HALE Comprehensive Exam: Part One Section A

(Assigned code)
Choose one of the articles named below and write an essay on the strengths and weaknesses of its research and the conclusions drawn from it, and identify the article’s relation to other work in its area(s) of inquiry.


**Introduction**

In an article for the *Journal of College Student Development*, Linder and Rodriguez (2012) examined how women of color student activists on a predominantly white campus made meaning of their multiple identities. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted and findings were analyzed utilizing intersectionality and multiple identity development theories. Findings indicated that students made sense of their identities by following a path toward activism, experiencing marginalization, and ultimately creating safe spaces on campus where they could express their full selves. In this article critique, I will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the research design and conclusions drawn from the research study. I will address these issues based on the following sections of the paper: problem statement/purpose of the study, literature review/theoretical frameworks, methodology, findings/discussion, and recommendations. I will conclude by placing this study in the context of the larger body of literature on similar topics in higher education.

**Problem Statement/Purpose of the Study**

Creswell (2009) argued that an introduction “needs to create reader interest in the topic, establish the problem that leads to the study, place the study within the larger context of the scholarly literature, and reach out to a specific audience” (p. 98). Linder and Rodriguez (2012)
included each of these elements in the introductory section of their article. In the introduction, the authors created reader interest by utilizing a narrative hook. The authors piqued the readers’ interest by providing a quote by Audre Lorde summarizing her feelings about being a woman of color activist. Then, the authors established the problem the study sought to examine. Through highlighting historical developments and past literature, the authors established that women of color activists often experience discrimination despite the assumption that fellow activists would be open-minded and accepting of all people. The authors clearly established that there is still a problem where women of color may experience racism as members of women’s groups or experience sexism as members of race-specific activist groups.

The establishment of the problem leads into the rationale for the study. The authors appropriately placed the problem in the context of literature without getting too specific about past studies. Creswell (2009) argued it is important for an introductory section to utilize broad streams of literature to justify the study, but to save the majority of the literature review for subsequent sections. Linder and Rodriguez (2012) followed Creswell’s model of how to include literature in an introductory section. Finally, the introductory section met Creswell’s final component of a good introduction in that the introduction established an audience for the study. The authors established the audience by identifying women of color activists as the population being studied and also indicated the importance of the study for the work of educators.

A couple areas of the introductory section could be improved. One area that could be improved is the research question. It should first be acknowledged that the research question does have some quality components. For example, the research question is appropriately broad and open-ended to allow for in-depth discovery of the subject matter (Fossey, Harvey,
McDermott, & Davidson, 2002) while also being appropriately narrow in focusing on one specific population, women of color student activists (Creswell, 2009). However, the research question could have been strengthened by the inclusion of sub questions for the study. Sub questions are not a requirement of a research study, but Creswell (2009) argued that sub questions allow for studies to remain broad while also exploring specific issues in more depth. The authors could have added sub questions specifically aimed toward the nature of being a woman of color on a predominantly white campus or how the students’ activism influenced their meaning making experiences. There is nothing inherently wrong with only asking one main research question, but the study could have been strengthened by including sub questions that examined some of the intricacies of the main question that was studied.

An additional area that could have been improved is how the authors established the significance of the study. Merriam (2002) argued that authors should establish the significance of a study by identifying a problem that has not yet been addressed and then make a compelling case for why it is important to address that gap in the literature. Linder and Rodriguez (2012) identified an important problem to address by indicating that women of color activists often experience discrimination within single purpose activist groups (i.e. race-specific or gender-specific groups). However, the authors did not provide a strong rationale for why the problem should be studied. Why is it bad that women of color activists experience discrimination? Are women of color student activists dropping out of college due to discrimination? Are they learning less during their time in college? Discrimination may be generally accepted as a negative outcome, but the authors could have provided a more explicit argument about how women of color activists experience negative outcomes due to discriminatory actions. Providing
a stronger rationale about the significance of the study could have helped the authors establish a
greater sense of urgency of the need for the study (Merriam, 2002).

**Literature Review/Theoretical Frameworks**

Creswell (2009) argued that literature could be organized in various forms including thematically or chronologically. Linder and Rodriguez (2012) utilized both formats. The structure of the literature review was divided into two theoretical frameworks, intersectionality and multiple identity development theories. Within each framework the authors provided a detailed account of the chronological developments of each theory and how the theories evolved over time. The authors also provided a strong rationale for how they chose the two theoretical frameworks. The authors argued it was important to move past a single perspective in analyzing women of color activists, which is why they chose to consider both the intersectionality and multiple identity development theories instead of focusing on only one theory. Furthermore, the authors concluded the literature review by tying the theoretical frameworks back to the original purpose of the study. Creswell (2009) argued it is important for a literature review to relate to the problem/s being examined in the study, which the authors did by explaining how the theoretical frameworks would help provide a better understanding of how women of color activists on a predominantly white campus made meaning of their multiple identities.

A weakness of the literature review is that it focused almost exclusively on establishing the theoretical frameworks while largely ignoring reviewing past studies on the topical area the study sought to examine. Smart (2005) argued that studies should be grounded in an appropriate amount of literature to place the current study in context. However, the authors provided only a few examples of past studies that explored how marginalized populations made sense of
maintaining multiple identities. Even if the authors thought there were no relevant studies specifically about women of color student activists at a predominantly white campus, they could have highlighted studies on similar topics. For example, the authors could have cited studies about women of color activists at historically black institutions, studies about women of color who are not activists at predominantly white institutions, or studies examining the experiences of other student populations maintaining multiple identities. The authors provided a strong overview of what has been discovered about multiple identity theory and intersectionality theory generally. However, the literature review left unclear how much or how little work has been conducted about the study’s specific population, women of color student activists.

**Methodology**

It is important in qualitative research to follow rigorous methodological standards and provide a rationale for decisions that are made in regards to study design. Linder and Rodriguez (2012) followed many of the standards consistent with high quality qualitative research. First, the authors placed themselves in the study and acknowledged their own biases. Both authors disclosed demographic information pertaining to their gender, race, socioeconomic status, and revealed their philosophies about race and gender issues. Linder also divulged having prior relationships with the research participants. Revealing this information was important since Creswell (2009) argued researchers should reveal pertinent personal information that may influence how they interpret research results.

A second strength of the methodology was that the authors utilized multiple points of data collection. Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, and Davidson (2002) argued that utilizing multiple forms of data collection provides a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being
studied. Linder and Rodriguez (2012) conducted one-on-one interviews with the seven research participants and followed up with a focus group interview consisting of six of the seven original participants. By collecting data in multiple forms, the authors argued that they were able to better understand the participants’ experiences in multiple contexts. The focus group was specifically identified as helping the authors check and confirm if members’ experiences were consistent with one another.

A third strength of the methodology was how the authors established trustworthiness by explaining the steps taken to ensure dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability of results. The authors established dependability by utilizing multiple sources of data collection. The use of member checking of emergent themes helped ensure an accurate depiction of members’ experiences, establishing credibility. Confirmability was established by triangulating data between the two authors. The authors independently analyzed the data collected, discussed preliminary themes, and compared their perspectives to confirm each other’s interpretations. Finally, transferability was established by utilizing thick descriptions to allow participants’ voices to be clear in the article. Creswell (2009) argued it is important for researchers to employ multiple methods to establish trustworthiness both to ensure the accuracy of results and to establish credibility with readers. Linder and Rodriguez (2012) followed four common methods of establishing trustworthiness and provided clear explanations of each method.

Despite the rigorous research methods employed, there are some areas that could have been improved. First, the manner in which participants were selected led to the inclusion of a marginalized group of students not originally intended to be part of the study. Participants were selected to meet the qualifications of being a woman of color activist. Each interested participant
that met those qualifications was selected for the study. The troublesome part of this selection method is that the majority of the participants also ended up being part of another marginalized group as members of the LGBTQ community. The study was intended to examine the experiences of women of color activists, but ultimately may have explored the experiences of students who also happen to be part of the LGBTQ community. This is an important distinction since students who are part of three marginalized groups may have different experiences than students who are part of two marginalized groups. Given the original intention of the study and the research question posed, the authors should have taken steps to prevent a majority of participants being part of a third marginalized group. Merriam (2002) argued that researchers should maintain explicit criteria for how they choose to purposefully include and exclude participants for research studies. Linder and Rodriguez (2012) were explicit about whom to include, but were not explicit about whom to potentially exclude from the study.

An additional weakness of the study was that the authors did not delineate the limitations of the study. All research has limitations, but limitations should be identified and accounted for by the researchers (Creswell, 2009). One limitation of the Linder and Rodriguez (2012) study was the nature of participants self-selecting into the study. Self-selection is an appropriate method for identifying participants for a qualitative study, but it does have some limitations. For example, in the Linder and Rodriguez study, the participants had all thus far successfully navigated persisting at their institution. Other women of color activists may have transferred to other institutions or dropped out completely. Examining the experiences of those students may have provided a different understanding of how women of color activists made meaning of their multiple identities. This limitation is not meant to argue that the authors should have selected
participants differently. However, the authors should have acknowledged some of the limitations of the study based on how participants were selected.

**Findings/Discussion**

The findings and discussion sections of Linder and Rodriguez’s (2012) article presented a rich and thick description of the participants’ experiences. Creswell (2009) argued that presenting qualitative research findings in a narrative form helps eliminate research bias and allows participants’ voices to come through naturally. The authors presented findings from the study in a narrative format that described the participants’ collective experiences in navigating a path of activism, experiencing marginalization, and ultimately creating safe spaces on campus. In order to express the findings, the authors provided rich, thick descriptions and numerous quotes and stories directly from the participants. The authors also intertwined the participants’ stories to provide a comprehensive and flowing view of the participants’ experiences. The use of rich descriptions and the intertwining of participant stories is consistent with the description by Fossey et al. (2002) about how to write a qualitative research findings section.

The discussion section of the article was also well written and did a good job of tying the findings back to the original research question and theoretical frameworks. Merriam (2002) argued that discussion sections of research papers should tie findings back to the original purpose of the study and place the findings in the context of prior work, which the authors did effectively. The authors clearly answered how the study participants made meaning of their multiple identities and grounded the discussion in how the participants’ experiences could be understood in the context of intersectionality and multiple identity development theories. Overall, the presentation of the findings with rich, thick descriptions and a discussion grounded in theory
provided a strong argument about how women of color activists in the study made meaning of their multiple identities.

There are also some areas for improvement in how the findings and discussion were presented by the authors. At times the findings section delved into areas more appropriate for the discussion or recommendations sections. There were multiple points in the findings section where the authors referred back to the literature to make sense of the participants’ experiences. Referring back to literature to make sense of the findings is appropriate, but should be reserved for the discussion section (Fossey et al., 2002). Additionally, near the end of the findings section about experiencing marginalization, the authors went beyond presenting the participants’ stories and moved into providing recommendations for how educators should challenge marginalizing experiences on campuses. This portion of the article would be better placed in the recommendations section to avoid mixing the participants’ experiences with the authors’ call to action to eliminate hostile experiences on campus.

**Recommendations**

The final section of the Linder and Rodriguez (2012) article provided a set of recommendations for practitioners to consider in eliminating hostile environments toward women of color activists on campus. The authors took an interesting approach to this section in that the recommendations came directly from the study participants. Recommendations from the participants provided credibility to the suggestions since the participants could speak from direct experience about what could improve hostile environments on campus. The authors further ensured the credibility of the recommendations by comparing participants’ ideas to those found
in the literature. This made it clear to the readers that the participants’ recommendations were consistent with prior studies.

One way the recommendations section could have been improved is by offering more recommendations about how to improve classroom experiences and faculty interactions for women of color activists. Some of the findings from the study indicated that women of color activists had uncomfortable experiences in classroom settings, particularly feeling discriminated against and marginalized by faculty members. Yet, none of the recommendations explicitly addressed those concerns. Additionally, recommendations were only made for future practice. Smart (2005) argued that studies should provide recommendations for research and theory as well as practice. It could have been particularly beneficial for the authors to provide recommendations for future theory since the study was built upon two theoretical frameworks. In the initial setup of the theoretical frameworks the authors devoted significant space to detailing the history and evolution of the two theories utilized in the study. The authors could have contributed to future research by referring back to the theoretical frameworks and identifying what new angles could be explored in future studies utilizing the same theoretical frameworks.

**Relation to Other Work**

Linder and Rodriguez (2012) provided a unique perspective about how women of color student activists made meaning of their multiple identities while attending a predominantly white institution. Although the specific population studied and contextual factors made the authors’ study unique, the study is also related to a larger body of literature. This section provides a brief
overview of how the Linder and Rodriguez study relates to prior work about identity
development and the experiences of individuals who are part of marginalized groups.

Tajfel and Turner (1979) developed the concept of social identity theory, which introduced the idea that individuals’ self-concept is partially derived from membership in various social groups. Roccas and Brewer (2002) brought a new angle to social identity theory and developed the idea of social identity complexity, whereby individuals’ identities are influenced by the interaction of the multiple groups to which they belong. The Linder and Rodriguez (2012) study contributes to this broad stream of literature by examining the experiences of women of color who identify as members of their gender and ethnic groups, but also as members of activist groups on campus. The authors examined the experiences of women of color activists through the multiple identity development and intersectionality theories. However, the findings from the study also contribute to and build off the area of inquiry related to social identity complexity as described by Roccas and Brewer.

Linder and Rodriguez (2012) examined a narrowly defined population. Although the specific study of women of color student activists at a predominantly white institution (PWI) may be unique, the study contributes to a larger body of work on the individual experiences of women and ethnic minorities on college campuses. For example, the experience of ethnic minority students at PWIs has been studied in the past (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Loo and Rolison, 1986). Although the Jones, Castellanos, and Cole (2002) and Loo and Rolison (1986) studies did not focus specifically on women of color, the findings from those studies identified the struggles and difficulties ethnic minorities experience at a PWI. Although Linder
and Rodriguez focused on only women who are ethnic minorities, the study adds to the broader literature about minority populations of any type at a PWI.

A study more specific to the issue of women of color that preceded Linder and Rodriguez’s (2012) work is an article by Tate and Lin (2005) about women of color engineering students. Tate and Lin found that women of color in engineering programs developed multiple identities to persist through a field dominated by white males. Students formed different identities in their academic and social lives in order to fit into their multiple environments. There has also been prior work conducted about women of color faculty members. Turner (2002) found that faculty women of color often lead “invisible” lives since they must balance membership in different gender and racial groups, with fewer faculty being both a woman and an ethnic minority. Linder and Rodriguez identified similarly difficult experiences for women of color activists as Tate and Lin and Turner discovered. Each study adds to the broader literature on the experiences of women of color. Faculty and students may be at two different stages in their professional and personal lives, but faculty and students who share the identity of being a woman of color may experience some of the same discriminatory practices. Similarly, engineering students and self-identified campus activists may not have completely analogous experiences, but may share comparable experiences as women of color. Examining women of color in multiple contexts provides a more comprehensive body of literature about the experiences of that specific population.

There are many studies exploring the experiences of women and ethnic minorities from multiple perspectives. Each of these studies contributes to the literature on this important topic. Creswell (2009) argued that qualitative research is specific to a certain context and not intended
to be generalizable beyond the individual study. As such, it is important for multiple studies to explore similar issues from different perspectives. Linder and Rodriguez (2012) provided a unique examination of women of color in an activist context at a PWI that contributes to the body of literature about how marginalized populations make meaning of their multiple identities.

Conclusion

Linder and Rodriguez (2012) examined the experiences of women of color student activists at a predominantly white institution. There are many strengths and weaknesses of the article. The article provided a clear, cogent argument about the experiences of women of color activists. The purpose of the study is clear, the research question directly related to the study’s purpose, rigorous research methods were employed, and the authors provided a rich, thick description of the study participants’ experiences. Providing a stronger description of the significance of the study, accounting for the limitations of the methodology employed, and providing more recommendations to address the concerns discovered during the study could have strengthened the article. Overall, the authors conducted a sound study that contributes to the larger body of literature about the experiences of marginalized populations and specifically how members of multiple marginalized groups make meaning of their multiple identities.
References


Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47).

