

**Student Development Theory in *Higher Learning*:
Unique Theories for Three Different Students**

Shannon Usher

College of Professional Studies, Northeastern University

EDU 6216: The College Student Experience

Dr. Mounira Morris

August 14, 2022

Content Warning and Positionality Statement

The following paper describes several situations that can be triggering, including discussions of racism and White supremacy, rape and sexual harassment, and gun violence in a school setting. Though no explicit language is used to describe these situations, I felt it important to acknowledge ahead of time.

Additionally, it is equally as important to acknowledge that I am a White, queer woman who is still learning how to understand and utilize theory to describe student development. This is my first major utilization and interaction with Critical Race Theory and its application. I look forward to constructive and corrective critique where necessary as I continue to learn and discover more about my position as a higher education professional and as an active and engaged citizen.

In this paper, multiple student and identity development theories will be utilized to critically examine the film *Higher Learning*, written and directed by John Singleton in 1995. First, a summary of the film and the film's main themes will be presented. Subsequent sections of this paper will explore each of the main characters and use development theory to describe their experiences in the film. A conclusion will then be presented, drawing together similarities and differences across the three characters.

A Summary of *Higher Learning* and Its Themes

Higher Learning tells the story of three first-year college students and their overlapping friend groups, and focuses predominantly on the time period of the first day of class through November 15 at the fictional Columbus University, located somewhere in California; the film explores the themes of sexuality, rape, racism, and gun violence and how it affects the lives of students on campus. As this film shows how interconnected these students are, the audience is forced to acknowledge that systems of injustice do not exist in separate bubbles; instead, these social experiences, identities, and injustices are intersectional and systemic. Furthermore, the events portrayed in the film and John Singleton's commentary on the United States in 1995 are not so different from the reality of 2022.

Malik Williams, a young Black man, arrives on campus with a partial sports scholarship for track. His coach disciplines him for his arrogant behavior and "big-man-on-campus" attitude. Malik is then shown interacting with Fudge White, a "super senior" who understands learning to be a tool for liberation rather than professional success. The film follows his journey to realizing how systemic racism plays a role in his social experience on campus and in his future, mostly played out in conversations with Fudge, Professor Phipps, and his girlfriend, Deja.

Kristen Connor, a young White woman, also attends Columbus University with the help of financial aid. Her story begins with two of her high school friends, whose only contributions to her story come in the form of racial microaggressions and the willful ignorance of her safety as a woman. Her Black roommate, Monet, is connected to Fudge's group of friends. After Kristen was raped by one of the fraternity brothers, Monet, Fudge, and their friends confront the rapist—though their motivation was for a slur that was thrown at Monet rather than for Kristen herself. Kristen begins to experience bouts of depression, but ultimately uses her terrifying experience to fuel activism on campus—all while exploring her own sexuality.

Remy, a young White man, grew up in Boise, Idaho with a survivalist father who he describes as abusive. His character and story arc represent the existence and persistence of neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups and rhetoric. Remy is socially awkward, and his attempts to interact with other people are seen as weird and uncomfortable behavior. This pushes Remy to isolate himself until a neo-Nazi skinhead finds him late at night and recruits him. He grows more aggressive and indoctrinated into racist and white supremacist ideologies throughout the film, ultimately shooting and killing two students—including Malik's girlfriend, Deja—and himself at the rally organized by Kristen.

John Singleton was no stranger to films that explored these topics. His breakout directorial debut was with *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), and with films like *Poetic Justice* (1993) and *Rosewood* (1997), it is clear that his body of work was devoted to telling stories about the Black experience in America, with a focus on the development and trajectory of social movements. His films, particularly *Higher Learning*, force the audience to think critically about how they learn and understand social customs and systemic injustice in their everyday life. This is most clearly seen by the end of this film, where the American flag is overlaid with the word “unlearn.”

Malik Williams: Critical Race Theory and Ethnic Identity Formation

Central to Malik William's experience at Columbus University is his Blackness. It is present and noticeable in every interaction in this film. It starts with Kristen holding her purse closer to her body in an elevator after Malik steps in. It is clear and present in his various interactions with Fudge and Professor Phipps. It is why Remy pulls a gun on him. To assess Malik's experience, Critical Race Theory (CRT) can be utilized. Interestingly, this film was developed around the same time that CRT was first used as a framework. The framework for CRT consists of five tenets: counter-storytelling; the permanence of racism; Whiteness as property; interest conversion; and the critique of liberalism (Hiraldo, 2010).

Fudge and Malik often utilize counter-storytelling to describe experiences they have had on campus: Fudge describes how the police break up his parties but not frat parties with White students. The scene where students gather after Remy pulls a gun on Malik provides an example of Whiteness as property—where property can also be defined as “the right of use and enjoyment” (Hiraldo, 2010). The police attempt to disperse the Black students that have gathered around Malik. It isn't until Fudge points out that the police have not removed the White students for using the same space that the police disperse all students.

In examining the fourth tenet of CRT, interest conversion, it is important to acknowledge that White students are the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation; furthermore, White women are the majority recipients of benefits from affirmative action (Hiraldo, 2010). Kristen also received a scholarship; however, unlike Malik, she doesn't have to do any physical work to maintain it, whereas Malik refers to himself as “their racehorse.” The critique of liberalism is also present in this film, most visibly when Malik explains why he is leaving his shared dorm with Wayne; Wayne objects, saying he isn't racist and doesn't understand why he needs to leave.

Wayne is taking a stance as a bystander rather than a support—colorblindedness and being a complicit part of a system prohibits the movement towards dismantling social inequities.

Malik's story can also be examined in the way his personal identity is formed on campus. Ethnic identity is a complex and dynamic construct that involves a commitment and sense of belonging to one's ethnic group and an interest in and knowledge about the group, changing overtime and varying across individuals. This evolution can be broken into three stages: (1) a period where ethnicity has been given little conscious thought, (2) a period of search and immersion to learn more about the group, and (3) the development of a secure sense of self in that group (Phinney, 1996).

Malik's understanding of Blackness and higher education is continuously pushed by Fudge for a majority of the film. When Malik asks Fudge if he had any Frederick Douglas, Fudge looks elated that Malik is choosing to learn, but then immediately becomes frustrated that the only reason he is reading it is because of a class. That moment marks a moment of transition for Malik, as he leaves stage one and moves into stage two. He begins to seek Fudge out more often, and frequently has discussions about his place in society as a Black man with his girlfriend, Deja. During this stage, he also begins to push back to Professor Phipps, who offers additional information to consider about how his Blackness informs his position at the university and in the nation. Ultimately, at the end of the film, Malik is teetering on stage three: he presents a well thought out and research paper on Blackness in America for Professor Phipps, who ultimately acknowledges Malik's success and respect for how far he has come on his journey to understand more about himself.

Kristen Connor: D'Augeli's Lifespan Model and Queer-Authorship

Kristen Connor is not a unique student. She is a white, cisgender, middle class woman who is well-educated. Based on her early interactions on campus and the company she had been keeping prior to her rape, it is clear that Kristen, like many students entering college, had her understanding of self and gender “challenged in the college environment” (Robbins & McGowan, 2016). Her experience on campus is therefore most informed by her experience as a woman and the exploration of her sexual identity. As her story develops in *Higher Learning*, she begins to question her sexuality and explores a sexual relationship with both a male and female companion.

Much research has been conducted on the experience of, heterosexual, gay, and lesbian students, but the bisexual experience challenges traditional models of sexual orientation identity development, as those individuals experience development differently from other LGBT students; this difference can be further broken down by gender. Despite perception and presentation of non-heterosexual identity processes in woman as parallel to men, research shows that women tend to explore their bisexual identity at a slower pace than men (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Kristen herself is an example of someone who hadn't explored her bisexual feelings until after experiencing a traumatic heterosexual relationship.

In this way, Kristen's social identity evolution can be explained with a lifespan approach rather than a traditional stage model. Traditional stage models focus on internal conflict resolution, or the “coming-out” process, and rely on clear and distinct stages of identity development that usually begins with suppression of feelings and moves through various levels of resolution. Instead, D'Augeli's lifespan model reflects the complexity of human relationships that happen concurrently and fluidly. The six “identity processes” in this theory are the

following: exiting heterosexuality, developing a personal LGB identity, developing an LGB social identity, becoming an LGB offspring, developing an LGB intimacy status, and entering an LGB community (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

These processes can be experienced simultaneously, more than once, or not at all. Kristen presents herself as an example of a student that has had greater development in one process than in others. For example, as she engages in a relationship with Taryn, a leader of a woman's rights group on campus, she is somewhere in the exiting heterosexuality, developing a personal LGB identity, and developing an LGB intimacy status processes; however, it can be assumed based on her conversations with Monet and her other sexual partner, Malik's white roommate named Wayne, that she is not publicly out and therefore has not begun developing an LGB social identity, becoming an LGB offspring, or entering an LGB community.

Additionally, Kristen's activism also follows another queer theoretical perspective on development: "for students who do not identify as heterosexual, identity development as part of the journey toward self-authorship requires resisting power structures that define one as abnormal" (Abes & Kasch, 2007). Self-authorship theory describes the development of a sense of self focused on internal meaning making, and is initiated as a result of challenges to the pre-established personal identity with sufficient support (Baxter Magolda, 2007); though self-authorship allows for LGBT students to make sense of their place in a heteronormative society, it does not account for challenging heteronormativity and social change. Kristen is a great example of "queer-authorship"—a form of self-authorship as social change described by Abes and Kasch—as she works on deconstructing the external framework rather than the internal framework (Abes & Kasch, 2007).

Remy: White Racial Identity Development

Remy is a much harder student to examine. He offers no details about his life until after he joins a neo-Nazi organization, his social awkwardness means that he doesn't have positive interactions with other students, and his story is driven mostly by loneliness and as a periphery to Malik and Fudge. Remy appears almost two-dimensional: he has no interests, no friends, and no motivations. Furthermore, his apparent disinterest in his education and lack of direction make it easy for him to place blame for his failures—social, academic, or otherwise—on someone else. It is because of this that he is susceptible to the manipulation of Scott and the other skinheads.

Remy is an example of a student who undergoes development of his personal identity as it pertains to race like Malik—except that this journey is very different. For understanding White racial identity development (WRID), utilizing the same model as minority students is simply ineffective, as the process is different due to positions and power in society. It is also important to note that even traditional methods of evaluating WRID, like Helms 1998 model only consider students moving in a direction of positive attitudes towards other racial groups (Rowe et al., 1994).

Instead, Rowe et al. suggest using a dynamic model that separates two types of White identity into unachieved and achieved consciousness, further broken down into subtypes that are mutable and do not necessarily follow any particular sequence. Persons categorized as unachieved, where exploration and/or commitment are lacking, can be further described as avoidant, dependent, and dissonant. Persons categorized as achieved, who have undergone and continue to explore and commit to a personal outlook on racial issues, can be further described as dominative, conflictive, reactive, and integrative (Rowe et al., 1994).

Remy begins this story exemplifying an avoidant type, where he has no outward expression or consideration of his own Whiteness and how he interacts with people in minority groups. Even when he reports Fudge to the police because of a loud party, it is clear that he does not understand the implications of reporting a large group of Black students to the police. When Fudge comes back to the dorm after class and immediately plays loud music while Remy is trying to work, he asks Fudge to turn off the radio. When his request is denied, he and his roommate move out. At this time, his motivations are rooted in consideration for his own environment, and his seemingly inconsiderate roommates; however, it becomes abundantly clear that those interactions are internalized into the beginnings of hatred and dominative consciousness.

The first time in the film that Remy is engaged in a conversation about race is seemingly innocuous. Scott, who at the time is just a random person on the street, makes a comment about having a good time: “We're young, we're White, we live in America. What more do you want?” When Scott further discusses White supremacist ideologies, that the “White man is endangered,” Remy tells him that he hadn’t considered that before. This indicates a movement toward a dissonant type, where previously held attitudes are brought into conflict with new information and experiences.

Ultimately, Remy settles into a dominative consciousness. The moment this happens is shown in the film, when he looks around the room at the race and gender of the other students while getting increasingly agitated—before pulling off his hat and revealing his shaved head. This type is indicative of a White person who upholds the belief that White Americans are superior. I would like to make clear that not all people with this type resort to violence like Remy did; however, anger, fear, and hostility are all typically present in this type (Rowe et al., 1994).

Conclusion

Malik, Kristen, and Remy all have very different, yet eminently connected experiences at Columbus University. Malik confronts systemic racism in the nation and in higher education, Kristen explores her personal sexual identity as well as her confidence in order to enact positive change. Remy undergoes development in a different direction, turning to White supremacy to find meaning and connection in their lives. Throughout this story, their social circles overlap and significant events in each of their lives all happen at the same time and/or in the same place. Ultimately, the story ends with a definitive conclusion to these progressions: Remy shoots and kills Malik's girlfriend Deja at a campus unity event that was put together by Kirsten to address racial tension.

Unfortunately, it appears as though violence is one of the only through lines in this film, as each situation requires a different approach to understanding their development. Unique models for White students and Black students need to be acknowledged in order to fully acknowledge power and position in society as contributing factors to development, as is the case with applying CRT to Malik's story and WRID to Remy's. In Kristen's case, development needs to be examined as it pertains to her gender and sexuality—which is why D'Augeli's lifespan model and queer-authorship are utilized herein.

References

- Abes, E. S., & Kasch, D. (2007). Using queer theory to explore lesbian college students' multiple dimensions of identity. *Journal of College Student Development, 48*(6), 619–636.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2007.0069>
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2008). Three elements of self-authorship. *Journal of College Student Development, 49*(4), 269–284. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0016>
- Bilodeau, B. L., & Renn, K. A. (2005). Analysis of LGBT identity development models and implications for practice. *New Directions for Student Services, 2005*(111), 25–39.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.171>
- Hiraldo, P. (2010). The role of critical race theory in higher education. *The Vermont Connection, 31*(1), 53–59. <https://doi.org/https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol31/iss1/7>
- Phinney, J. S. (1996). Understanding ethnic diversity. *American Behavioral Scientist, 40*(2), 143–152. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764296040002005>
- Robbins, C. K., & McGowan, B. L. (2016). Intersectional perspectives on gender and gender identity development. *New Directions for Student Services, 2016*(154), 71–83.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20176>
- Rowe, W., Bennett, S. K., & Atkinson, D. R. (1994). White racial identity models. *The Counseling Psychologist, 22*(1), 129–146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000094221009>