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Racial Conflict in Schools

Marquette University

### Overview of Study

That racially motivated conflicts occur in schools is an indisputable fact that becomes evident upon review of popular media. Events such as the Jena 6 incident (Maxwell & Zehr, 2007), school wide racially motivated riots (latimes.com), and court rulings (theithican.org) are distressing examples that racial barriers are real and potentially dangerous for many students in this country. However, little is written about the nature of racial conflicts, including the actual process school leaders engage in when determining how or even whether to intervene in racial conflicts, and the affect those racial conflicts have on the school climate and relevant stakeholders (e.g. directly involved students, other students, and school staff). To address this concern the current study is designed to provide insight into the decision-making process of school counselors in the intervention of racial conflicts that occur between students. While this study focuses on one specific type of school employee, the findings will be pertinent and beneficial to all educational professionals as well as students. The following review provides context for understanding racial conflicts in schools, and addresses such issues as prevalence rates, causes, consequences, theories, and interventions to address such conflicts. Finally, the review concludes with a description of limitations in the research and a description of the current study.

### Definition of Terms

Defining *Racial Conflict* is a complicated task, in large part because of the lack of scholarly consensus on what experiences the phenomenon of conflict includes. A general definition of conflict will first be presented and then applied to the more focused meaning of racial conflict. Broadly speaking, social conflict is described as having no common definition

(Thomas, 1992), being difficult to define (Nicotera, 1995), and “a nebulous area at best” (Schmidt & Kochan, 1972 p. 368). Major contributing factors to the complexity of defining conflict are the many related terms often used (e.g. tensions, violence, disputes, competition, etc.) and the dilemma of how broadly (or narrowly) to conceptualize the phenomenon (Fink, 1968). Narrow definitions (e.g., Coser, 1956; Mack & Snyder, 1957) are characterized by a focus on overt, action-centered interactions between parties (Schmidt & Kochan, 1972) such as physical altercations or verbal arguments. However, to *include* only action-centered interactions as conflict situations may simultaneously *exclude* other relevant phenomena and related variables that have been characterized as important to the nature of conflicts (Fink, 1968). Alternatively, then, broad conceptions (e.g., Dahrendorf, 1957 and Fink, 1968) include a wider range of experiences such as events that may occur early in the conflict process like perceptions, hostilities, competition, and tensions (Thomas, 1992). Including more covert, psychological aspects (i.e. perceptions) seems to describe conflict as more of a process with many distinct but related components that each contributes to the experiences of the persons involved in the conflict.

In selecting whether the broad or narrow definition is most appropriate for a study of racial conflict, it is necessary to take a closer look at some particulars germane specifically to such situations. Recent research has called for inclusive definitions that may better account for the diffuse types of conflict that are likely to occur when race is a motivating factor such as isolation, indifference, and avoidance in addition to insults, aggressions, and fights (Salame', 2004). For example, recent results indicate that racial microaggressions (i.e., intentional or unintentional negative verbal, behavioral, or environmental messages to people of color [Franklin, 1999]) are harmful to victims in part because they spend a great deal of time and

energy processing these negative experiences (Constantine & Sue, 2007). Thus, it appears plausible that racial conflict may encompass acts beyond physical, overt aggression and from a victim's perspective may occur when the other parties involved did not intend to harm or do not perceive harm. Racial conflict, then, manifests in a multitude of ways including: Vandalism, physical violence, verbal threats, racial/ethnic jokes, graffiti, or intimidation (Adler, 1996; Community Relations Service [CRS], 2001; Office of Civil Rights [OCR], 1999).

Across all of the literature on social conflict and racial conflict, it appears that harm to a victim(s) is an essential element, whether the harm is overt or covert, physically or emotionally hurtful, contains actual harm or threatened harm, or verbal or bodily abuse. Furthermore, it appears these conflicts can arise out of intentional or unintentional actions, and nonverbal as well as verbal or physical actions. Therefore, we define racial conflict events as situations in which misunderstandings or targeted harassment or discrimination co-occur with or result in actual interpersonal altercations and/or emotional or physical distress to the targeted groups based on cultural variables, ethnic background, or perceived racial differences.

#### Prevalence

It cannot be denied that racially motivated conflicts occur every day and in a wide variety of settings. Still, reporting prevalence rates of these occurrences, for the same reasons that defining the phenomenon is challenging, proves to be a difficult task. In order to present as inclusive a picture as possible, all points on the wide continuum of racial conflict including discriminations, racial tensions, witnessed conflicts, experienced conflicts, and hate crimes are covered. The discussion begins broadly with looks at race-related transgressions in the wider community (not school-based) and general violence incidence in schools before narrowing to a focus on the prevalence of racial conflict incidents in schools.

In 2007, there were over 30,000 cases received by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) garnering over \$67 million in benefits for victims of discrimination in said cases (<http://www.eeoc.gov/stats/race.html>). Between 2000 and 2003 the United States Department of Justice (2005) reported an annual average of 210,000 hate crimes. In addition, of those documented hate crimes, 56% were reportedly motivated by the victim's race and 28% were motivated by the victim's ethnicity (categories of race and ethnicity were not mutually exclusive). The preceding data begin to provide compelling evidence for the existence of racially motivated conflict in the greater society. Therefore, it is unsurprising to find that statistics provide a similar picture regarding students' experiences in their schools.

The United States Department of Justice (2005), for instance, recently reported that 21% of hate crime offenders were under the age of 18, and 20% of hate crimes occurred at schools. Recent reports indicate that as much as 64% of school-based hate crimes are motivated by race or national origin (United States Department of Justice, 2007). Additionally, the 2005 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization survey indicated that 7.5% of students between the ages of 12-18 indicated someone had used hate-related words against them based on their race or ethnicity (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2007). Thirty-five percent of the same students reported seeing hate-related graffiti (words or symbols) written in bathrooms, classrooms, hallways, or on the outside of the school building (NCES, 2007). Furthermore, 2% of elementary, middle, and high school principals reported that hate crimes occurred at their schools at least daily or once a week (School Survey on Crime and Safety, [SSCS] 2004). Fifty-three percent of these principals identified racial tensions as being present at least "occasionally," with another 5 % indicating racial tensions surfacing at least once a month. Finally, The Community Relations Service (CRS), a branch of the Department of Justice whose

purpose is to prevent and resolve racial and ethnic conflict in the community, reports that along with police departments, schools are the institutions that most often (“hundreds of schools and colleges”) request intervention in reducing current and preventing future racial conflict, tension, and violent incidents.

Unfortunately, the regularity and current nature of racial conflicts in schools is easy to confirm in a review of academic literature. Occurrence of racial conflict was described as increasingly evident in schools (Salamé, 2004), and students could easily recall racial conflicts they had experienced or witnessed (Kiang & Kaplan, 1994; Pinderhughes, 1997; Salamé, 2004;). In response to witnessing several acts of race-related bullying, one fourth grade bilingual classroom teacher introduced a harassment log to her Vietnamese students and trained them to record the number of physical and verbal harassments they either experienced or witnessed over the course of three months (Kiang, Lan, & Sheehan, 1995). At the end of observations, the group of 26 had recorded 84 “to me” incidents, 26 “to classmates incidents”, and 67 “to others” incidents. Teachers also confirm the presence of racial tension with 43% believing racial conflicts to be minor problems and 20% believing that racial conflicts were moderate or serious problems in their schools (Goldsmith, 2004). Students of majority and minority racial/ethnic background both seem aware of the presence of racial tension in their schools (Salame’, 2004), though most studies examined the experience of the minority students involved. Race-based conflict in schools appears to not only exist, but also represent an important part of all students’ everyday lives (Kiang & Kaplan, 1994; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004).

Although the preceding statistics are noticeably high, it is important to point out that these are only *reported* cases and may be an underrepresentation of the total number of racial conflict incidents that *actually occur*. Part of this discrepancy may simply lie in the different interpretations people have of the term 'racial conflict.' Indeed some may believe conflict to only refer to overtly hostile or violent incidents and not account for covert incidents involving verbal harassment (Henze et al., 2002). In these cases, two people may witness the same event but only one of them may interpret the event as a 'racial conflict.' Beyond just a difference in how people define the term, the discrepancy in perception of racial conflicts might also provide an example of a much more disturbing trend: Lack of personal/social awareness and/or colorblindness (Neville, Worthington, & Spanierman, 2001).

#### *Lack of awareness*

In a review of what the field of social psychology has learned about bias and intergroup conflict, Fiske (2002) concludes that as many as 80% of people in Western democratic societies may be unaware that they display subtle biases. Fiske describes this significant segment of the population as well-intentioned moderates, a group that wants to believe all of their biases are conscious and controllable even though many biases are automatic, unconscious, and hidden. Moderate biases can remain camouflaged to the individual who holds them (and possibly to the in-group/majority as a whole) because their impact does not visibly match the overt, violent biases of extremists (i.e. segregation, containment, and/or elimination of the out-group). Rather, the moderate bias manifests in an indirect manner and could include withholding basic liking, attributing positive characteristics to the in-group more rapidly, exclusion, and avoidance. In effect, each of these biases contributes to an unequal distribution of resources across several dimensions like housing, employment, education, and the justice system. However, biases such

as these remain mostly subtle in part because they are in constant conflict with the message of tolerance for other cultures that is recommended as best practice in our society (Fiske, 2002). This lack of awareness of the potency of race in everyday experiences likely contributes to a tendency for people to define racial conflict in an overly narrow way. When, as is the case in American society, many people in the community lack awareness and understanding of cultural groups different than their own, interracial tension becomes more likely (Gutierrez, 2005). It makes sense then that students who are the victims of racial harassment can experience it from teachers, administrators, community citizens, or other students who may not see themselves as perpetrators of a racial bias and are even encouraged by the school to avoid acknowledging cultural differences (OCR, 1999).

#### *Colorblind attitudes*

*Colorblindness* refers to denying or distorting the impact race has on people's lives and the existence of interpersonal and institutional racism (Neville, Worthington, & Spanierman, 2001). Many schools both implicitly and directly promote a colorblind ideology among their students and staff (Henze, 2002). In effect, this "blur[s] the clarity of the inequity [between Whites and non-Whites] and confound[s] public efforts to understand or address" that inequity (p. 104, Tarca, 2005). Adherence to this type of policy however, contrasts the finding that minority students often feel that it is important for their differences, even from those within the same racial or ethnic group, to be adequately acknowledged (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). What follows is a twofold problem. First, students and staff are discouraged from acknowledging and exploring racial differences making it impossible to recognize biases, improve on inequities, and celebrate diversity. Second, the establishment of a colorblind institution makes it difficult for

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victims of racial conflicts to come forward because in doing so, they would be breaking the colorblind code.

One example of how damaging a colorblind institution can be is found in the results from interviews with members of a rural town that portrayed many of the characteristics of colorblind racism, including a general attitude that race is an unmentionable and inappropriate topic in discussions (Tarca, 2005). In this community, residents' adoption of a colorblind ideology led to a rejection of racial differences during decision making and the creation of uninformed and racist programs and policies. A clear illustration of one such policy was the establishment of a "classy living" class in the local high school. The class was designed to provide "identity and values clarification" to female students in the high school. However, only African-American females were enrolled in the group and the overall message to the students was that they needed training to change their unacceptable cultural customs, which they had often acquired from "nonlocal" family and friends. A colorblind or difference-blind ideology, through institutional decisions, worked to intensify the racism that Black students experienced and established a racist atmosphere into the school community.

In sum, multiple factors contribute to a likely underreporting of the prevalence of racial conflicts. Each student and school staff member brings their unique interpretations as to what constitutes a racial conflict. Many, especially those from the majority/in-group, use descriptions that are more narrowly inclusive. In doing so, they simultaneously exclude from their conceptualization other closely related and therefore relevant interactions. Lack of awareness of personal, subtle biases is common among many Americans and may inhibit individuals from recognizing the harmful behaviors or attitudes of themselves or others. Additionally, colorblind attitudes, which may result from lack of awareness or be a conscious choice, fail to recognize the

inherent challenges faced by students and people of color. The preceding factors may make it difficult to recognize the presence of racial conflicts in a school and also work to create an unsafe atmosphere where victims feel they cannot seek help.

### Consequences of Racial Conflicts

The presence of racial conflicts and/or racial tension in schools requires attention because they result in negative consequences for both the individuals or groups involved as well as the greater community. Regarding individuals, it is possible that exposure to racial harassment and hate crimes could potentially cause serious harm to a victim's development in the areas of physical/emotional well being, academic achievement, and violent tendencies (OCR, 1999). When racial and ethnic minority students and families feel discriminated against, the entire educational process breaks down for them, thus working against the goal to provide equal opportunity to all students (Adler, 1996; Croninger, 1996). When occurring within educational settings, racial conflicts, it seems, have the potential to portray an imbalanced power structure between different racial groups, therefore creating a feeling of victimization among students of color (Phan, 2003) For example, ethnic and racial minority university students who perceived a hostile environment or racial tension on their campus were less likely to feel a sense of belonging to their campus (Hurtado & Faye-Carter, 1997), a variable commonly associated with academic persistence and success for minority students (Barquet, 1996; Gloria, Castellano, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005). In effect, racial conflicts have a negative impact on the school's overall climate, creating an unsafe environment, especially for, but not limited to, those students involved in the conflict (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004).

Racial conflicts also work to either create new or exacerbate existing racial tensions in the community (CRS, 2001), an idea clearly illustrated by the recent conflicts in Jena, LA

(Maxwell & Zehr, 2007). These racial tensions, though they may initially be confined to a school can leak out into the community to trigger community wide conflicts or tension which could include civil disturbances and, in extreme cases, riots. In other words, rather than causing negative consequences for only those individuals immediately involved, racial conflicts place entire communities at risk for a number of short and long term consequences such as depreciating property values, damage to community/school reputation, and being forced to expend valuable local resources (i.e. police, fire, medical personnel) in intervention efforts (CRS, 2001; OCR, 1999).

### Explanations for Racial Conflicts

Because school-based racial conflicts lead to detrimental consequences, it is imperative to understand as much as possible about the phenomenon so that attempts can be made to prevent or intervene in those situations. One way to gain insight into racial conflicts is to examine theoretical models that attempt to explain the occurrence. A look at the history of inter-race relations in the United States, government agency documents, and intergroup theorists' writing will demonstrate the complexity of elements that cause racial conflicts. Indeed, Allport (1954) asserts that prejudice has its roots in "historical, sociocultural, and situational analysis, as well as from analysis in terms of socialization, personality dynamics, phenomenology, and finally, but not least important, in terms of actual group differences" (p. 314). As such, the following theories seem to support the notion that racial conflict is intensely complex in origin. In other words, the following theories or hypotheses are not necessarily competing alternative suggestions, but may each contribute in their own way to an overall understanding of the phenomenon of racial conflict.

#### *Political Explanations*

Historically, racial conflicts may be rooted in long-standing hatreds, mistrusts, or misunderstandings that groups of people have about or towards groups who are racially or culturally different (Adler, 1996). Some research supports the claim that court rulings and legislation from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries laid the foundation for a legitimization of racial boundaries and even instigated conflict (Shanahan, 2002). For instance, Supreme Court rulings between 1869 and 1924 began to include more European immigrant groups as “White” while simultaneously defining Asians and African-Americans as “non-White.” At the time of these rulings, collective attacks against the “non-White” population increased while collective attacks against “White”/European immigrants decreased. The rate of attacks against non-White individuals increased (44% for Asian immigrant victims; 67% for African American victims) in years in which court rulings clearly defined racial boundaries when compared to years without similar court rulings (Shanahan, 2002). These findings highlight that public institutions have a potentially strong impact on race relations within a society, especially when those institutions create or maintain racist policies.

### *Triggering Incidents*

The presence of institutional racism within a society may precipitate the occurrence of conflicts based on race. In a recently published guide for municipalities on how to avoid racial conflict, experts point out that the presence of two specific community dynamics, (1) a perceived disparity of treatment between groups and (2) a lack of confidence in redress systems, may contribute to extraordinary tension and thus lead to a triggering incident (<http://www.usdoj.gov/crs/pubs/avoidracial.htm>). The document defines a triggering incident as “a tension heightening event that catalyzes discontent and turns it into civil disorder.” Triggering incidents are precipitated by a number of different acts of antagonism or confrontation and occur

in communities in which high levels of tension, frustration, and/or anger exist. One such example of a triggering incident occurred in New Bedford, Massachusetts in 2004 (CRS Annual Report, 2005). The neighborhood's African American community was feeling concerned about increasing rates of violence, and they felt that their needs were being neglected by local officials. Experiencing this neglect led African American community members to lack trust in the local government's capability or willingness to respond to their needs so they did not express their concerns until two African American youths were shot to death. In this instance, these violent deaths prompted anger, dialogue, and action. This incident serves as a practical warning that inequities based on racial boundaries may be perceived and experienced by members of a community even though they are not publicly/politically voiced.

#### *Contact Theory*

In addition to the above explanations, several intergroup theorists from the fields of psychology and sociology address the concept of conflict between racial groups from several perspectives. Most notably, Gordon Allport (1954) asserts that interracial contact inherently tends to produce conflict interactions. These conflicts naturally evolve out of the prejudice and stereotypes that are present in the general population. It is hypothesized that prejudice and the formation of in-groups and out-groups come naturally to all humans even as early as childhood when physical or perceived differences are interpreted as real differences. As such, it is the human propensity to erroneously generalize that "deposits us on the very threshold of ethnic and group antagonism" (p. 17). Because we generalize, differences between groups become exaggerated, and it becomes "easier" to maintain separateness which can lead to either genuine, imaginary, or perceived conflicts of interest (Allport, 1954; Dovidio, Glick, & Rudman, 2005).

Belonging to certain in-groups is important to individuals because membership in said groups defines acceptable behaviors, customs, and ways of thinking (Allport, 1954). Encountering members of the out-group threatens in-group members because their previously formulated and 'culturally appropriate' way of thinking and acting is challenged. In essence, when out-group members behave in ways and according to rules that are contrary to the rules of the in-group, in-group members look for a way to resolve this dissonance. While hostility towards out-groups is not necessarily an automatic or inherent solution option, for many people rejecting out-groups becomes "a salient need" (p. 48). Once the in-group member has discarded the out-groups' rules as foreign or incorrect, they regain confidence that they are acting according to the 'right' set of rules. Intergroup competition and conflict also certainly develop in diverse societies due to limited resources and competing or differing value systems (Esses, Jackson, Dovidio, & Hodson, 2005). Importantly, Allport maintained that positive interracial interactions can still develop, but only with the presence of the following four characteristics: equal status, authoritative support, cooperation, and shared goals.

Empirically, Allport's contact theory and hypotheses have received critiques cautioning that some of his specific theories are in need of extension or even reworking. Specifically, a recent meta-analysis (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005) provided evidence that indicated intergroup contact may initially and generally *diminish* prejudice. According to this study, a number of positive factors, beyond the four proposed by Allport, may impact the degree to which intergroup prejudice is diminished. Particular weaknesses of the theory also include its comprisal of too many facilitating, but not essential, conditions for improving race relations, lack of addressing the process (i.e., the how and why) of how positive contacts occur, and failure to assert whether or how event- or situation-specific effects generalize to the larger out-group or

society as a whole (Pettigrew, 1998). Details aside, the legacy of Allport's overall organization of ideas regarding intergroup relations programs seem to have "stood the test of time" and even today appear "completely modern" (Stephan & Stephan, 2005, p. 442). Additionally, Allport's broad conceptualization of group conflict (e.g. with potential roots in economic resources, social power, religious views, group status, and social identity) remains accepted even by contemporary research standards with much research on prejudice and group conflict dissecting these explanations into two categories: conflict over tangible resources (i.e. economic, power resources) and conflict over more symbolic factors (values, positive group distinctiveness) (Esses et al., 2005). Though Allport's hypotheses continue to be one of the most widely cited sources in intergroup relations literature, there remain other important theories that focus less on personal characteristics and more on environmental and social factors.

#### *Socio-historical Theories*

Other race relations theorists have emphasized environmental and historical influences when explaining causes for racial conflict, thus extending beyond Allport's proposed roots in internal, inherent drives. For instance, Group Threat Theory (Blalock, 1967) posits that more interracial competition occurs when a setting, like a school, has two different groups that are close to each other in proportion. The number of racial conflicts between these groups would decrease in schools where one group greatly outnumbers the other group. According to this framework, when one group outnumbers the other they acquire or use more of the resources available in the school. On the other hand, when the groups are equal in size, more interracial competition for school resources leads to an increase in interracial conflict.

Alternatively, Macrostructural theory (Blau, 1977) states that as the number of interracial contacts within a setting increases, both the number of interracial friendships and interracial conflicts increase accordingly. As such, the amount of interracial contacts is impacted by two

elements: the racial heterogeneity within a setting and the amount of racial segregation present. Whether or not interracial contact translates into actual interracial interactions (either positive or negative) depends on students' willingness to interact with students different from themselves and the degree of racial inequality in the school perceived by the students.

Blumer's (1958) theory of racial competition is based on a sense of relative group position. Rather than focus merely on contemporary relationships, this model acknowledges the significance of "historically and collectively developed judgments about the positions in the social order that in-group members should rightfully occupy relative to members of an out-group" (Bobo & Hutchings, 1996 p.955). Therefore, feelings of threat are the result of "social and collective processes that derive from the long-term experiences and conditions that members of a racial group have faced" (Bobo & Hutchings, p. 956). Blumer contends that four elements are necessary in making intergroup prejudice and hostility a reality: 1) beliefs about in-group superiority/preference, 2) out-groups are alien/different, 3) group position equates to proper claim over certain rights, and 4) out-group members desire a greater share of those rights, resources, or privileges that are understood to belong to the in-group (Bobo & Hutchings, 1996).

Though it would benefit the field if there were more research directly testing the practical applicability of the above theories, Goldsmith (2004) recently answered this need by examining, and finding partial support for, three of those theories. First, in support of Contact Theory he found fewer minority teachers, less group work, and the absence of common goals across diverse groups led to more racial conflict among the students in the school. Second, Group Threat Theory was supported in the finding that interracial contact was more likely to be avoided in schools in which the two different racial groups were closer in size to each other. Finally, in support of macrostructural theory, results indicated higher numbers of both interracial



friendliness and interracial conflict in schools with greater heterogeneity. These results add further support to the notion that racial conflicts likely stem from multiple causes.

*The Iceberg Model of Racial or Ethnic Conflict (IMREC)*

The Iceberg Model of Racial or Ethnic Conflict (IMREC) represents a broad conceptualization of what constitutes a racial conflict (Henze et al., 2002). This model defines racial conflict or tension as existing in three different tiers. The first tier includes overt conflicts such as racial slurs or physical violence based on race/ethnicity. These conflicts reside at the top of the iceberg model because of the ease with which they are detected. Slightly less perceptible is the second tier, underlying tensions/conflicts, which consists of examples like group avoidance, group exclusion, and unequal treatment across groups (i.e. based on cultural, ethnic, or language differences/factors). Those affected by or who witness such tensions may feel hurt or uncomfortable by such experiences but at the same time may or may not recognize them as a form of racial bias or tension. Finally, the base of the iceberg model encompasses the root causes of racial or ethnic conflicts and include segregation (development and maintenance of stereotypes), racism (institutionalized and individual), socialization (the conscious or unconscious transfer of destructive beliefs from generation to generation), and inequality (unequal distribution of resources (Kreisberg, 1998, pp.40-44)).

*Summary*

It becomes evident then that racial conflict may best be described as incredibly complex and multifaceted in nature, and perhaps no one perspective can fully explain this phenomenon. Complementing the above presented theoretical work are more recent empirical evidence on racial conflicts in school.

Empirical Evidence from Schools

Though research examining racial conflicts in schools is limited, empirical findings have begun to clarify these conflicts by defining the nature of school-based racial conflicts (i.e. what do they look like), examining the negative consequences resulting from racial conflicts, and evaluating intervention techniques used by school staff.

#### *Nature of Racial Conflicts*

While racial conflicts may manifest in a number of ways, it seems clear that they often occur publicly and include both students and adults in schools (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). That being said, the conflicts can be either interpersonal or institutional in nature. On one hand, interpersonal conflicts include prejudices, stereotypes, physical altercations (i.e. pushing, jumping, stealing from), verbal harassment (slurs, racial/ethnic jokes, making fun of), isolation/segregation, lack of respect for other cultures (i.e. not attempting to pronounce a name correctly), and riots (Kiang & Kaplan, 1994; Kiang, Lan & Sheehan, 1995; Phan, 2003; Pinderhughes, 1997; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Salame', 2004; Wing, 2007). Also evident in the above research is the fact that these interpersonal offenses may be either unintentional or intentional. At one extreme of this range, there are times when, in order to be perceived as a full member of an ethnic group, negative attitudes towards other groups are necessary in that they "affirm allegiance to the community and authenticate their ethnic identity" (Pinderhughes, 1997, p. 155).

Institutional policies, on the other hand, deserve mention because of their role in promoting, either actively or passively, the above interpersonal conflict incidents. Specific examples of such policies include absence of ethnic minority groups from school curriculum and colorblind attitudes or administrations. Racist practices, ideologies, and conflict result from systems that fail to acknowledge and discuss race and racial differences (i.e. immigrant status,

language proficiency, acculturation level) (Kiang & Kaplan, 1994; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Salame', 2004). Therefore, whether interpersonal or institutional in nature, it appears that racial conflicts appear in a variety of ways and therefore could likely result in an assortment of potential consequences.

#### *Consequences of Racial Conflicts*

Racial conflicts result in a variety of negative student beliefs and appear to lead to conflicts in the future. For example, when racial conflicts occur repeatedly on campuses, students come to believe that racism is condoned (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Furthermore, victims of racial conflicts come to expect violence and hostility on a daily basis. Living in that atmosphere creates a sense of marginalization, victimization, and powerlessness for those affected by racial discrimination (Kiang, Lan & Sheehan, 1995; Phan, 2003; Salame', 2004). Such experiences can result in racial or ethnic minority students feeling marginalized and invisible in the eyes of the other students, staff, and even the entire educational system (Wing, 2007). Additionally, when students of color or newly immigrated students witness racial inequities, it can cause internal conflict because they contradict the equal opportunity messages commonly portrayed about American society (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Students who are consistently victimized are also more inclined to develop feelings of anger or resistance towards those offending groups (Kiang & Kaplan, 1994; Kiang, Lan, & Sheehan, 1995; Wing, 2007), perhaps leading to further tension. Therefore, the presence of racial tension can not only lead to negative consequences on an individual level, but can also exacerbate levels of inter-group competition and segregation which may legitimize violence across groups (Kiang & Kaplan, 1994; Salame', 2004).

#### *Inadequate School Staff Interventions*

The multitude of negative effects resulting from racial conflicts is further complicated by a twofold finding regarding staff intervention. First, students reported that when racial conflicts are acknowledged by the school, intervention efforts are limited in both who they reach and how impactful they are. A major component of this concern is the tendency for school leaders to only involve the students directly involved in the conflict, thus ignoring the possibility and likelihood that other students and the school's racial climate in general have been affected as well (Kiang & Kaplan, 1994; Salame' 2004). In doing so, school leaders inaccurately focus on surface issues of behavior and thus fail to address underlying, root causes of racial tension within the school (Salame', 2004).

Even more disturbing than non-comprehensive interventions is the alarming lack of any staff intervention at all. This lack of intervention is apparent in both implicit and explicit behaviors and attitudes among staff. Implicit examples include lack of awareness on part of the staff or the tendency to think that only overt, racially aggressive students hold and perpetuate racist beliefs, thus ignoring more covert forms of racial conflict (Salame', 2004). Alternatively, explicit examples that bothered students include teachers telling students to "just forget it" (in response to a student informing staff of a racial conflict concern) and treating clearly race-based conflicts as general conflicts, thus ignoring the racial element (Kiang & Kaplan, 1994). Still other students spoke of much harsher consequences to pointing out racial conflicts, citing they were not only ignored but also retaliated against (by teachers) in the form of lower grades and more severe consequences (e.g. not being allowed to go to the bathroom, inappropriate suspensions, being jailed for no reason) (Phan, 2003). In sum the interventions of school staff appear inadequate in multiple ways and therefore seem to both allow for and in some cases encourage the occurrence of racial conflicts in schools (Kiang & Kaplan, 1994).

### School-based Interventions for Racial Conflicts

In turning towards prevention and intervention, it is important to keep in mind that the causes of racial conflict and prejudice are numerous (Allport, 1954; Esses et al., 2005).

Obviously, then, successfully preventing or intervening in racial conflicts cannot be accomplished with a single approach. Rather, intervention efforts must be multifaceted and may work best by combining different strategies.

School leaders have many variables to consider when deciding how to most appropriately address racial conflict in schools. These variables include the demographics of the student body, nature of the conflict, intensity of the conflict, number of students involved, multicultural climate of the surrounding community (in which the school resides), and the level of support/dedication of other stakeholders (teachers, school security, students' families) (Banks, 2006). For example, if the greater community is experiencing racial conflicts as well, the school may view themselves as a starting point of intervention from which to create larger change in the society. Likewise, if school staff is divided on the need for these types of discussions or interventions, it is likely that preemptive work would need to be done among the staff before implementing any kinds of plans in the school. Therefore, in order to be effective, interventions must consider the relevant components (e.g. diverse attitudes/beliefs and/or environmental conditions) that make up a particular school's unique situation (Banks, 2006).

To address these conflicts in such a comprehensive way requires planning and forethought and is a potentially daunting task. To facilitate the process, school staff may choose to base their work on existing frameworks such as that of Henze et al.'s (2002) which consists of a three-pronged model of interventions designed to improve inter-ethnic relations among students. These interventions focus on affecting all members of the school community, are

designed to have a direct impact on students, and are designed to reach extended audiences.

Approaches that affect all members of the school community include data inquiry, a school/district vision, organizational changes (if necessary), diverse staffing, and professional development. Approaches designed to have a direct impact on students include making necessary changes to curriculum and instruction, planning and utilizing special events/programs, and establishing and abiding by behavioral standards (for students and other members of the community including adults). Approaches designed to reach extended audiences include parental involvement and expanding the school community. The three components of this model serve as a framework from which to present the following section: a review of recommendations and best practice guidelines regarding prevention and intervention with racial conflicts.

*Affect entire school community*

Several elements of intervention, including when and how schools intervene and school leaders' attitudes toward racial conflict, will necessarily impact the whole school. It is certain that when racial conflicts do emerge within school settings, it is unlikely that students have the skills necessary to navigate through them successfully on their own (Adler, 1996). Therefore, it is no surprise that schools are called on to intervene in racial conflicts (Croninger, 1996). This means that the customary practice of many school leaders, to ascribe to the old saying "if it ain't broke don't fix it," is both ineffective, inappropriate, and must be changed. It puts the school staff in a constant reactionary state of mind that never allows the root causes or underlying tensions to be addressed, changed, or even recognized (Henze, 2002). Primarily operating from a reactive position is dangerous because school leaders must not only recognize that racial conflict exists, but also attempt to understand the foundation and root of those racial conflicts within their individual settings (Adler, 1996). While new policies and codes of conduct play some part in

attending to racial conflicts, it is critical that school leaders be aware that creating a more accepting cultural climate throughout the school requires consistent and sustained efforts that promote an open examination and discussion of race related issues (Croninger, 1996).

Within schools, a strong leadership presence is an essential part of promoting positive intergroup relations (Soukamneuth, 2004). Strong leadership can increase the level of connectedness students feel to each other while at the same time eliminate the cultural borders that may exist that serve to foster intergroup tension. In addition, strong leadership includes continuous self-examination of personal biases (Adler 1996). The CRS points out when conflicts do occur, the best response is for leaders to address the conflicts swiftly as possible (<http://www.usdoj.gov/crs/pubs/avoidracial.htm>). Not addressing racial tension will only lead to a festering of unhealthy attitudes and beliefs which will work to increase the amount of interracial tension and conflict. It is no surprise then to see that the CRS states preventative, proactive measures are an important way to intervene in racial conflict, with the goal of eliminating discriminatory acts.

#### *Direct impact*

Other recommendations provide specific ideas for interventions that more directly impact students. One resource that takes a school's unique characteristics into consideration is the already briefly described Community Relations Service (CRS). An important element of the CRS intervention is the Student Problem Identifying and Resolving Issues Together (SPIRIT) program, a structured two day workshop that engages teachers, students, school administrators, school security, and local law enforcement officers in problem solving dialogue around racial conflict (Gutierrez, 2005). The student-led nature of the SPIRIT program yields several benefits including empowering students to identify and solve problems, improving their decision making

skills, identifying natural student leaders of diverse backgrounds, discovering commonalities between groups and appreciating differences between students (usdoj.com/crs). Gutierrez (2005) provides case examples from two high schools in which the SPIRIT program resulted in a considerable decrease in the racial tension of the school and surrounding community. While this goal remains constant in all schools in which SPIRIT is implemented, the means of attaining decreased racial tension are always unique, in part because the students of each school are responsible for identifying problems and brainstorming solutions. Examples of different responses from the two example schools include the identification of natural student leaders, the composition of racially heterogeneous study groups, the establishment of weekly student-administration proactive meetings regarding race relations, creation of school wide educational posters, and developing press materials for public distribution. Key to the success of the SPIRIT program is follow-up.

In the classroom, teachers can be expected to contribute to improving race relations as well. Banks (2006) recommends curriculum be restructured by teachers so that equal opportunity is given to all students, even those from traditionally marginalized groups (e.g. by race or social class). Additionally, he suggests promoting social inclusion among students by building connections with each other even across their differences (Banks, 2006).

#### *Reach broader community*

Far from confining their efforts to within the walls of the school, school leaders are called to be active agents in raising the broader community's racial consciousness (Tarca, 2005). To prevent future racial conflicts, a focus on the underlying causes of community racial tension is necessary (Henze et al., 2002). The CRS specifically mentions a school or school board can take to work towards these goals. Recommended interventions include parent/school councils at each



school, in-service training for teachers, outreach programs to parents and the community at large, and a police/school cooperation agreement (CRS, 2001). Additionally, the CRS describes recommendations intended specifically for municipalities to curtail racial conflict, though several of their suggestions, to be described below, seem appropriate for work in schools as well. For instance, *equal access* to participation in all school events should be guaranteed to all members of the student population. Additionally, a school can firmly establish their *position on racial conflict and hate crimes* by addressing the matter in an official document like the school philosophy, mission statement, or code of conduct. Similarly, a school can ensure that racial conflicts will get addressed by having a *written policy* on how to deal with racial conflicts between different members of the school community.

#### Limitations of Current Research

A number of gaps exist in the current literature base on racial conflict or harassment in schools. First, there is a need for more empirical studies that provide detailed looks at the experiences of individuals involved with racial conflicts. This includes a need to observe participants in the conflict, victims, perpetrators, and also those who are likely to intervene in said conflicts like school counselors, principals, and teachers. Second, it would be helpful for research to continue to clarify the meaning of the term racial conflict and the many types of behaviors/incidents that qualify as such in an attempt to increase awareness in the general public, especially students and school leaders. Specifically, it may be beneficial to give students and school personnel the opportunity to express what types of incidents they define as racial conflicts. Third, more empirical research is needed on the practical, negative outcomes of racial conflicts. Current information addresses either individual or greater community consequences. It is also necessary to increase our knowledge on what impact racial conflicts have on the racial

and general climate of the school. Fourth, great benefit would result out of studying a sometimes forgotten party in the racial conflict: the bystander. In particular, it would seem helpful to decipher what elements specific to racial conflicts would make bystanders more or less likely to intervene. Finally, while recommendations for best practice regarding racial conflict intervention are many, there is a need for increased outcome studies that evaluate the effectiveness of these recommended approaches. Additionally, though guidelines are plentiful, it remains unclear how school leaders are actually intervening or whether they are at all. It is only by collecting and analyzing the data that school leaders will confidently know how and if implemented programs improve students' experiences with racial conflicts and work towards eliminating said conflicts in the future.

### Conclusions

Though research on racial conflicts in schools is limited, this review exposes several findings that could prove to be useful for school practitioners and researchers alike. First and foremost, it is clear that racial conflicts occur in schools and at a rate high enough to warrant both discussion and action. Action is needed based on the considerable negative consequences that arise as a result of these racial conflicts. Negative consequences can affect many different individuals or groups including: the students involved in the conflict, other uninvolved students attending the school (of all races), families of students, school staff who are or are not involved with intervening in the conflict, and can even spill over into community wide costs. Experiences can be especially painful to minority students who are often times the victim of overt or covert transgressions based on their race or related characteristics (i.e. language use, immigrant status, customs, clothes). Additionally, characterizing or even recognizing the racial element of a conflict can be difficult to do for some individuals. In fact, one incident may be interpreted as

racial by one involved party while the other party may deny any racial element at all. This discrepancy, which could be the result of denial or lack of awareness or a colorblind perspective, may actually cause even more pain to the minority student(s) (and their family and to a greater extent their entire cultural group within the community) involved and in effect serve to increase racial tension within the community. Exacerbating the problem is the fact that school staff appear to, in many cases, either inadequately intervene or not intervene at all. Moreover, these episodes, based on the country's increased rate of minority population, cannot be expected to go away by themselves any time soon.

#### Purpose of Current Study

Clearly, racial conflict in schools is a topic worthy of future research. The conclusions in the previous section serve as a rationale for the current study which seeks to fill gaps and strengthen areas in the literature base regarding racial conflict in schools. The purpose of our study is to gain insight into school counselors' decision making process of whether and how to intervene in racial conflicts that occur between students in their schools. Additionally, we look to describe how the conflicts and interventions impacted the individuals involved, the school as a whole, and the school counselors themselves. Despite the availability of a considerable amount of policy and practice recommendations, literature has failed to recognize or examine what schools actually do to intervene in race-based conflicts. The current study will provide context to a rather large theoretical literature base by examining actual cases of racial conflict and probing for participants' inner experiences of those conflicts. Because the main purpose of our study seeks to understand an individual's internal experience, the CQR method is suitable for our needs.

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