Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Black Graduate Students' Social Relationships with White Professors and Students in a Predominantly White Public University

Juanita Johnson-Bailey
The University of Georgia

Thomas Valentine
The University of Georgia

Ronald M. Cervero
The University of Georgia

Follow this and additional works at: https://newprairiepress.org/aerc

Part of the Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons

Black Graduate Students' Social Relationships with White Professors and Students in a Predominantly White Public University

Juanita Johnson-Bailey, Thomas Valentine, & Ronald M. Cervero
The University of Georgia

Abstract: This study employs a mixed method approach to understanding the cross-racial relationships experienced by Black graduate students at a major Southern research university. Data were collected using a multifaceted mailed survey. Cluster analysis was employed to construct a four-part typology of cross-racial social relationships. Qualitative comments were examined to better understand the identified types. The study reveals the variety of perceived social relationships experienced within a single university.

As historically racist, predominantly White universities in the American South move toward inclusion, they sometimes fail to recognize the social costs paid by students who engage in "color-breaking" in what was once an exclusively White environment. This study seeks to identify the types of social relationships with White faculty and students that adult, Black graduate students experience.

In a previous report (Johnson-Bailey, J., Valentine, T., Cervero, R., & Bowles, T., 2005), we describe the experiences of students across a thirty-year period.   This allowed our critics to assume that the blatant racism we uncovered could be largely attributed to the experience of students many years ago. The current study represents a significant refocusing and reanalysis of the data in that report. There are three major differences that define the current work: (a) we used only relatively recent graduates (post 1990), (b) we employed only measures that captured significant Black-White social relationships, and (c) we moved beyond univariate dimensions and measures of central tendency to create a holistic picture of social relationships by cutting across variables.

Method

Although our research was informed by existing research, our approach was inductive.   Rather than subscribe to theory, we used quantitative and qualitative data to build new and useful theory. Data were collected using a multi-faceted, self completion questionnaire mailed to Black graduate alumni. A full description of the methodology can be found in our earlier report (Johnson-Bailey, J., Valentine, T., Cervero, R., & Bowles, T., 2005). The current sample (*n*=243) is described in Table 1.   The quantitative analysis is based on scores from six highly reliable scales:

- **White professor support and acceptance**, which measured the extent to which Black students felt accepted and supported by White faculty members.
- **White student support and acceptance**, which measured the extent to which Black students felt accepted and supported by White students.
- **White professor generalized racism**, which measured the extent to which Black students perceived White professors to be insensitive, dismissive, or offensive concerning the existence of racism in society.

Table 1. Description of respondents	
Variable	**Values**
Age at time of highest degree	Mean=31.6, SD=8.4
Gender	Female: n=185, %=76.8
	Male: n=56, %=23.2
Highest degree	Master's: n=144, %=59.3
	Specialist: n= 30, %=12.3
	Doctorate n= 69, %= 28.4
Area of study	Humanities: n= 14, %= 5.9
	Sciences: n= 13, %= 5.5
	Education: n=107, %=45.1
	Social Work: n= 42, %=17.7
	Law: n= 28, %=11.8
	Business: n= 21, %= 8.9
Employment status	Full-time: n=210, %=86.8
	Part-time: n= 5, %= 2.1
	Unemployed: n=2, %= 0.8
	Other: n= 25, %= 10.4
Income	Less than $30,000: n= 14, %= 6.2
	$30,000-$49,999: n= 81, %=35.8
	$50,000-$69,999: n=68, %=30.1
	$70,000-$89,999: n=44, %=19.5
	$90,000 or more : n=19, %=8.4
Highest education level of most educated parent or guardian	No diploma: n= 24, %=10.1
	High school: n= 53, %=22.3
	Some college: n= 32, %=13.4
	Associates: n= 19, %= 8.0
	Bachelor: n= 48, %=20.2
	Graduate: n= 62, %=26.1

- **White professor academic bias**, which measured the extent to which Black students experienced White professor bias in their learning endeavors.
- **White student isolating behaviors**, which measured the extent to which White students acted to exclude Black students from meaningful peer relationships.
- **White student generalized racism**, which measured the extent to which Black students perceived White students to be insensitive, dismissive, or offensive concerning the existence of racism in society.

Sample items from the scales appear in Table 2. Scale distributions and reliability coefficients appear in Table 3.

As can be inferred from Table 2, two of the scales are positive in nature while four are negative. It is worth noting in Table 3 that, in all cases, the mean item mean fell on the desirable side of the midpoint of the six-point response scale (i.e., on the "agree" side for the positive scales and on the "disagree" side for the negative scales). These simple measures of central tendency lead one to conclude that things are satisfactory

Table 2. Sample Items from Scale	
Scale	**Sample Items**
White Professor Support & Acceptance	●White professors believed in my ability. ●White professors valued me as a person. ●I felt safe speaking my mind to White professors.
White Student Support & Acceptance	●White students believed in my ability. ●White students valued me as a person. ●I felt safe speaking my mind to White students.
White Professor General Racism	●White professors were racially insensitive. ●White professors were dismissive concerning claims of racism. ●White professors stereotyped Black students.
White Professor Academic Bias	●White professors underestimated the intelligence of Black students. ●White professors assumed that Black students were admitted because of affirmative action rather than ability. ●It was harder for Black students to earn good grades than it was for White students.
White Student Isolating Behavior	●White students were hostile toward Black students. ●White students kept their distance from Black students. ●White students rarely interacted with Black students.
White Student General Racism	●White students were racially insensitive. ●White students were dismissive concerning claims of racism. ●White students stereotyped Black students.

Table 3. Scale Distributions and Reliabilities					
Scale	**Number Of Items**	**Scale Mean**	**Scale SD**	**Mean Item Mean**	**Alpha**
White Professor Support & Acceptance	6	25.5	6.6	4.2	.93
White Student Support & Acceptance	6	24.2	6.3	4.0	.91
White Professor General Racism	7	21.6	8.1	3.8	.90
White Professor Academic Bias	10	31.2	12.0	3.1	.93
White Student Isolating Behavior	8	26.2	10.0	3.3	.93
White Student General Racism	5	19.8	6.8	4.0	.93
Note: The response scale for all items range from 1= "Strongly disagree" to 6= "Strongly agree".					

(though sometimes just barely) for the group as a whole. However, such simple statistics mask important variation that exists among the cross-racial social experiences of Black graduate students.

Scores from the six scores were subjected to exploratory cluster analysis to identify holistic, multivariate "types" of social experiences. It is important to note that these types are based on relative differences *within* the group of Black students—without reference to the experience of their White counterparts. Multiple solutions were examined, with the four cluster solution exhibiting the best conceptual clarity. Qualitative data, consisting of handwritten responses, were then examined to add to our understanding of the identified types. The majority of the qualitative data is derived from

two survey questions ("What was the *single biggest factor* that helped you, as a Black graduate student, complete your graduate degree?" and "What was the *greatest challenge* you faced during your graduate studies?") To aid readability, the comments included here are presented in slightly edited form.

Findings

The findings from the cluster analysis are summarized in Table 4. Each of the four types is described separately below.

Table 4. Results of Cluster Analysis							
Type	N (%)	White Professor Support & Acceptance	White Student Support & Acceptance	White Professor General Racism	White Professor Academic Bias	White Student Isolating Behavior	White Student General Racism
I. Optimal Social Relationships	74 (30.5)	High (z=.93)	High (z=.93)	Very low (z= -1.03)	Very Low (z=.-1.10)	Very low (z=.-1.03)	Very Low (z=-1.09)
II. Unsupportive Professor-Student Relationships	55 (22.6)	Low (z=.-.88)	Average (z=-.49)	Average (z=.10)	Average (z=.30)	Average (z=-.21)	Average (z=-.18)
III. Racist Student Relationships	55 (22.6)	Average (z=.45)	Average (z=.20)	Average (z=.22)	Average (z=.06)	Average (z=.37)	High (z=.62)
IV. Toxic Social Relationships	59 (24.3)	Low (z=-.77)	Low (z=-.90)	High (z=1.00)	Very high (z=1.04)	Very high (z=1.14)	High (z=.96)

Type I. Optimal Social Relationships. In Type I environments, students experience optimal social relationships with White faculty and students. The quantitative data exhibits high scores on the positive measures and very low scores on the negative measures. The 30.4% of students experiencing such relationships offered the following exemplar comments:

- *Being involved with so many students and staff allowed me to build a community which was mutually supportive. My experience was very positive.*
- *In the first class I took, I met a nice woman and we became very good friend. We took all but three of our courses together. We studied together and worked on class projects together. Having a friend made all the difference. By the way, she was White. We are still great friends.*
- *The department's faculty [was] undoubtedly the single biggest factor for the successful and meaningful completion of my graduate degree. The faculty was helpful, attentive to the individual needs of students, and overall a joy to be with.*
- *[I had] the support of my professors in & outside of the classroom. Their offices were always open of me.*
- *I received authentic support from faculty & staff in particular my major professor.*
- *The friendships between both Black and White friends and the encouragement the relationship provided [contributed to my success].*

Type II. Unsupportive Professor-Student Relationships. Type II environments are defined by students experiencing unusually low support and acceptance by White professors. The 22.6% of students experiencing such environments offered the following exemplar comments:

- *My professors were [the] greatest challenge. No real relationships were formed.*
- *Some of my White professors, though not a majority of them, had a hard time believing that I could turn out good, quality work.*
- *I went to talk to a professor after an exam. Before I could ask a question, he told me a story about how "Black don't do well here." He told my roommate, also Black, the same story.*
- *In my department I was constantly accused of being lazy and not doing my job. Although the facts stated otherwise, I was viewed this way. In addition I was viewed as hostile and blatantly overlooked for assistantships.*
- *I finally realized that my grades were not reflective of my true abilities. . . . Although I received a good education, I hated the experience because I was not respected and racism was always there.*
- *[I had to overcome] the negative feelings of being treated differently. I had to face the fact that I had to give 120% while White students could get away with giving 60%.*

Type III. Racist Student Relationships. Type II environments are characterized by high levels of White student racism. The 22.6% of students experiencing such environments offered the following exemplar comments:

- *One example was a classmate assuming I would need a study partner for a class because the course was very difficult. She offered to tutor me without asking or realizing that I was outperforming her in the class.*
- *[The greatest challenge I faced] was the attitudes of White students. We often had discussions about race/equality in class & through the discussions I learned that a lot of students felt that Black students [were admitted because] of Affirmative Action & did not work for it.*
- *[White students] had a lot of negative attitudes and stereotypes about minorities in general & could not understand the concept of White privilege.*
- *I know the prevailing attitude among White students was that all the Black students were lesser qualified and not as intelligent. As a law student, you are already doubting yourself – and the dismissive attitude of the students just added to the stressful environment.*

Type IV. Toxic Social Relationships. Type IV environments are defined by low scores on the positive measures and high or very high scores on the negative measures. Students experiencing such toxic relationships offer the following exemplar comments:

- *The greatest challenge I faced was being accepted by other White students. I had to work twice as hard to prove that I was a valuable team member.*
- *[My experience would have been better if there were fewer] White professors that make derogatory racial statements.*
- *Because of where I grew up, I was already accustomed to dealing with White authority figures and "classmates" that were insensitive to and ignorant of race issues.*
- *[The greatest challenge was dealing with] stereotypes and subjective grading.*
- *[One of the greatest challenges was the] lack of support from White professors. I had a lot of difficulty talking to my White professors about my research, because it dealt with racism. There is a serious disconnect between White professors' perceptions of racism and reality.*
- *I constantly [had] to remind myself that someone's negative opinion or ignorance does not have to constitute my reality.*

- *One day after a class, the professor pulled another student and me (the only Blacks) aside and asked if we understood the lecture, and asked if he needed to go through the concepts more slowly. I was offended by these questions because he had no reason to believe we understood the lectures less than the White students, our test scores were well above the class average and we had responded to questions he may have had. Because he singled out the only two Black students, I felt it was disrespectful and demeaning.*
- *In two Professors classes I was picked out to be picked on.*
- *Some professors were condescending. Oftentimes, if was difficult to be acknowledged.*
- *[The greatest challenge was] the unwillingness of White faculty to be self reflective and introspective about their racial biases.*
- *[The greatest challenge was] hostility from White students. Feelings of isolation and loneliness on this White campus.*
- *I always felt that I had to be discreet and somewhat dishonest about my views when in racial mixed groups.*
- *[The greatest challenge was the] narrow mindset of White students. I began to doubt my own ability to succeed. My first experiences of rejection occurred at law school.*
- *[The greatest challenge was] being accepted as an equal by other students*
- *I remember raising my hand in class volunteering to complete [an] assignment and the lecturer looking at me funny while selecting someone else to complete the assignment; I was left feeling small and devalued.*

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

If traditionally racist universities are to make meaningful strides with respect to diversity and inclusion in graduate education, they must realistically examine the way the campus looks to the Black adults who participate in their programs. Our findings demonstrate that even in a single university, there is wide variation in the experiences of students owing to notable differences in the social climates of different departments and classrooms. Although the largest single group (Type I) experienced positive relationships with White faculty and students, nearly 70% of Black graduates faced significant cross-racial challenges—and 24% experience extremely destructive relationships with White faculty and students.

Despite the substantial support the students reported receiving from Black faculty and students (included in our earlier report), a predominantly White campus necessitates constant and unavoidable social interaction with White faculty and students. Throughout their studies, they are surrounded by White students' faces and in the power of White professors. It is a tribute to these Black students that, even those experiencing toxic social relationships, went on to complete their degrees. One cannot help but wonder how many Black students elected to abandon their studies because of the lack of support and blatant racism that, regrettably, is still part of the culture of this campus.

References

Johnson-Bailey, J., Valentine, T., Cervero, R., & Bowles, T. (2005, September). *The social experiences of Black graduate students at The University of Georgia.* Technical Report No. 7-13. Athens: The University of Georgia, College of Education, Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy.