1991

The Experiences, Perceptions, and Consequences of Campus Racism among Northern Plains Indians

Terry Huffman

George Fox University, thuffman@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Huffman, Terry, "The Experiences, Perceptions, and Consequences of Campus Racism among Northern Plains Indians" (1991). Faculty Publications - School of Education. Paper 110.
http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty/110

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - School of Education by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.
The experiences, perceptions, and consequences of campus racism among Northern Plains Indians

Terry E. Huffman

The encounter with campus racism among American Indians (hereafter referred to as Indians) has received little attention among scholars. Nevertheless, the obstacle created by racism is as worthy of scholarly investigation as any barrier to Indian educational achievement articulated in the literature. This paper is a discussion of the subjective experience and perceptions of Indian students on campus racism as delineated through an ongoing research project. Among the more salient findings is that clearly the Indian students in this study face pervasive verbal racism from non-Indian students which serves to compound their feelings of isolation and not belonging at college.

Racism directed toward Indian college students has received relatively little attention. Overshadowed by headlines on campus racism directed toward other minorities, the struggles of Indians against the currents of racial prejudice have passed virtually unnoticed.

This oversight is not surprising. The racism directed against other minorities all too often is expressed in violent ways on large urban campuses (Webb, 1990). Such a sensational formula guarantees media (and ultimately scholarly) attention. Indians, however, tend to be enrolled in smaller western and midwestern colleges and universities where racism often takes more subtle forms. Nevertheless, the burden that racial prejudice places on Indian students should not be dismissed.

It is estimated that only 6% of Indian students complete their college education (Astin, 1986). There are a variety of factors identified that account for the lack of Indian academic success. For example, the barriers presented by low achievement motivation, poor academic preparation, inadequate financial support, and lack of parental and community support have all been variously iden-
tified in the literature as hindrances to educational achievement (Falk & Aitken, 1984; Guyette & Heth, 1983; Lin, 1985; McIntosh, 1987; Scott, 1986; West, 1988).

While these factors are recognized and understood to contribute to the lack of success, there is little research on the role racial prejudice plays as a barrier in the Indian educational experience. Quite often, the racial prejudice encountered by Indian students is simply included under the rather generic label of “cultural conflict” (Huffman, 1990). Less often is campus racism singled out as a contributing factor in and of itself.

This paper discusses campus racism as it relates to Indian educational experience and achievement. The results are part of an ongoing research project on the subjective perceptions of Northern Plains Indian college students. Specifically, this paper addresses the extent and nature of racial prejudice, the perception of prejudice and the overt expression of racism, and the consequences of racial prejudice.

Methodology

This paper results from an ongoing research project designed to achieve a greater understanding of the Indian academic experience. The project utilizes a “double-barreled” approach involving both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The quantitative approach consists of a survey questionnaire designed to obtain information on cultural, social, academic, and financial problems encountered by Indian students. The qualitative approach involves indepth interviews with students designed to gain a better understanding of the subjective thoughts and views regarding their college experience. This paper reports findings gathered from the indepth interviews. The research process for this qualitative component consists of four steps: contacting informants, the interview, follow-up, and data analysis.

Contacting Informants

A list of all Indian students attending a small midwestern university was obtained from that institution’s academic counseling office. From this list of 87 students, it was established that 77 were currently enrolled in the university. Each of these 77 students were mailed a letter informing them of the research project, along with a survey questionnaire to be used for the quantitative analysis of data. Of these 77 students, 48 returned completed questionnaires and 22 eventually participated in the longer indepth interviews.

Although a small sample, the usefulness of the information gleaned should not be underestimated. Many researchers are uncomfortable with the “generalizability” of a small sample. However, that shortcoming should be weighted against the greater depth of understanding that is accessible through qualitative research strategies. As Taylor & Bogdan (1984, p. 81) point out, “In qualitative research, an ‘N of One’ can be just as illuminating as a large sample (and very often more so).”
The Interview

As is typical in most indepth interviews, the interview format used open-ended questions (Bailey, 1978). An instrument of 25 questions served as a guide for the interview. However, the session ran much like a conversation, with the researcher pursuing other pertinent areas of interest which surfaced. Interviews averaged about one and one-half hours.

The guide consisted of questions designed to gather information on the cultural background of the student, a perception of and attitudes toward assimilation, the experience of cultural conflict (or the lack thereof), relationships with other Indians and non-Indians, evaluation of the positive and negative nature of the college experience, major concerns/problems encountered while in college, future goals and plans, etc. Typical examples of guide questions included:

While growing up did you spend most of your life on a reservation?
While growing up, would you say your family lived close to more traditional ways?
Do you think Indian values and non-Indian values are basically alike or different? (probe - How are they alike/different?)
Imagine a situation in which you faced this dilemma: you came to realize that completing a college degree meant that you would lose almost all Indian values and adopt values much like non-Indians. How would you react to such a dilemma?
Do you believe college is designed to instill non-Indian values in Indian students?

While none of the guide questions asked specifically about campus racism, the question, "What is it like being an Indian on a campus that is predominantly non-Indian?" most frequently generated discussions relating to this issue.

With the permission of the student, each interview was tape recorded. After each session, the researcher kept notes of the interview in a journal. The purpose of the journal was to remind the researcher of major themes that seemed to emerge, striking gestures and nonverbal expressions of the student. Even comments on the researcher's own performance for reference and modifications in future interviews were recorded in the journal.

Follow-ups

After initial interviews, the researcher felt compelled to follow-up some interviews by asking for clarification and/or further information from some students. The researcher attempted to be as conservative as possible in analyzing the data. That is, the researcher attempted not to read more into the comments of students than they might have intended. Thus, in those cases where the researcher was unclear as to the meaning of a response, additional information was requested from the student.

Data Analysis

The analysis of qualitative data is one of the most time consuming and tedious endeavors for a researcher (Drass, 1980). This research has proven to be no dif-
ferent. The first step of analysis consisted of coding the data. Data from the guide questions along with other information were coded into categories of responses. This step involved seemingly endless listening and relistening to taped interviews, reading and rereading transcripts from interviews. This process led to the construction of initial categories of data responses, modification of the coding scheme, adding and collapsing categories, and ultimately the refinement of the coding categories.

For instance, for the guide question:

Imagine a situation in which you faced this dilemma: you came to realize that completing a college degree meant that you would lose almost all Indian values and adopt values much like non-Indians. How would you react to such a dilemma?

Using the data analysis process outlined above, responses could ultimately be coded into four categories (these categories were also given descriptive labels for quick reference):

1. Make the decision that Indian values are more important than a college education and would leave college rather than risk losing those values (Estranged).
2. Do not really hold to Indian values. Therefore, the situation would not present itself (Assimilated).
3. Although Indian values are important, a college education is so important to the future as to attempt an adoption of a lifestyle more like non-Indians (Marginal).
4. Would try even harder to hold to Indian values but also try to understand non-Indian values. Attempt to relate to both cultural worlds as demanded by the situation (Transculturated).

Once the data were coded, the researcher was able to “sort through” in a search for patterns of behaviors, attitudes, experiences, and perceptions. Utilizing the typology of studies cited above, it was observed that two Indian students were estranged, 10 were assimilated, two were marginal, and eight were transculturated.

The Extent and Nature of Racial Prejudice

The students in this study did not report episodes of physical aggression against themselves or their acquaintances. Whether this reflects the absence of violent racism or a reluctance for subjects to report those incidences to an interviewer is not known. The researcher surmises that physical aggression against the Indian students involved in this study is probably quite rare.

More often racism directed toward Indian students is expressed in the form of verbal attacks (Table 1). Of the 22 students who participated in interviews, 14 specifically recalled encountering at least one incident of verbal racist remarks while in college. It is interesting to note that assimilated students were least likely to report the experience of campus racism. Whereas both estranged students and marginal students and six of the eight transculturated students reported encoun-
tering verbal racism, only four of the 10 assimilated students related such experiences. This suggests that Indian students who more closely relate to Indian values are more sensitive to negative racial comments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Student</th>
<th>Experience of Verbal Racism</th>
<th>Nature of Racist Remarks</th>
<th>Source of Racism</th>
<th>Perception of Campus Hostility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>General Attacks</td>
<td>Personal Attacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estranged</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assimilated</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transculturated</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1
Extent and Nature of Campus Racism

Racist remarks range from derogatory remarks about Indians in general to verbal attacks specifically directed at the individual. For instance, typical racial remarks include name-calling and racial slurs arising from prevalent stereotypes. Racist slurs about Indians in general seem to be more common than remarks directed as an attack on the character of the individual. Fourteen students related encountering comments that reflect a verbal assault against Indians in general, whereas, nine related an incident involving a direct verbal racial attack on him/her personally. It should be noted that some students recalled experiencing both types of verbal racism.

It appears that the different types of Indian students are equally susceptible to personal racist attacks. Indeed, even among the assimilated students (who supposedly are more culturally similar to their non-Indian peers), three were the victims of personal racist attacks. Additionally, one of the estranged students, one of the marginal students, and four of the transculturated students were subjected to personal racist encounters.

In one of the few studies on prejudice toward Indians among college students, Peterson (1989) reported rather pervasive racist feelings among non-Indian students in the Northern Plains region. Therefore, it is not surprising that non-Indian students are the major source of negative racial comments. Among the
14 Indian students who reported encountering verbal racism, all indicated that, at least on one occasion, a student had been the originator.

Interestingly enough, however, five of the students also reported encountering racial comments from campus administration staff personnel. When probed on the specifics of these incidents, two of the students appeared very uncomfortable with any further discussion and the matter was not pursued. However, three students did offer some specificity. Apparently these three students had encountered resentment from staff personnel in the university’s financial aid office regarding supposedly “free money” for Indians’ higher education. It is revealing that this is such a strong myth that those in a university position who should know better, nevertheless, regard it as fact.

It is also revealing that, again, the different types of students are equally vulnerable to staff racism. At least one student of each type reported experiencing this kind of racism (one estranged, one assimilated, one marginal and two transculturated). The indication is that racism from staff personnel is exhibited simply at the presence of an Indian regardless of his/her cultural background, orientation, or personal circumstances. It is also noteworthy that none of the students believed they were denied assistance due to their racial identity. However, three of the students were emphatic in their regard of the episode as racial harassment and, as such, were quite bitter.

Generally, students had positive comments regarding their professors. The students tended to regard their professors as supportive and understanding of Indians. Only two students (one assimilated and one transculturated) reported an episode of verbal racist remarks from an instructor. In one case the racist remark reportedly came from an adjunct instructor (who no longer teaches for the institution). In the other case, the student viewed the professor as exhibiting both sexism and racism and, therefore, simply attributed these displays to his personal shortsightedness. Moreover, for both students the perception was these were isolated cases of faculty racism and not indicative of the faculty in general.

These interviews demonstrate several aspects about the nature and extent of campus racism directed at Northern Plains Indians on one campus. First, campus racism almost always takes the form of verbal derogatory racist comments. Second, these racial slurs are usually directed at Indians in general rather than an attack on the individual. And third, fellow students are typically the source of negative racial comments.

The Perception of Prejudice and the Overt Expression of Racism

Many Indian students perceive the campus as harboring deeply embedded hostility towards them. From the essence of the interviews, it is this researcher’s judgement that this sensitivity is largely a result of direct encounters with racial prejudice. More to the point, experiences with overt verbal racism helps foster a general sensitivity and awareness of racial/cultural campus hostility. It is interesting that 16 of the 22 students interviewed related a perception of the campus setting as being in some way a hostile environment. Even two students who did
not specifically relate an encounter with racism offered information that described an awareness of campus racial/cultural hostility.

Some students related feelings of “being an outsider” and unwelcomed by the general college community. For example, one student supported this perception by pointing out the absence of presentations of Indians in campus promotional material and pictures in the school catalog. Others felt that non-Indians look at Indians with disdain, while some believed they were subjected to discriminatory treatment in campus services.

Reports of the perception of general campus hostility raises an important issue; namely, are Indian students oversensitive to campus racism and reading more into the actions of non-Indians than is really intended? Obviously this study cannot render a simple definitive answer to such a complex question. However, the likelihood that the Indian students engaged in this study reflect a tendency to overemphasize the perceived hostility around them is a possibility (Heiss & Owens, 1972; Pettigrew, 1978; Ray & Simmons, 1990; Taylor & Walsh, 1979). However, it should be noted that the majority of the students in this study also experienced some direct form of campus racism. Therefore, for these students, the perception of campus hostility may not be misplaced.

The Consequences of Racial Prejudice

In terms of the final outcome, it matters little whether or not Indian students are overemphasizing campus racism and hostility. As W. I. Thomas proposed in his now famous Thomas Theorem, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas, 1966; Thomas & Thomas, 1928).

For Indian students the frequent consequences of campus racism is an early exit from the academic institution. Combined with the myriad of obstacles many must overcome (i.e., poor secondary preparation for college, reluctance to leave family and friends, financial difficulties, etc.), encounters with campus racism only reinforces the student with the feeling that the decision to go to college was a poor one and the only real alternative is to return home. This is particularly true for Indians from reservations who may be more culturally traditional than their often more assimilated non-reservation counterparts. The two estranged students, one of the marginal students, and three of the transculturated students (all from the reservation) left the institution before completing their academic programs. Additionally, all of these students related experiences of campus racism.

Bouts with verbal racism drive home the hard-hitting blows of alienation and low self-esteem (Kinch, 1978; Lutfig, 1983; Ray & Simmons, 1990). Time and again students related to the researcher a feeling of not belonging at college. Often the student felt out of place and related a desire to return to the familiar setting of home and support of family. When these feelings are compounded by experiences with campus racism, one can easily understand the likely result.

While these negative consequences are apparent, it would seem unlikely that encounters with racial prejudice could lead to positive developments. Yet, the researcher did in fact discover ways in which some Indian students actually
used what is inherently a negative experience and turned it into something beneficial for them.

In one such case, the experience of racism helped lead a student to a greater understanding of other Indian people. During an interview early in her academic experience, a young woman, who referred to herself as an “urban Indian” (she was, in fact, very assimilated and had never lived on a reservation), displayed rather negative attitudes toward “reservation Indians.” However, later in that first semester, she encountered racism (which she felt was for the first time in her life). Apparently, her dorm Residential Advisor unjustly accused her of stealing. The young Indian student contended that the accusation was racially motivated. Even after the guilty party was revealed, she was continually harassed by the R. A. and other non-Indians (i.e., name-calling, late night banging on her door, etc.). At the end of the first semester, she moved out of the dorm.

However, her attitude toward other Indians changed during the course of that first year of college. She became active in the campus Indian student organization and obviously more receptive toward those she had previously regarded with some disdain. The researcher believes that this change in attitude was due in no small part by a sense of greater “peoplehood” with other Indians brought on by the antagonistic treatment of those who were racially different. Certainly there is support for such an assumption from the social psychology of in-group solidarity (Moreland, 1985; Sherif, 1958; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Another case demonstrates how the appreciation of and reliance on Indian cultural traditions helped to overcome racial hostility. In this instance, a middle-aged woman (a transculturated student), very traditional and quite active in her native religion, related how she had relied upon her beliefs and support of elders to endure the racial/cultural hostility of non-Indians. For this woman (who was in fact nearing the end of her academic career), the anchor of stability provided by traditional Indian ways and people demonstrates that racial prejudice need not be debilitating but can indeed be overcome and that assimilation is not necessary for a successful academic career. In the process, an already strong reliance on traditional ways was made even stronger.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

Clearly, Indian students in this study share a perception of general campus hostility and thus an uneasiness with college. Encounters with racism serves to exacerbate this problem. Lin, LaCouente, and Eder (1988) found the perception of racial hostility to be significantly correlated with feelings of isolation and strongly (although not statistically significant) correlated to a negative attitude toward college and a poor grade point average.

Given the alarming attrition rate of Indian students, a concern that campus racism poses one more barrier to greater higher educational achievement is not misplaced. By creating a perception of hostility and reinforcing already existing feelings of inadequacies, campus racism is as great an obstacle as any
hindrance alluded to in the literature. Unfortunately, it may also be one of the most frustrating and troublesome to eradicate (Hornett, 1989).

On a more positive note, racial prejudice, despite its crippling nature, has been overcome by some Indian students in this study. One would hope that racial prejudice need not be present in order to foster greater understanding between culturally different Indian students or to strengthen an appreciation of Indian ways. However, until the time when racial prejudice is expunged from the campus scene, Indian students must conquer or be conquered by one more menacing foe.

Although this study reveals the pervasive nature of the campus racism encountered by Indian students, the findings are based on a small study. Quite simply, much is yet to be learned. Given the concerns stated above, further research in this area is crucial. Additional research is needed to replicate this study and otherwise expand our understanding of Indian students and campus racism.

Endnotes

'It is not the author's argument that the Indian students involved in this study are "oversensitive" to racism. Simply, the writer is acknowledging the possibility of an overemphasis on racism. Conversely, it is also possible that the Indian students are underreporting white racism to a non-Indian researcher.

Terry E. Huffman is an assistant professor of sociology at Northern State University, Aberdeen, South Dakota. He received a Ph.D. in sociology from Iowa State University. His major areas of interest include minority studies and the sociology of the family.

REFERENCES


