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Adult Graduate Students Perceptions of Gender & Race: Implications for Program Development in Rural Communities

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to assess the existing levels of awareness toward issues of race and gender in graduate students. Implications for curriculum planning are that faculty members should encourage sensitivity to diversity in all of their classes through small group discussions, case studies, presentations concerning racial and gender issues, and readings that encourage multiple views of issues.

Knowledge about individual awareness and sensitivity to issues of gender and race have been discussed as crucial to constructing effective counselor-based education (Pederson, 1988; Ponterotto & Pederson, 1993; Sue, 1978) and adult education programs (Cunningham, 1989; Hayes & Colin III, 1994; Tisdell, 1995). Adult educators, counselors, and school administrators increasingly find themselves working in situations that require them to engage effectively in cross-cultural exchanges between themselves and their students or clients. As professors who work within the fields of counselor education, adult education, higher education student services (a counseling related program) and educational administration, we are concerned with the level of sensitivity and awareness our graduate students have concerning race and gender issues. We are particularly aware of the challenges faced by our students in becoming sensitive to issues of race, class, and gender since most of them live and work in rural southern communities.

Graduate education courses should provide training for adult educators, counselors, student affairs professionals and school administrators who will in turn practice in settings where they interact with the larger diverse population of learners. Curriculum should incorporate readings, reflection and discussions concerning the important issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (Cunningham, 1989; Bailey, Tisdell, & Cervero, 1994). However, to plan programs and classes that focus on these topics and stimulate discussion, active listening, and increased understanding among students, more information is needed concerning the current awareness and sensitivity of graduate students in these programs toward issues of race and gender. The problem this study addressed, then, was the lack of information concerning the level of awareness of racial and gender issues of typical graduate students in adult education, counselor education, higher education student services, and educational administration programs. The purpose of this study was to discover the existing levels of awareness toward issues of race and gender in order to plan programs that are more effective and classes for graduate students.

Method

Participants and the Graduate Programs. The university which was the site for this study is located in a rural coastal area of a southeastern state, and students within the graduate programs typically are from and return to practice in rural settings. The programs included in this study are located in the College of Education, whose graduate enrollment during Fall 1997, the period of this study, was 7.2% of the total university population of approximately 14,000 students. In any one quarter, 70-75% of the graduate students attend school part. Masters, educational specialists and doctoral degrees are all available in this college of education.

The majority of participants in this study were between the ages of 20- 40. Eighteen percent were adult education master degree students, 50% were in counselor education programs, 14% were higher education student services majors, and 18% were in educational administration or other graduate education degree programs. Twenty-four percent of the participants were African-Americans, 75% were European-Americans, and 1% were of other ethnic backgrounds. Of the total participants, 75% were female and 25% were male. Only 19% of those surveyed had taken a multicultural or cross-cultural counseling course; the rest reported never participating in either of these classes. The demographics reported are consistent with the enrollment patterns in the programs examined and reflect actual population of students.

Two graduate courses specifically designed to address issues of race, class, and gender are available in the College of Education in this university: *Foundations of Multicultural Education*, offered as a curriculum course, and *Cross-Cultural Counseling*, offered as a counselor education course. The Adult Education Master of Education Program requires the *Foundations of Multicultural Education* course. No other graduate program within this study required that students take courses that raise their awareness of issues of race, class, and gender. However, the College of Education conceptual framework at this university indicates that faculty members should acknowledge diversity in all of their undergraduate and graduate classes.

Instrument. In order to ascertain graduate students' awareness and sensitivity to gender and multicultural issues, the researchers chose to use the Quick Discrimination Index Social Attitude Survey (QDI), developed by Ponterotto et al. (1995). The QDI contains 25 Likert-type self-report items in an inventory that measures attitudes toward racial diversity, women's equality, and can examine both cognitive and affective components of prejudicial attitudes (Ponterotto & Pederson, 1993). It also allows researchers to look at both racial and gender issues together on one survey. The QDI asks participants to choose on a Likert scale how strongly they agree or disagree with statements such as "Generally speaking, men work harder than women" and "Overall, I think racial minorities in America complain too much about racial discrimination" (Ponterotto & Pederson, 1993, pg. 156-157). Considering the total scores, participants can fall into one of the following groups: (Ponterotto & Peterson, 1993, p. 158)

Score 25-50 indicates that the respondent is very insensitive to and unaware of minority and women's issues.

Score of 51-75 indicates low sensitivity and little awareness of minority and women's issues.

Score of 76-100 indicates moderate sensitivity to and knowledge of minority and women's issues.

Score of 101-125 indicates high sensitivity to and knowledge of minority and women's issues.

Procedure. The data were collected within the same month from graduate students enrolled in master of education degree programs in counselor education, adult education higher education student services (a counseling related program), and educational administration. During the academic term of data collection, all classes that were offered by a program area targeted above were surveyed. To avoid duplication and provide confidentiality of responses, the last six digits of the social security numbers were requested from participants. No other data that would identify students was requested. SPSS 6.1 computer program was used for data analysis that yielded mean and standard deviation comparisons. Except in one instance (courses), categories that had fewer than nine entries were excluded from data analysis.

Results

Means and standard deviations were calculated for the group as a whole as well as the sub-categories of Race, Age, Program Area, Gender, and Courses Taken. Within the range of 0-125, the mean scores for the entire population surveyed was 80.32 with a standard deviation of 11.98, indicating that although the group surveyed had a moderate sensitivity to and understanding of women's and minority issues, there was some variance within the group. When the scores of sub-categories were examined, differences in scores became apparent (Hansman, Jackson, Grant, & Spencer, in press). Chart 1 compares means and standard deviations for the different populations surveyed. The chart also provides the sensitivity classification from the QDI.

Chart 1

Population Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	QDI Classification
Entire Population	80.32	11.98	Moderate Sensitivity
African Americans	87.88	10.77	Moderate Sensitivity
European Americans	77.88	11.49	Low-Moderate Sensitivity
Females	82.89	10.67	Moderate Sensitivity
Males	72.55	12.66	Low sensitivity

Although barely above the low awareness cut-off score of 75, European American's mean score of 77.88 indicates a moderate awareness of these issues. African Americans' mean score reflects

their moderate, but not high, sensitivity to minority and women's issues. Gender was also a sub-category that was used to examine scores. While the females' mean score indicates that they are moderately aware of gender and minority issues, the males' mean score indicates that they have a low awareness and sensitivity to these issues.

Age was also a variable used to sort mean scores. There were too few scores in the age group over 45 to report. These scores indicated that all age groups are within the moderate category. However, the age group 41-45 score of 76.91 is very close to the low sensitivity QDI rating (Hansman, Jackson, Grant, & Spencer, in press). Chart 2 compares means and standard deviations for the different age groups surveyed. The chart also provides the sensitivity classification from the QDI.

Chart 2

Age Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	QDI Classification
Ages 20-25	80.85	10.29	Moderate Sensitivity
Ages 26-30	77.79	12.34	Moderate Sensitivity
Ages 31-35	83.62	14.80	Moderate Sensitivity
Ages 36-40	82.45	11.84	Moderate Sensitivity
Ages 41-45	76.91	8.12	Low-Moderate Sensitivity

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We also examined the data by program areas. There were too few cases in other program areas to report data. Except for students in Educational Administration, whose score placed them in the low awareness category, all other program areas' scores indicated that they had a moderate awareness of gender and race issues (Hansman, Jackson, Grant, & Spencer, in press). Chart 3 compares means and standard deviations for the different program areas surveyed. The chart also provides the sensitivity classification from the QDI.

Chart 3

Program Area	Mean Standard	Deviation	QDI Classification
Higher Ed Student Services	86.5	10.60	Moderate Sensitivity

School Counseling	81.75	12.66	Moderate Sensitivity
Community Counseling	80.77	8.9	Moderate Sensitivity
Adult Education	78.77	14.34	Moderate Sensitivity
Educational Administration	74.10	7.77	Low sensitivity

Students who had taken either *Foundations of Multicultural Education* or *Cross-Cultural Counseling* courses scored higher than those students who had taken neither of these courses. . . Only one participant reported taking both courses; interestingly enough, her or his mean score was 105, indicating a very high awareness and sensitivity to racial and gender issues (Hansman, Jackson, Grant, & Spencer, in press). Chart 4 provides a comparison of means and standard deviations for students who took courses designed to raise their awareness concerning issues of race and gender and those who did not take any of these courses. The chart also provides the sensitivity classification from the QDI.

Chart 4

Courses Taken	Mean	Standard Deviation	<u>QDI Classification</u>
Cross-Cultural Counseling	87.5	2.12	Moderate Sensitivity
Foundations of Multiculturalism	85	11.41	Moderate Sensitivity
Did not take Awareness Courses	78.71	11.67	Moderate Sensitivity
Took both courses	105	N/A	High sensitivity

Discussion

Although the mean score for the entire population surveyed was 80.32, denoting that the group surveyed had a moderate sensitivity to and understanding of women's and minority issues, these scores indicate that although the students are moderately aware, they still lack basic understandings of issues concerning race and gender that are essential to them in their practices as adult educators, counselors, and school administrators. Examination of the scores by subgroups reveal the varying levels of awareness within the population surveyed. It is noteworthy that African Americans and women scored only in the moderate range and not the high-awareness range. Perhaps this is due to the historic and geographic context of rural southern culture. Ponterotto et al. (1995) and Ponterotto and Pederson (1993) theorize that people who

live in urban settings are more accepting of racial diversity and women's issues because the diversity of their day-to-day contacts allows them to interact with a more diverse group of people. The low to moderate awareness scores of some groups in our study may be an example of this theory.

Among the most significant finding of this study, however, was that participants within the graduate programs of school administration had the lowest scores (M=74.10) within any of the groups surveyed, which placed them in the low awareness category. Since school administrators are essential to implementing programs within educational institutions, it points out how institutionalized customs and norms may perpetuate sexism and racism. If school administrators are unaware or unwilling to address racial or gender issues within their school setting, they are setting the tone for a non-responsive culture. Graduate curriculum for school administrators should include courses that heighten sensitivity to racial and gender issues.

The most promising finding, however, was the high scores of those students who had taken the *Foundations of Multicultural Education* and/or the *Cross-Cultural Counseling* courses. Although the number of students surveyed who met these requirements was very small in this study, their high scores on the QDI may indicate that courses that focus on issues of race, class, gender and sexual orientation issues may indeed foster sensitivity towards these issues by students in the courses. Further research is needed and should focus on discovering if sensitivity is consistently raised following these courses.

Conclusion

Our concern about preparing our students to effectively deal with race and gender led us to examine our own graduate curricula at our university and the beliefs of students within our graduate programs concerning race and gender. While faculty members may want to be inclusive of racial and gender issues, frequently the politics of knowledge production and dissemination at local levels may get in the way for planning inclusive curricula. "What counts as knowledge in a particular learning context -- and decisions about what gets included in the curriculum for a given learning activity -- are decisions made with attention to the politics of ...educational context and to what is seen as 'knowledge relevant to this educational context'" (Tisdell, 1995, p. 11). The "real knowledge" Tisdell mentions reflects the power and politics of knowledge production and dissemination, both inside the educational institution and in the outlying communities from which graduate students come and subsequently return. This real knowledge, many times seeped in historic and institutionalized oppression, provides the background for students' beliefs and actions concerning gender and racial issues. As teachers and researchers, we believe that we should endeavor to plan classes and curricula and "become instruments through which our students begin to reflect on the multiple and varied realities that they, like we bring to the classroom" (Sheared, 1994, p. 27).

This survey reflects in general a low to moderate awareness of issues of race and gender in a rural southeastern regional university. This could in part be due to the rural setting within which the study took place and the historic oppression of the southern culture in the United States. Since students who participated in this study come from and return to rural settings, their beliefs are probably indicative of the larger societal view in the rural settings in which they live and

practice. The question becomes, then, how do we, as educators, become, as Sheared (1994) says, "instruments through which our students begin to reflect on the multiple and varied realities that they, like we, bring to the classroom"(p. 27)?

Who has the power to determine what counts as knowledge is extremely important to understanding how issues of race and gender can be emphasized in graduate level courses. College and University faculty members frequently serve as both teachers and researchers and have the power to "produce knowledge in their research pursuits; they also determine what research is 'good,' what research is to be published and disseminated, and what of the resulting literature is to be included in the curriculum" (Johnson-Bailey, Tisdell, and Cervero, 1994, p. 65). As the College of Education Framework at our institution states, faculty members should acknowledge diversity in all of their classes. This acknowledgment can take many forms: small group discussions, case studies, presentations concerning racial and gender issues, and readings that encourage multiple views of issues. Through these activities, students may begin to become more sensitive to and aware of issues of race and gender that they face in their practices as adult educators, counselors, higher education student services administrators, and school administrators. Sensitivity and awareness are the first steps toward change.

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