

The Impact of "Colorblind" Ideologies on Students of Color: Intergroup Relations at a Predominantly White University

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This article examines some post-admissions issues related to collegiate affirmative action. Specifically, it focuses on the experiences and interactions of students of color with their White peers on predominantly White college campuses. Focus group interviews with African American, Latino/a, Asian American, and Native American students were conducted to explore and analyze student intergroup relations. The data reveal White student behaviors that often have a negative impact on students of color, especially patterns of White "colorblindness" and color consciousness, along with racial or ethnic stereotyping. They suggest that problematic intergroup peer relations on college campuses can be best understood by placing them within the larger organizational and social contexts that frame and support them.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, race relations on U.S. college campuses have received renewed theoretical, programmatic, and public attention. Sustained inequality and racial harassment in higher education settings resurfaced in the late 1980s and early 1990s bringing with them fresh student protests in response. In the early to mid-1990s, greater attention was devoted to planning for and debating the merits of diversity and multiculturalism. The latter period also saw the emergence of a generation of anti-affirmative action movements and legal suits. On a theoretical level, these trends have led to a reconsideration of the meaning and measure of prejudice in the United States, analyses of the relationship between institutional power and racism, renewed investigations of identity politics, examinations of the nature of Whiteness, and reviews of traditional assumptions about the influence of social support and/or isolation and alienation in the academic performance and social behavior of students of color.

Much of the recent literature on higher education agrees that racial problems exist on the nation's college campuses. Some articulate these problems as indicative of a racial crisis (Altbach & Lomotey, 1991; Chesler & Crowfoot, 1991), while others imply that the problems, though present and important, are not quite at a critical level (Allen, 1985; Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Allen & Niss, 1990; Hurtado, 1992; Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986). At the very least, researchers have pointed to a significant gap between White students assessments of their schools' racial climate and those of students of color. Many point out that, at least for Black students, the question is not whether racial tension exists

on their campuses but to what degree and with what impact. As McClelland and Auster (1990) note,

Racial tensions have been documented at integrated institutions at least since the 1960s. Stereotyping by their white faculty and peers as "special admits," a perceived lack of support by faculty and staff, and a largely segregated social life have made Blacks at white schools feel quite aware of their marginal status and have contributed to feelings of sociocultural alienation. From their perspective, the racial climate at our nation's colleges and universities has never been good. (pp. 612-613)

Though the literature highlights the main patterns of race relations on U.S. campuses, several important gaps remain. High levels of alienation on the part of students of color have been identified, but no research has yet analyzed how that alienation is generated. Specifically, much of this work is based on survey data that neither include students' voices nor consider their daily experiences. Moreover, the literature primarily focuses only on the campus experiences of Black students (and occasionally Chicanos) and does not include other racial/ethnic groups in their analyses. Too little research has examined either the relationship of the institutional context to patterns of relations on campus or the links between what takes place in colleges and universities and what goes on in the larger social context. Finally, like race relations research in most educational settings, K-12 as well as higher education, very little of this work actually engages the relational aspects of race relations. Though many authors have discussed whether relations are good or bad (Allen, 1985, 1988; Astin, 1982; Chesler, Wilson, & Malani, 1993; Peterson et al., 1978; Simmons, 1993; Smith, 1981; Willie, 1981; Willie & McCord, 1972), or whether students of color have similar or different assessments of the campus climate than do White students (Astin, 1982; Lemoyne College, 1991; Loo & Rolison, 1986; McClelland & Auster, 1990; Oliver, Rodriguez, & Mickelson, 1985; Trujillo, 1986; Smith, 1981), there is little discussion of what is actually taking place between White students and students of color.

How students of color feel about their personal encounters with racism—about having racially coded characteristics ascribed to them, of being excluded from mainstream activities and struggling with having self-perceptions that do not match the expectations of the majority group and others, and so forth—provides critical insights to this discussion. The perspectives of Black, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American students, in their own voices, reveal a great deal about the behaviors of White students—behaviors that often are unintended, invisible to, or not understood by White students themselves. This article focuses on the ways in which various groups of students of color at a large predominantly White public university experience and interpret their relationships with their White peers in the classroom and on campus. It reports findings from focus group research with students of color that identifies the particular challenges these students face on such campuses and explores the meanings for students of color of White students' actions and reactions in interracial situations. Students of color themselves highlighted the impact of White students' purported "colorblindness" with regard to race and ethnicity. This article attempts to explain how this colorblind ideology often blinds White students to their own color-conscious behavior and its subsequent stereotyping effects. It also places collegiate racial peer relations within both their appropriate institutional context and the wider societal context, specifically examining how these macro-level factors set the stage for micro-level interactions.

METHOD

Sample

The data for this study were drawn from transcripts of 15 group interviews, or small structured discussions, conducted with 75 undergraduate students of color (Black, Latino/

a, Asian, and Native Americans) who were enrolled at a large, research-oriented university in the midwestern United States. All of the discussion groups were homogeneous by race/ethnicity and mixed by gender. The discussion leaders were students who were specially trained in focus group interviewing techniques; in every case they were of the same race/ethnicity as the group being interviewed.

Interview Questions

The interview questions clearly were targeted at generating focused information about students' positive and negative experiences with peers in academic and social arenas. We especially desired to identify or make visible behaviors that often are subtle or unidentified. Thus, the following general questions were posed in each interview:

- (1) How do you and students of other races relate to one another in class?
- (2) Have you ever felt uncomfortable by assumptions or comments in class related to race and/or ethnicity?
- (3) How do your peers expect you to do in class?
- (4) Have you ever worked on a team project? How was that?
- (5) What do white students think of you? How do you know?
- (6) What do white students do that offends or hurts students of color outside class?
- (7) Has an instructor ever done something constructive about race relations in or out of class? What do they do about incidents? What could they do?

Various additional specific probes asked informants to identify, specify, and elaborate on these issues.

Procedures and Analyses

The interviews lasted from one to two hours each. Discussions in most group interview sessions were open and free flowing and not narrowly directed by the discussion leaders. The authors personally undertook the analysis of the taped transcripts of these group sessions, utilizing an inductive or grounded theory approach and the general technique of constant comparison in coding, recoding, and analyzing (or thematizing) the taped discussions (Charmaz, 1983; Chenitz & Swanson, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We each independently read all the transcripts, identified segments (that is, coded the text), grouped like segments together, and organized them into metacategories. We then tested the integrity of these categories by pooling and comparing our individual results. The product of these analyses was a series of six major categories outlining some of the most substantial and frequently mentioned issues of concern to these students of color.

We present the six major categories of our student sample's responses, in their own words and voices, in combination with other reports of similar phenomena found in the literature. On occasion, we use the students' words and experiences to discuss White students and their behavior. This approach is justified on a number of counts, among them the following:

- (1) Students of color often talk about their perceptions of and relations with White peers and about how the actions of these peers help shape their college experiences in positive and negative ways.
- (2) A history of African American writing and research, from W. E. B. DuBois to Richard Wright to James Baldwin, has demonstrated that, for people of color, discussions of their life experiences and their relations with Whites are often as much about what it means to be White as they are about what it means not to be White (Roediger, 1998).

- (3) Survey and interview data has repeatedly shown that many Whites believe that the racial/ethnic climates of the predominantly White campuses they attend are fine and are often not aware of the ways in which their behaviors directly and negatively affect students of color.

Perhaps the reports presented in this article can transcend that ignorance by using the views of those who are often in a position of disadvantage to articulate how the processes of racial/ethnic domination and interaction work.

Finally, and importantly, we assert that the details of students' specific experiences are not as important, in terms of impact, as the interpretation of those experiences. As Thomas and Thomas (1928) noted long ago, if people "define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (p. 572). Consequently, the narratives these students shared with us are part of the "reality" of their campus lives. Whether exact or not in the detail related to us, these events have already had an impact on these students, both in terms of identity and action. Furthermore, though it might have been useful to seek White students' own interpretations of their behavior, the absence of that data does not mitigate the importance of the experiences and interpretations of students of color of those events.

MAJOR THEMES IN THE CAMPUS EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR

Though some of the six themes discussed in this article address the direct or indirect insults targeted at students of color, others capture requests from, pressures upon, or sometimes even demands (i.e., for conformity, assimilation, and/or information) presented to these students by their White peers. All of the themes reflect a response triggered either internally (i.e., emotional pain, anger, and/or questioning of one's identity and sense of place) if not externally (i.e., defensiveness, withdrawal, debate, explanation). First, however, a caveat: Although most of the students who participated in our study spoke negatively about their interactions with their White peers, some exceptions were evident. When probed about whether a White student had ever personally offended them with a racist comment or behavior, several students of color replied simply, "No." Other student of color mentioned Whites whom they knew behaved differently from most White students:

Since I've been here, one of my closest friends, she's White, and she's very aware of how, . . . what it means for her to be a White woman, what it means to me, how she fits into the broad framework. You know, she's not necessarily knowledgeable about everything about Asian American culture, but I tell her. (an Asian American Female Student)

When it comes to White people, you can really tell who grew up in an all-White neighborhood and who didn't. I know this friend of mine, he lived in an all-Black neighborhood and he was just totally comfortable around any color of people at any time. He could speak to anyone. He was totally natural about it, not tip-toeing, making sure he didn't step on anybody's toes. (a Black Male Student)

Students of color perceived these "exceptional" White students to have some understanding of "what it means to be a White," and believed this to make a huge difference in their relationships.

Racial Stereotyping

We identified two different strains of racial stereotyping: academic and behavioral. Though these two types are closely related, it is also important to distinguish between them, as described in the following discussion.

Academic Stereotyping ("Oh, my God, this Black person said something that was intelligent!"). Several study participants maintained that they were stereotyped by their fellow White students or viewed as less competent by virtue of their racial membership. Many felt that Whites often targeted them as "affirmative action attendees" or tokens:

They know that I'm there and, in a sense, expect lower scores for me because I am Black. We had taken an exam and people were looking at the scores and a White student was shocked that I did extremely well on the exam. (a Black Female Student)

I've noticed that in my science classes people just assume that since I'm Asian American that I'm supposed to be good at this. I struggle through classes just as they do, but there's still that stereotype that if you're Asian American and you're in the sciences you know your stuff, you don't have to study all the time. (an Asian American Male Student)

[In a Spanish class], because I was Mexican, people assumed I would know Spanish, and I didn't. When they found out I didn't really know it they said, "You're just Latina on the outside, not on the inside." (a Latina Student)

Across the board, the students of color noted that, by their stereotyping, their White peers seemed to convey that they "knew something" about them or could ascertain something about their academic abilities and/or proclivities based on their apparent or signaled racial affiliation (i.e., that a particular student would be smart, slow, scientific-minded, etc.).

Though the racial stereotypes about the academic ability and potential of students of color varied for different groups, the impact of the assumptions were similar in their negative effect, a finding that has been confirmed in the literature. For example, Chan (1991) and Chan and Hune (1995) noted that although stereotypes of Asian Americans as the model minority seem relatively benevolent, they mask the current and prevalent discrimination that Asian Americans experience in social and economic realms. Such stereotypes further place extraordinary pressures on Asian American students to perform academically and ignore both the great variety in experience of different individuals and members of different Asian American ethnic groups. As Essed (1997) has pointed out, those who are the targets of racist stereotypes typically face a range of experiences where they are constructed as "Other," excluded, and made to feel inferior. Similarly, Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1996) noted the following in their study of the experiences of African American students at a predominantly White university: "A white gesture that might be seen as complimentary if it were solely based on achievement criteria is (here) taken as offensive because of the racial stereotype implied in the white action" (p. 66). The application of group stereotypes to individuals created distress among the students of color in our study and led to personal struggles about their identity and competence. It also forced them to choose whether or not they wanted to conform to the stereotypical notions.

Behavioral Stereotyping ("Show us the 'M. C. Hammer'"). The students of color in our study contended that they did not experience stereotypes merely in relation to academic issues but also relative to expectations of their interpersonal behavior and cultural styles. As a Latino student noted, "The other class members would look to the Latinos for good stories about life in the barrio." Other students of color shared similar perceptions:

I think most of them think you are from the ghetto, and if you are here you are on financial aid. You can tell this from the conversation in class. This one girl made it seem that Blacks are all lower class and don't know anything but the ghetto. (a Black Female Student)

Every day, little things happen, like, one time when I was living on my hall someone was playing loud music, like M. C. Hammer was rapping. So they said to me, "Show us the 'M. C. Hammer'! How you do the M. C. Hammer?"—like I'm supposed to know! I was the only Black person on my floor, and it was like I was supposed to know how to do it. I said, "I don't even dance that well." I mean, I can dance, but I can't do the M. C. Hammer and the Running Man and this other stuff. (a Black Male Student)

Behavioral stereotypes, though also sometimes seemingly benevolent, are similar to academic stereotypes in that they originate both from vestiges of older, genetically based racist notions and from nouveau, culturally based explanations. They are based on the expectation by Whites that all students of color are experientially expert in their groups' minority experience, which is often equated with poverty. Thus, all Blacks and Latinos/

as are expected to know about poverty and urban life, and they are simultaneously expected to be or behave in certain ways (i.e., be meek, rhythmic, spiritual).

Pressures or Expectations to Assimilate: "You're American! Speak English, damn it!"

Ironically, the students of color in our study noted that while they were experiencing pressures from Whites to be "representatives" of their racial/ethnic groups, they were also experiencing pressures to assimilate into the mainstream, or dominant White, culture. For example,

People tell me, "You're American! Speak English, damn it!" when I am struggling to learn Spanish. I have no patience for that whatsoever. When I'm in my dorm room and my next door neighbors are Puerto Rican, they're from New York, and we're speaking Spanish, others come in and they're like, "What are you doing that for? We don't understand you when you speak Spanish. That's rude." (a Latina Student)

To be an Afro-American student here means you have to learn how to adapt and deal with the pressures, not only school, but from the white majority. You have to build a tolerance to certain things, like the white majority structure. You really have to be within yourself and know who you are. If not you could be caught in the system and lose your identity as an Afro-American person. (a Black Male Student)

As noted by Feagin et al. (1996) and other researchers, such pressure to assimilate is a salient theme throughout the literature on students of color at predominantly White colleges and universities. According to Duster (1991): "Those [Asian American students] more integrated into the mainstream white culture noted that white acquaintances would frequently make a distinction between them and other Asian-Americans, usually through remarks intended as compliments, such as, 'You're not like other Asians'" (p. 23). Indeed, the emerging literature points out that Whites often see themselves as the norm and as being without racial or cultural specificity (e.g., as neutral, nonracial persons); they thus view their own sociocultural norms of interaction as universal rather than particular (Doane, 1997; Fine, Powell, Weis, & Wong, 1997; Frankenberg, 1994; Lewis, 1998). As a result, White students may often be unaware that their assumptions about normal or appropriate views, styles, or behaviors are quite culturally specific and read others' differences as deviance or divergence from their assumedly universal norms.

A number of students in our study also reported that many of their White peers attempted to ignore or erase these differences by treating the race or culture of students of color as trivial, meaningless or invisible. As these students related:

It really bothers me when a White person says, "Well, why can't we see each other as individuals instead of race being always an issue?" I always come out and say, "I can't understand why you would think we can separate race and see each other as individuals, when my ethnicity is part of who I am and something I can't ignore." (a Latina Student)

When I met my roommate, who's White, she said, "Well, I'm not going to think of you as Black. I'll just think of you as my friend who has a natural suntan." (a Black Female Student)

People are constantly saying, "Oh, I thought you were white." And I say, "No, I'm Native American." And they say, "Well you look White." I tell them my mom is White. People expect this Indian with a feather in her hair. I think people make a lot of assumptions about your ethnicity. I don't mind if people ask, but it really upsets me when people make assumptions about who you are. (a Native American Female Student)

These themes also are repeated in much of the literature on the racial climate of U.S. college campuses (Duster, 1991; Feagin & Vera, 1995; Thomas, 1991). That literature reveals that students of color feel they are required to "blend in" on predominantly White campuses while at the same time the application of academic and behavioral stereotypes emphasizes their group characteristics and difference. This dilemma was captured precisely in one student-interviewee's comment that she was either "totally marginalized" or stereotyped as "the Asian American woman." Her comments reflect two halves of the

same coin in which students of color feel they are expected to be different from Whites in certain ways but, at the same time, to be or at least pursue sameness with Whites. Naturally, this conflict causes a great deal of confusion, frustration, and pain for those who experience it. Taking the form of direct or implicit insults and demands (e.g., to assimilate, to act out cultural stereotypes, to explain), this push-and-pull generates daily quandaries about whether to resist or conform both internally, with regard to identity, and externally, with regard to behavior and challenge.

Exclusion and Marginality: "This school is for Europeans!"

The students of color we interviewed reported experiences in and out of the classroom in which they felt they were excluded from peer interactions with or by White students, either through deliberate actions or through the "normal" course of intergroup relationships. The following comments are illustrative:

I've always felt left out of study groups. It's almost like they [White students] have these cliques already. They're going to do much better because of the groups they have. They have their friends who took the class before and have all these resources that we don't have. (a Latino Student)

Since I'm a science major, I've had to take a lot of labs. It seems like the last person who doesn't have a partner is *me*. I generally expect to be paired up with a student by the teacher. (a Black Male Student)

There was a Black woman who had written a paper and a White woman who had written a paper about the same topic. The class could ask either of them questions. The Black woman would start talking about the topic and everyone would start to direct their questions toward the White woman. The Black woman was obviously upset but no one noticed, and she got up and left the class early. And no one noticed, and no one said anything. (a Latina Student)

White students look over you if they have a question. One time this guy sitting next to me didn't know anyone and went around me to ask the other guy about a question on the homework and I'm sitting right there. He made a point to go around me. (a Black Male Student)

The students of color in our study perceived that many of the networks available to White students were closed off to them and difficult to access or even that they were not wanted in their academic settings. McBay (1986) reported a similar phenomenon in her study of racial climate at another predominantly White university, where over 40% of Black alumni indicated that they experienced "a sense of racial isolation" and of not fitting in or belonging to the larger community during their student days (p. 10). As one student in our sample stated, "It's good for me to converse with people of my own race, but some days I can go the whole day and not see another Black person on this campus."

One byproduct of being the target of stereotypic expectations is a sense of distance from and discomfort with others. When this is combined with the behavioral exclusion practiced by some White students, whether consciously and deliberately or not, and certainly experienced by many students of color, it leads to and supports the actual separation of racial/ethnic groups in campus daily life, as evidenced by these comments:

The first day I walked in there I sat in the front. All these white people sat in the back, and they avoided sitting next to the people of color. Every time we had a project to do in groups, our group always was the group of people of color. When our teaching assistant noticed that and started separating us into groups, these other people wouldn't even listen to what we had to say. So from then on we're like, "No, we're not going to be with them." (a Black Female Student)

You sit next to them, and they look at each other like, "Oh, my God, she's sitting next to me! Get away! A person of color!" When you walk in and they're, like, all eyes on you to see what you're wearing, how you wear it, the way you speak, whether you have a Spanish accent. (a Latina Student)

There is some tension, I think, among the White students about things like the minority lounges that we have, and some of the parties and things we go to, or when a group of Afro-Americans gets together. I think White people somewhat fear that, or it seems that they fear it. (a Black Male Student)

Some students of color respond to these perceived exclusions by further separating themselves from Whites. According to McBay (1986), "*separation*, meaning the movement of Blacks together to form a more positive and affirmative environment than that provided by the larger White community," is a common adaptation to the challenges students of color faced on predominantly White campuses (p. 14). However, such adaptations carry their own dilemmas. As related by the Task Force on Racial and Cultural Concerns (1990), "[M]any students, both minority and non-minority, feel isolated from students of different backgrounds from their own" (p. 1). That report further maintained that both minority and majority students felt "slighted" by the lack of attention other groups paid them in social interactions and activities: "Minority students deplore white students' hesitance about approaching students of color. They ask, 'Why would you consider Black students sitting together as hostile. All the white students sit together. Is that hostile?'" (p. 6). Thus, as noted by the students in our sample, when students of color retreat to "their side," they are chastised for separating themselves when they are actually trying to find and create supportive spaces within campus environments that they often experience as racially hostile or exclusive.

White Ignorance and Interpersonal Awkwardness: "Why isn't the palm of your hand the same color as the back?"

Racial/ethnic separation—in neighborhoods, in elementary and secondary schools, and on college campuses—both creates and reinforces cultural ignorance and interpersonal awkwardness. Whereas students of color must learn about Whites and White culture in order to survive, let alone advance, in U.S. society, White students are under little pressure to learn about minority cultures or traditions. Indeed, the students of color in our sample reported that their White peers often knew little if anything about their group's histories or cultures. They further reported that White students often were uncomfortable in their presence or awkward and fearful about how to relate to them.

They [White students] ask stupid things, like, "Why is your hair straight?" "Why do you fling your hair around all day?" We have to know about their culture, and they don't have to take the time to find out about what we're about, what our culture is about, why we react to things, how we feel about certain things. (a Black Female Student)

When I was in an English class, one of the White men in the class said, "Well, I don't know what everyone's all worked up about. I've never seen any act of racism on campus." (a Latino Student)

I remember once the day after Columbus Day, I said that what happened to Native Americans was comparable to what happened to the Jews during World War II. I said that it wasn't the same, but there were parallels. And someone in the class said that I was wrong and went into all these details about the Holocaust. I was thinking that the details weren't my point. (a Native American Male Student)

I don't know about tension, but there's just an awkwardness. Like, many White people don't know whether to say, "Hi," or not. . . . Sometimes they don't speak, and sometimes they do speak. (a Black Female Student)

These students' experiences with their peers' ignorance—or innocence—are not unique. Feagin et al. (1996) reported similar phenomena based upon their interviews with African American college students. They noted that although White students sometimes act inappropriately in interactions with Black peers out of overt bigotry; at other times Whites do so "out of ignorance or a lack of experience with African-Americans" (p. 65). Students of color also often experience this "not knowing" about others—or rather, what they perceive as White students' feeling that they do not *need* to know about others—as arrogance. Instead of providing opportunities for opening discourse, White students' expressions of socially structured as well as personal ignorance often reinforce racial boundaries by reinforcing a sense of difference and distance. As the students of color we interviewed repeatedly reported, they end up having both to know about Whites and to

teach Whites about themselves, or to suffer misconceptions and the attribution of aloofness or resistance.

A related aspect of White ignorance and interpersonal awkwardness is the repeated mention by these students of color that their White peers were very careful not to say the "wrong thing" about a topic addressing race or ethnicity in their presence. Several members of our sample noted that White students, in their interactions with students of color, frequently sought to create the illusion of peace and harmony and withdrew from or even denied uncomfortable racial/ethnic realities. They maintained that this was due either to White students' concerns about political correctness or their fear of challenge and confrontation.

In a political science class, when the teaching assistant asked us how we all felt about affirmative action, the Whites looked at the Blacks, waiting for an answer from us. They want to hear what we're going to say before they say anything. They don't usually open their mouth after you say something. They are afraid if they say something they might offend us, and we'll go off on them. (a Black Male Student)

One thing that I always run into with White students is that you can say things and they're, like, "That's not really me. What did I do?" You know, "Why are you attacking me?" And they don't listen to what you are saying. They don't listen to the content. (an Asian American Female Student)

I find a lot of times, when talking about issues of race, White students want to feel good and hold your hand, and don't want to see color and want to be unified. They want us to be White and not have to deal with us being Black. (a Black Female Student)

I remember this one White [female student] saying, "I'm really a nice person, and I get along with Latinos." Like, "I want you to approve of me." I didn't say anything. I just let it go by. (a Latina Student)

White students' confusion, or reticence and defensiveness, often feels to students of color like an unwillingness to engage. White students' personalization of racial phenomena, and their attempts to reduce intergroup relations to the individual level, appears to many students of color as denial of structural racism and a lack of recognition of differences and/or group-level discrimination. Moreover, some students of color indicate that they see such silence or withdrawal as a lack of caring about these issues or about their potential offense or pain. This leads to a lack of on-going student dialogue across racial/ethnic difference (Task Force on Racial and Cultural Concerns, 1990).

White Resentment and Hostility About Affirmative Action

Though the specific legal and administrative issues surrounding affirmative action have changed shape throughout the years, the widespread perception that minority student admissions and advancement are due primarily to unearned preference and only minimally, if at all, to talent persists. Indeed, that perception has probably escalated in the midst of current debates on and off campus, as reflected in the following comments from our student participants:

[White] students directly asked me about affirmative action and was I a "token" student. It's like, yeah, you must of gotten here because you're a token student anyway. You must be stupid. (a Black Male Student)

I came from out of state, and I was very intimidated by the university. I was appalled when a White got up and pointed his finger at me and said, "I don't think it's right that you go to school here when my best friend doesn't!" I thought that was kind of outrageous, so I said, "You know nothing about me! You should get over your ignorance and find out something about people you don't know anything about. You're just making generalizations." But then I felt bad because I started to try to justify myself for being here, and in my opinion I don't have anything to prove to him. I only have to prove things to myself. From then on, I knew it was going to be a hard road. (a Black Female Student)

These kinds of interactions inevitably lead students of color to feel less than full citizenship on campus. Duster (1991) documented similar responses in his study, in which students of color made statements such as: "I feel like I have Affirmative Action stamped

on my forehead," "We're guilty until proven innocent," and "There's no way to convince whites we belong here" (p. 19). In such settings, group-level struggles over resources clearly are played out in interpersonal interactions (Blumer, 1958). Some of the resources being struggled over are as simple as funds, time, and space for curricular and cocurricular student activities. However, in a society in which higher education is a central element of one's cultural capital, attendance and graduation from a "good college" is an important resource. Group-level struggles for access to such institutions, both numerically and symbolically, are captured and illuminated in the issue of racial/ethnic representation on the college campus. Under far too many circumstances, students of color on predominantly White campuses are seen as filling a role—that is, as providing something that the university needs, namely, diversity—rather than as individual students seeking to receive an education (Woo, 1994).

Additionally, White America's typical view of the social world often enables some White college students to express resentments or hostilities that seem absurd to many of the students of color in our study. For example, as one noted:

I had one very closed-minded [dormitory] resident who was very negative about everything. I was wearing a [Black Student Union] shirt and he walked up to me and asked me how I would feel if he were to wear a "White Power" shirt. I said, "You have no reason to wear a White Power shirt because this university is itself part of your White power." He said, "I totally disagree because I can graduate with a 4.0 and you can graduate with a 2.0 and you're going to do far better than I am." He also said that he found a notebook in the computing center and that the grammar inside was really bad. And, just as he suspected, a person of color came to retrieve the notebook. He also said that he was resentful of the fact that there are so many Black students here and that the reason that there was racism was because most White people are not as good at controlling their anger as he is. (a Black Male Student)

The above comment reveals not only that many aspects of racial ideology are tightly linked but also that they are played out daily on the typical U.S. college campus in interactions between students. In this instance, a White student's resentment over the existence of certain Black student organizations and symbols on campus quickly merged into a diatribe about reverse racism and Black intellectual inferiority. The reality is that students of color suffer the wrath of White students who imagine themselves to be the "new" victims of racism (Gallagher, 1995). Indeed, Whites' newfound sense of racial victimhood has been identified as more and more rampant among members of the White working class, White college students, and White professionals (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Feagin & Vera, 1995; Fine & Weis, 1998).

The nature of the current debate about affirmative action is replete with rhetoric about the lowering of academic standards and the generally lesser credentials or competence of students of color. In interviews with White students on four majority-White college campuses, Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) found that White students' views of the social world often lead them to believe that racism is a problem of the past, solved either by the Emancipation Proclamation or the civil rights movement. They reported White students' general belief that discrimination no longer exists and that if Blacks are not doing well in society currently it is because of personal or cultural deficiencies. This rhetoric, and its associated affirmation of White racial disadvantage and victimization in the face of what is perceived as unmerited Black privilege, serves only to drive students of color into even more vulnerable and protective stances and to perpetuate stereotyped, awkward, separated, and hostile climates for all students, but especially students of color.

The Focus on Black and White

The dominant focus on Black-White relations in most discussions about campus racial/ethnic climate was sometimes found to create problems for the Latino/a, Asian American,

and Native American students of color in our study. Two students offered the following comments:

If you're in class and they start talking about people of color issues, I guess many of us are offended when it's always just the Black issues that are discussed. It's not even Latinos. (a Latina Student)

I remember a lot of times in class discussion when we talked, it was like they would say something about an issue and I would bring up the Asian American perspective or what I felt about it, and they would be like, "Yeah, that's nice, but here's the real issue." (an Asian American Male Student)

As these comments reveal, racial/ethnic relations are not only an issue between students of color and their White peers but between students of color from different groups. Duster's (1991) research yielded a statement from a Chicano student confirming this view:

... they [African American students] talk about racism and then a Chicano/Latino will go, "Oh yeah, I know what you mean," and they'll just look at you or if you're not dark enough they don't think you've experienced it and I've come out and say, "Well, Chicano/Latinos face racism, too." (p. 35)

In such exchanges, Latino/a, Asian American, and Native American students report feeling additionally excluded and marginalized.

Institutional Context: The College Curriculum and the Faculty

Other students are not the only forces creating these struggles for students of color. The larger institutional context within which all these interactions do, or do not occur, include the college or course curriculum and the role and behavior of the faculty. Two students in our sample expressed concerns about the marginalization of their group within the curriculum:

There's a lot of references to the Bible, and you're not going to pick up on those unless you're a Christian or unless you've taken a course on the Bible. I feel excluded sometimes because of that. (an Asian American Male Student)

There were things that were on the syllabus that were about women and that were about Asian Americans too. And then we ran out of time, and so the professor had to cut some of the things out—the things about women and the things about Asian Americans. (an Asian American Female Student)

For many students of color, this absence is another form of exclusion that not only minimizes their intellectual opportunities but also frustrates their desires to gain understanding from and appreciation by others. Indeed, concern about the content of the curriculum is a theme echoed in colleges throughout the nation. For example, Margolis and Romero (1998) argued that, at the graduate level in sociology, the absence of regular courses on race and gender maintains "an implicit hierarchy of knowledge" and a "deafening silence" for female students of color (p. 19). One study indicated that students of color on a predominantly White campus believed their curriculum and courses lacked "content that will promote an understanding of racial and cultural diversity" (Stanford University Committee on Minority Issues, 1989, p. 7). Moreover, most of the respondents in that study, from 84% to 93% in each of the minority racial/ethnic groups, agreed that the curriculum "does not teach students about the contributions of diverse racial and cultural groups" (p. 7).

Margolis and Romero discussed not only the manifest content of the curriculum but also the presence of a "hidden curriculum" represented in the behaviors and norms modeled or expressed by faculty, by both omission and commission. As students of color in the present study indicated:

I don't understand why professors don't say anything about racist stuff [that happens in class]. I don't know if it's that they want the students to express themselves or if they don't see anything wrong with it. (a Native American Female Student)

The professors never joke with Black students. Their jokes are directed toward White students. You would think they know the White students personally. When professors and TAs [teaching assistants] favor the White students, that makes you feel uncomfortable. It affects you. (a Black Male Student)

Other students of color identified faculty behaviors that seemed to have a positive effect on them personally, on the behavior of their White peers, and on their peer relations in class.

I know I did poor on one exam, and I went to talk with the professor. After talking with the professor, he realized I knew the material, but for some reason I just didn't do well on the test. After that, he held regular sessions with me, and we kept the lines of communication open, and I began to do well. But if he had just blown me off, I probably would have continued to do poorly in the class. (a Latino Student)

In an English class, some students said that one of the authors was sexist as well as racist. It was put on the computer conference, and people actually wrote back. The professor got on and said that this was a very good thing to put on the system. He said people need to not just read the material but actually discuss the differences in perspective. (a Black Male Student)

The literature on the relations of students of color with faculty demonstrates similarly contradictory trends. Some studies have reported that college students of color generally feel satisfied with their relations with faculty members (McClelland & Auster, 1990). Other work has identified differentiated patterns on the part of faculty (Trujillo, 1986). Students of color often report that collegiate faculty, like White students, have stereotypically low expectations for them, direct more complex questions to White students, do not appear to care about or reach out to them, single them out as "experts" or "spokespersons" on racial/ethnic issues, and generally seem uncomfortable relating to them (Allen, 1988; Astin, 1982; Chesler et al., 1993; Peterson et al., 1978; Trujillo, 1986; Willie & McCord, 1972).

The faculty is a key part of the organizational context that influences White students and students of color on predominantly White and other college campuses. Evidently, some faculty members do not feel it is their responsibility or within their abilities to address social relationships and interactions, let alone racial/ethnic interactions, that occur in their classrooms. Most have not been trained to consider the classroom as a social group or mini-social system with dynamics that affect students' abilities to learn as well as their social comfort and identity development. Moreover, upon entering the college classroom, they typically are left to manage classroom-related phenomena on their own, without substantial institutional support for challenging traditional patterns of racial/ethnic understanding and interaction. Their actions and non-actions with regard to these phenomena often permit the reproduction of stereotypic, assimilative, exclusionary, awkward, and resentment-filled experiences for students of color.

THE IMPACT OF RACIAL/ETHNIC INTERACTIONS ON CAMPUS

The students of color interviewed for this study have benefited from recent advances in secondary education, from the rising economic status of portions of the African American and Latino/a communities, and from affirmative action policies. Indeed, they are the best and brightest of their ranks. Whether they come from racially segregated or desegregated secondary schools, once they enter predominantly White college environs they are required to negotiate and/or renegotiate their identities, expectations, and relations with others. By paying close attention to the words of these young people of color, one realizes that they are confronted with a daunting set of pressures and demands. They are expected by their White peers to be representatives of their racial/ethnic group and to embody certain racial/ethnic stereotypes—the supposedly "positive" as well as the obviously "negative" ones. At the same time, Whites question why they emphasize recognition of their own and others' race/ethnicity, and why they will not just assimilate or "blend in." Furthermore, not only do Whites ascribe racial/ethnic identities and behav-

iors to students of color, they and members of the students' own identity groups also often challenge students of color with regard to their racial/ethnic membership "qualifications" (e.g., are they "too Black"?; do they "act White"?; are they "really Latino"?). Additionally, the individual abilities and talents of students of color and their membership in the collegiate community often are questioned or discredited because of their ascribed group affiliation. Thus, contradictory expectations, demands, and assumptions come from several directions, placing students of color into awkward and often objectionable or painful circumstances.

One result of these mixed social messages and experiences is that students of color on U.S. college campuses risk damage to their self-esteem and self-identity as well as occasional physical danger (Duster, 1991; Feagin et al., 1996; McBay, 1986). They also carry an extra burden of mental and emotional stress and typically must struggle, to a greater extent than their White peers, to figure out what is real about themselves and about their campus environs. One student of color reflected on this struggle as follows:

So much of our mental energy is used talking about these issues. Talking about our anger and frustration in being asked ignorant questions and so on. White students are not thinking about that. They don't use mental energy to do that. (a Black Male Student)

External experiences of this sort described by the students of color we interviewed—in conjunction with poor advising, counseling, and channeling of students' resources—create a series of internal psychic struggles and trauma that amount to their paying an intangible extra cost for a college education (Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Kuo, 1995; Salgado de Snyder, 1987; Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997). Most students of color nevertheless pay the additional "price," cope with these additional demands, and by and large cope with them successfully. That they do testifies to their strength, their ability to maintain an intellectual focus, and their emotional resilience in the face of stress that is far greater than that experienced by most White students.

THE BROADER SOCIAL CONTEXT OF CAMPUS INTERGROUP RELATIONS

How can the co-existence of rhetorical colorblindness and behavioral color consciousness in the collegiate context be explained? What is it about the ideologies and experiences of White college students that lead to these dynamics? What is it about the institutional context and operations of higher education in the United States that permits, supports, and reproduces them?

U.S. college campuses, though unique in many ways, are not exempt from the larger social trends that take place beyond their ivy-covered walls. Over the last several years, new literature has emerged on the changing nature of racial/ethnic attitudes, racism, and discrimination in our society. This literature challenges a re-thinking of the trends in racial/ethnic relations witnessed on college campuses in the light of the wider social context. Some scholars have argued that the change in the collegiate racial/ethnic climate is primarily one of degree—that is, there is less racism and ethnic discrimination, or these phenomena are milder than they used to be. Others have argued that the two are just as pervasive as in the past, yet they manifest themselves in different ways and therefore "look" different (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Bonilla-Silva & Lewis, 1999; Kinder & Sanders, 1996). According to Bonilla-Silva (1997):

In sum, whites today exhibit a very different racial ideology than during the apartheid period of race relations. The new ideology of whites, characteristic of the distal and antagonistic post-civil rights race relations, avoids direct hostility toward minority groups, affirms the principles of equal opportunity and egalitarianism, but at the same time rejects programs that attempt to ameliorate racial inequality in reality rather than in theory. Generally speaking, contemporary white ideology denies the fact that race imposes a number of constraints upon minorities and proclaims that we are all individual actors with similar opportunities in the market. (p. 22)

Such trends and transformations explain why the students we interviewed did not report high levels of traditional racial/ethnic prejudice or explicit exclusion, but they did report numerous, more subtle, but still potent negative interactions.

As the nation debates the question of whether racism and ethnic discrimination are history, numbers of White Americans are concluding that individual effort and merit should be the only criteria used to allocate positions or resources in society. This logic seems to lie behind much of the White student behavior reported by the students of color in our study. Whites' "new racism" asserts a kind of free market individualism in which they can imagine a colorblind world, where all should (and can) compete freely and equally (Bobo et al., 1997). In the collegiate context, for instance, and in much of the popular media, the typically higher scores of White students on standardized aptitude tests and their greater status and privilege in society are thus interpreted as meritorious achievement, instead of as the outcome of what Feagin et al. (1996) attribute to their "accumulated social, economic, and political privileges" (pp. 152–153). Additionally, arguments interpreting the disproportionate success of Whites as due to merit and ability reciprocally locate all responsibility for their lack of success and negative social outcomes on the disadvantaged themselves. These perspectives set the stage for viewing affirmative action as an assault on fair play and White students' meritorious achievement or earned status, rather than as a strategic effort to redress inequality and create a more diverse and creative learning environment for all students. They further fuel the kind of resentment, hostility, and sense of victimhood among White students that students of color in our focus groups reported witnessing.

Both White students and students of color enter college with assumptions and expectations formed through earlier experiences both in and outside the educational system. Students who have grown up in a context of widespread racial segregation often have their first real contact with people of other racial groups when they come to college (Massey & Denton, 1993). In recent research conducted at four universities around the country, many White students reported having had very little to no contact with people of color before arriving on campus (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). Long histories of racism—both covert and overt, institutionalized and interpersonal—which have created and enforced the segregated living spaces and privileged life chances of Whites, are treated by many White college students as coincidence rather than as the product of deeply embedded patterns of social dominance. White students typically utilize their personal experience of an homogeneous upbringing, combined with what they glean from media reports and from school and other sources of information, to make assumptions about what racial and ethnic minority identities are or are not about and what it *should* mean to be Black, Asian or Native American, Latino/a, and White. Indeed, the notion of Whiteness as normative is integral to the operation of the new racial paradigm in that it creates an assumed center to which others are expected to conform (Feagin & Vera, 1995; Fine et al., 1997; Frankenberg, 1994; Lewis, 1998). Many students of color, in turn, bring with them to the predominantly White college campus experiences of exclusion, oppression, and unequal educational and social opportunity. These students must negotiate their own sense of what it means to be a person of color in the face of racial/ethnic stereotypes and calls for colorblindness about issues addressing race/ethnicity and minority status.

It is not only precollegiate experiences that dispose White students to view, expect to view, and behave toward students of color in stereotypical ways. The contemporary collegiate environment sets the stage for White students to actualize these attitudes and behaviors—indeed, that environment reinforces and reproduces them. Several authors have drawn attention to the powerful effects of the organizational climate of higher education on all students' experiences. Hurtado (1992), for example, has pointed to institu-

tional issues such as selectivity and campus size, "responsiveness to the entrance of Black students, program responses, and the attitudinal or perceptual climate" (p. 542) as contributing factors. Chesler and Crowfoot (1997) have drawn attention to issues such as organizational mission and culture, pedagogy, operational styles of dominant elites or power-holders, and the nature and distribution of key resources. Others contend that institutional factors can lead to a sort of "academic colonialism" that shapes both the patterns of interaction as well as the attitudes and behaviors of individuals within institutions (Arce, 1978), including those reported in previous sections of this article. Thus, powerful institutional norms have been shown to influence all participants in the academy.

CONCLUSION

College represents the first opportunity many young people have to engage in sustained interaction with peers and elders of different races, ethnicities, and economic classes. Collegiate social environments such as the classroom and dormitory represent unique opportunities for students to learn whether and how to work together with others who are different from themselves and to decide how to think and behave in the inevitably racially and ethnically mixed settings of their future. Some of this learning, accomplished or avoided by White students and students of color in college when they are on the verge of adulthood, has long-term implications. At college age, and in higher education settings, young people may be more willing and able to take risks, to unlearn old patterns of social interaction and to discover new intellectual and social evidence about their own and others' race/ethnicity than at any prior or subsequent time in their lives. Yet too often, by design or omission, colleges miss the opportunity to teach positive forms of interracial/ethnic interaction, and therefore fail to help lay the groundwork for real changes in group relations and the distribution of power on campus and in the society. The findings of even this limited study make it clear that for many students of color, life within on the college campus offers increasingly daunting challenges that White students and many White faculty do not understand and with which they do not have to contend.

Ironically, many collegiate Whites increasingly imagine students of color to be recipients of an unfair system—affirmative action—in which students of color have the upper hand. Rather than seeing the working of organizational norms and expectations regarding interpersonal behavior as evidence of institutionalized "White power," today's White college students are behaving more and more as if students of color are actual or potential deviants from consensually accepted norms. Many White students are confused about the resultant dynamics, and some resentfully contend that the overt discrimination of the past is now being used as an excuse to give students of color an undeserved advantage over them. They further maintain that affirmative action policies run counter to the principles of meritocracy, equality, and colorblindness. Though in the abstract these are important ideals, at this stage in our nation's history, we believe them to be merely ideals to be worked toward. Any policy, practice, or behavior that takes these ideals as fact and assumes that they currently govern collegiate or public life, ignores enduring realities of vast inequality and persistent discrimination based on race and ethnicity. The attempt to dispel these myths, to uncover disturbing patterns in interracial/interethnic peer relations on the college campus, and to create more just patterns in collegiate relations, is not merely a matter of fairness or of enriching the educational experiences of all. It is a matter of constructing a more realistic, just, and livable future for our society.

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