

The Racial Wall: An Evaluation of Social Interaction Between Whites and Blacks on a Predominantly White University Campus

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Literature Review

According to Lennon (1988), Black students are now more integrated into the academic setting in American colleges and universities, but they still remain socially segregated in the higher education system. Although there have been many advancements by Blacks in our society, the higher education system continues to be one of the most segregated institutions in our society. I consider social segregation on college and university campuses to be a racial wall, a wall that continues to perpetuate racial tension in America. To begin to deconstruct the racial wall on college and university campuses, researchers need to consider several points.

First, college administrators are trying to implement a multicultural curriculum on American college and university campuses due to current and past racial tension in the country (Fisher & Hartmann, 1995). If researchers can identify the underlying factors for social segregation between White and Black students, then college administrators can create a multicultural curriculum to improve race relations on American college and university campuses.

Second, research on social segregation would create healthier communication between Blacks and Whites during college and in life. More research on social segregation on college campuses would improve the ability of researchers, college administrators, and students to identify subjects and problems that may create tension between Black and White students. Through this research, Black and White students can have healthier cross-dialogue conversations about racial matters.

Finally, research on social segregation could create a better social and educational experience for Blacks at predominantly White institutions. Based on Hemmon's (1982) research, Black students on predominantly White campuses are more likely to have a hard time adjusting to college life and less likely to enjoy their college experience than Black students on predominantly Black campuses. If there is more research done on social segregation, then colleges and universities could begin to implement and emphasize programs that could improve the college experience for Blacks at predominantly White institutions of learning.

This section of the paper reviews two theoretical foundations that attempt to explain the influence of race on social interaction in American colleges and universities: college campus climate and racial identity theory. Additionally, it will examine studies related to each theoretical framework.

College Campus Climate Theory

Researchers suggest that the campus climate may influence the social segregation that exists on many college and university campuses (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Hurtado,

1992; McClelland & Auster, 1990; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). Campus climate has been defined as “how individuals perceive their college campus environment” (Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003, p. 264). Campus climate can include how students perceive their professors, the student activities, student organizations, racial matters, and general social life on a college campus. The theory suggests that if Black students perceive the campus and racial climate to be negative on their college or university, then they are more likely to segregate themselves and White students are more willing to accept the idea of Black students segregating themselves (McClelland & Auster, 1990 & Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003).

The research conducted from a campus climate perspective has led to unique findings about the relationship between race and campus climate. First, researchers have found that Black students perceive campus climate more negatively, which may result in social segregation between White and Black students (D’ Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; McClelland & Auster, 1990; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). Black students may perceive a more negative campus climate than White students because they must deal with discrimination and financial issues more than their White counterparts, which may lead to the segregation between Whites and Blacks on a college campus (D’ Augelli & Hershberger, 1993).

Second, race influences the pattern of social interaction among students. Researchers have found that Blacks are more likely to interact with White students than White students are to interact with Black students (Bennet, 1973; D’ Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; McClelland & Auster, 1990; Sigelman & Welch, 1993; Tuch, Sigelman, & MacDonald, 1999). This may be due to the fact that White students outnumber Black students on college campuses, so Black students are engaged with White students more on a voluntary and involuntary basis.

Racial Identity Theory

Theories on racial identity provide important insights of social segregation on American college and university campuses. Racial identity refers to a “psychological attachment to one of several social categories available to individuals when the category selected is based on race or skin color and/or a common history, particularly as it relates to oppression and discrimination due to skin color (Thompson, 2001, p. 155).” The concept of racial identity may influence how Black students at a predominantly White institution interact with other people in social settings. Researchers suggest that Black students and other minority students will notice race due to racial identity (Tatum, 2003; Thompson, 2001; Wilson & Constantine, 1999). In order to gain a better understanding of racial identity, Cross (1991) presents a five stage model of the process of racial awareness in his research:

- 1) Pre-encounter: Blacks absorb many beliefs from Whites
- 2) Encounter: An event occurs that makes Blacks acknowledge racism
- 3) Immersion/Emergence: Blacks become immersed in their own culture in order to learn more about their identity
- 4) Internalization: Blacks learn about their own identity and are able to feel confident in being Black
- 5) Internalization-Commitment: Blacks are now able to commit to being open minded and more accepting of other cultures

During college, some Black Americans may begin to experience the Immersion/Emergence stage. During the Immersion/Emergence stage, Blacks' perceptions and behaviors are constructed in a manner that resists the dominant thought, ideas, and behaviors of White students (Cross, 1991).

Due to the resistance of the dominant group, Black students and other minority students voluntarily segregate themselves socially from White students on college and university campuses. Fisher and Hartman (1995, p. 124) suggest that African American students do not desire more social group interaction with students of different races for three reasons:

- 1) African American students cope with social segregation on a predominantly White campus by forming predominantly Black groups.
- 2) Forming an ethnic community within an institution helps minority students fight problems related to race.
- 3) African American students find it a challenge to fit into a White campus and community without feeling they have abandoned their heritage and culture.

Racial identity research suggests first that Black students are socially segregated from other students because they want to continue a strong sense of a racial group. Black students have a variety of behaviors and beliefs due to their racial group affiliation (Fisher & Hartman, 1995; Thompson, 2001). According to Fisher and Hartman (1995, p. 125), 27% of Black students consider it important to stick with their own race for security reasons and to maintain a sense of racial and ethnic identity." Black students also experience racial discrimination more than White students. Forty-four percent of Black students and 7.5% of White students have experienced racial discrimination (Fisher & Hartmann, 1995). This significant gap between Black and White students' responses may suggest that Black students want to remain socially segregated in order to create a sense of solidarity and security so they can organize when racial situations or incidents occur at their predominantly White institutions.

The review of the literature encourages a deeper analysis of social segregation on college and university campuses. Does the issue begin with Black students? According to research, Black students on college campuses segregate themselves to form a stronger sense of identity and to create a sense of solidarity on their college or university campus (Fisher & Hartmann, 1995; Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001; Tatum, 2003; Thompson 2001). Does the issue begin with the college or university campus itself? The research has shown that social segregation occurs on college and university campuses where the climate is unstable towards positive interactions between Whites and Blacks (D' Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; McClelland & Auster, 1990; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). Or does the issue begin with White students? Studies have shown that Blacks are more likely to interact with White students than White students are to interact with Black students; therefore one may ask whether White students are reaching out sufficiently to minority students on college and university campuses (Bennet, 1973, D' Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; McClelland & Auster, 1990; Sigelman & Welch, 1993; Tuch et al., 1999). The goal of this research is to investigate social interaction between Whites and Blacks on a predominantly White college campus, examine perceptions of race relations, and to begin to understand where college administrators can begin to deconstruct the racial wall.

Hypotheses

The current research has identified independent and dependent variables. The variable of race will be used as my independent variable to explore the racial wall on college and university campuses. The research has two dependent variables: personal level of interaction with people outside one's race and perception of race relations. The reasoning for two dependent variables is to analyze if there is a difference between what people say and do. In order to better understand how the independent variable is related to the dependent variables, there are two major hypotheses that are explored by this research:

H1: A Black student is more likely to have a negative perception of racial climate than a White student

H2: A Black student is more likely to interact with people outside of one's race than a White student

Hypothesis one is based on research that states race relations on a college campus will influence the social interaction among races (Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). Studies have also shown that Black students are more likely to have negative perceptions of race relations, so their perceptions will influence how they interact with students outside of their race (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; McClelland & Auster, 1990; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). If people perceive racial relations to be positive, then people are more willing and comfortable to interact with people outside of their race.

Hypothesis two is based on the research done on social interaction on predominantly White college and university campuses. Furthermore, hypothesis two is a contradiction of hypothesis one. Although research has indicated that Blacks have a more negative attitude towards racial climate, researchers have found that Blacks are more likely to interact with White students than White students are to interact with Black students due to being outnumbered on college and university campuses (Bennet, 1973; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; McClelland & Auster, 1990; Sigelman & Welch, 1993; Tuch et al., 1999).

Methodology

Data were collected through surveys at a small-size, predominantly White, private university in the Southeast. The sample was selected in several ways. First, classes were purposely selected to participate in the survey in order to get a variety of students with different ages and racial backgrounds. If the class was selected, the professor of the class was contacted to arrange a time to conduct surveys during class. Since these selected classes did not enroll a sufficient number of Black students for research, three predominantly Black student organizations were contacted to complete the surveys. In the end, 184 participants completed the survey. Of those 184 participants, 132 were White, 45 were Black, and 7 were members of other ethnicities. Due to the focus of the research, these 7 participants were eliminated from the sample, bringing the sample size down to 177. The survey consisted of demographic questions and likert scales regarding perceptions of race relations, personal interaction with people outside one's race, and factors that hinder and foster social interaction between Whites and Blacks.

Results

Race and Perception of Race Relations

Hypothesis one states: A Black student is more likely to have a negative perception of social race relations than a White student. Respondents were asked to complete a series of 5-point likert scale statements in order to measure their perceptions of racial climate on their college campus. A score of 1 on the likert scale indicated a strong positive view of racial climate on their college campus and a score of 5 indicated a strong negative view of racial climate on their college campus. The scores were added up for each participant, and they were given an average. A means difference test statistic was used to compare White and Black respondents' average on the likert scales. The results supported the hypothesis (See Table 1). The data indicate that there is a gap between White and Black students regarding perceptions of racial climate on their college campus. The 42 Black students who responded to the likert scale averaged a 3.095 racial climate perception score, while the 118 White students who responded to the likert scale averaged a 2.788 racial climate perception score. The results were significant at the .05 level.

Table 1: Race and Racial Climate Perceptions of College Campus

<i>Race</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
African Americans	3.0952	42	.65554
Whites	2.7881	118	.82536
Total	2.8503	160	.80382

Critical Value= 2.17795

*Significant at the .05 Level

Race and Social Interaction

Hypothesis two states: A Black student is more likely than a White student to interact with someone outside of their race at a predominantly White college or university. To gain a better understanding of social interaction among races, the research examined social interaction during meals and during outside classroom activities.

The first question was related to interaction with people outside of one's race during meals. Since social interaction occur on a daily basis in dining facilities, it is important to understand how much interaction there is among students of different races during meal time. The students were asked to estimate how often they eat a meal with someone outside of their race from a list of four categories: Less than 10%, 10%-25%, 26%-50%, and More than 50%. After collecting the data, the categories were divided into frequently (more than 50%), occasionally (10%-50%), and rarely (less than 10%). To analyze the data, a chi-square statistic was used for the data set. Using a chi-square statistic, the results show that there is a statistically significant difference between White and Black students regarding how often they eat a meal with someone outside of their race at the .05 level (See Table 2). Only 4.5% of the White respondents reported eating meals with someone outside of their race frequently, while 17.7% of Black respondents reported eating meals with someone outside of their race on a frequent basis. Furthermore, 44.4% of Black respondents reported rarely eating a meal with someone outside of their race, while 56.8% of White respondents reported rarely eating a meal with someone outside

of their race. However, 53.7% of the students in the sample rarely eat meals with someone outside of their race.

Table 2: Race and Social Interaction in the Dining Halls

	<i>Black</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Total</i>
Frequently Eat Meals with People Outside of Race	17.8%	4.5%	7.9%
Occasionally Eat Meals with People Outside of Race	37.8%	38.7%	38.4%
Rarely Eat Meals with People Outside of Race	44.4%	56.8%	53.7%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Chi-Square Statistic	8.38		

*Significant at the .05 Level

The next question measuring social interaction with someone outside of one's race was regarding out of classroom experiences. The respondents were asked to identify how often they interact with someone outside of their race during social events, including sporting events, cultural events, university-wide programming, and social gatherings using the following categories: Less than 10%, 10%-25%, 26%-50%, and More than 50%. After collecting the data, the categories were divided into frequently (more than 50%), occasionally (10%-50%), and rarely (less than 10%). To analyze the data, a chi-square statistic was used for the data set. Using a chi-square statistic, the results show that there is a statistically significant difference at the .1 level between White and Black students regarding social interaction (See Table 3). The results indicate that 17.8% of Black students frequently social interaction with people outside of their race compared to 7.7% of White students.

Table 3: Race and Social Interaction during Social Events

	<i>Black</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Total</i>
Frequently Interact with People Outside of Race Socially	17.8%	7.7%	10.3%
Occasionally Interact with People Outside of Race Socially	33.3%	50.8%	46.3%
Rarely Interact with People Outside of Race Socially	48.9%	41.5%	43.4%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Chi-Square Statistic	5.915		

*Significant at the .1 Level

Discussion

The research concludes with many interesting insights. First, race continues to play a major role on predominantly White college and university campuses. One's race does influence how he/she will perceive race relations on one's college or university campus. In the research, the data indicated that Blacks were more likely to perceive race relations more negatively than Whites. Although Blacks perceive race relations more negatively than Whites, the data suggest that Black students are more likely to interact with people outside of race at a higher rate than their White counterparts.

This contradiction in the literature and research data leads me to want to investigate qualitative approaches in the future to understand why Blacks have a more negative attitude about race relations; however, they continue to interact with Whites at a high level. Is it because

they are forced to interact with Whites because they are outnumbered and feel a need to assimilate with Whites at some degree to be successful? Or is it because some Blacks just want to interact with Whites but just have a better awareness about the problems with race relations on their campus? I think it is both. I believe that almost any person with a minority status will notice differences consciously and unconsciously. Therefore, you may have students of color who have mostly White friends, but they may notice differences in areas and subjects related to race on a conscious and unconscious level because they are in the position to understand what it is like to be a minority in our society. Furthermore, the basic idea to understand is that Blacks are outnumbered on many college and university campuses, so they will have more opportunities to come in contact with White students. Thus, Black students will interact more with their White counterparts than their White counterparts will interact with them.

Conclusion

There are several weaknesses in the current structure of this research project. First, data were only collected on 45 Black students, which may not be adequate in making general statements about Black students on a predominantly White university campus. For future research, there should be more Black students represented in the sample. Also, all the data have been collected at one university, so the results can not be generalized to race relations at all predominantly White colleges and universities. However, additional data will be collected at more predominantly White colleges and universities in the future in order to gain a better understanding of social interaction at these colleges and universities. Next, the voices of students from other racial and ethnic backgrounds should be represented in future research to include the voices of multicultural students who are not only Black. Finally, research questions in future surveys will be added to support validity of the questions and also more questions will be added to take a deeper look at social interaction between minority and majority students. Although there were weaknesses in the research, the research in this project has presented interesting and new insights on race relations on college campuses.

So who is to blame for the social segregation between Whites and Blacks on college and university campuses? Is it the colleges and universities? Is it the Black students? Is it the White students? I would say everyone has a part in creating the racial wall that exists in our society and on college and university campus; however, we all can have a part in deconstructing that racial wall. This research is imperative in improving race relations in the United States. College administrators and students must understand this research as they continue to improve race relations on their college and university campuses. Administrators and student affairs professionals must continue to create programming and events that will give students the opportunity to interact with people outside of their race if we are to move forward in positive race relations.

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