Measuring the Impact of Higher Education on Racial Prejudice and Opposition to Race-Based Policy

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In his seminal study of American race relations, Gunnar Mrydal proposed that racism is a problem of prejudice that would succumb to the American Creed through education. Sociological research has done well in conceptualizing contemporary expressions of racial prejudice and racism, but more can be done to examine education's role in reducing racial prejudice and racism. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the educational effect of diversity course requirements on undergraduate students' racial attitudes and support for race-based policy at a Research I university.

ISSUES OF CONCEPTUALIZATION AND MEASUREMENT

Over the past five decades or so, sociological research of racial attitudes has proposed that educational attainment is strongly linked to the liberalization of white racial attitudes about integration (Farley, Steeh, Kryson, Jackson, and Reeves 1994; Tumin, Barton, and Burrus 1958). In 1956, Hyman and Sheatsley were the first to propose that the liberalization of white racial attitudes about integration occurs when the younger generations replace the older, less tolerant generations who have been socialized in a culture of racial segregation. Furthermore, Hyman and Sheatsley's (1956) belief in Gunnar Mrydal's (1944) argument that mass education curtails the expression of racial prejudice led them to predict that education on its own would liberalize racial attitudes.

Tumin et al. (1958) tested Hyman and Sheatsley's prediction about education's liberalizing effect on racial attitudes. In their study, Tumin et al. (1958) found that white male adults with a college education were more favorable in their attitudes toward desegregation than those whites who did not go beyond a high school education.

Twenty years later, Quinley and Glock (1979:188) declared that institutions of formal education reduce prejudice in the following three ways:

(1) By providing people with more knowledge about minorities and about the historical, social, and economic factors responsible for minority and majority group differences.

(2) By teaching people to recognize prejudice and to understand its dangers.

(3) By providing cognitive skills, which increase people's capacity to detect prejudice and to reject it.

These three ways are exemplified through the efforts made by many colleges and universities across the nation to implement diversity course graduation requirements in their general educational curriculums to help prepare their students to meet the challenges in a diverse complex world. Indeed, a growing number of empirical studies have shown that desegregation, efforts to diversify the curriculum, and an increase in interracial contact in American colleges and universities have contributed to a positive change in racial attitudes and commitment to improving racial understanding (Chang 2002; Hogan and Mallott 2005; Hu and Kuh 2003; Marullo 1998)

However, even though the research studies aforementioned had indicated a decline in racial prejudice and racism over the last fifty years, research studies have also shown that racial prejudice and racism still persist despite the fact that racial and ethnic diversity courses have been implemented into the existing curricula structures at predominantly white colleges and universities (Downey and Torrecilha 1994; Feagin, Vera, Imani 1996; Hogan and Mallott 2005). For example, survey research has shown that old-fashioned racism or traditional prejudice (i.e., blatant expressions of innate inferiority of blacks) especially among the educated has declined in the last fifty years; but, on the other hand, research studies indicate that whites still hold negative stereotypes of blacks and rely more on cultural rather than biological attributes to explain blacks' socioeconomic position relative to whites (Bobo 2000; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Hogan and Mallott 2005; Hughes 1997; Jackman and Muha 1984; Kleinpenning and Hagendoorn 1993).

Furthermore, in their study on reducing racial prejudice through diversity education, Hogan and Mallott (2005) concluded that completion of a racial diversity course had no effect on undergraduate students' feelings of resentment toward blacks. Downey and Torrecilha (1994) pointed out that one of the major challenges educators confront in their racial diversity courses is that students come into these courses with preconceived notions of racial and ethnic minority groups that run counter to the mission of the diversity course requirement.

Many questions have arisen about the nature of whites' racial attitudes and how they have changed since the Jim Crow era (Bobo 2000; Feagin et al. 1996; Sears, van Laar, Carrillo, and Kosterman 1997). The most prominent question presented in the research on white racial attitudes is, "Even though whites espouse general principles of egalitarianism and racial integration, why do they oppose policy to reduce racial inequality between blacks and whites?"

There are many theoretical explanations that sociologists have proposed to explain why whites oppose policy to reduce racial inequality, but two theoretical approaches to understanding white opposition to racial policy have been underscored in the literature and will be addressed in this study. The first theoretical perspective to emerge among these theories was the social psychological approach *(symbolic racism)*. The social psychological approach argues that whites believe that the Civil Rights movement entirely eradicated racial discrimination, and thus blacks should just work harder to overcome their disadvantages without any special favors (Sears, Henry, and Kosterman 2000; Sears et al. 1997). In addition, the social psychological approach has conceptualized racial prejudice as the moral resentment that whites feel toward blacks for violating cherished American values such as individualism and the work ethic (Sears et al. 2000). \

On the other hand, the second theoretical approach known as the social structural approach (*laissez-faire racism*) contends that as whites compete for jobs, education, housing, and political positions with other racial and ethnic minority groups, whites will try to maintain or sustain their sense of domination in the social

structure (Bobo, Kluegal, and Smith 1997). Furthermore, whites blame blacks themselves for their disadvantaged social condition. According to laissez-faire theorists, the reason that whites do not support race-based policy is because they want to protect their own social and economic interests and believe that blacks are culturally inferior (Bobo et al. 1997). Both theoretical perspectives (i.e., symbolic racism and laissez-faire racism) provide a social psychological and social structural explanation to the racial conflict and also call into question the effect multicultural education has on reducing racial prejudice racism. However, too much emphasis is placed on how different these social psychological and social structural theoretical conceptualizations are and consequently, there is a tendency to focus on these racial attitudes as if they are static—i.e., the white population as a whole either expresses the social psychological or the social structural dimension. None of these studies take into account the impact of diversity course graduation requirements on students' racial attitudes and beliefs. Therefore, this study proposes that because colleges and universities across the nation are making efforts to improve race relations by implementing diversity course graduation requirements into their curriculum, students are more likely to become acquainted and sensitized to other racial and cultural experiences other than their own thereby increasing their range of reference groups. Consequently, this could have a profound impact on how whites view blacks relative to themselves regarding the distribution of rights, statuses, and resources. This study proposes that the racial attitudes of undergraduate students are uniquely affected by the nature of their secondary socialization experiences with higher education—i.e., promoting interracial contact and understanding via diversity graduation requirements—compelling students to conform to the principles of meritocracy and equal opportunity.

Two hypotheses were constructed to test the significance of the diversity course requirement effect on opposition to race-based policy, symbolic racism, and laissez-faire racism at a Research I university:

H1:   Diversity Course exposure reduces racial prejudice and racism (i.e., symbolic racism and laissez-faire racism.

H2:   Diversity Course exposure will induce support for race-based policy.

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

The data used in this study were collected at a Research I university during the spring 2002 semester using a web-based survey design. The web-based survey design presents social scientists with an unprecedented method for collecting data (Dillman 2000). The fact that every student at the university has an e-mail account and free access to the World Wide Web makes the use of a web-based survey design for surveying students a viable option. A repeated pretest/posttest designed was employed to allow for a precise examination of attitude change across time (Campbell and Stanley 1963; Marullo 1998). Data from the pretest group were collected during the first two weeks of the course. Presumably, students would not have been exposed to the entire course's content during the first two weeks of a sixteen-week course. Data were collected again in the fourteenth-week of the semester.

The sample consisted of courses that were not randomly chosen but rather conveniently selected from a list of courses that the Faculty Senate Curriculum Committee had approved for meeting the university's diversity course graduation requirements. Courses that addressed race, class, and more than one racial or ethnic group in the U.S. were the focus of this study (e.g., Intro to African American studies, Sociology of Race and Ethnicity, Social Class and Inequality, and Intro to Cultural Anthropology). Two weeks before classes began in the spring 2002 semester, ten instructors who were teaching those diversity courses aforementioned were contacted by letter via campus mail asking them to participate in the study by

distributing a "consent and participation" letter to all of their students. In addition, the letter informed the instructors of the purpose of the web-based survey and pointed out that their class time would not be interrupted for students to complete the survey. To maximize the response rate, the instructors were asked to consider offering extra-credit in addition to a cash prize to be won in a raffle drawing conducted by the researcher.

About five days after the initial mailing, all ten instructors were contacted by telephone and e-mail to make arrangements to receive and distribute the "consent and participation letters" to their students. Of the ten instructors who were contacted, nine agreed to participate in the study by distributing "consent and participation letters" to their undergraduate students in their courses during the first week of classes. In the letter, students were asked to participate by completing a questionnaire twice (i.e., once in the beginning and once at the end of the semester) on the Internet. The letter specified that their participation was important and voluntary. Also, they were told that their participation would be confidential and their names would not be matched to their responses. In addition, the letter described the nature of the Internet survey, and provided instructions on how to complete the questionnaire on-line. Students were given two weeks to complete the questionnaire. 565 students received the letter.

Of the 565 students who were contacted to complete the pretest and posttest questionnaires on the Internet, 196 chose to participate. The overall response rate was 35%. Since this study only examined white racial attitudes, twenty respondents were dropped from the sample because they were not white (n= 176). Forty-four respondents were dropped because they did not complete the posttest questionnaire and four respondents were dropped because they had indicated that they were not undergraduate students. Thus, the final sample size of those undergraduate students who completed both the pretest and posttest was 128.

The measures of symbolic racism, laissez-faire racism, and opposition to race-based policy used in this study were obtained from the research of sociologists and

psychologists who were doing cutting-edge research on the contemporary nature of racial prejudice and racism (Bobo 2000; Pettigrew 1997; Sears et al. 2000). The survey questions of racial prejudice and opposition to race-based policy in this study were based on a 5-point Likert scale format where students answered to what extent they "disagree or "agree" to questions. The measures were coded so that a higher score reflected more negative views toward blacks and greater opposition to race-based policy. For example, a score of 1 indicates no racial prejudice and opposition to race-based policy whereas a score of 5 indicates the highest levels of racial prejudice and opposition to race-based policy.

The Symbolic Racism Scale was selected to measure the subtle social psychological expressions of racial prejudice (Sears et al. 2000). The scale consisted of the following statements to which the respondents answered to what extent they would "disagree" or "agree": (a) "Most blacks who receive money from welfare programs could get along without it if they tried." (b) "Irish, Italians, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors." (c) "It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder, they could be just as well off as whites." (d) "Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve." (e) "Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class."

Laissez-faire racism was selected to measure the social structural approach to racial prejudice—i.e. respondents' perceptions of threat or zero-sum competition for scarce resources. Laissez-faire racism measures the degree to which whites feel threatened by blacks while competing for scarce resources. Students were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement and disagreement with each of the following statements: (a) "More good jobs for blacks means fewer good jobs for members of other groups." (b) "The more influence blacks have in local politics the less influence members of other groups will have in local politics." (c) "As more good housing and neighborhoods go to blacks, the fewer good houses and neighborhoods

there will be for members of other groups." (d) "Many blacks have been trying to get ahead economically at the expense of other groups" (Bobo 2000).

As aforementioned regarding race-based policy, past research studies have revealed that while the college-educated were likely to promote racial equality and racial integration, they were not in support of governmental policies to bring about equality and integration (Bobo and Kluegal 1993). This study attempted to capture this dimension of racial attitudes by using the following three-items to measure respondents' support for race-targeted policies that provide opportunities for blacks: (a) "Giving business and industry special tax breaks for locating in largely black areas." (b) "Spending more money on schools in black neighborhoods, especially for pre-school and early education programs." (c) "Provide special college scholarships for black children who maintain good grades." Each item used a five-point scale ranging from "strongly favor" to strongly oppose" to measure students' support for race-targeted policies.

Undergraduate students were required to complete one US diversity course and one International perspective course (i.e., two courses total) in order to have met the university's diversity course requirements for graduation. The diversity course requirement measure consisted of two parts. In the first part, students were asked if they had met the diversity course requirement. If they answered "yes," then students specified the type of courses (i.e., US diversity and International Perspectives) they completed for fulfilling the diversity graduation requirement. If they answered "no," then students were directed to the second part that asked them if they had completed only one diversity course (either US diversity or International Perspectives) that counted towards meeting the diversity graduation requirements. If students answered "yes" to either completing a US diversity or International Perspectives course, they were also asked to specify the type of course completed. If students could not find their course listed as a response category, they could type the name of the course in the space provided in the Internet questionnaire.

In addition to these measures of racial prejudice and opposition to race-based policy, there were some basic socio-demographic items included in the questionnaire such as gender, parent's annual income and educational level, size and racial composition of hometown. The size and racial composition of hometown are particularly relevant to this study because the size and diversity of one's hometown can have an effect on how much interracial contact she or he has had before college. Thus, the size and racial composition of hometown are briefly presented and discussed in the results of this study.

RESULTS

Over 70 percent of the students came from small towns and rural areas (e.g., 37.2 percent came from small towns and 34.9 percent came from rural areas). The racial composition that students experienced in their home communities was mostly white. Out of the 128 students, 67 students were identified as completing one diversity course for the first time. A paired t-test was conducted with these 67 students to see if there were any differences in the levels of prejudice and opposition to race-based policy before (i.e., pre course exposure) and after (post course exposure) completing a diversity course.

Table 1 reveals the results of the paired t-test and shows that there are no significant differences between the mean levels of symbolic racism, laissez-faire racism, and opposition to race-based policy of those students who had just started their diversity course versus almost completing it. Thus, the paired t-test results do not provide qualified support of the hypotheses of this study because it appears that the completion of one diversity course does not reduce students' level of racial prejudice and opposition to race-based policy. Also note in Table 1 that symbolic racism has the highest mean score (3.08), followed by opposition to race-based policy (3.00). Recall that the higher the mean scores for each of these racial prejudice and race-base policy measures, the greater expression of racial prejudice and opposition to race-based policy. Based on these mean levels, it suggests that

students were reluctant to support race-based policy even after being exposed to a diversity course and leaned more towards believing that blacks were violating the American work ethic by not "trying hard" enough to succeed.

TABLE 1. PAIRED T-TEST RESULTS FOR MEASURES OF RACIAL PREJUDICE AND OPPOSITIONAL TO RACE-BASED POLICY AS A FUNCTION OF PRE- ANDPOSTTEST DIVERSITY COURSE EXPOSURE

Variable	Pre course exposure (n=67)		Post course exposure (n=67)		
	M	SD	M	SD	*T*
Symbolic racism	2.98	.71	3.08	.67	-1.076
Race-based policy	2.97	.77	3.00	.85	-.150
Laissez-faire racism	2.27	.63	2.26	.75	.137

*p≤.05 **p≤.01 ***p≤.001
M= mean level
SD= standard deviation

However, could students who had already fulfilled the diversity requirement and who were taking additional diversity courses express lower levels of racial prejudice? Out of the 128 students, 35 students were identified who had already fulfilled the diversity requirement and were about to complete an additional diversity course. An independent samples t-test was conducted with these 35 students to compare them with those students (n=67) who had almost completed one diversity course. The results of the independent samples t-test in Table 2 indicate that those students who had already fulfilled the diversity requirement and were about to complete an additional diversity course, exhibited significantly less symbolic racism and were more likely to support race-based policy than those students who were about to complete only one diversity course. In addition, the mean level of laissez-faire racism is very low for both groups and there are no significant differences found between them.

TABLE 2. INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TEST RESULTS FOR MEASURES OF RACIAL PREJUDICE AND OPPOSITION TO RACE-BASED POLICY GROUPED BY EITHER NEARLY COMPLETING DIVERSITY COURSE OR REQUIREMENT ALREADY FULFILLED AND TAKING AN ADDITIONAL COURSE

Variable	One Diversity course (n=67)		Requirement fulfilled plus additional course (n=35)		
	M	SD	M	SD	*T*
Symbolic racism	3.08	.67	2.78	.47	2.903**
Race-based policy	3.00	.85	2.60	.61	2.906**
Laissez-faire racism	2.27	.75	2.10	.52	1.652

*p≤.05 **p≤.01 ***p≤.001
M= mean level
SD= standard deviation

The independent samples t-test results in Table 2 seem to suggest that fulfilling the diversity requirement and taking additional diversity courses could reduce racial prejudice and induce support for race-based policy. However, these results must be treated with caution because a selection bias could be at work here. That is, those students who had already fulfilled the diversity course requirement and were taking an additional diversity course may have been more open to and interested in learning about racial prejudice, racism, and race-based policy than those students who were just starting their diversity course requirement for the first time.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the mean level findings of this study that students did not express laissez-faire racism—i.e., do not feel threatened by blacks. However, consistent with prior research on the persistence of racial prejudice and racism, the

findings do reveal that students may have had a tendency to blame blacks themselves for not working "hard enough" to succeed and thus they were less likely to support race-based policy to eradicate racial inequality.

This study was a departure from previous studies that call into question the effect that diversity education has on reducing racial prejudice and racism by making the case that undergraduate students are uniquely affected by secondary socialization forces—i.e., diversity values and mission of higher education. Interestingly, the students in this study came from mostly white communities who had very little, if any, interracial contact before coming to college. As a result, students were more likely to believe that the opportunity structure was open and fair and thus were unlikely to support the implementation of race-based policies to help eradicate racial inequality.

It is interesting to mention that the quasi-experimental findings could lend support to the necessity of requiring undergraduate students to take diversity courses that challenge their prejudicial views. However, since this study did not test for selection bias and other possible intervening variables, a definite conclusion could not be made in the sense that the diversity course content was primarily responsible for improving racial attitudes.

There are some limitations in this study that should be addressed in future research. First, this study only examined prejudicial and racist attitudes towards blacks. Diversity course requirements are not limited to the African American experience in the United States and so racial prejudice and racist attitudes toward other racial groups should also be assessed. Second, the data were collected at only one university, which has its own unique approach to implementing diversity requirements. Consequently, the findings of this study are unique to this Research I university and thus cannot be generalized to other institutions. Studies that assess the impact of diversity course graduation requirements at many colleges and universities would be far more useful for colleges and universities who are interested in implementing diversity course requirements into their curricula.

Third, although survey studies are useful in gathering information on respondents' views and opinions about race and race relations, they are severely limited tools for examining the reasons why people answer or respond the way they do (Bonilla-Silva 2003).   For example, the survey questions in this study were primarily based on a five-point Likert scale format where respondents answered to what extent they "disagree" or "agree" to questions. Furthermore, because of the social condemnation of racial prejudice and stereotypes, there could be a tendency for students to overlook their real feelings about blacks and provide answers that are consistent with public norms regarding race (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Therefore, mix mode data collection techniques (qualitative interviews and survey questions) are highly encouraged to provide an opportunity to go more into depth with the reasons why people answer the questions the way they do. Future research that addresses these limitations will provide very valuable curricular insights into how universities can implement diversity course requirements into their curricula to reduce racial prejudice and improve interracial understanding.

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