

# Learning Race in a U.S. Context: An Emergent Framework on the Perceptions of Race Among Foreign-Born Students of Color

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Foreign-born students of color arrive in the United States with racial and cultural orientations specific to their country of origin, which are often quite distinct from issues of race and racism within the U.S. context. This qualitative study examines the college experiences of 15 foreign-born students of color to address the research question: How do foreign-born students of color perceive and respond to racialized experiences and their racial minority status in the United States? The findings of this study reveal that traditional frameworks on race and racial identity development do not fully capture the perceptions and behaviors of foreign-born students of color. Our data reveal patterns that we offer as an emergent framework on Learning Race in a U.S. Context (LRUSC). Understanding how foreign-born students make meaning of racialization in the United States can give education researchers and practitioners more holistic insight into the educational experiences of this growing student population.

*Keywords:* race/ethnicity, racial identity, international students, students of color

Foreign-born students in the United States are an increasingly heterogeneous population, originating from more than 200 countries (Institute of International Education, 2011). In the U.S. context many of these students are considered racial and/or ethnic minorities who are exposed to issues of race, racism, and discrimination (Hanassab, 2006). Being the target of racial or ethnic prejudice has many implications for foreign-born students, negatively impacting their academic success, socialization, and personal wellbeing (Hanassab, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007). Currently, there is limited published literature specifically examining how foreign-born students of color perceive their racial minority status in the U.S. context or how they process racial/ethnic discrimination as part of their identity development.

We present results of a study of foreign-born collegians of color majoring in physics and STEM-related programs. We use the term “for-

eign-born” to describe the participants within our sample as each was born and raised abroad, but had varied types of citizenship statuses. Stories from these students reveal their experiences with implicit and explicit messages about race that are communicated by faculty, administrators, staff, and other students on their U.S. campuses. In addition to describing these experiences, students often emphasized the ways in which their experiences impacted perceptions of self. As a result of these observations, we turned to literature on racialization in the United States, experiences of international students of color, and racial/ethnic identity development models to guide further analysis of participants’ experiences. This study addresses the question: How do foreign-born students of color perceive and respond to racialized experiences and their racial minority status in the United States?

## Literature Review

Definitions and classifications of race are socially constructed, rather than genetically determined (Bashi & McDaniel, 1997). In the United States, racial constructions reflected in today’s society originate from white European colonization of Native Americans, enslavement of Africans, and the oppression and marginalization of ethnic communities including Asian and La-

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tino immigrants to the United States. This resulted in the creation of a racial hierarchy with those considered white at the top and all other populations considered “of color” or black beneath (Bashi & McDaniel, 1997; Smedley, 1993). Social status in the United States became tied to racial classification, which had direct implications for economic opportunities and positions of power. Thus, a process of racial stratification or racialization emerged centering on a black–white binary, which allocated or denied opportunities to individuals and groups based on how they were “raced” (Bashi & McDaniel, 1997; Smedley, 1993). Racialization continues to permeate social structural systems in the United States (Solórzano, 1998). Opportunities for assimilation, socialization, and upward mobility are all impacted by the U.S. construction of race (Alba & Nee, 2003; Waters, 1994). In the U.S. context, race often subsumes culture and ethnicity; thus, commonly ignoring possible distinctions among people of the same race who vary in ethnicity and nationality (Foner, 2001; Hughes, 1945). This racial reality becomes part of the experiences of foreign-born students attending college in the United States.

### International Student Experiences With Race and Discrimination

Although there are few studies examining the experiences of international students of color regarding race in U.S. contexts, there are themes that emerge across the extant literature. International students of color arrive in the United States with racial and cultural orientations specific to their country of origin. In the U.S. context, researchers have found that international students of color—primarily from Asian, Middle Eastern, African, Latin American—experience discrimination based on their skin color, ethnicity, and nationality from faculty and students in addition to systemic racism embedded in national policy (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005; Hanassab, 2006; Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Lee, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007; McFarlane, 2010; Phelps, Taylor & Gerard, 2001). According to the literature, international students of color experience more discrimination than their white international student counterparts (Constantine et al., 2005; Hanassab, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007). Researchers find that encounters with

racialization are as hurtful as they are baffling for international students of color (Hanassab, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007).

Despite encounters with discrimination, students often choose to remain at their universities in part because of familial expectations or other pressures (Lee & Rice, 2007). Students frequently have friend and family support networks, but the stress from racist encounters can place them at higher risk for psychological and physical distress (Constantine et al., 2005). International students of color experience complicated intersections of race with other dimensions of social identity such as nativity, ethnicity, gender, and social class (Constantine et al., 2005; Phelps et al., 2001). However, researchers have yet to examine how students process their experiences with race as part of identity development. Our study addresses this gap in the literature. In this study we offer an emerging framework that identifies the strategies that foreign-born students of color use to stay focused on academic success during stressful encounters with racism.

### Racial and Ethnic Identity Development

Researchers have developed racial identity frameworks that explore the development of specific racial-ethnic populations (see Cross, 1971; Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001; Horse, 2001; Kim, 2001; Parham, 1989) as well as frameworks for application to diverse populations of color (see Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1979; Helms, 1995; Phinney, 1993). Because of the diversity of race, ethnicity, and national origin within our sample, we emphasize the broader models on race and ethnicity in our conceptual framework, specifically Phinney’s (1993) Ethnic Identity Development model, Helms’ (1995) People of Color Racial Identity model, and Sue and Sue’s (1999) Racial/Cultural Identity Development model.

Phinney (1993) defines ethnic identity as a social identity stemming from membership in a social group, particularly the value and significance an individual places upon social group membership. Phinney’s (1993) original model is composed of three stages of ethnic identity development: a) Unexamined Ethnic Identity, b) Ethnic Identity Search/Moratorium, and c) Ethnic Identity Achievement. In 2007, Phinney and Ong updated the original model, focusing

on the process of exploration and commitment to one's ethnic group, rather than on distinct identity statuses. Like these ethnic identity frameworks, Helms (1995) and Sue and Sue (1999) developed identity models that can be applied widely to people of color; however, their models focus on racial, rather than ethnic identity. These models suggest that all people of color have internalized racial stereotypes as a result of socialization in the United States and thus a healthy racial identity requires transcending one's internalized racism. Helms' (1995) People of Color (POC) Racial Identity model bridges concepts from Cross' Nigrescence Model (1975) and Atkinson, Morten and Sue's (1979) Minority Identity Development model. Sue and Sue's (1999) Racial and Cultural Identity Development (R/CID) model, updated from Atkinson et al.'s (1979) original Minority Identity Development model, suggests that racial/cultural identity reflects perceptions about self, one's minority group, other minority groups, and the dominant racial-cultural group. Like Helms' (1995) model, R/CID also incorporates concepts and stages found in other racial and ethnic identity development models (Sue & Sue, 1999).

Phinney's (1993); Sue and Sue's (1999), and Helms' (1995) models share a common developmental process of identity formation with individuals moving from an unexamined or negative perception of their minority group to a search for understanding of their minority group and rejection of the majority. The processes' most advanced level of development is an integrated and balanced awareness of racial/ethnic identity. A major limitation of these models is that they were developed to address a U.S. racial context and minority populations in the United States. Therefore, applying the models to immigrant and international students can be problematic because these students come to the United States with a racial/ethnic identity shaped by their home society's constructions of race and ethnicity. Because of this limitation we refrained from using any one model of racial/ethnic identity development as a framework. Instead we draw on elements from Phinney's (1993); Sue and Sue's (1999), and Helms' (1995) models to examine how foreign-born students' experiences with race and discrimination are a dynamic, ongoing process impacted by the U.S. racial context.

## Method

### Study Site and Sample

This study is part of a project conducted over a 5-year period (2004–2009) with the National Society of Black Physicists (NSBP) and the National Society of Hispanic Physicists (NSHP). This research focuses on a sample of 15 undergraduate and graduate physics students who identified as a racial minority and were born and raised outside of the United States. The overwhelming majority of the participants in the study are from African and Caribbean countries, including Nigeria, Trinidad, Tobago, Senegal, and Haiti. A number of these countries have black majority populations. The participants attended a variety of postsecondary institutions such as historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Research I universities, land-grant institutions, and Ivy League or elite schools. The sample was almost evenly split by gender. Some students indicated that they spoke languages such as Spanish and French in addition to English.

### Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred annually at the joint meeting of NSBP and NSHP from 2005–2009 and primarily consisted of small focus groups and several individual interviews. Individual interviews were usually 60–90 minutes in length and the focus groups lasted 90–120 minutes. The semistructured interview protocols included questions focused on students' educational experiences; interactions with faculty and classmates inside and outside of the classroom environment; and students' perceptions of their race, culture, and ethnicity as well as whether race, culture, and ethnicity impact their academic achievement. All individual interviews and focus groups were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The research team used several processes to ensure trustworthiness. For example, each of the focus groups was facilitated by two researchers who engaged in peer debriefing at the end of each focus group to review and compare notes, check interpretations of data, and to clarify points that were discussed (Krefting, 1999). Over the course of the data collection we also conducted member checks with student participants, faculty, and program

directors attending the conference and received confirming feedback that supported emerging themes.

### Data Analysis

Although a conventional approach was used to identify categories and patterns before data collection, a constructivist approach was also adopted allowing us to remain open to new and emerging data throughout the course of the project (Manning & Stage, 2003). For example, whereas previous literature informed the study's design to examine participants' educational experiences and perceptions of race/ethnicity, the emergence of how participants made meaning of racialized experiences led us to integrate racial/ethnic identity frameworks into our analysis.

Data analysis occurred in several stages beginning with the examination of both the interview transcripts and the documents previously mentioned, followed by the categorizing of data based on emerging themes in an Excel document, and culminating with a detailed analysis and interpretation of the findings. Data were scrutinized for clarity, accuracy, detail, and plausibility in each of these stages. This process is consistent with Creswell's (2003) three-step process of data analysis and interpretation.

We organized and prepared the data for analysis by reading through each transcript individually to get a general sense of the data collected. The coding structure was first established using inductive and deductive strategies, which were validated by a three-person coding team. Using the literature as a guide, we used evidence found in the interviews to develop common and contrasting themes or codes. We focused on narratives related to students' experiences with race, racism, and identity. The members of the coding team then met and compared notes as we began organizing the data into categories to make meaning of our findings. Categories included the following: unexamined U.S. racial-ethnic identity, ethnic/racial encounters in the U.S. context, racial-ethnic identity examination in the U.S. context, and integrative awareness of racial-ethnic identity in the U.S. context. These categories will be presented and discussed in the Results and Discussion sections of this paper.

### Limitations

We recognize that the categories that we have identified in this emerging framework may be different for other populations of foreign-born students of color including other populations majoring in STEM fields. We do not expect these categories to be generalizable to all students who fit this demographic. Instead, we use a constructivist lens to emphasize students' collegiate experiences and perspectives and seek to increase the transferability of the study through detailed data analysis and the use of thick, rich description and extensive quotes throughout our findings (Krefting, 1999).

### Results and Discussion

Similar to the existing research, we found that no one racial/ethnic identity development theory or framework fully captures the experiences of foreign-born students in this study. There were aspects of the frameworks that were instructive as foreign-born students have similar experiences as native-born students of color in their "encounters" with race. However, the study findings reveal distinct perceptions and behaviors from foreign-born students that warrant new conceptualization of the impact of race and racial identity. Akin to Helms' (1995) POC Racial Identity model, we use the terms "category" and "status" when describing each of the four components because students described their experiences less linearly than terms such as "stage" may imply.

We organize the discussion of the findings around four broad categories or statuses that define the emergent framework of Learning Race in a U.S. Context: a) unexamined U.S. racial-ethnic identity, b) ethnic/racial encounters in the U.S. context, c) moving toward identity examination in the U.S. context, and d) integrative awareness in the U.S. context.

#### Unexamined U.S. Racial-Ethnic Identity

Many participants in our study stated that they did not understand issues of race in a United States context and expressed a lack of awareness or salience of racial identity until coming to the United States. Participants expressed feeling disconnected to the U.S. context of racial issues. The majority described percep-



tions and behaviors reflecting this status as they talked about their own racial experiences. Sylvia, a graduate student from Trinidad and Tobago, noted that she did not think about race until coming to the United States: "Actually, I don't see color. It's only when I came here, I noticed the black and white world. So here, it's really hard. . . . I don't see it." In addition to not seeing race, Sylvia also does not believe that one race is better than another: "not because you are this race means you are better than me. No . . . it's not about being better than anybody; it's about what I want to achieve." Coming from a predominantly black country, she knows that whites are not better than blacks; rather she chooses not to examine the "black and white world" in the United States in order to remain focused on what she wants to achieve as a student.

Students, who had not examined issues of race and ethnicity in the U.S. context, expressed confusion about the dominance of race in this society. Manuel, a Senegalese student who acknowledged his lack of understanding, powerfully illustrates this:

Oh, it's just funny when people speak of race. I don't know how you guys felt, but when I first came here I knew nothing about race. I knew how to spell racism but that's as far—I didn't even know what it really meant. I never looked it up in the dictionary.

There is lightheartedness in how Manuel speaks about race noting that it is "funny" when the topic arises in conversation. It is not that he literally thinks that race or racism is comical, rather he found it odd that the topic is often discussed and he initially had no idea why. One might assume that Manuel's comments simply express a lack of knowledge about race and lack of interest in learning about race. However, it is important to understand that in Manuel's homeland context race may be far less salient compared to other factors such as economic status and education. Other students in the study could relate to Manuel's lack of interest in dealing with race albeit for different reasons. For example, Sarah from Nigeria simply did not feel connected to race in the U.S. context. Although she understood that racial issues certainly had meaning in her homeland, she was able to distance herself from discussions of race in the U.S. context because she did not grow up in the United States:

It's not that we don't have problems in African countries, too, but when you talk about racism here in the U.S., I mean it doesn't really mean anything to me 'cause I didn't grow up here. But people that it means a lot to, I don't blame them because I've seen movies on how the ancestors were treated. But as much as that is part of their history, I believe that we should be able to move past that.

Unlike Manuel, Sarah acknowledged learning about racism and how African American's ancestors were treated. She also seemed to understand how this treatment could be a cause for concern. Yet, ultimately she feels that racism is in the past and there does not seem to be a reason to examine these issues today; thus from Sarah's perspective we should be able to move past this period in our history.

Robert, a male participant from Trinidad and Tobago who attends a historically black college and university (HBCU), shared that it was a challenge for him to understand race issues when compared with his experiences in his home country. He acknowledged that he conceptualizes race differently and does not think of himself as a minority because blacks represent a large percentage of Trinidad's population. Even more important, his national identity as a Trinidadian superseded issues of race. Talking about his experiences of being perceived as a minority in the U.S. context Robert explains:

So to come to America and—first of all, to . . . be considered a minority was weird because in Trinidad we are Trinidadians and it doesn't matter if you're Indian, Chinese, white, whatever. Once you're from Trinidad, you're from Trinidad. But to come up here and be a minority, so to speak [it was] a little awkward. I should say – I mean, I don't pay much attention to it, because you're here for a purpose and you just stay on that track, but it was a little awkward.

Robert was able to refer back to his home country's cultural context to affirm his identity and to stay focused on his *purpose* rather than becoming distracted by racial issues in the United States. Although Robert responded that he does not pay attention to race, at some level he was beginning to internalize how race might impact him. Notice his concerns about race as he anticipates preparing for his first internship experiences in a predominantly white environment:

I'm kinda nervous about as far as getting an internship, 'cause I've never had one. I didn't have one last summer . . . being around everybody that's white, pre-

dominantly, and you're the only person of some type of color in there. How you actually feel—if I would be comfortable in there, I'm not sure, honestly. I mean, I've been around different races, but to be all of one race concentrated like that, I've never really done it, so that's, I guess, one thing I'll be kinda nervous about while getting an internship.

Robert feels nervous about what it will be like to be the only “person of some type of color” in the room and whether he will feel comfortable. Even if he personally does not want to examine race as he stated earlier, he realizes that certain situations will require him to think about race. As Robert begins to explore his feeling about seeking his internship, he clearly is engaging in an exploratory examination of ethnic identity. Over time as a result of his internship or other experiences Robert may begin to have interactions that cause him to examine more deeply his racial identity in the United States, a process that others experienced which we discuss later in this article.

Manuel, who initially did not understand racism, shared the following: “It was never something I went to school thinking, ‘Oh, I’m black so I gotta do better than everybody.’” However over time something shifted as a result of his interactions in the classroom. The classroom became a point of racialization, increasing Manuel’s racial and ethnic encounters and pushing him out of an unexamined stage into a transition stage of racial/ethnic encounters.

### **Racial/Ethnic Encounters in the U.S. Context**

As evidenced above in the first category, the participants were not seeking opportunities to examine race and ethnicity as students in the United States. Yet, during interviews, students described encounters that were catalysts for examining their race in the U.S. context. They shared a number of examples from their experiences in the classroom with peers and faculty, being pulled over by police on campus, being called the “N” word, and responding to comments about their hairstyles and dress.

For example, Manuel began to experience his peers dismissing his perspective and comments in class, which culminated in a major encounter with race:

I remember in undergrad *The Bell Curve* – everybody knows that book—was put right on my [desk] . . . in undergrad we were just a few physics students. . . . I

was the only black person and one day I found that book . . . right on my desk. . . . I mean I acted a fool . . . and just tried to find out who put it there 'cause I knew about that book, so a friend of mine told me about that book . . . and I ended up just ripping it in front of everybody. Everybody saw it. I went to the dean and showed him. They're like, “No, this is nothing. I'm sure it was a mistake,” and all.

At HBCUs foreign-born students of color also encountered incidents involving racial and ethnic identity with their same-race American peers. Marshall, who came to the United States from Haiti to attend an HBCU, talked about the culture shock that triggered his engagement with issues of race and ethnicity. As he interacted with his fellow HBCU students, he found that African American’s saw him as a foreigner despite his shared identification as black. Coming from a predominantly black country, he was surprised that others had a difficult time accepting him:

I really experienced that [culture shock] because coming from Haiti and going to a . . . black school, so even though Haiti’s mostly black but still, as a foreigner, the school didn’t accept me. So I used that as a motivation, I mean, to succeed.

As Marshall continued to discuss his experiences, he noted that in his physics department a number of his peers were born outside of the United States. These students were very helpful in his transition, but he was shocked that most of the students were not native-born blacks. This was a surprise to him given that he was studying in the United States and had expected to interact with American born students:

I guess we have only one African American student at the physics department. It’s like most of us are from Zaire, Congo, Bahamas, Haiti, yeah, and . . . Nigeria. So that was a real shock for me. But yeah, it was a culture shock, I had to adapt myself quickly . . . some of my friends who were African American, they helped me to . . . transition and that was really great.

Marshall’s interactions with his diverse peers served as a turning point for him to begin to examine race and ethnicity in the U.S. context. Although his African American peers reminded him of his foreigner status, many also helped him in his transition. Additionally, having the support of his international peers in his department eased his navigation of the campus milieu and began to move him toward his own identity examination.

## Moving Toward Identity Examination in the U.S. Context

The encounters that students had created a degree of discomfort which moved them into an examination of their own racial and ethnic identity in the U.S. context. We identify this next category as moving toward identity examination because the participants in this study did not fully commit to an examination of identity; rather they were beginning to understand that their identity was being perceived in the U.S. context differently from how they saw themselves. They also were beginning to understand that they were perceived as the “other” because of their background and culture. While they continued to maintain identification with their own homeland culture and ethnicity, they also were beginning to examine and react to their status as a racial minority in the United States.

Marshall talked about distinguishing himself by how he dressed. Here, again, he has decided to engage in a process that begins to define his own identity. Marshall felt like others would respond differently to him if he looked different. He used his dress to convey meaning about his identity:

I distinguished myself the way I was dressed. Sometimes, I wore [a] suit to go to school. Some, they even called me lawyer. I mean, ‘do you teach at the school? Because most of the time, you only dress like long-sleeved shirt, shoes and stuff like you don’t have like jeans and stuff like that?’ So I really used that as a motivation and my family also motivated me.

Being called a lawyer by his peers clearly conveys an important degree of status that Marshall wanted to project about himself. It was important for him to project an image that conveys his own sense of identity and to combat the encounters he had with others.

Sam, who identifies as half Spanish and half black, also described using his appearance as a way to convey meaning and gauge others reactions to him. Talking about his hair he described how he changed his style to braids to see how others would react: “I started growing my hair and putting braids in my hair just to see because I was an A student. I was 4.0 and my first B came along.” Sam attributed his first B to a change in his hairstyle. He talked about overtly trying to experiment with his hair as a way to see how others would treat him. He felt like when he wore his braids professors treated him

very differently. Interestingly, Sam seemed to be experimenting with his identity to have control over his encounters with faculty and peers by changing his appearance.

Amalia, who physically looks Asian and was raised in Latin America is an example of a participant who was moving toward identity examination in the United States. She talked about the unique insights that her racial/ethnic identity provided as she sought to understand the U.S. racial context:

So I’m Asian, but I grew up in Latin America. . . . So when I came here, I feel like there are lots of people in Latin America that can be a lot better . . . but they just don’t have the opportunity. Like in that sense, race does matter. . . . So for me, like in engineering, it’s really easy for people to see, well I’m Asian. You know, well there are lots of Asians in engineering—you’re just like another one of them. But if I see myself like as somebody who comes from Latin America, then it would be a little bit different. So it’s kind of—like for me, it’s kind of hard to pinpoint like how race plays into my situation. I don’t think I’m pressurized by the fact that I’m like from this race or that race. . . . If I were the only one, I feel like I would be pressurized.

Amalia is aware that the complexity of her identity means that in the United States others are likely to perceive her in multiple ways. Moreover, she is not sure herself of how race impacts her because she sees it as difficult to “pinpoint” because of the intersections of her identity and how they are perceived in the U.S. context. By others she is perceived as one of many Asian students in her engineering program or “just like another one of them,” although she perceives herself as different because of her upbringing in Latin America.

Conversely, Manuel began to experience a type of rejection or outsider status in the classroom where no one wanted to work with him, which led him to search for a way to understand those experiences. He felt “pushed” to consider race:

I think that [race] became a motivation . . . not because you want to but because you are pushed to be that way [because] nobody wants to work with you. Nobody wants to hear what you have to say. . . . So you have no interaction and you wonder why. . . . Then you realize maybe . . . it’s because of my race. Then your race becomes a motivation, which involves emotions and sometimes gets you out of your focus, I guess.

Clearly considering race made Manuel uncomfortable. However, given the rejection that he was experiencing, he had no choice but to

consider how it might be shaping his experiences. Even as Manuel contemplates race and the motivation it serves for him to succeed he is cautious and aware of how emotional race can be, which makes him worry that he will lose focus.

### Integrative Awareness

Informed by the experiences of students in this study, we incorporate integrative awareness as an additional category. Some students in our study appeared to have a growing awareness of their racial/ethnic positioning within the U.S. context as well as exhibited an internalized and more confident sense of their racial positioning. However, only one student appeared to integrate his racial experiences in ways that served as a source of motivation for commitment to action.

Amittai, a graduate student from Nigeria attending a highly selective predominantly white institution (PWI), had an understanding of his own racial experiences in ways that informed his desire to succeed and serve as a source of support for others:

I guess, there was also some just expectation for me to succeed. But at the same time, I know going through physics, I don't see a lot of people who look like me. . . . I only have one class in undergraduate with a black professor. And I know that that was a completely different experience. And I feel like I want to succeed, so I can be that person for other people.

Talking about his own experiences in the field, Amittai was keenly aware of the limited number of blacks studying physics. This motivated him to be successful and to help others as a role model.

### An Analysis and Discussion of Learning Race in a U.S. Context

We discuss four emerging themes regarding the experiences of foreign-born students' *Learning Race in a U.S. Context*. Herein we examine the perceptions and behaviors that differ from, and are similar to, existing racial identity frameworks. These themes address the perceptions that students have about race and the behaviors that they engaged in when confronted with race.

### Race Doesn't Affect Me

In traditional models of racial-ethnic identity development, students in early development stages demonstrate behaviors and attitudes that show a lack of interest in issues related to ethnic and racial experiences (Phinney, 1993; Sue & Sue, 1999). Many of the participants were at an unexamined status at the time of their interview or they shared examples that reflected this status. Yet, although models of racial-ethnic identity development find that students in early stages of development internalize stereotypes and idealize whiteness (Helms, 1995; Sue & Sue, 1999), the participants in this study did not reflect these attitudes and behavior. Our participants felt disconnected from race in the U.S. context because of the socialization experiences in their home country. Foreign-born students of color come to the United States with a racial context shaped by their home country (Lee & Rice, 2007; Phelps et al., 2001). Students in this study expressed awareness that the United States is a highly racialized society (Solórzano, 1998), but they themselves did not feel connected to that aspect of society. The foreign-born students did not relate to the struggles that African Americans have regarding racism, often stating that they were not affected by racist acts or discrimination because they were not from the United States. Similarly, while students in this study experienced a number of microaggressions, they did not connect these incidents to racial discrimination. As one student explained, being called the N-word or F-word did not bother her because she does not understand the words' meanings. Slurs from other cultures do not carry the same power; therefore, the statement "I am not from here" is protective.

Students were not completely unsympathetic to or ignorant of the issues of race in America. Sarah expressed that racism did not affect her, but understood that it is a long-standing issue for African Americans. She saw herself as different from African Americans. Although they shared the same skin color, they did not share the same historical, social, political, and racial contexts. Students who come from countries with majority black populations acknowledged that they had challenges with race in their home country but the issues were different. The students' home country identity—comprising intersections of gender, socioeconomic status, re-



ligion, and ethnicity—may mean other aspects of identity are more salient (Lee & Rice, 2007; Phelps et al., 2001). Therefore, when encountering racism in the U.S. context they responded very differently from their African American peers. They did not feel the same level of discrimination or threat because they looked to their own cultural context for understanding. Many of them perceived the United States as too racialized. Thus, for the foreign-born students who did not see racial issues in the United States as “their struggle,” they were able to shield themselves for a while from the negative outcomes that resulted from acts of racial discrimination. Essentially these students felt that they could resist or delay dealing with race because their own cultural context provided a buffer to racism in the United States.

### Resisting Racial Distractions

Participants encountered incidents in and outside of the classroom that were beyond their control. Thus, the category of racial/ethnic encounters in the United States reflects a transition status outlined in a number of racial and ethnic identity models. In both Helms’ (1995) POC Racial Identity Development Model and Sue and Sue’s (1999) R/CID model, students experience dissonance as they encounter a critical racial incident that turns them toward an examination of race. Similarly for the foreign-born students in this study, encounters with race in the United States resulted in movement between and among different categories inciting them to examine their own ethnic/racial sense of self in the U.S. context. Yet, even as they were confronted with racial incidents students were initially reluctant to respond or become engaged because they felt that dealing with racial issues was a distraction from their academic work. They felt like it was important for them to remain focused and to achieve their academic and personal goals. As one student noted, even though they understood how African Americans might feel about U.S. history, it was time to move past it. These sentiments have also been expressed by some African Americans; however, the role that race and racism has played in the history of the United States has resulted in some enduring challenges, which makes simply getting over racism a bit more challenging.

A second aspect of resisting racial distractions was understanding the emotional costs of dealing with racism. Foreign-born students felt that racial discussions were emotionally difficult, particularly when the incident involved them directly (Constantine et al., 2005). Deciding to confront a situation that was racist meant that they also had to factor in the emotional aftermath and how much time it takes to deal with the recovery process. They understood the importance of race in American society, however race was not a large part of who they perceived themselves to be, thus they had some separation from issues of race in the United States. Certainly some students did invest energy on racial discussions. However, they were keenly aware that highly charged emotional issues could easily throw them off course; thus it was important for them to keep working toward their academic goals. Having this larger purpose insured a level of detachment from race. Therefore, when they did get involved in racial discussions, they seemed to be aware of the fact that they needed to protect their energy.

### When Racism Finally Catches up With You

Like many of their minority peers, the students in this study encountered the full range of racial incidents from subtle microaggressions to direct hostility such as being called the N-word. They were able to manage and deal with these through strategies discussed earlier. However, similar to the traditional ethnic/racial identity models, students over time experienced multiple encounters or had a critical racial incident that they could no longer ignore, forcing them to pay greater attention to race. Helms (1995) and Sue and Sue (1999) refer to this transition as dissonance, which leads to immersion within one’s racial group, rejection of majority culture, and examination of broader societal issues of race. Yet students within our study expressed a different outcome of dissonance, which was to begin to consider their own *positioning within a U.S. racial context*. Focusing on their individual position is an important transition in status for foreign-born students because it shifts the degree of importance of race as a factor to be considered. Despite their previous resisting of racial distractions and their desire to remain focused on their academic success, racism finally catches up to them in such a way that they

must deal with it. This places them in a status where race becomes more salient in their lives. Students begin to consider its impact and ways that they have to consider how others perceive them racially. Once students find themselves no longer able to ignore race as a factor in the U.S. context, they also begin to experience the U.S. cultural context differently. They move from being an “outsider,” where they relied on their beliefs that race did not affect them and they could remain somewhat removed from the society’s norms/issues, to becoming more of an “insider,” where societal issues can impact them. Even as students moved toward an insider perspective, they continued to see their national identity and homeland affiliation as the primary lens for understanding broader issues of race. However, the salience of race as part of their identity became greater, particularly around how their race was being perceived by U.S.-born peers and faculty.

### Using Race as a Motivation to Succeed

Nearly all of the students, once they reached the point at which racism caught up with them, used these encounters as a source of motivation to succeed. Using race as a motivation to succeed reinforced the overall strategy of these students to focus on their purpose and their goal to be successful academically. Rather than shut down and withdraw from the academic process, participants used these situations as a way to demonstrate how they could be successful. This strategy demonstrates an internal locus of control and shows that they see their own behaviors as most relevant to their success. Using race as a source of motivation is a very effective way to channel the negative energy and emotion from racism but it does not move students to a level of action and commitment to ending racism.

Traditional models of ethnic and racial identity characterize the final stage of development as one that reflects a confident and balanced understanding of one’s racial/ethnic identity as well as a commitment to ending racial injustice (Helms, 1995; Phinney, 1993; Sue & Sue, 1999). Only one participant in this study, Amittai, was using race as a source of motivation to succeed and to take action in ways that benefited others. Amittai had reached a status of dealing with race from an activist perspective. He specifically noted that he was motivated to

use race in ways to change the experiences of others. He wanted to be successful so that he could become that black physics professor and professional role model that so many students never have. His integrative awareness of race provided an understanding of racism in the larger social context that helped him move beyond an individual examination of race to considering the success of others.

Amittai’s commitment to action also reflects identification with other black or African American students, which is an outcome that is a major part of traditional models of racial-ethnic identity developed for native-born students (Helms, 1995; Sue & Sue, 1999). However, it may not be as likely an outcome for foreign-born students of color who share the same race, but have a different ethnicity or culture from their same-race American peers.

### An Emergent Framework on Learning Race in the U.S. Context

Although there are similarities, the intersections of identity for foreign-born students of color complicate traditional models of racial-ethnic identity. Based on the findings of this study, Figure 1 illustrates the critical elements of the Learning Race in a U.S. Context (LRUSC) for foreign-born students framework. Students come to the United States with a racial understanding that is informed by racial constructs and experiences in their home country, which are unique and distinct. In the framework the home country and the U.S. racial context are separate but slightly overlapping circles to convey bidirectional influence over time. The LRUSC framework emerges from racial experiences with the U.S. context and is represented by a solid line to the three categories in the model. Because race manifests differently across national contexts many of these students do not identify and internalize U.S. notions of racism, leading to an unexamined U.S. racial-ethnic identity. Figure 1 illustrates how at the unexamined status students are much more heavily guided by the notion that race does not affect them. However, over time as students have racial/ethnic encounters (REs) in the U.S. context they try to resist the impact of racism, but race has a way of “catching up with them” moving them toward an examination of U.S. racial ethnic identity. Eventually, racial encounters led

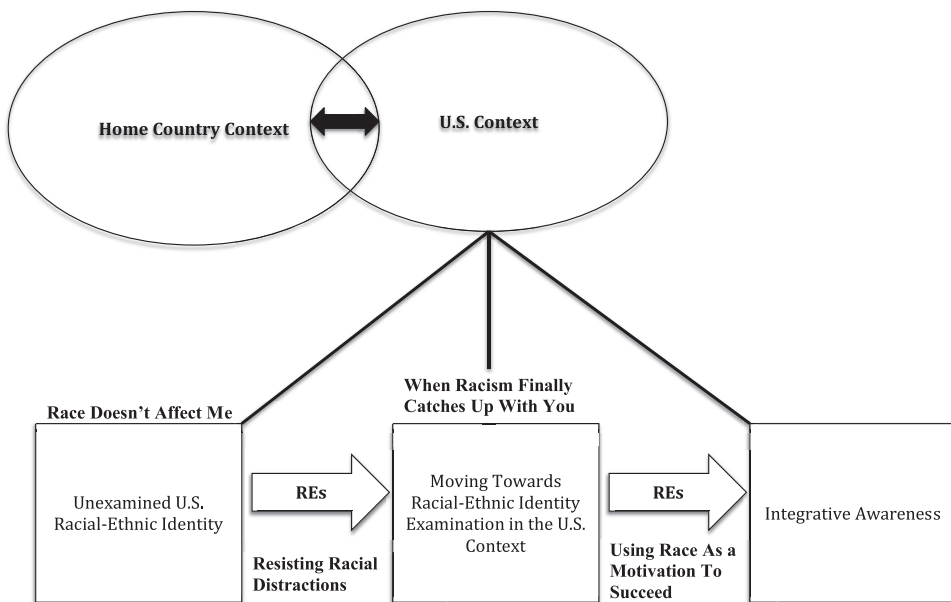


Figure 1. Learning Race in a U.S. Context (LRUSC) emergent framework.

students to make a variety of choices, which ranged from withdrawal and isolation to motivation for academic success. In the last category integrative awareness, race serves as a source of commitment to action that leads to social change. Only one student fully demonstrated this commitment to action, however several students were beginning to contemplate behaviors and actions that would move them toward integrative awareness.

### Implications for Research and Practice

This study has a number of implications for research. Of particular importance is the need for greater theoretical work on racial-ethnic identity development for foreign-born students of color. Although we turned to traditional models to inform our analysis, these theories are inadequate in addressing some of the unique characteristics of foreign-born students. For example, these students come to the United States at a level of racial-ethnic identity development shaped by their home country's racial-ethnic context. Additionally, race may be a less salient aspect of identity than nativity for these students, particularly when they first enter the United States. Future research should consider

these and other aspects of foreign-born students' racial-ethnic identity that traditional models created to examine identities of U.S.-born people of color do not address.

Researchers should continue to examine the intersections of acculturation and racialization for foreign-born students of color. What impact do racialized experiences and discrimination have on students' adjustment to college life in the United States? How do these experiences vary across different countries of origin and/or races for foreign-born students of color? We recommend longitudinal studies focusing on questions such as these to better understand how issues of race and discrimination affect these students over the course of their educational experience in the United States.

Lastly, much of the research on foreign-born students puts the onus on these students to successfully adjust to their educational environment (Lee & Rice, 2007). Yet, researchers should also explore the impact of faculty and U.S.-born students on the racial climate within academic departments. Many of the struggles with discrimination described by the students in this study occurred in their academic environment. Therefore, it is critical for researchers to examine how the intercultural competence of

faculty, students, and staff affects the educational experiences and adjustment of foreign-born students of color.

In addition to academic research, there are substantive implications for practice. Faculty, staff, and peers all play an instrumental role in the foreign-born student of color identity development in the U.S. context. However, further education and professional development on all fronts is needed. Faculty and staff should have a substantive understanding of the statuses of foreign-born students of color identity development in the U.S. context to help foreign-born students navigate these categories, particularly when their identities do not neatly fit how the U.S. society perceives racial and ethnic identity. There seem to be advantages and disadvantages to each category, as students attempt to deny or manage encounters with racism. A practitioner who understands that sometimes being in a state of unawareness is protective or that moving toward integration stokes resilience may be able to better communicate with and advise foreign-born students of color. Further practitioner-based research would include pinpointing promising practices for facilitating safe and appropriate transitions through these statuses. In particular, the racial/ethnic encounter category is a potentially painful time, during which faculty and staff can act as a resource and guide while students make meaning of these events. In addition, such guidance may prevent the potential for isolation in addition to decreasing anger and frustration, all of which are often cited as risk factors in the literature (Constantine et al., 2005; Lee, 2007).

Aside from an understanding of foreign-born student of color identity development, strategic programming may encourage more native-born student, faculty, and staff interaction with international students. Such interaction seems to be an avenue for further development for foreign-born students to understand race in the U.S. context. This confirms previous findings and suggestions that programs should be developed about race in the U.S. context for foreign-born students of color in addition to programs for faculty, staff, and students to create awareness regarding foreign-born students of color (Constantine et al., 2005; Hanassab, 2006). As we learn more about the strategies used by foreign-born students to navigate racism, there are implications for how educators can facilitate dis-

cussions across diverse student groups, particularly between foreign-born and native-born blacks. Both communities can learn from and better understand each other's ways of combating racism. The strategy used by foreign-born students to keep their academic goals as the most important priority is beneficial for all students to learn. Understanding how their foreign-born peers remain focused on success can engender a similar set of aspirations in other students of color who encounter racism.

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