

Racism on Campus: An Exploratory Analysis of Black-White Perceptions in the South

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Racism has been a persistent problem in American society. Sociologists refer to racism as unfair treatment of an individual or a group solely on the basis of race.¹ It may be covert or overt, and it may be expressed on an individual level when a person consciously or unconsciously discriminates against another person. Racism may also be expressed on an institutional level, when rules, policies and practices of organizations and/or institutions discriminate against an individual or a group.²

Racists believe that their race is superior to others and that there is no such thing as racial equality. They assume that their color, culture, mental, and physical capabilities are superior to other races. Racists have prejudiced beliefs and discriminate against other racial and ethnic groups. These beliefs are justified because of their racist perceptions.³ Racists are insecure and afraid of their own uncertainties. As a result, racism is usually a product of ignorance rather than genuine hatred.

Racism is a fact of life in American society. It is learned through the socialization process at an early age, and throughout life its pervasiveness is reinforced by individuals, organizations and institutions.⁴

Covert Racism on College Campuses

Although overt racism is rare, black students routinely encounter covert, individual racism. There are numerous incidents of covert racism accorded black students at predominantly white institutions. First, white academic advisors discourage black students from taking difficult courses, or allow them to overload with more courses than they can handle. Second, white students often avoid black students in classrooms, lecture halls and/or study groups. Third, blacks are left out of student networks such as sharing of notes, course syllabi, or old exams. Finally,

professors, fearing a racist label, may hesitate to advise black students to drop courses when they have problems that may cause them to fail. to fail.

Black students also experience institutional racism on predominantly white college campuses. This includes standardized tests on which blacks tend to score lower than whites and which are weighed heavily in the admission process, rising costs of college tuition, a decline in the amount of student aid, and other financial cutbacks. Unfortunately, decreases in financial aid under the Reagan administration neglected the fact that many blacks are in need of financial aid for about 60% of their college costs.⁵

Previous studies have examined racial attitudes on white campuses. Many white students believe they are living in a racially equal society and resent that blacks and other minorities are given special treatment, and therefore resent a minority group being singled out for cultural programs or special activities.⁶ Some white students also feel that they are being victimized by efforts intended to correct past discrimination and that minorities enjoy unfair advantages.⁷

Over 80% of all blacks enrolled in college attend predominantly white institutions.⁸ On these campuses, racism often prevents blacks from developing a sense of belonging.⁹ They experience culture shock and little socialization with white students. Most are generally isolated from mainstream campus activities.¹⁰

In addition, some black students on predominantly white college campuses lack African American cultural knowledge. Many are struggling with their identities and have a very limited awareness of the black struggles in the past, which allowed them to have access to the major institutions today.¹¹

Faculty support and assistance are scarce for black students at predominantly white institutions. For example, these schools do not provide enough black role models. And some black students have trouble locating the few black faculty on campus because of their low numbers. Unfortunately, some black students go through college with little or no mentoring, because many white professors are unaware of and insensitive to their needs.¹²

Student support services for blacks and other minorities are often lacking at predominantly white institutions. Indeed, support services are important in assisting and supervising all students in achieving academically. As such, white students have an advantage over black students which becomes evident in the classrooms, job market, and their opportunities for upward social mobility.¹³

Racism may also cause unnecessary psychological stress for blacks, which may lead to apathy and frustration, which may then lead to academic failure. This impacts upon and causes high attrition rates, although many black students have above average GPAs. Moreover, some blacks develop negative self-concepts and attitudes, which may

lead to a lack of academic persistence, and finally to dismissal or withdrawal from school.¹⁴

Hence, symbolic interactionists assert that individuals develop their self-concepts and identities from interacting with others around them. Therefore, when minorities are constantly treated as inferior, this treatment is likely to affect them. Scholars believe that the way minorities are perceived and treated on a campus has a direct effect on their self-concepts and academic performances.¹⁵

The present study draws heavily from Herbert Blumer's quasi-microlevel analysis of race relations in the South. His neglected work on the significance of the "color line" has stifled the use of the sociological imagination in studying racism. The color line, according to Blumer, "comes into play when members of the two races meet each other not on an individual basis but as a representative of their respective groups."¹⁶

It seems apparent that Blumer recognized the effects of stereotypes on the interaction between members of different racial groups. Moreover, Blumer observed that the color line helps establish "intimate and private circles, represented by social sets, cliques, private clubs, friendship sets, family circles, courtship, and marriage."¹⁷ These observations provided the background for conceptualizing the problems encountered by black students at predominantly white colleges and universities in the South.

In addition, an individual's definition of the situation may shape his or her character. Since people respond to both the objective features of a situation and to the meanings that situations have for them, false perceptions can be created that become real in their consequences.¹⁸ This self-fulfilling prophecy can be extremely devastating for minorities, particularly for blacks, since their race is often perceived as a negative stigma. Some whites may perceive and expect them to lack the ability to perform in rewarding and meaningful positions.¹⁹

It is important to note that an individual's definition of the situation varies by racial group membership. Therefore, based on the aforementioned theoretical perspective, the objective of this study is to assess black and white students' perceptions of racism on their college campus. This assessment focuses mainly on their perceptions of individual and institutional racism, based on their definitions of the situations.

Methods and Data

This study was conducted at a major university in the South. The population consisted of 113 black and white Resident Hall Assistants who attended a weekend retreat workshop on "Racial Awareness" in August, 1988. This population was ideal because these individuals have to deal with racial problems in their residence halls. Many of them were aware of racial problems that went unnoticed by the university's administrators.

A questionnaire was administered to the respondents at the end of the workshop. The instrument assessed their perceptions of racism and race

relations on their campus, as well as their definitions of the situations. The items selected for this study assessed their perceptions of issues relating to black faculty and administrators, white professors, administrators and advisors, student networks, and racial discrimination. Response categories for each item included in the analysis were 1=agree and 2=disagree.

Findings

Of the 113 respondents, 78% were white and 22% were black. The results indicated that 40% of whites and 76% of blacks disagreed with the statement that people in authority on campus respond vigorously to negative incidents of racism.

The results show that 64% of whites and 48% of blacks agreed that teaching techniques used by most instructors appealed to students with different cultural backgrounds. It is interesting to note that blacks were almost evenly divided in their assessment of this statement with 48% agreeing and 52% disagreeing. Only 23% of blacks and 32% of whites agreed with the statement that, "It is clear to most on campus what racial discrimination is." However, the majority of both blacks (68%) and whites (77%) disagreed with the statement.

The results show that 57% of whites and 84% of blacks disagreed with the statement that, "There is a sufficient number of black faculty on campus." Likewise, 68% of white and 100% of blacks disagreed with the statement that, "There is a sufficient number of black administrators on campus." These findings indicate that black students perceived the number of black faculty and administrators to be low on their campus. It also points out that white students may not be as sensitive or as conscious of that fact, and therefore define the situation differently.

In response to the statement, "On campus, there are things going on that contribute to good racial interactions," 51% of whites and 80% of blacks agreed. This finding indicates that whites were almost evenly divided on their perceptions of this item, whereas there was more concordance among blacks.

The findings show that 49% of whites and 72% of blacks agreed that white academic advisors discourage black students from taking difficult courses. This finding could be due to the fact that whites are not knowledgeable about what advisors tell blacks.

In response to the statement that black students are left out of student networks such as sharing of classnotes, course outlines, and/or old exams, 73% of whites and 60% of blacks agreed. This finding may be due to the fact that white students are more knowledgeable about this situation since it concerns how some white students discriminate against some black students.

Finally, the results of the analysis show that 57% of whites and 72% of blacks agreed that white professors, fearing a racist label, hesitate to advise blacks to drop courses when they have problems that may cause

them to fail. These findings suggest that about two-thirds of the black students, and more than half of the white students perceive that white professors are unaware of or insensitive to some of the needs of black students.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that black students perceive racism on their college campus. These findings are consistent with the results of previous studies of blacks on predominantly white campuses.

What are the causes of campus racism? Many scholars believe that educational institutions have neglected to educate all students on all aspects of U.S. history. Consequently, many white students come to college ignorant of racial barriers and the need for programs to rectify the problems of the past. Based on their definitions of the situations, they then resent the programs and become angry. In addition, there is a change in the social climate which encourages white students to openly act out their racial hostilities.

Racial incidents on campuses are, in part, a manifestation of some white males' fears about losing their elite status. For example, over 90% of the reported acts of racial violence or harassment has been at the hands of young, white males. Many whites are afraid that blacks and other minorities are taking something away from them, and may one day gain too much power and therefore pose a threat to their privileged status.

What can be done about campus racism? First, colleges and universities should acknowledge that campus racism exists and administrators should take a strong opposition to all forms of discrimination. They should make a commitment to educating students on racial diversity as well as in math, English, and science. Ethnic Studies programs should be created or present ones enhanced, and all students should be required to take a race relations course upon entering the institution.

The Vice President for Student Affairs should have an Office for Minority Affairs that will directly support minority students and their organizations and that will serve as a means for obtaining their input. This office could also develop strategies for better recruitment of minorities, sponsor race relations seminars to discuss racial questions openly, design programs to modify alienation of minorities, conduct surveys of students' attitudes about race, and sponsor conferences to heighten cross-cultural awareness.

Black faculty and administrators need to become more visible and serve as positive role models for black students. At the beginning of the year, black freshman should have the opportunity to meet black faculty, administrators, and student leaders on campus. Also, parents should be encouraged to involve themselves in events for black students and to meet black faculty and administrators.

More interaction among blacks and whites should be encouraged. In addition, residence hall staff, white professors, and other staff should be

trained in racial awareness, racial sensitivity, and cultural diversity.¹⁹ Only with a concerted cooperative effort of all levels of administration and faculty can campuses become both culturally diverse and sensitive to that diversity.

Notes

¹James William Coleman and Donald R. Cressey, *Social Problems*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1987).

²Paula S. Rothenberg, *Racism and Sexism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

³Joe R. Feagin, *Racial and Ethnic Relations*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989); Harry H. Kitano, *Race Relations*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989); Vincent A. Parrilo, *Strangers to These Shores: Race and Ethnic Relations in the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1985).

⁴Anthony G. Dworkin and Rosalind J. Dworkin, *The Minority Report* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982).

⁵Diane K. Yavorsky, "The State Leadership Role," *The Journal of State Government* 61 (1988): 66-68.

⁶Shelby Steele, "The Recoloring of Campus Life," *Harper's Magazine* (February 1989): 47-55.

⁷Denise K. Magner, "Blacks and Whites on the Campuses: Behind the Ugly Racist Incidents, Students Isolation and Insensitivity," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 33 (April 1989): A28-A33.

⁸Rose Mary L. Bray, "School Daze: The Dilemma of Blacks on Campus," *Essence* 15 (1984): 74-76.

⁹Walter R. Allen, *Correlates of Black Student Adjustment, Achievement, and Aspirations at a Predominantly White Southern University* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987).

¹⁰Julia C. Elam, *Blacks on White Campuses* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983).

¹¹Charles A. Taylor, "Black Students on Predominantly White College Campuses in the 1980s," *Journal of College Student Personnel* 27 (May 1986): 196-202.

¹²Laverne Baker, "A Comprehensive Model to Enhance the Academic Achievement of Minority Students Attending Predominantly White Colleges and Universities" Unpublished Manuscript. University of Southwestern Louisiana.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Julia C. Elam, *Blacks on White Campuses* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983); Walter R. Allen, *Correlates of Black Student Adjustment, Achievement, and Aspirations at a Predominantly White Southern University* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987).

¹⁵John W. Kinch, "Experiments on Factors Related to Self-Concept Change," *Symbolic Interaction*, 3rd ed. Jerome G. Manis and Bernard N. Meltzer, eds. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1978) 197-201; Melvin C. Ray and Motoko Y. Lee, "The Effects of Stigmas on Intergroup Relationships," *Journal of Social Psychology*. (Forthcoming).

¹⁶Herbert Blumer, "The Future of the Color Line," in *The South in Continuity and Change*, John C. McKinney and Edgar T. Thomson, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1965) 329.

¹⁷Blumer, 335.

¹⁸William I. Thomas, "The Definition of the Situation," in *Symbolic Interaction: A Reader in Social Psychology*, Jerome G. Manis and Bernard N. Meltzer, eds. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1978) 254-258.

¹⁹Carla Anderson, "Coalitions, Institutes, Student Groups Combat Campus Racism," *Black Issues in Higher Education* 22 (June 1989): 15; Richard T. Schafer, *Sociology* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1986)