The Unchosen Me—Race, Gender, and Identity Among Black Women in College (review)

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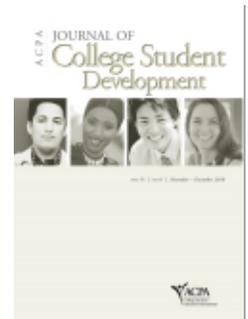
chapter 13, by Enloe, provides the reader with an example of a learning environment—a charter high school—where civic engagement is infused throughout the students' experience, not only in what they are learning, but also in how their learning environment is constructed through the students' own collective action.

While a majority of this book is written about service-learning in U.S. institutions of higher education settings, chapters 9 and 13 address service-learning in higher education settings in Europe and a civically engaged U.S. charter high school, respectively. Although these chapters are interesting, they seem out of place in this volume. Strait provides a thoughtful discussion for including these chapters in chapter 1, however, such connections to the broader focus of the book were not made clear within the chapters themselves, and may not be as relevant to the intended audience.

Student-affairs practitioners should be aware that most chapters specifically refer to service-learning within the classroom context. Jacoby's chapter provides some discussion about student affairs' role in service-learning, but most chapters refer to service-learning as rooted in the academic experiences of students, managed by faculty and academically-housed service-learning administrators. This is not to say that those within student affairs interested in service-learning would not benefit from reading this edited volume, as it helps to provoke many important discussions about the purpose, goals, and consequences of service-learning, but the volume's intended audience is primarily within academic affairs. In sum, this well-constructed volume will be of particular interest to higher education faculty engaged in service-learning in practice or as an area of research, service-learning coordinators, and administrators considering the institutionalization of service-learning.

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The Unchosen Me—Race, Gender, and Identity Among Black Women in College

Rachelle Winkle-Wagner

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In the book *The Unchosen Me—Race, Gender, and Identity Among Black Women in College*, Rachelle Winkle-Wagner takes a sociological perspective that "shifts identity work toward an interaction-based approach whereby race and identity are manifested through interactions between self, others, and society" (p. 13). Her book details her critical ethnographic study of 30 Black women at a large, public institution in the Midwest that investigated to what extent "institutions of higher education impose identity on students differentially by race and gender . . . [and] how . . . this shape[s] the students' experiences and success in college" (p. 12). Her work powerfully illustrates how Black college women have reacted to and maneuvered their social world in efforts to succeed in college. The result is the new concept of the *Unchosen Me*: an identity that is imposed upon these women to perform in order to gain success in college and achieve a certain level of acceptance and recognition among their peers and faculty. This book contains eight chapters that include her critique of the field of identity research (chapter 1), her theoretical perspective (chapter 2), methodology (chapter 3), findings (chapters 4-7), and implications for higher education policy makers and practitioners (chapter 8).

A Sociological Perspective in Identity Research

In chapter 1, Winkle-Wagner explains how a sociological perspective presents racial identity

differently than social psychology because it shifts the focus from individual meaning making of one's identity (as is generally the perspective found in student development theory) to examining how the social world informs one's identity. A sociological perspective more fully acknowledges the influence that social forces (e.g., racism, privilege, marginalization) play on minoritized populations in how they identify and how they enact their identity by examining the extent to which society constrains and predetermines these choices. Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) acknowledge the need for student development theory to include the impact that social forces play on identity, and have indicated that a more sociological perspective has begun to emerge through the application of critical theory (e.g., Abes, 2009) and the examination of how racism may affect identity development (e.g., Torres & Hernandez, 2007). However, in arguing for the need of a sociological perspective, the points that each perspective examines different aspects of identity and that both perspectives can be complementary rather than conflicting, are lost.

The Unchosen Me

Chapter 2 offers a detailed explanation of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934/1967; Stryker, 1980), the theoretical foundation for Winkle-Wagner's sociological perspective. Challenging Stryker's (1980) conclusion that one chooses the identity that best suits her or that is the most advantageous, Winkle-Wagner concluded that the Black women in her study were "coerced, forced, or persuaded to accept identity characteristics . . . [because] choice is constrained to the point where aspects of one's identity are ultimately unchosen" (p. 153). These unwanted components of identity are aspects of the *Unchosen Me*: a particular identity or its components "that are institutionally bounded, culturally and institutionally imposed, and

thus not necessarily freely *chosen* by people. The Unchosen Me reveals the process of accepting these aspects of identities into one's notion of self" (p. 36).

Unchosen Me is comprised of dualities, or "two-ness," that constrained how these women could identify. They were either "the representative" for the African American community, or they dealt with being unseen in the classroom by their instructors and classmates (chapter 5). Another dichotomy that the women had to negotiate was being either "too White," or "too ghetto" (chapter 6). These chapters provided a rich description of how these women's identities shifted between these dichotomies according to context and environment, and the consequential anger, resistance, and confusion associated with recognizing that their choices were imposed and constrained.

Other chapters of this book further investigated the women's narratives to illustrate other aspects of Unchosen Me, from the effects of marginalization and culture shock (chapter 4), to the intersection of race and gender (chapter 7). A key question that the author posed throughout was to what extent did these women have agency in regards to their own identity? Winkle-Wagner concluded that resistance in the form of experiencing and voicing discomfort, and refusing to acculturate (i.e., dropping out of college), were ways that these women enacted their agency. Yet, these are meager challenges to the power that society plays in shaping and determining our identity. This understanding leaves the reader with a sense of discomfort in realizing the limits of individual agency to challenge social forces.

Contributions to Scholarship in Identity Research

This book is an exemplar for research design because research design and procedures are extensively detailed. In chapter 3, Winkle-

Wagner's examination of her reflexivity and positionality revealed how she considered the potential influence of her identity as a White woman on the perspective she carried into the study, and how it may have affected her participants' willingness to share certain feelings and experiences. This level of disclosure and detail is rarely found in higher education scholarship and offers insight on "research across the color line" or the process of gaining entrance to a community where one is immediately regarded as an outsider. This requires the need to make certain that participants' perspectives are accurately portrayed and that they are willing to talk openly about issues of race. In addition, the expansive Appendices contain focus groups protocols and data analysis examples that may be helpful models for new researchers.

Implications for Faculty and Student Affairs

Winkle-Wagner stated that "this study provides a glimpse into an often overlooked aspect of campus climate: the way institutional norms, policies, and practices impose identity on students and the influence of these impositions on the student experience" (p. 10). The revealing stories from Black college women challenge us to evaluate our current policy and practice towards underrepresented student populations. Chapter 8 provides provocative questions for the reader to consider, such as: To what extent are institutions expecting students to acculturate to campus culture in comparison to the institutional effort taken to adapt to an increasingly diverse campus population? What identities do we privilege, and what identities do we ignore in our classrooms, residence halls, and student services offices? What resources do we have for women who are grappling with Unchosen Me aspects of identity?

In summary, Winkle-Wagner's book is a significant contribution to furthering understanding of the great influence that social forces play in Black college women's identity. Researchers will appreciate this work because it offers a sociological perspective to identity scholarship. Institutional policy makers, faculty, and staff who seek to support Black college women's success will also find value in this book because it reveals how this population experiences college life—their needs, how they seek support, and the ways that policy and practice may support or challenge their success.

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