

United States

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ABSTRACT

This study involves interviews of approximately six African-American students attending a southern Appalachian University which shall be given the pseudonym Mountain University. Subjects were all between 18 and 24 years of age and came from a variety of academic disciplines. All come from cities which are much larger than the town bordering Mountain University (approximately 2,000 persons). The nearest large city is 100 kilometers (66 miles) away. Only 25 African-American students inhabit this campus of approximately 1200 mostly Caucasian students. The interviews conducted indicate that the students had excellent academic records and enjoyed their classes. They expressed themselves as feeling little of the effects of racism typical of the South of a few decades ago. This finding is in direct contradiction to many previous studies. These students uniformly found themselves bored on the campus. On the weekends, most of the other students left campus for their homes nearby, but many African-American students could not leave, partially because they, by and large, did not own automobiles and partially because their homes were often several hundred miles away. Thus, they had little choice but to stay on the campus. They generally found themselves isolated and unable to make many new friendships. One of the six interviewees plans to leave the university because of this isolation. Another theme that ran through the interviews was one of adjustment: adjustment to the white student culture, to the routines embedded into a small rural university, and to their need for entertainment and friendship, particularly on weekends. Adjustment to the academic life on campus was rarely found to be a problem. Student responses to an African-American interviewer were found to be substantially the same as those given to the White interviewer.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

This paper involves interviews of six undergraduate African-American students attending a southern Appalachian University which shall be given the pseudonym Mountain University. All subjects were between 18 and 24 years of age and came from a variety of academic disciplines. All came from cities which are much larger than the town which borders the university (approximately 2,000 persons) which is adjacent to the university. The nearest large city is 100 kilometers (66 miles) away. Only 25 African-American students inhabit a campus of approximately 1200 mostly white students.

This study is similar to many other studies which have examined the adjustments made by African-American students to colleges and universities with a preponderantly white population (Buckley, S.V., 2012; D'Augelle, A.R. & Hershberger, S. (1993); Gray, R. et al, 2013); Grier-Reid, 2013; Torres, K. (2009); Woldoff, R. A., Wiggins, Y. M., & Washington, H. M.,2011). Common findings amongst these studies were that "black students perceive greater racial tension and hostility in their environment, express lower levels of satisfaction and greater levels of isolation, and feel less identified with the institution than do white students (Thompson, C. & Fretz, B.R. 1991). Another study found that "African-American students reported significantly more racial-ethnic conflict on campus, pressure to conform to stereotypes, and less equitable treatment by faculty, staff and teaching assistants" (Ancis, J.R., Sedlacek, W.E. & Mohr, J.J., 2000, p.180). Several studies agreed that African American students attending predominantly Black institutions were happier and more adjusted than their counterparts in predominantly White institutions. (Constantine and Watt, 2002; Morley, K., 2003; Torres, K. (2009). African-American students were seen by Booker (2007) as giving "accounts of being harassed, mistreated, and experiencing institutional and individual discrimination. Furthermore, and most

troubling, these negative experiences were often as a result of interactions with university administrators, faculty, and classmates" (p. 179). Morely (2003) states that African-American students "are significantly less likely to graduate than Asian-American or White students at predominantly White institutions of higher education" (p. 147).

Racism is a common complaint found among African-American students in predominantly White colleges. Torres remarks:

Racism also remains a 'significant' factor in the lives of black students at majority white universities. Overt racist acts by white students are still commonplace and blacks are not treated as equals by white peers, faculty and administrators. They continue to be stereotyped as 'special admit' students and treated as 'second-class citizens who are not ready to compete with white students on an intellectual level. As a result, many black students come to feel alienated, isolated and estranged from mainstream life on white campuses. (2009, p. 884)

The concept of isolation mentioned by Torres is another theme that runs through much of the related literature. African-American students were isolated in many ways. They were often markedly outnumbered by Whites. "The large number of whites compared to the small number of blacks on campus makes this a wholly new experience with which they have had little direct experience" (Torres, 2009, pp. 892-3). Another form of isolation was the separation from their families. The intensity of this separation was considerably greater than that felt by their White peers (Morley, 2003). Morley found that:

. . . there was a pattern among minority students of noting how they missed their families when they came to college. The minority students described a closeness with their families from which they did not want to be away and a closeness they took active steps to maintain. (2003, p. 161)

This can be seen as important in the light of Tinto's (1993) theory of college student persistence. He addresses what he sees as a need for successful students to make a considerable separation from their prior relationships. "In a very real sense, a person's ability to leave one setting, whether physical, social, or intellectual may be a necessary condition for subsequent persistence in another setting" (p. 96).

Walpole (2007) notes yet another form of isolation: the social realm. "The social isolation African American students at PWI's [note: Predominantly White Institutions] experience may be compounded by low levels of involvement in student activities, in part because the activities offered are less appealing to African Americans" (p. 239). The society the African American student comes from can also be viewed as intensifying a sense of isolation. "Cultural values provide students with a map of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. This has the consequence of prohibiting certain social activities for some students but not for others" (Swigart, T., 2001, p. 298).

METHODOLOGY

This paper utilized the principles of "classic" grounded theory, as espoused by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967). The literature review was conducted after the fieldwork was completed and the data analyzed. This was done so as to minimize bias in formulating a theory explaining the statements of the participants. As Glaser (1978) explained:

The question continually arises as to what is the 'proper' pacing of reading the literature with the grounded theory process. The concern is brought out by the dictum to not contaminate one's effort to generate concepts from the data with *preconceived* concepts that may not really fit, work or be relevant, but appear so momentarily. The danger is, of course, to force the data in the wrong direction if one is too imbued with concepts from the literature. (p.31)

Six subjects were identified through purposive sampling. The Dean of Students, an African-American, selected the students using criteria involving individuals with high communicative skills. They were interviewed on campus and were often partially or fully interviewed by the Dean privately to verify that their answers were not biased by the presence of the primary researcher, who was a White professor. All interviews were recorded and notes were taken throughout by the Dean of Students and the primary researcher. Later, the notes and excerpts from the interviews were coded. Coding was done in accordance with concepts espoused by Allan (2003):

Grounded theory coding is a form of content analysis to find and conceptualize the underlying issues amongst the 'noise' of the data. During the analysis of an interview, the researcher will become aware that the interviewee is using words and phrases that high light an issue of importance or interest to the research. This is noted and described in a short phrase. This issue may be mentioned again in the same or similar words and again is noted. This process is called *coding* and the short descriptor is a code. (p.1)

The codes were analyzed using the Constant-Comparative Method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

This method continually compares data to data, data to concept, and finally concepts to emergent theory. Charmaz (2006) states:

Coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data. Through coding, you *define* what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means. The codes take form together as elements of a nascent theory that explains these data and directs further data-gathering. (p.46)

Approximately twelve preliminary categories were found through the coding process, and two themes emerged as syntheses of these categories. One was Boredom (this is the word used by the subjects which seemed to encompass many forms of the theme of "isolation" seen in other studies). The other was Adjustment. These themes will be elaborated upon in the following section.

ANALYSIS

The subjects of this study were all polite, well-spoken, and motivated to succeed academically. They were all pleased with the progress they were making in their classes. They were far from home-most were admitted to Mountain University on scholarships. Few owned automobiles, and even if they did the distances to the cities they had come from made weekend travel home prohibitive. There were two interviewers-the primary investigator who was White, and the Dean of Students, who was African-American. Parts of some of the interviews were done separately, and the results were compared to ascertain whether the students spoke more candidly with the African-American Dean. No significant differences were noticed. The interview schedule questions all stemmed from the basic research question: "What are your perceptions regarding being an African-American student at Mountain University.

Adjustment

The African-American students in this study often referred to "culture shock" when first entering the institution. In spite of the difficulty of adjustment, only one of the subjects was considering transferring away from Mountain University. One pre-medical student said that:

As an African-American I feel that I have to show white people a different side of what they perceive black people to be.

Over and over, the subjects stated that they intended to graduate, and made it clear that they were doing well in their classes. Their academic performances were uniformly at least at a satisfactory level. The problems were cultural. One subject told the Dean:

I would say it's the Black and White thing. . . like I say that's really a small problem. . .

The Appalachian culture surrounding the college is markedly different from the urban environments which these students grew up in. One student remarked, particularly in regard to music:

There's nothing here for us. There is nothing that we can call our own. . . . They don't have the African-American fraternities and sororities here. . . . We don't have a radio station. . . it seems like everything around here is Bluegrass or Country. I don't have anything against it. There's nothing here-we make our own CD's and we have to find everything that we want. . . . Maybe they never thought about it. There's not many of us, but I think having these things would draw us here.

Several of the students were surprised that the small towns near the college could not give haircuts to African-Americans. The haircutting equipment necessary to properly cut their hair was different. Coming from much larger cities, the lack of variety was staggering. One stated:

Back home I'm used to a bigger place. I don't know that much about this town or Mountain County. That's one thing. . . that's a really really big adjustment.

In a surprising contradiction to the findings of previous studies, the African-American subjects declared uniformly that racism was not a problem. When asked to relate stories of racist incidents, they brought up what they made clear were isolated incidents. When asked if they had to deal with racism most responded as one math major did:

No. I do know some people that don't like mixed (racial) couples. . . . It bugs me at times but I just ignore it. It reflects on the way she was raised.

Another stated, without bitterness, that:

I really haven't had any negative experiences. I don't speak out because you know nobody going to hear you out. . . . I don't want to make this a Black and White thing because there's more to it than that. I'm more cool with most of them (Whites) than I am with Black people.

Incidents had, nevertheless, occurred. The pre-veterinary student told a story about buying a refrigerator at Wal-Mart and having to take it back:

. . . and they say that we stole it. How can we steal a refrigerator that weighs about sixty pounds? The receipt number and the number on the refrigerator match up. . . and they were rude, too.

When asked if other experiences like this had occurred, the subject responded adamantly in the negative. Several students related incidents of racism, but insisted that they were isolated and not a problem. One female student experienced her first roommate as giving her the silent treatment, refusing to speak to her under any circumstances. She occasionally began to sleep in the room of a friendly White student and eventually changed roommates. There was no bitterness in her explanation-she simply moved on. It was clear to the interviewers that these were mature students who realized that some of the attitudes of their peers had to be tolerated. No subject felt that racism was a major factor in their dissatisfaction with Mountain University. Racism, in their eyes, was little in evidence and, should it arise, could be dealt with in a satisfactory manner.

Similarly, the students generally felt that their professors treated them fairly. There was one exception when one student felt that the Education Department had been particularly difficult for her because of formally unexpressed racial overtones. Though they reported occasional racial incidents involving the classroom, most felt that their academic life was well on track.

Students appeared to separate the lack of diversity as a much larger problem than overt racism. An art education major stated:

They preach diversity, but there is none.

The students often lamented the lack of a larger number of African-Americans on campus.

Boredom

The second theme which emerged in this study was boredom. It is a word used to describe campus life by all the participants. When asked what comes to mind first as a student at Mountain University, one student gave a representative reply:

Boredom. I'm easily entertained but there's nothing to do on campus. . . I don't like being bored. I'm a very high energy person. We go to Wal-Mart just to do nothing.

The lack of activity on the weekends was pointed out by all the subjects. One student said:

Nothin' here. If you want to go out and have fun you have to drive at least two hours. Basically you have to make up your own fun. Mostly it will drive you insane.

Students expected the numbers of blacks at Mountain U. to be low, but found the sparse Black population they faced when they took up residency on campus to cause problems that they had not anticipated.

Suggestions for Improvement

The subjects of this study made many suggestions for improvement. They included:

- An increase in African-American scholarships
- The establishment of African-American sororities and fraternities on campus
- Organized weekend sports, particularly basketball
- Weekend facilities for recreation such as laser-tag and roller-skating
- Organized dances and other social events
- Transportation to the nearest large city on weekends
- The establishment of a football team (this was seen as a vehicle which would bring in more African-American students.
- More awards and other forms of recognition which would apply to blacks.

CONCLUSIONS

Recruited as scholarship students and then unconsciously discarded, these subjects were relegated to years of on-campus monotony. They report that no one in power asked them how they felt about their life on the campus of this university. Their suggestions for improvement remained ineffectually dormant within their own constricted circles of friendship. The African-Americans, probably along with the international students and other minorities of Mountain University, found themselves marooned on campus for an average of four years.

This isolation might be considered trivial in the light of Mountain U's African-Americans' higher goals and hopes for lifetime advancement, but the social cost of four years of ennui to their bright young minds must be counted as a terrible loss. Beyond working on academic assignments, the weekends involve the heart of the remainder of the spare time these individuals possessed. For most of them, this time is spent with a few dozen other too-familiar students. If we regard a university as a vehicle to broaden and deepen our understanding of our world, then the world of these students has been seriously, unconsciously, and institutionally constricted. African-American students have been left spending weekend after weekend with little of interest beyond academics to occupy their time. Their White peers, meanwhile, routinely spend their extra time maintaining links to a wider world, leaving a small contingent on the campus invisible and silent. They have been separated from a broader culture by an unseen segregation, and find themselves unable to become members of a wider community.

We marginalize our minorities at our peril. They come to us with the unique gifts of their culture and character, yet these gifts remain largely ungiven. It is not only a loss of a part of the promise and hope education extends to these students-it is ultimately an injury to our wider society and a lowering of the robust possibilities diversity offers to our broader civilization.

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