Qualitative Study of White Second-Semester Undergraduates’ Attitudes Toward African American Undergraduates at a Predominantly White University

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The attitudes of White second-semester undergraduates toward African American undergraduates at a predominantly White university were examined. The interviewees had very little contact with or understanding of African Americans, and their thoughts and impressions of African Americans were based on misinformation or a total lack of information. Many interviewees felt that Whites should not be held culpable for presumed wrongs due to past discrimination against African Americans.

1. On the 17th of May, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the landmark decision outlawing the doctrine of separate but equal in public education, and instructed the nation to institute the desegregation of public schools with all deliberate speed (Allen, 1988). This court order was the beginning of a transition intended to lead eventually to racial equality in American society and systems of education. African American students were to attend colleges and universities of their choice alongside White students.

2. The hope was that after the laws were changed and institutions across the country adopted the ethic of nondiscrimination, equality in American society would be achieved. But many have been surprised by the strength and the breadth of opposition to equal rights under the law: “Nowhere is the puzzle of persistent Black inequality and limited opportunity in American society more apparent than in the field of education” (Allen, 1988). It seems ironic that the proclaimed bastion of progressive thought, the American system of higher education, should be found wanting in its reaction to providing an environment conducive to racial equality.

3. This study was based on two assertions. First, substantial evidence suggests that one reason for the disproportionately high attrition rate among African American students at predominantly White institutions is a collegiate environment unsupportive of, and often hostile toward, African American students. Although a cursory glance at the last 10 or 20 years of higher education may give the impression of advances toward a welcoming environment for African American students, a closer examination shows that there has been little progress—and some would contend, a backslide. Beckham (1988) has contended that African Americans at predominantly White institutions are accurately considered and perceived as “strangers in a strange land.”

4. Second, because a major influence within a collegiate environment is peer culture, the attitudes of a predominantly White peer culture will likely contribute to a collegiate environment unsupportive of, and often hostile toward African American students. The literature chronicles incident after incident of racist behavior toward African Americans (Anderson, 1988; Hora, 1988; Lutz, 1987; Terrell, 1988; Turner, 1985; Weiner, 1989; Wilson, 1990), commonly referred to as “the new racism.”

5. The importance of building and maintaining healthy peer relationships should not be underestimated

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(Sherif & Sherif, 1964). They provide the undergraduate with an important support mechanism that helps them navigate the higher educational experience. The lack of a supportive peer culture presents a myriad of problems to African American students (Berry, 1983; Fleming, 1984).

6. The issue of African American student retention has been explored extensively from the perspective of African Americans (Lomotey, 1990; Love, 1993; Williams, 1993). Very little has been written about the attitudes of White students at predominantly White institutions. This gap in the literature discounts the effect that adverse attitudes by the predominant race and culture may have on African American students within the campus environment.

METHOD

7. In this exploratory study qualitative methods were used. The discovery of individuals’ attitudes called for a personal, in-depth approach that would provide the best chance of mirroring individual realities. Firestone (1987) wrote:

> Qualitative methods express the assumptions of a phenomenological paradigm that there are multiple realities that are socially defined. Rich prescription persuades by showing that the researcher was immersed in the setting and giving the reader enough detail to “make sense” of the situation. (p. 16)

8. Qualitative research emphasizes the importance of conducting research in a natural setting (Bogdan & Bilken, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This form of research assumes the significance of understanding the interviewees’ perspectives on the topic researched (Magoon, 1977; Patton, 1980) and is based strongly in interviewee observation and participation (Wilson, 1977). The method requires interaction between the researcher and the interviewees, a phenomenon that is context bound and is based on value-bound inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

9. Two specific approaches provided the framework and methodology for the study. First was the ecological psychology method, an approach developed at the University of Kansas (Jacob, 1988). “Ecological psychologists are interested in the relationships between human behavior and the environment; they see individuals and the environment as interdependent” (p. 17). The central focus is describing the interviewees’ behaviors as it is influenced by their environment (Barker, 1968). One significant component of the ecological psychology approach used in the study was predetermined questions that remained constant throughout the research (Jacob, 1988). The responses to the questions were allowed to take their natural course, but the consistent set of questions helped in framing interviews and in analyzing the data.

10. The second approach guiding the study was the cognitive anthropologist method (Marshall & Rossman, 1989), in which the interviewees’ perspectives are assumed to be organized into cognitive categories that can be tapped through in-depth interviewing to develop domains of understanding (Spradley, 1979). A structured questionnaire of key questions provided categories in which the interviewees could assemble their thoughts. A clear picture of White students’ attitudes can be obtained by combining the basic tenets of these two approaches—examination through predetermined questions and in-depth interviews.

11. This study was based on the individual interviews of thirty White second-semester freshmen males and females. The study involved an informal approach that followed a set of key questions but allowed the interviewees to redirect the conversation as they saw fit. The actual number of interviews conducted was determined by the researcher. As Fetterman (1989) observed:
The law of diminishing returns can determine that it is time for the ethnographer to leave the field. When the same specific pattern of behavior emerges over and over again, the fieldworker should move on to a new topic for observation and detailed exploration. (p. 20)

Participant Selection

12. The site of the study was a predominantly White university, which enrolls approximately 38,000 undergraduate and graduate students, less than 5% of whom are African American. Given the small number of African Americans enrolled, it is not unusual for White students to live on a floor, and sometimes an entire residence hall, that does not house an African American student. The academic environment is very similar to that of the residence hall environment in racial composition, and the number of African American faculty is low.

13. Participant selection was achieved using purposive sampling (Fetterman, 1989; Patton, 1980, 1990). Goetz & LeCompte (1984) have referred to this type of sampling as criterion based, characterized by a predetermined set of criteria or list of attributes that participants must possess. The attributes employed by this study in developing a sample included race (Whites); age (18 or 19); semester standing (second semester); enrollment status (full-time); gender (women and men); place of residence (on-campus); and willingness to participate.

14. The sample was determined by a random sampling of all undergraduates who fit these attributes. From the population, 100 potential interviewees were selected using a computerized random-sampling program, drawing equal numbers by gender. Through the use of a computer program, a list of random numbers was generated, equaling the number from both genders. These numbers were assigned to every individual in the population. Fifty more numbers were randomly generated, and these spanned the range of numbers from the separate male and female populations. These 50 numbers were then used to determine who would be contacted and in which order for an interview.

15. The males and females of the sample were sent a confidential letter explaining the nature of the study and inviting each one to take part. The potential interviewees were then telephoned to invite them to participate and to remind them of the letter that introduced the study. If they could not be reached on the first call, they were called two more times before no longer being considered for participation.

16. Thirty-three males were called in order to set up and carry out 15 successful interviews. Of the 33 called, only three declined to take part. The other 15 were not at home when the interviewer called.

17. Thirty-one females were called in order to set up and carry out 15 successful interviews. Of the 31 called, three decided not to take part. The other 15 were not available at the times called. A total of 30 interviews, split evenly by gender, were conducted.

Data Collection

18. During the initial part of the interview, a complete explanation of the study was presented to each potential interviewee. The interviewees were then given the opportunity to withdraw. All interviewees chose to complete the interview and were the basis of the analysis.

19. The researcher asked what Patton (1980) proffers as the six kinds of questions available to the researcher: those pertaining to experience, opinion, feeling, knowledge, sensory awareness and back-
According to Lincoln and Guba, (1985) the focus of the interviews may change or evolve as new areas change and develop. The original key questions serve as boundaries but are not set in concrete; they can be altered and, in the typical naturalistic inquiry, will be (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The in-depth study of individual perceptions has been found to be an effective way of analyzing and better understanding social issues (Gable & Rogers, 1987). The individual interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim as a primary source document. The interviewer also took notes to record important visual observations about the interviewee, such as body language and facial expressions. Nervous shifting of legs and arms, tapping of feet and drumming of fingers were clues to the comfort level of the interviewee. This information adds to the richness of the data collected (Tierney, 1991).

Data Analysis
20. To begin the data analysis, the researcher reviewed all of the raw data again (tapes and notes), as well as the initial proposal of the study (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Patton, 1990; Tierney, 1991). It was important for the researcher to become absorbed in the data and highly familiar with the results of each interview. The interview data were transcribed; coded to indicate key words and phrases; and analyzed; and examined for emerging themes, ideas, and attitudes. Validity of the analyzed data was checked by using self-corrective techniques, which help one examine findings for personal bias and verify the correct understanding of what the interviewee expressed. This included checking for consistancy between the transcripts and the personal notes of the interviewer. If incongruities existed, the interviewee was contacted for clarification.

RESULTS
21. The interview protocol covered a number of areas relating to the attitudes of the White interviewees. Some of the interview questions were used to maintain or reinstitute an air of comfort and trust. The following questions related specifically to the attitudes of White, second-semester undergraduates toward African Americans and responses are summarized. Quotations from the interviews are offered to provide a sense of the interviewees depth of feeling. The names used for the interviewees were assigned during the data collection phase of the study.

Key Question 1: Describe the interactions you have had, if any, with African Americans prior to your enrollment at this campus.

22. The majority of those interviewed had had little or no interaction with African Americans before enrolling in college. This fact was often exhibited by the way they described their lone interactions in some detail. The novelty of the interactions allowed the interviewees to remember it more vividly than if they had been asked to describe their interactions with Whites enrollment.

23. Most often, the comments offered by the interviewees were based on observations of African Americans, not actual interactions. Chantal was not alone in stating, “We didn’t have any Black students whatsoever in our high school. The only time I had ... like interacted with them was when we would go to Johnstown.” Statements like “~there was] only one Black in my school” or “I’ve never really interacted with a Black person” were common. Almost every interviewee was able to state the exact number of African Americans in his or her high school class and sometimes the exact number residing in his or her hometown.

24. Some of the interviewees noted that the quality of their interactions with African Americans, if any,
were predicated upon the background of the African Americans involved in the interaction. Elena noted, “In the area I lived, it was not predominantly Black, it had a small percentage of Black people, but . . . I was friends with a couple of Black girls. They were different from other Black children—they were brought up as though, as though they were in a White family.” Odette also observed differences in African Americans, a few that acted like her White friends, and the rest that isolated themselves. She noted, “Well, in high school . . . there were I guess, there were two types of Black students. We had, just . . . I guess normal . . . Black kids that lived in the community, you know—just like anybody else, and they were treated just like everybody else. They pretty much kept to themselves.” The observation that African Americans kept to themselves was very common. The observations were almost always presented that the isolation of the African Americans was self-imposed.

25. Some of the interviewees commented on the prevalent racist attitudes within their hometowns. Mindy noted, “The town I live in is very prejudiced.” Larry observed, “After serving in county chorus, I felt that they [African Americans] were just like us, you know . . . and it kind of was weird though, because . . . some of my friends would just sooner shoot one to see one. And then, you know, they say, ‘Oh, we’re not racist,’ and I’d think, Yes you are.” In describing her hometown, Mindy offered, “The town, yea, White, basically White. There’s like . . . two pools in our town. There’s a club pool, which my family belonged to that, you know. There weren’t one Black there. I mean, it wasn’t because they weren’t allowed . . . they didn’t join. That’s kind of how the town was separated.”

Key Question 2: Describe the interactions you have had, if any, with African Americans since you enrolled at this campus.

26. The first observation of note was the lack of change the interviewees unanimously reported in the number of interactions they had had with African Americans before college and after their first year. Henri offered, “I’d say it’s probably even less interaction . . . I don’t really know any [African Americans] as well as I did in high school.” Several noted that they did not interact with African Americans at all on campus. Those who did report having interactions with African Americans were most likely commenting on chance interactions or observations. Teresa responded, “On my floor and classrooms . . . I don’t really notice . . . I’m sure that there are some but I really don’t. . . .” This kind of a response was common.

27. As with their observations about precollege, some interviewees observed what they interpreted as African Americans’ self-isolationism. Asked about his interactions with African American students, Danny responded, “None really . . . They’re around obviously because they’re here, but you don’t see them around. They seem to really keep to themselves . . . you know, the whole Black fraternity thing. I’ve heard that technically a White person could go to the Black Student Union and listen in on their meeting, but it would be clear that you weren’t wanted there or needed there — you should leave like A.S.A.P.” Fabian offered, “I’ve seen a lot of Black people in the dining hall sitting together basically. It appears as though they are separated from the Whites.”

28. The sense of seeing African Americans as a collective entity, through their comments or their actions, was common. As Elena said, “I noticed on campus when you do see, I can’t say for all times, but when you do see one, you see a Black person, usually, they have a Black friend along with them.”

29. Positive interactions were often qualified as an exception. Fabian has had the opportunity to interact with only one African American on campus, and only because this student is one of Fabian’s frater-
nity brothers. He notes, “One of my brothers is Black and . . . he’s very active in, in school. He’s very active in USG (undergraduate student government), and . . . he’s a very intelligent person. And I guess it kind of takes me by surprise because . . . where I come from, it’s very conditioned to believe that, you know, Blacks were uneducated. I really never, I really don’t have any prejudice, I really didn’t know.”

30. Other White students spoke of exceptions in terms of different kinds of African Americans. Elena talked about the two African American women she has interacted with on campus: “They’re really nice people, but again, they’ve been brought up in a way that I think we’ve been brought up. They’re different. They’re from a suburban area.”

31. In their negative observations about interactions, the White interviewees most often referred to a stereotyped, urban, aggressive African American with an arrogant attitude. Dean stated, “Originally, the first contact up here, the person that lived next to me, was Black. He was a very obnoxious person who then moved off the floor after the first semester. He likes to play his music excessively loud, you know.” Mindy offered, “There aren’t that many up here actually . . . but when I do see them, they are usually in groups together. I’m not, I’m not a prejudiced person, but — this is really bad — but since I’ve been here I’ve become more so . . . because when they’re together and they’re just very obnoxious, very loud. I seem to think they bring it upon themselves, the separation.”

32. References to the African Americans as obnoxious, pushy and rude were common. Such views fit with the interviewees’ comments about what they perceived as two different kinds of African American students at college as described earlier.

Key Question 3: **How would you, or do you, feel about having an African American roommate?**

33. This question brought a variety of responses. The interviewees were asked to think about how they had felt about the possibility of having an African American roommate during their first year. When asked if they had had apprehensions about the possibility of moving in with an African American, some students said that other concerns had taken the forefront. Wanda answered, “My concerns were, gosh, I hope the person doesn’t drink, I hope that they don’t do drugs. I hope they don’t party. No, it didn’t come into my concerns at all.” Elena added, “For me, I would [page 689] not mind, you know, as long as I get along with the person, they’re clean, and that kind of thing.”

34. A few others were not concerned for themselves, but thought their having an African American roommate would make a difference to their family at home. Mindy had a friend who had an African American roommate, and these roommates did not get along at all. Mindy and her friend did not attribute this fact to the roommate’s being African American, but Mindy’s Friend’s father did. Mindy offered, “She was just very inconsiderate . . . just a mean person. She ate all of Lori’s food. I mean, that could happen with anyone . . . but because she was Black that made it worse, because of her background.”

35. Several of the interviewees initially stated that having an African American roommate would not matter, but then offered qualifiers. Danny stated, “It would depend on who it was. A lot of them seem to retreat into their own culture, which I don’t really understand, and their own ways of life, which I don’t really understand and they speak closer to even their own language which once again I don’t understand. So it would depend on who he is. There’s a better chance that I wouldn’t get along with and I wouldn’t want to live with the Black ones—just because they are different, you know, they have created their own culture for themselves here.”
36. Mindy offered, “See, I’m not so much against . . . them being Black, I’m against the way that they act. Do you know what I’m trying to say? But one of my pledge sisters is Black and she . . . is like . . . I don’t know, not like that . . . you know what I’m trying to say, that stereotype. She’s not like that at all. So it would depend on what the roommate was like. If she was Black and she was considerate and was nice, not obnoxious and so forth, I wouldn’t have any problems with it. If she was like the stereotype — the loud, the obnoxious, the rude, inconsiderate, very inconsiderate — I couldn’t handle it.”

37. The primary concerns raised were that of difference in lifestyle. The White students perceived no problem living with the African American students who “acted properly.” The interviewees were not concerned about having an African American roommate, as long as the person did not fulfill their negative stereotype of an African American.

Key Question 4: What special obligation, if any, do you have to help make the campus environment welcoming to and supportive of African American students?

38. This question allowed the interviewees to go in any direction they wished, whether they thought of the classroom environment, residence hall environment, or general campus environment. The responses to this question were very consistent. The interviewees often look shocked and immediately responded with some variation of “What obligation do I have?” and a tone of voice indicating that the question had caught them totally off guard. In as many different ways as there were interviewees, they all said, none.

39. Nicholas stated, “I don’t know . . . they’re getting along fine as far as I can tell.” Rose added, “As long as I’m friendly to everyone I feel I’m doing my part, I mean, I’m not going to stereotype anyone or . . . not talk to someone just because of their color type deal. I mean, that’s just kinda rude.” Erin added that she felt she was doing her part by “not adding to the problem.”

40. Some of the interviewees expressed concern about not being patronizing toward African Americans. Fabian stated, “I feel that maybe that segregating them, making them feel like they have to be welcomed, you know, differently than Whites, that may make them feel inferior.” Larry noted, “See, the whole thing is, you don’t want to treat them any different . . . cause then they feel that you’re, you know, being racist that way.”

41. Most students were very tactful with their answers, but they clearly did not perceive themselves as the persons to solve any existing problems. These findings are similar to those regarding the interviewees’ views about the existence of a racial climate on campus. The sense of indifference among the interviewees was strong, supported by similar findings in the literature (Fleming, 1984; Magner, 1989).

42. In most cases, the interviewees saw themselves in the same position as the African American students, being new in a strange environment. They did not look beyond that point.

CONCLUSIONS

43. Institutions must recognize the very limited frame of reference that many first year White students have in regard to African Americans. Before attempting to heighten the White students’ appreciating of people from diverse cultures, university professionals may need to assess further White students’ knowledge regarding African Americans. Then, appropriate strategies can be developed to eradicate some of the myths and misinformation the Whites are using as a framework for their present and
future interactions with African Americans.

44. The results also point to the need for positive interactions between African American and White students from the beginning of the academic year. The efforts to create positive interactions need to be very intentional. Because White students realize that they can easily fade back into the comfort of a peer culture almost identical to the one they left in their high school and hometown, the planned interactions need to be a required part of their college experience. As other researchers have pointed out, social distance among college students may be what lies at the root of racial tension on campuses today (Crull and Burton, 1985; Schaefer, 1987).

45. As suggested in the literature, the perceived gap between African Americans and Whites on campus may more accurately be described as a gap of socioeconomic status. DuBois (1968), for example, contended that a caste system exists in American society. In this study, the interviewees were worried, on the surface at least, not so much about color or racial background as about the background and interests of prospective roommates. White students wanted a roommate who had come from a similar upbringing, no matter the color. Adding the difference in skin tone can complicate interactions, but not as much as the gap between an urban African American and a suburban White, or vice versa. Therefore, it may be more appropriate to use programming focused on socioeconomic differences in cultures, as well as on racial differences.

46. The interviewees seemed to hold to a strong desire for others to assimilate to their ways of thinking and acting, which indicates a concern for dealing with differences of any kind. Traditional-age first year students typically have trouble looking beyond their own needs to the needs of others. This reflects developmental stages as much or more than racial understandings (Chickering, 1969; Gilligan, 1982; Perry, 1970). Although in some ways the White students’ responses may reflect a negative attitude toward African American students, the connection was far from clear. If asked whether they should help the homeless or give of themselves for any other worthy cause, they might well have responded as they did in regarding the need to help remedy problems that African American students face. First year students’ central focus at the moment is their own needs, not those of others. Efforts should be made to broaden White first year students’ perspective. Involvement in community service and volunteer work has proven to be helpful in this regard. Students often benefit from guidance in how to make a positive impact.

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