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Evaluating the Effects of Intergroup Interactions and Color-blind Racism on Perceptions of University Campus Cultural Climate

Emily Haley

Abstract

This study examines college students at a large, public university in the Northeast and their perception of the campus's cultural climate. The online survey was completed by 362 students whose responses were used to answer the following research questions: "Does the frequency of interactions with people from other cultures affect one's perception of campus cultural climate?" and "Is there a difference between people who experience color-blind racial attitudes and their perceptions of campus cultural climate compared to those who do not experience color-blind racial attitudes?" Results showed that frequency of interactions was significantly correlated with perceptions of acceptance, and color-blind racial attitudes were significant for all measures of campus cultural climate. Increased representation of minority groups and future research into types of interactions could be beneficial for non-white students' academic success in secondary education.

Introduction and Literature Review

To promote openness and cultivate environments of greater learning, increased involvement, and higher senses of belonging, colleges are increasing their efforts at diversifying their campuses. These efforts have seen a large increase over the past four decades, aimed at celebrating other cultures and creating environments where individuals are equally valued (Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, and Hart 2008). Despite these efforts, many minority students tend to view the results of these efforts as less successful than their white counterparts. Previous studies found that white students held more favorable views of the campus cultural climate, while students of all non-white racial and ethnic backgrounds viewed their campus cultural environments less favorably. A lot of these less favorable views came from experiences all across campus, especially in residential halls. The academic success of students is contingent upon their ability to feel as though they belong at their schools, which, for many non-white students, has not been aided by current efforts to increase diversity (Worthington et al. 2008).

For students of color, issues of acceptance have been shown to affect their ability to complete their degrees at college. Although overall degree completion has risen, Museus, Nichols, and Lambert (2008) found that rates of degree completion remain lower for both black and Hispanic students, with only 46% and 47% completing a four-year degree respectively, compared to 67% of whites attaining degrees. The authors found that facing discrimination and prejudice can “negatively influence the adjustment, sense of belonging, institutional attachment, and persistence of both White and racial minority students” (Museus, Nichols, and Lambert

2008: 110). This can be especially hard for minority students, who face instances of prejudice and discrimination much more frequently.

Worthington et al. (2008) were concerned with the perceptions of campus climate for racial-ethnic minorities (RECC), as well as general campus climate (GCC). Worthington et al. (2008) operationalized campus climate as students' perceptions of campus acceptance by African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and Middle Easterners. General campus climate was measured "regarding the extent to which it was 'open,' 'friendly,' 'respectful,' 'concerned,' 'communicative,' and 'improving'" (Worthington et al. 2008:9). The authors hypothesized that white students view both of these more positively than non-white students. To measure these variables, survey participants were asked to rate with Likert-scale questions their perceptions of acceptance for different types of minority groups, as well as to rate the campus culture with various sets of ranging from "friendly to hostile," "concerned to indifferent," and "respectful to disrespectful." These ranges were put on five-point semantic differential scales, with lower scores indicating more positive views of the campus.

Worthington et al. (2008) also looked at how color-blind racial attitudes, as well as social dominance orientation, influenced perceptions of RECC and GCC. They found a correlation between color-blind racial attitudes and RECC and GCC for both non-white and white students. Social dominance orientation was more correlated with GCC than it was with RECC. Color-blind racial attitudes, which Worthington et al. (2008) broke up into categories such as "unawareness of racial privilege, institutional discrimination, and blatant racial issues" were indicative of GCC and RECC. The authors found that individuals who had higher levels of color-

blind racial attitudes were more likely to view GCC and RECC more positively than students with lower levels of color-blind racial attitudes (Worthington et al. 2008:8).

Park (2009) examined the levels of satisfaction of campus racial diversity based on one's racial/ethnic background (known in her study as Demographic Diversity Satisfaction (DSS)). Along with this, Park (2009) looked at the pre-college, institutional, experiential, and attitudinal factors that predicted DSS for various racial/ethnic groups. This question can be comparable to Worthington et al.'s (2008) research regarding color-blind racial attitudes on the influence of RECC and GCC. Park (2009) found black students to be the least satisfied with diversity, whereas white and Asian American students were "least likely to be dissatisfied" (Park 2009:303). The two strongest predictors of DDS were satisfaction with the community, peers, and college, as well as the racial heterogeneity of the student body (Park 2009).

The university Park (2009) studied was known as a predominantly white institution, defined as a school whose population consists of a majority of white students. While this is not an official classification of these schools, like the classifications of Historically Black Colleges, many use the term to simply refer to higher proportions of white to non-white students enrolled in a college or university. However, Bourke (2016) argues that such a simplification of the term fails to acknowledge the ways in which these social institutions are saturated in complex relationships between race, racism, and social institutions. Museus, Nichols, and Lambert (2008) discuss that while previous researchers have speculated that minority students at predominantly white institutions were more successful when separating oneself from their own culture and adopting white culture, these claims have brought forth many criticisms, and many researchers believe this to be false (Park 2009).

Many researchers have tried to discover under what conditions whites' racial attitudes change. Gordon Allport's Intergroup Contact Hypothesis focuses on the role of intergroup contacts, which, under the right conditions, can have positive effects on one's racial attitudes (McClellen & Linnander 2006). McClellen and Linnander (2006) found in a study on interracial interactions and exposure to information about contemporary racial attitudes that whites were more likely to have changes in racial attitudes when exposed to this information, especially when their relationship with another racial group came in the form of friendship. Worthington et al. (2008) received similar findings, showing that with increased exposure to non-white communities, one will be less likely to have color-blind racial attitudes.

A few limitations exist with the previous research. For Worthington et al. (2008), their research had an oversampling of minority populations, as well as self-selection bias among individuals. These, as well as the fact that their research was based specifically in the Midwest, make their research difficult to generalize to the United States as a whole. That being said, their research does align with previous findings. For Park (2009), a limitation was the differences between sample sizes of white and non-white populations, even with reducing the sample of white students. These issues showed with her regressions, as some populations have so few numbers they could not be considered. While also looking at a predominantly white institute, I found similar issues of low minority representation.

Research Methods

Protocols

To gather information, students in a sociology research methods course conducted an online survey through the research software Qualtrics. The survey was distributed through email,

posted on Facebook, and other online methods. This survey was created in late October of 2016 and sent out mid-November using a convenience sampling technique. Many respondents were recruited through their relationships with the members of the class or through membership in the same university-related Facebook groups, and the students who took the survey were not compensated. This sampling technique is inexpensive and gave us results in a short period of time. The limitations of this sampling technique are that it is nonrandom and biased, and may not be representative of the university population.

Measures

My first research question was “Does the frequency of interactions one has with other cultures affect their view on their university’s campus cultural climate?” I wanted to look at the frequency in which people interact with other cultures to see if the amount of times in which these interactions occur affects one’s view on campus culture climate more than others. My independent variable for this research question was the frequency of interactions, and my dependent variable was perceptions of campus cultural climate. My independent variable was operationalized through the question “How frequently do you interact with people from cultures other than your own since coming to [University’s name (henceforth referred to as “university”)]?” with responses of “very frequently,” “frequently,” “occasionally,” “rarely,” “very rarely,” and “never.” I operationalized my dependent variable in methods similar to Worthington et al.’s (2008) study, with questions to denote certain characteristics of the campus climate. Students were asked to respond how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: “People at the university are accepting”; “People at the university are friendly”;

“People at the university are respectful”; and “People at the university are communicative,” answering either “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” or “strongly disagree.”

My null hypothesis for my first research question is as follows: the type of interaction students have with other cultures does not influence their perceptions of campus cultural climate. My research hypothesis is that students who have more experiences and interactions with other cultures will view campus climate more negatively than students who have less personal interactions. By this, I hypothesized that students who interact with other cultures more frequently will have more negative perceptions than those who had limited or no interaction with other cultures. This hypothesis was formed to test McClellan and Linnander’s (2006) research results.

My second research question followed the results of Worthington et al.’s (2008) research on color-blind racial attitudes and perceptions of CCC and RECC. My question was, “Is there a difference between people who experience color-blind racial attitudes and their perceptions of campus cultural climate compared to those who do not experience color-blind racial attitudes?” Color-blind racial attitudes were measured with two questions: “Do you believe that racial prejudice and discrimination exist at your university?” and “Post-racial is defined as 'Denoting or relating to a period of society in which racial prejudice and discrimination no longer exist' (Oxford Dictionary). Do you believe that American society is 'post-racial?,'” both of which allowed for respondents to answer either “yes” or “no.” Campus cultural climate was operationalized in the same way as the first research question.

My null hypothesis for my second research question was that there would be no difference between students experiencing color-blind racial attitudes and students not

experiencing color-blind racial attitudes and their perceptions of campus cultural climate. My research hypothesis was that students who experience color-blind racial attitudes are more likely to view the campus cultural climate more positively, while students who do not have color-blind racial attitudes are more likely to view the campus cultural climate more negatively.

Results

Our survey had an attrition rate of 21%, with 459 respondents starting, and 362 respondents completing the survey. Seventy-five percent of our survey respondents (n=307) identified as women, with twenty-three percent (n=94) identifying as men. The other 2% of respondents (n=9) identified as neither male nor female. Of our survey, fourteen percent (n=59) were freshmen, twenty-two percent (n=89) were sophomores, forty percent (n=161) were juniors, eighteen percent (n=74) were seniors, and six percent (n=24) were categorized as other. Eighty-five percent of respondents (n=333) stated their race/ethnic background as white, making them a majority. Four percent of respondents (n=14) responded as Black or African American. Another four percent (n=14) responded as Latino or Hispanic categories. Four percent (n=17) and three percent (n=12) identified as Asian and Multi-Ethnic respectively. These low numbers are relatively representative of the university, which is a predominantly white institute (PWI). These low numbers make it hard to come up with conclusive data while doing some cross-tabulations.

Variables

The modal category for my independent variable was “occasionally,” where thirty-seven percent (n=136) stated they interact with members of other cultures. Forty-four percent (n=164)

said they interacted with members from other cultures either very frequently or frequently. Nineteen percent (n=70) reported rare, very rare, or no interactions.

My dependent variable for my first research question was measured with questions rating the university population on various qualities. The modal category for this variable was “agree” for all variables of “acceptance,” “friendliness,” “respectfulness,” and “communicativeness.” The numbers for the agree category ranged from seventy percent to seventy-two percent in all of the categories. The most telling finding of these results, however, was an increase in responses for “disagree” with the variables “respectfulness” and “communicativeness.” Whereas this category held 10 percent (n=37) and 8 percent (n=29) for “acceptance” and “friendliness” respectively, 16 percent (n=59) chose this response for “respectfulness” and 17 percent (n=62) chose it for “communicativeness.”

For my second research question, I looked at the questions concerning racial prejudice and discrimination, as well as belief in a post-racial America for my independent variables (with my dependent variable the same as my first question). For the first question, racial prejudice and discrimination, I found my modal category to be “somewhat,” with forty percent (n=149) of respondents. For responses on a post-racial America, eighty-two percent (n=294) answered “no.”

Cross-Tabulations

Research Question 1

Seventy-seven percent of individuals who chose “very frequently” viewed people at their university as accepting, while twenty-three percent viewed them as not accepting. For my first research question, I created a cross-tabulation with my independent and dependent variables. For the dependent variable measuring acceptance, I merged the “strongly agree” and “agree”

categories, as well as the “disagree” and “strongly disagree” categories. While the majority of people, regardless of interaction level, agreed with the statement, there was the biggest disparity between agreeing and disagreeing in the “very frequently” and “very rarely” interact categories. While the results for “very rarely” revealed similar percentages, (about 79% and 22% respectively), the “very rarely” category only held 14 total respondents, comparable to the 70 respondents of the “very frequently” category (See Table 2).

| How would you rate the university on the following statements?: People are accepting | | Very Frequently | Frequently | Occasionally | Rarely | Very Rarely | Never | Total |
|---|---------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|----------------|-------|
| Strongly Agree, Agree | 54 77.14% | 87 91.58% | 123 91.11% | 48 90.57% | 11 78.57% | 3 100% | 326 88.11% | |
| Disagree, Strongly Disagree | 16 22.86% | 8 8.42% | 12 8.89% | 5 9.43% | 3 21.43% | 0 0.00% | 44 11.89% | |
| Total | 70 100.00% | 95 100.00% | 135 100.00% | 53 100.00% | 14 100.00% | 3 100.00% | 370 100.00% | |
| Chi Square | | | | | 12.21 | | | |
| Degrees of Freedom | | | | | 5 | | | |
| p-value | | | | | 0.03 | | | |

The chi-square value was 51.40, with a p-value of .03, indicating these results as statistically significant. I therefore can reject the null hypothesis that the frequency of one's interactions with individuals of other cultures does not have an effect on one's perception of campus cultural climate. This shows that there is a significant relationship between the amount of interaction one has with other cultures on their perceptions of university's population as accepting. The other three categories of my dependent variable were not statistically significant.

Research Question 2

For my second research question, I created a cross-tabulation of the question "Do you believe that racial prejudice and discrimination exist at the university?" and my question measuring campus cultural climate. For acceptance, my chi-square value was 73.04, with a p-value of 0.00 (see Appendix 1, Table A). For friendliness, my chi-square value was 29.34, with a p-value of 0.00. Respectfulness (see Appendix 1, Table B) and communicativeness (see Appendix 1, Table C) saw values of 60.61 and 47.23 respectively, both with p-values of 0.00. Because of this, all my results are statistically significant, and I reject my null hypothesis.

One noteworthy comparison on the measure of acceptance was the difference amongst racial prejudice and the "strongly agree" category for acceptance. The highest value of this was for those who thought racial prejudice and discrimination existed "not at all," with 39% of respondents choosing "strongly agree." Those who chose "to a great extent" only strongly agreed with acceptance at 9%, showing a 30% difference. As perceptions of racial prejudice decreased (from "to a great extent" to "not at all"), more respondents answered "strongly agree" for acceptance. While this trend did not hold for friendliness and respectfulness, it did hold for communicativeness, going from 6% to 30%, a 24% increase. For friendliness and respectfulness,

both saw higher numbers for “strongly agree” in the “to a great extent” categories, with slight dips with the “somewhat” categories (going from 14% to 11% in friendliness, and 9% to 5% in respectfulness) and then increases from these categories to “not at all.” Respectfulness and communicativeness saw the highest percentages total responding as “disagree” and “strongly disagree” to their variables, with 17% and 18% respectively.

These findings show that those who find racial prejudice and discrimination at the university are more likely to view their campus cultural climate negatively. This corresponds with one of Worthington et. al’s (2008) measurements of color-blind racism and unawareness of blatant racial issues. Those who were unaware of blatant racial issues viewed campus cultural climate more positively, showing consistencies between these results.

Conclusion

Through the survey, I was able to conclude that those who have more frequent interactions with people from other cultures are less likely to view the university as accepting, and those who find racial prejudice and discrimination exist to a great extent are less likely to view it as accepting, friendly, respectful, and communicative. I was able to reject both of my hypotheses, showing there is a statistically significant difference in the effects of frequency of interactions one has with other cultures, as well as color-blind racial attitudes, on perceptions of campus cultural climate. These findings are consistent with previous findings by Worthington et al. (2008) and Park (2009). Students at the university who interacted very frequently with people from other cultures viewed campus cultural climate more negatively than those who interacted with other cultures frequently, occasionally, and rarely, yet saw similar percentages with those

who interacted very rarely. These similarities could have be due to the low number of respondents who very rarely interacted, creating a false correlation.

While the data are significant, many limitations were present throughout the research. The first of these was the convenience sample, causing my results to be ungeneralizable to college campuses as a whole. Furthermore, the sample was predominantly white. This made it difficult to look at race and ethnicity. As seen above, the majority of students only interacted with members from different cultures occasionally. As the university is a predominantly white institute, this was not surprising. Because it is a PWI, however, these results would not be similar to institutions with more diverse racial backgrounds, a limitation also found in previous research. Another limitation was due to the university studied being a PWI, there was the lack of representation in many categories. For some cross-tabulations, results were significant because numbers for certain races were very low. This lack of representation could have skewed data and created a false correlation between the variables, causing the findings to be inconclusive, and thus was not included.

Improvements to this survey would come with random sampling. Potentially, for more data on this subject, these results would have to be stratified to include higher minority population results. This would be important, as non-white students' perceptions of campus cultural climate can affect their academics. Again, the conditions of the university make it hard to generalize to college campuses as a whole. Another improvement would be to isolate the types of interactions, and see if any of these have stronger correlations than others (something discussed by Worthington et. al (2008) with looking at residence halls). With these findings, programs and policies could be more effectively implemented to improve campus cultural climate. With clear

data on this, the university would be able to better focus on efforts of integration. My research is a good starting point, and finds similar results to previous research available.

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Appendix 1.

| How would you rate the university on the following statements?: People are accepting | | To a great extent | Somewhat | Very little | Not at all | Total |
|---|---------------|-------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|-------|
| Strongly Agree | 3 8.57% | 15 10.07% | 28 21.37% | 21 38.89% | 67 18.16% | |
| Agree | 15 42.86% | 118 79.19% | 93 70.99% | 31 57.41% | 257 69.65% | |
| Disagree | 13 37.14% | 14 9.40% | 8 6.11% | 2 3.70% | 37 10.03% | |
| Strongly Disagree | 4 11.43% | 2 1.34% | 2 1.53% | 0 0.00% | 8 2.17% | |
| Total | 35 100.00% | 149 100.00% | 131 100.00% | 54 100.00% | 369 100.00% | |
| Chi Square | | | | | 73.04 | |
| Degrees of Freedom | | | | | 9 | |
| p-value | | | | | 0.00 | |

| How would | | To a great extent | Somewhat | Very little | Not at all | Total |
|-----------|--|-------------------|----------|-------------|------------|-------|
|-----------|--|-------------------|----------|-------------|------------|-------|

| | | | | | | | |
|---|----------------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|--|
| you rate the univer sity on the follo wing state ments ?: Peopl e are respec tful | Strongly Agree | 3 8.57% | 8 5.41% | 18 13.74% | 17 31.48% | 46 12.50% | |
| | Agree | 15 42.86% | 113 76.35% | 100 76.34% | 32 59.26% | 260 70.65% | |
| | Disagree | 16 45.71% | 27 18.24% | 10 7.63% | 5 9.26% | 58 15.76% | |
| | Strongly Disagree | 1 2.86% | 0 0.00% | 3 2.29% | 0 0.00% | 4 1.09% | |
| | Total | 35 100.00% | 148 100.00% | 131 100.00% | 54 100.00% | 368 100.00% | |
| | Chi Square | | | | | 60.61 | |
| | Degrees of Freedom | | | | | 9 | |
| | p-value | | | | | 0.00 | |
| | | | | | | | |

Table C. Do you feel that racial prejudice and discrimination exists at the university?

| How would you rate the univer sity on the follo wing state ments ?: Peopl e are comm unicat ive | | To a great extent | Somewhat | Very little | Not at all | Total |
|--|---------------|----------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|-------|
| Strongly Agree | 2 5.71% | 9 6.08% | 19 14.50% | 16 29.63% | 46 12.50% | |
| Agree | 16 45.71% | 115 77.70% | 93 70.99% | 32 59.26% | 256 69.57% | |
| Disagree | 15 42.86% | 23 15.54% | 17 12.98% | 6 11.11% | 61 16.58% | |
| Strongly Disagree | 2 5.71% | 1 0.68% | 2 1.53% | 0 0.00% | 5 1.36% | |
| Total | 35 100.00% | 148 100.00% | 131 100.00% | 54 100.00% | 368 100.00% | |
| Chi Square | | | | | 47.23 | |

| | |
|--------------------|------|
| Degrees of Freedom | 9 |
| p-value | 0.00 |