Chapter 11
What Is It Like to Be a Minority Student at a Predominantly White Institution?

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the differences in experiences and perceptions of campus climate of 38 minority students enrolled in a predominantly white institution (PWI). African American students, Native American students, gender and sexually diverse students, students with disabilities, Latinx students, and international students participated in the study. About half of the participants reported negative experiences with racism and discrimination on campus whereas the other half reported the opposite. Attribution to discrimination theory informed the theoretical framework of this study and the data analysis. Policy recommendations to improve the climate of diversity on university campus are provided.

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the experiences and perceptions of campus climate of 38 minority[1] students enrolled in a predominantly white institution (PWI) of higher education in the U.S. Research indicates that minority students' experience can be distinctively different from that of the dominant groups at PWIs (Bennett, Cole, & Thompson, 2000; Griffith, Hurd, & Hussain, 2019). Having a minority status can add additional pressure to minority students that goes beyond the regular stresses usually expected in an academic institution of higher education (Smidt et al., 2019). At a PWI, minority students can feel isolated, underrepresented, stereotyped, misunderstood, and discriminated. They can feel like "guests in someone else's house" (Turner, 1994, p. 356). The absence of diversity views in the curriculum, minimal ethnic faculty representation, and misunderstanding of diversity enhance the stresses faced by minority students at a PWI (Mills, 2020; Sue et al., 2007; Smedley et al., 1993). According to Gusa (2011), "PWIs do not have to be explicitly racist to create a hostile environment…unexamined historically situated White cultural ideology embedded in the language, cultural practices, traditions, and perceptions of knowledge

allow these institutions to remain racialized" (p. 465). Furthermore, PWIs tend to privilege the voices and perspectives of Western scholars and marginalize the voices and perspectives of non-dominant groups (Dhillon et al., 2015; Patton et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2007). When these normative "messages and practices remain subtle, nebulous, and unnamed, they potentially harm the well-being, self-esteem, and academic success of those who do not share the norms of White culture" (Gusa, 2011, p. 471).

Despite significant evidence concerning the hardship of minority students' experiences at PWIs, not all minority students perceive PWIs as hostile and "racialized." Some students may not even notice the White cultural ideology in the practices and norms of the university. Others might purposely deny or ignore acts of discrimination and instead focus on pleasant experiences. In this study, we found such variability in the experiences and perceptions of campus climate among participants. While many minority students did report an array of challenges and discriminatory acts on the university campus, several others reported exactly the opposite. To examine the differences in participants' experiences and their perceptions of campus climate,[2] I draw on the work of social psychologists on attributions to discrimination (Crocker & Major, 1989; Major & Dover, 2016; Major & Sawyer, 2009). Below I discuss the theory and research of this field of study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Attribution theory is concerned with the ways in which individuals explain events and people's behavior. Research on attributions to discrimination examines how people respond to social disadvantage and negative treatment and how specific examples are explained (Crocker & Major, 1989; Major & Dover, 2016; Major & Sawyer, 2009; Schmitt et al., 2014). Major, Quinton, and McCoy (2002) define attribution to discrimination as having two primary elements: a) a judgment that treatment was based on social identity or group membership; and b) a judgment that treatment was unjust or undeserved. Events are prone to be attributed to discrimination when both elements are present. In other words, "people are most likely to say that they were discriminated against when they feel they were treated *unfairly* because of their social identity" (Major & Dover, 2016, p. 215). According to social psychologists, perceptions and attributions to discrimination are often subjective, disputable, and dependent on a number of psychological factors. Research in this area reveals that

…two people can often see or experience the same event and explain it quite differently, depending on their cultural beliefs, expectations, location in the status-hierarchy, and personality characteristics. This is particularly true when discrimination is ambiguous. Thus, people who are chronically high in stigma consciousness or race-rejection sensitivity are more vigilant for prejudice cues and likely to interpret ambiguous events as discrimination (Major & Dover, 2016, p. 224).

The characteristics of the event as well as the characteristics of the people involved in the event play an important role in the attribution to discrimination. For example, people tend to have prototypes or expectations for the types of events that constitute discrimination, such as being treated unfairly by an out-group member (Baron, Burgess & Kao, 1991; Branscombe & Baron, 2016). The more an event resembles the prototype, the more likely it will be labeled as discriminatory. Status-asymmetry between the people involved in the event also plays a role in the attribution to discrimination (Simon et al., 2013). When the perpetrator is of a higher status than the victim, events are more likely to be attributed to

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