language is still an indicator of racial affiliations in the modern society.

In my interactions with students, I realised that the belief in supremacy of English prevailed even among the victims of racial categorization. It is accurate to say that the perceptions that propagate the idea of race and fundamental differences between them are sustained by the willingness of the society to acknowledge the existence of race. It is ironic that even those who are negatively affected by racial perceptions, whether based on language or colour, still appreciate the existence of distinct races. For this reason, race remains an important issue in education and other important sectors of the world society. However, race plays no important role in the society, but affects the performance of minority who are

considered to be of different racial background. It is also evident that there are distinguishing characteristics of race. While it is not acceptable to use height and weight of people as a parameter of determining race, the society accepts the use of colour and language to distinguish racial affiliations. The use of language literacy as a measure of one's relationship to a certain ethnic group or race is also a perception that has no scientific evidence. Cultural values and beliefs that favour literacy in particular languages have been created over time to protect the dominance of specific races to the disadvantage of foreign students like me.

Works Cited

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