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Annelise Green

Pressley Harrison

Caroline Rubach

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Pepperdine Student Outgroup Impressions, Interactions, and Anxiety

Annelise Green, Pressley Harrison, Caroline Rubach

Pepperdine University

Assigned in COM 300: Introduction to Communication Research (Dr. Lauren Amaro)

Abstract

Uncertainty reduction theory and intergroup bias suggest that remaining in homogenous environments could lead to negative impression of outgroups. The undergraduate campus at Pepperdine University has recently seen discrimination against LGBTQ+ and the African American communities. Regarding the current charged political climate at Seaver College, the researchers hypothesized that young adult outgroup impressions were directly affected by exposure to White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant (WASP) communities, social anxiety, and self-disclosure. Research questions also asked if there was an effect of exposure to Christian culture on anxiety levels when in contact with outgroups and what other personal factors influence outgroup impression. This study tested these propositions by having 132 university students respond to a survey sent out on Facebook. The researchers ran correlational and mean differences tests to check the hypotheses and research questions. While social anxiety and self-disclosure did not prove to be significant influencers, there was a strong correlation between time spent in WASP communities and negative outgroup impression.

Pepperdine University's student body is predominantly white and Christian (Admission Fast Facts). The Seaver College 2016-2017 school year included $50,022 in tuition and fees in addition to $14,330 in room and board (U.S. News & World Report). Additionally, Pepperdine offers study abroad programs with courses offered in Malibu, Germany, England, Italy, Switzerland, Argentina, China, and Washington D.C. (U.S. News & World Report). The U.S. News & World Report recently ranked Pepperdine as #50 overall in the nation based on their performance across indicators of excellence. Pepperdine University is a Church of Christ institution, which is generally a more conservative denomination of Christianity (A Place of Faith). Many students are attracted to Pepperdine for its spiritual life, especially if they have come from a similar faith background. Students exposed to a consistently homogenous community have shown to impact the Seaver College campus.

Events in the past year at Seaver College have highlighted discrimination of outgroups on campus. Two women athletes have filed a lawsuit against Pepperdine University and the women's basketball coach for being subject of discrimination against their sexual orientation and relationship status (The Graphic). Furthermore, a case of "blackface" and anonymous social media posts labeling other ethnicities "monkeys" lead to a student demonstration in the cafeteria (McPike, 2016; Sanford, 2016).

Efforts have been made by the administration of Pepperdine University to respond to these events with inclusivity. The first LGBTQ+ club at Seaver College, Crossroads, was established in 2016 (Littauer, 2016). Additionally, the Black Student Association has been leading the efforts to add a new diversity class as part of a general education requirement (Mason, 2016). However, there is no guarantee that these efforts will eradicate poor treatment of minorities. It has become imperative to understand the underlying causes of Seaver campus discriminatory behavior in order to prevent it.

There are many encompassing factors that could impact the treatment of outgroups on the Seaver College campus. Part of what makes Seaver College unique from other campuses nationwide is its emphasis on spirituality, including the requirements of three religion classes and attendance of fourteen spiritual events a semester (U.S. News and World Report). This study explores if an upbringing lacking in diversity, or exposure to different ways of thinking, could lead to higher levels of anxiety/uncertainty toward outgroups.

RQ1: What is the effect of exposure to Christian culture on anxiety levels when in contact with outgroups?

The current study will use quantitative survey methodology to explore how levels of social anxiety, amount of self-disclosure, and time spent in predominantly Christian communities affect impressions of outgroup members for White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant (WASP) Pepperdine students.

Review of Literature

Causes of discrimination from students at Pepperdine could be linked to intergroup bias. Intergroup bias can be defined as the "systematic tendency to evaluate one's own membership group (the ingroup) or its members more favorably than a nonmembership group (the outgroup) or its members," (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002, p. 576). Applied to Pepperdine students, an outgroup could be anything beyond the realm of WASP — including, but not exhaustive: different ethnicities, religious beliefs, and sexual orientations. Evaluating outgroups is mainly driven by the uncertainty reduction theory, which evaluates the motivation to reduce uncertainty via communication or behavior in an uncertain environment (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

Higher familiarity with outgroups (via direct and indirect friendship with outgroup members) has been shown to reduce anxiety and prejudice (Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, 2004). This understanding of outgroups suggests that the uncertainty reduction theory is at play in situations of discrimination. The uncertainty reduction theory posits that individuals are motivated to reduce uncertainty with strangers in order to avoid unpredictability (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 535). Additionally, the higher the uncertainty, the lower the positive expectations and quality of communication an individual can have with someone new (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 535). These lower expectations are a result of the anxiety associated with the interaction. Thus, a low familiarity with outgroups will maintain anxiety levels.

Uncertainty, within the context of uncertainty reduction theory, can be defined as "the feeling of discomfort or awkwardness when two strangers…try to relate to each other" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 535). More applicable to ingroup/outgroup interactions is social anxiety, or the fear of interaction with other people that leads to avoidance (Richard). The researchers therefore speculate that the more fear associated with an impression of an outgroup member, the higher the social anxiety and thereby avoidance. Avoidance perpetuates undue discrimination because anxiety and uncertainty cannot decrease without more intergroup encounters (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 535). The implications of this phenomenon occurring on Pepperdine campus generate the first hypothesis.

H1: There is a positive correlation between levels of social anxiety in a young adult and their negative impression of outgroups.

A further reduction catalyst of prejudice and anxiety is self-disclosure (Turner, Hewstone, Voci, 2007). Self-disclosure describes the expression of breadth (amount of information) and depth (intimacy of information) between two individuals (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Altman and Taylor introduced social penetration theory, which describes how self-disclosure is linked to current and future rewards (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). In other words, exchanging personal information is an indicator of desire to continue the relationship. In fact, higher amounts of self-disclosure may stimulate positive impressions of the speaker and strengthen a relationship (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Therefore, research has supported that the less social distance, which accompanies higher self-disclosure, can be shown to reduce negative attitudes toward outgroups (Bastian, Lusher, & Ata, 2012). The current study will discover whether or not social anxiety and the breadth of self-disclosure are related.

H2: There is a negative correlation between levels of social anxiety in a young adult and the amount of self-disclosure.

However, the researchers speculate that there is more to outgroup impression development than social anxiety and self-disclosure. A possible component in development of discrimination toward outgroups is an individual's environment. If an individual has been exposed to diversity, or may know a member of an outgroup directly or indirectly, research has shown weaker prejudice toward the outgroup (Paolini et al, 2004). This relationship has implications for diverse communities being less prejudiced. Living in a homogenous community, therefore, could suggest higher prejudice for outgroups. In a study demonstrating that brain activity can display prejudice, researchers concluded that "people high in prejudice do not intuitively grasp outgroup members intentions and actions" (Gutsell & Inzlicht, 2010, p. 844). The snowballing effects of uncertainty result in members of ingroups staying within their comfort zones to the point of not understanding an outgroup member perspective. Individuals prone to uncertainty benefit the most from intergroup contact as it reduces intergroup anxiety (Dhont, Roets, & Van Hiel, 2011). Therefore, anxious individuals who remain within their ingroup do not receive the benefits of reducing intergroup anxiety.

For the purposes of this study, the researchers will define the variable of frequency of interactions with predominantly WASP communities as the amount of time and the degree of saturation with which one has spent in such a community.

H3: There is a positive correlation between frequency of interactions with predominantly WASP communities and levels of social anxiety.

A key motivation for uncertainty reduction involves the expectation of future interaction (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 535). Therefore, if an individual does not anticipate future interaction, it is unlikely they will try to reduce uncertainty with a member of an outgroup. This perpetuates not only intergroup bias but also ignorance toward outgroups. The more time spent in a consistently homogenous environment without expecting interactions with outgroups can form certain perceptions of outgroup members. The researchers have thus predicted the fourth hypothesis.

H4: There is a relationship between time spent in predominantly WASP communities and young adult outgroup impressions.

Research has shown that factors such as attachment style and previous experience with outgroups influence outgroup impression (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001; Dhont et al, 2011). The current researchers speculate that possible other factors, such as parent political background or socioeconomic status, could also have an effect on outgroup impression. These factors will be studied in correlation with outgroup impression in response to the second research question.

RQ2: What other personal participant factors influence outgroup impression?
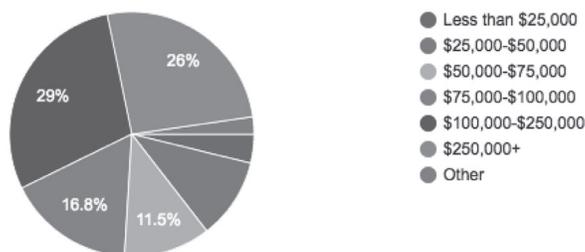
Method

Participants
Participants came from an array of backgrounds. 23.5% of participants did not attend Pepperdine University. Age of participants ranged from 17 to 23 years old, with the majority of responses being 20 years old. 70.2% of participants stated their sex as female. Only eight respondents listed a country of origin being somewhere beyond The United States of America. Countries that weren't The United States of America included Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala, India, Mexico, Singapore, Canada, and Japan, with only one participant per country mentioned. Despite the generally homogenous country of origin, 57.6% of participants mentioned that they've lived abroad.

Further demographic information was gathered about participant background. 79.5% of participants' parents were listed as Christian, while 74.2% of participants said they personally were Christian. The majority of participants (63.4%) attended public versus private school. 54% of participants listed their family income as over $100,000. See Figure 1 for the holistic pie chart of family income.

Figure 1

Family income: (131 responses)

- Less than $25,000
- $25,000-$50,000
- $50,000-$75,000
- $75,000-$100,000
- $100,000-$250,000
- $250,000+
- Other

Procedures

The researchers used a convenient sampling technique. The survey was posted on the three researchers' Facebook profiles with a post asking for participation. Researchers also posted on class group Facebook pages, such as the class of 2019 and sorority or fraternity pages. Criteria required to take the survey included the participant being a university student. Participants clicked on the Google Forms link provided and filled out the survey (see Appendix).

The study included 138 responses to the survey. Responses were thrown out for inconsistencies in responses or clearly inaccurate responses. For example, one participant listed their country of origin as "Atlantis." The other participant responses that were removed from data evaluation answered with too much variation to be considered valuable for data. In total, six participant responses were removed (N=132). Dr. Lauren Amaro, a communication professor at Pepperdine University, approved the concept, hypotheses, and survey before data was collected.

Measures

Every scale mentioned was compiled into the overall survey. To abbreviate the survey, items were chosen that were most applicable to the current study (see Appendix). All items for variables, other than demographic, were designed with Likert-type responses, where participants answered from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (6).

Social Anxiety. Social anxiety was measured using an interaction anxiety scale and a social anxiety in university students scale (Leary, 2013; Bhamani, 2013). The interaction anxiousness scale included items such as "I usually feel relaxed around other people, even people who are quite different from me," (Leary, 2013). A sample item of the social anxiety in university students scale includes, "I feel comfortable being introduced to new people," or "I feel comfortable to make friends with people who don't dress like me," (Bhamani, 2013).

Amount of Self-Disclosure. In order to measure quantity of self-disclosure, the researchers developed an original scale consisting of four Likert-style questions including questions such as, "I often discuss personal matters with friends," and "I do not feel comfortable sharing my personal matters." The four questions were written with the goal of measuring a participant's self-disclosure attitudes and patterns.

Negative Impression of Outgroups. Negative impression of outgroups was measured using a variety of scales, ranging from an ethnocentrism scale, PRECA scale, homophobia scale, and a religious fundamentalism scale. These scales were chosen to be used in the survey because they test the most common issues of negative impressions of outgroups at Seaver College.

The ethnocentrism scale studies participant ability to comprehend beyond their culture (Neuliep & McCroskey, 2013). An example of an item the researchers will be using in the current study is "My culture should be the role model for other cultures," (Neuliep & McCroskey, 2013). The survey included four items from the ethnocentrism scale. The Personal Report of Interethnic Communication Apprehension (PRECA) scale includes items such as "I am afraid to speak up in conversations with a person from a different ethnic/racial group," with participant answers ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). The homophobia scale has items such as "I avoid gay individuals," ultimately testing tolerance (Wright, Adams, & Bernat, 1999).

Finally, the religious fundamentalism scale includes items such as "It is more important to be a good person than to believe in God and the right religion," where a participant would also indicate how much they agree (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004).

      Frequency of Interactions with Predominantly WASP Individuals. In order to measure the frequency of interactions with predominantly WASP communities, the researchers developed their own scale consisting of four Likert-style questions such as "I attended church regularly while living in my parent's home," and "the majority of my 'circle' (family and friends) are Christian."

Results

      H1 predicted that there would be a positive correlation between levels of social anxiety and negative impressions of outgroups. To test the hypotheses and RQ1, the researchers conducted a Pearson product moment correlational analysis. The correlational testing resulted in a non-significant slight positive association (r=.14, p=.11). The hypothesis was not supported. The data does not suggest that as levels of social anxiety increases, so does negative impressions of outgroups.

      H2 suggested there was a negative correlation between levels of social anxiety in a young adult and the amount of self-disclosure. Again, correlational testing resulted in a significant positive correlation (r=.42, p<0.05). The p-value represents a 95% likelihood that the findings were not found by chance. H2 was both supported and not; while the projected direction was incorrect, a significant correlation was found between the variables. The results suggest that as levels of social anxiety increases, amount of self-disclosure also increases.

      H3 theorized that there was a positive correlation between the frequency of interactions with predominantly WASP communities and levels of social anxiety. The correlational results produced a very slight negative correlation, but the p-value was not significant (r= -0.04, p= 0.65). The relationship predicted in H3 was not supported. The data actually suggests an opposite directional relationship, whereas frequency of interactions with predominantly WASP communities increases, levels of social anxiety decreases.

      H4 predicted that there was a relationship between time spent in predominantly WASP communities and young adult negative outgroup impressions. The results proved significant, ultimately eliciting a positive correlation (r=0.55, p<0.00001). The data suggests that the more time spent in predominantly WASP communities is directly associated with young adult negative outgroup impressions. There were particularly diverse responses to items testing the participant's religious fundamentalism, as seem in the distribution of responses in Figure 2.
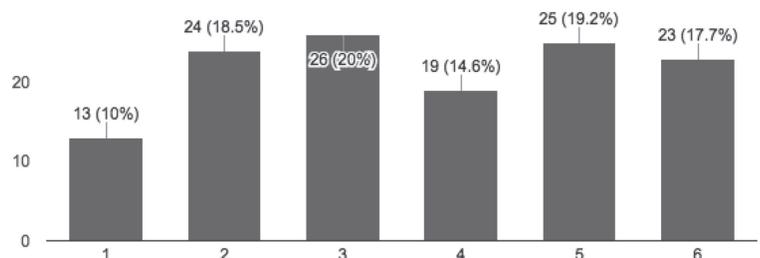
      RQ1 asked what the effect of exposure to Christian culture had on anxiety levels when in contact with outgroups. The relationship between anxiety and negative impression of outgroups was not significant (r=0.14). There was also an insignificant relationship between interactions with WASP communities and levels of social anxiety. Therefore, based on the results of this study, there is no quantified effect of exposure to Christian culture on anxiety levels when in contact with outgroups.

Figure 2

The fundamentals of God's religion should never be tampered with, or compromised with others' beliefs.
(130 responses)

      RQ2 asked what personal participant factors influence outgroup impression. To test to see if demographics had an effect on outgroup impression, the researchers ran mean differences tests. There were no significant differences on outgroup impressions between Christian parents (M=2.34; SD=1.93). Additionally, there were no significant differences on outgroup impressions for if the participant was Christian or not (M=1.34; SD=0.35), or the age (M=2.25), or sex (M=2.35) of the participant. Living abroad (M=2.35) and country of origin (M=2.33) were also not significant. Furthermore,

year at Pepperdine (M=2.48; SD=0.74), public/private school (M=2.36), and family income (M=1.73, SD=0.6) all did not show significant influence on outgroup impression in this study.

The averages between university students that do attend and do not attend Pepperdine were also compared to see if there was any significance. Pepperdine students showed higher negative impression of outgroups (M =2.75), lower self-disclosure (M =1.63), and higher religious fundamentalism (M=5.13) than non-Pepperdine university students. The differences between the other averages were not significant.

Discussion

Recent events on Pepperdine's campus illustrated various levels of discrimination. Based off of research on intergroup bias and the uncertainty reduction theory, the researchers hypothesized that there would be a relationship between Pepperdine's homogenous environment and negative impression of outgroups. The social anxiety some students may feel in general interacting with outgroups because of unfamiliarity, and ultimate levels of self-disclosure, were also taken into consideration. Therefore, the research studied the level of diversity that participants had experienced and whether or not that influenced their outgroup perception and anxiety levels.

The results showed that there was not an effect of exposure to Christian culture on anxiety levels when in contact with outgroups, at least as far as the variables studied in this sample. This suggests that it's not necessarily the WASP communities themselves that could lead to negative outgroup impression, but could depend more on significant experiences shaping impressions. As seen in the array of responses to the religious fundamentalism items, the participant's religious ideologies appeared to be diverse and also cannot be attributed to negative outgroup impression because they were not tested.

Both H1 and H3 had too slight of correlations in order to make significant statements about the student body as a whole. With H2 having an opposite directional relationship than hypothesized, it becomes clear that anxiety doesn't have as big of a role in the outgroup conversation as proposed. The variables of social anxiety and outgroup impressions could be only inadvertently related, as seen with the significant positive correlation in H2. Additionally, while H3 had a positive correlation, it was too weak to presume that levels of social anxiety change in particularly WASP communities.

The most significant results were seen in H4, which was the main undercurrent throughout the study. Being surrounded by homogenous people, such as spending time in predominantly WASP communities, was indeed significantly related to negative young adult outgroup impressions. This is supported by the uncertainty reduction theory. If an individual primarily spends time in WASP communities, there is no anticipation of future interaction with outgroups, and thereby the avoidance of trying to understand an outgroup individual personally (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 535).

Due to the insignificance of every demographic factor studied in relation to participant negative impression of outgroups, a response to RQ2 is that no personal factor studied had an influence. In particular, parent/participant Christianity, age, sex, year at Pepperdine, country of origin, public/private school, and family income did not influence participant's impressions of outgroups in this study.

The differences in responses between non-Pepperdine university students and Pepperdine students were striking. Pepperdine students had higher responses for religious fundamentalism and negative impression of outgroups. Furthermore, Pepperdine students had a significantly lower level of self-disclosure. These differences do not necessarily reflect the university and could be attributed to certain types of students being drawn to particular universities. However, this study does show an association of Pepperdine students with negative impressions of outgroups while the non-Pepperdine students do not.

Limitations

There were a few limitations within this study. The most poignant limitation was through the convenient sampling method: each participant was a friend on Facebook, indirectly or not, with a researcher. The opinions and lifestyles of the researchers would be reflected in the participant responses due to basic acquaintanceship or

developed real-life friendships. Researchers setting out to study negative outgroup impressions had an awareness of the circumstances, making it likely that the researchers' Facebook friends would also hold the same beliefs. As a result, social desirability bias could also have played a role in this research. Participants' wanting to respond with what is socially acceptable could influence some of the items, such as the items asking about church attendance or homosexuality.

Furthermore, the researchers neglected to include an item asking for the participant's ethnicity. While this does not necessarily affects participants' exposure to WASP communities, it limits any generalizations that can be made about whether or not ethnicity contributes to negative impressions of outgroups.

Ideally, the sample of Pepperdine students would've been representative of the Seaver college student body (Admission Fast Facts). This would entail a sample of 60% female and 40% male. Regarding ethnicity, 48.2% will be white, 15% Latino, 11% Asian, and 5% African American. The respondents ended up being around 70% female, which is including students that do not attend Pepperdine. As previously mentioned, ethnicity information was not gathered and conclusions cannot be drawn. Additionally, there was not an even amount of non-Pepperdine university students and Pepperdine university students. More meaningful differences in those averages could've been collected if the sample was more even. In general, results (and thereby the correlations) would be more solidified with a larger sample. Overarching the entire study is the inexperience of the researchers. The data was gathered by novice researchers and could've been accomplished more expertly with trained researchers.

Conclusions and Future Study

Future studies could explore other predominantly WASP universities or communities to see if there can be similar results. Additionally, a longitudinal study that measures for exposure to outgroups throughout the lifespan could test to see if impression of outgroups can change with an increase or stagnation of diverse experiences. While attachment style and previous experience with outgroups has been researched to influence outgroup impression (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001; Dhont et al, 2011), different personal factors should also be explored.

Overall, this study has supported that the dynamics of intergroup bias at Pepperdine University could contribute to the negative impression of student outgroups. Anxiety and self-disclosure were not significantly associated with this issue in the study.

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Appendix

University Student Attitudes

1. My parent/guardians are Christian: Yes/No
2. I identify as a Christian: Yes/No
3. Age: _____
4. Sex: F/M
5. Year at Pepperdine: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5+, I do not attend Pepperdine University
6. Country of origin: _____
7. Have you lived abroad? Yes/No
8. Did you attend public or private school? Public/Private
9. Family income: less than $25,000, $25,000-$50,000, $50,000-$75,000, $75,000-$100,000, $100,000-$250,000, $250,000+

Likert-style responses of choosing between numbers 1 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree):

10. I usually feel comfortable when I'm in a group of people I don't know.
11. People in my culture could learn a lot from people in other cultures.
12. I feel comfortable being introduced to new people.
13. I only have friends of the same sex.
14. I am afraid to speak up in conversations with a person from a different ethnic/racial group.
15. I feel comfortable to make friends with people who don't dress like me.

16. I usually feel relaxed around other people, even people who are quite different from me.

17. Communicating with people from difference ethnic/racial groups makes me feel uncomfortable.

18. I have many friends with different cultures.

19. I attended church regularly and/or was regularly involved in a youth group/bible/study/prayer group/ YoungLife type of program while living in my parent/ guardian's home.

20. Most other cultures are backward compared to my culture.

21. I attended Christian affiliated schools for the majority of my K-12 education.

22. I like to get involved in group discussion with others who are from different ethnic/racial groups.

23. The majority of my "circle" (friends and family) are Christian.

24. I have no fear of speaking up in a conversation with a person from a different ethnic/racial group.

25. I often discuss personal matters with friends.

26. I am currently an active member of a congregation/ youth group (not including small group convocation programs).

27. I do not feel comfortable sharing my personal matters.

28. My culture should be the role model for other cultures.

29. I consider myself to be an "open book."

30. I feel comfortable sharing my feelings with friends.

31. I avoid gay individuals.

32. Homosexuality is immoral.

33. If I discovered a friend was gay I would end the friendship.

34. It does not bother me to see two homosexual people together in public.

35. God has given humanity a complete, unfailing guide to happiness and salvation, which must be totally followed.

36. It is more important to be a good person than to believe in God and the right religion.

37. All of the religions in the world have flaws and wrong teachings. There is no perfectly true, right religion.

38. The fundamentals of God's religion should never be tampered with, or compromised with others' beliefs.PJCR