Student Perceptions of Campus Cultural Climate by Race

Julie R. Ancis, William E. Sedlacek, and Jonathan J. Mohr

Five hundred and seventy-eight African American, Asian American, Latino/a, and White undergraduates responded to a questionnaire assessing perceptions and experiences of the campus cultural climate. Results revealed significant differences between racial and ethnic groups on multiple dimensions of the campus cultural climate. African American students consistently reported significantly more racial–ethnic conflict on campus; pressure to conform to stereotypes; and less equitable treatment by faculty, staff, and teaching assistants. White students' responses reflected limited perceptions of racial–ethnic tensions and a university climate characterized by respect for diversity. Counseling implications are presented.

Recent demographic trends and the implementation of landmark court decisions challenging discriminatory admissions policies have contributed to a significant increase in the number of African American, Asian American, and Latino/a college and university students (Appel, Cartwright, Smith, & Wolf, 1996; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). Although educational institutions enroll a diverse student body, research suggests that these students do not necessarily experience a similar campus environment. For example, students of color enrolled in predominantly White institutions, unlike their White counterparts (the term *White* will be used to refer to European-Americans of non-Latino origin), often experience a lack of support and an unwelcoming academic climate (Loo & Rolison, 1986; McClelland & Auster, 1990; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996; Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999; Stone & Archer, 1990; Suen, 1983).

In addition to encountering different experiences, research demonstrates that students of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds have divergent perspectives regarding features of campus life. Whereas White students tend to view groups composed solely of African American or Asian American students as "racial segregation" (Loo & Rolison, 1986, p. 72), students of color perceive the same groups as providing a valuable source of support. Similarly, students of color may hold "more nuanced perceptions of . . . discrimination" (Cabrera & Nora, 1994; p. 404). Cabrera and Nora examined the construct validity of three dimensions of perceptions of prejudice and discrimination: (a) racial/ethnic climate on campus, (b) prejudiced attitudes of faculty and staff, and (c) discriminatory experiences in the classroom. Stu-

dents of color conceptualized prejudiced attitudes of faculty and staff and discriminatory experiences in the classroom as separate yet interrelated dimensions, whereas White students viewed these attitudes and experiences in the classroom as one dimension (Cabrera & Nora, 1994). These findings suggest that investigators must consider students' varied perceptions of a multidimensional campus cultural environment.

Stone and Archer (1990) discussed the need for college and university counseling centers to respond to the concerns of an increasingly diverse student body. Similarly, several authors (e.g., LaFromboise, Foster, & James, 1996; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992) have discussed the ethical responsibility of counselors to understand the particular life experiences of a culturally diverse clientele. Information regarding differences in students' experiences of the campus cultural climate is necessary for developing and implementing ethical and culturally responsive interventions.

Much of the research that has examined students' perceptions of the university climate has focused on one racial–ethnic group (typically Whites or African Americans), has compared African American students with their White counterparts, or has compared White students with a racially–ethnically heterogeneous group of students of color (e.g., Allen, 1987, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Follet, Andberg, & Hendel, 1982; Loo & Rolison, 1986; McClelland & Auster, 1990; Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986). It can be expected that African American, Asian American, Latino/a, and White students possess different perceptions of the academic environment as a function of their unique historical background, cultural values, and adjustment experiences (Special Report: Hispanics and the Academy, 1988; Hurtado, Carter, Spuler, 1996; Minatoya & Sedlacek, 1983).

Julie R. Ancis is an assistant professor in the Department of Counseling and Psychological Services at Georgia State University, Atlanta. William E. Sedlacek is a professor in the Counseling Center, and Jonathan J. Mohr is a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology, both at the University of Maryland, College Park. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Julie R. Ancis, Department of Counseling and Psychological Services, College of Education, University Plaza, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA 30303 (e-mail: jancis@gsu.edu).

Moreover, few studies have compared various racial and ethnic groups' overall and more specific perceptions of the campus cultural climate. Such information can be used to develop relevant counseling interventions that foster all students' psychological, academic, and social potential.

In contrast to previous investigations, the present study compared African American, Asian American, Latino/a, and White students' perceptions and experiences of the campus cultural climate. In addition, this study explored perceptions and experiences regarding multiple dimensions of the campus cultural climate, including dimensions specifically related to race and ethnicity. Thus, students' experiences of both general and more specific aspects of the university climate and their interactions with both racially–ethnically similar and dissimilar faculty, teaching assistants, and peers were assessed. Third, areas of particular relevance to counselors were assessed, including comfort with one's own racial–ethnic background, sensitivity to racial–ethnic differences, perceived pressure to conform to racial–ethnic stereotypes, and overall satisfaction with the university environment.

It must be noted that the term *race* is increasingly being recognized as a social, cultural, and political construct having no scientific basis (Cameron & Wycoff, 1998). We considered race a social construct that influences how individuals and situations are perceived and experienced. Participants' self-reported race–ethnicity are indicated.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 578 undergraduates (307 first-year, 271 juniors) enrolled at a large mid-Atlantic university. First-year students and juniors were targeted because they represent a range of exposure to the university campus. Participants' self-reported race–ethnicity was as follows: 136 African Americans (43 men, 93 women), 130 Asian Americans (72 men, 58 women), 77 Latinos/as (34 men, 43 women), and 235 Whites (105 men, 130 women). A total of 324 of the participants were woemn and 254 men. The mean age of participants for all racial–ethnic groups was 20 years, with a range of 17 to 42 years. There were no significant age differences between groups.

Instrument

The Cultural Attitudes and Climate Questionnaire (CACQ) was developed by Helm, Sedlacek, and Prieto (1998) to measure students' perceptions and experiences of the university racial and ethnic climate. Using a Likert-type scale, students report their level of agreement with 100 statements regarding the campus climate. Eleven factors were identified using principal axis factor analysis and varimax rotation, accounting for 48% of the total variance. The 11 factors are as follows: (1) Racial Tension (alpha = .76, range = 5–20; perception and experience of racial conflict on campus), (2) Cross-Cultural Comfort (alpha = .75, range = 7–35; comfort with racially–ethnically similar and dissimilar faculty and peers), (3) Di-

versity Awareness (alpha = .69, range = 5–10; sensitivity to racial–ethnic differences), (4) Racial Pressures (alpha = .65, range = 4–20; pressure to conform to racial–ethnic stereotypes), (5) Residence Hall Tension (1 item, range = 1–4; perception of interracial and interethnic conflict in residence halls), (6) Fair Treatment (alpha = .75, range = 3–15; experience of fair treatment by faculty, teaching assistants, and students), (7) Faculty Racism (alpha = .77, range = 2–8; experience of racist atmosphere perpetuated by faculty), (8) Respect for Other Cultures (alpha = .62, range = 3–12; faculty and student respect for different racial and ethnic groups), (9) Lack of Support (alpha = .63, range = 3–12; experience of help and support from faculty, students, and teaching assistants), (10) Comfort with Own Culture (alpha = .54, range = 2–10; comfort with own racial–ethnic background), (11) Overall Satisfaction (alpha = .78, range = 5–25; experience of university environment as academically and socially rewarding). An earlier study (Helm et al., 1998) using the CACQ found a positive relationship between Whites, Asian American, Latinos/as, and African American students' perceptions of fair treatment by students and teachers and comfort in cross-cultural situations, and overall satisfaction with the university. Conversely, high levels of perceived racial tension and lack of support were associated with low overall school satisfaction.

Procedure

This study was conducted as part of a campus diversity evaluation committee program. The university studied had implemented extensive diversity programming in academic and nonacademic areas for several years, including curriculum transformation workshops for faculty, prejudice reduction workshops for students and staff, diversity courses, extensive coverage of diversity information on the Internet, and related research and evaluation projects on diversity issues. The CACQ was mailed to 964 first- and third-year students using stratified random sampling to ensure sufficient racial and ethnic representation. Additional items pertaining to respondents' race, class, and gender were included on the questionnaire to verify information on student records. Thirty percent of respondents returned completed questionnaires separately from postcards containing identifying information. A follow-up letter was mailed to each participant. Next, graduate students in education and psychology performed an additional follow-up with a minimum of three telephone calls to each participant, resulting in an overall return rate of 60%.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Because of the unequal numbers of students in the different racial and ethnic groups, we conducted statistical tests for homogeneity of variance. Levine tests indicated heterogeneity of variance only for Factor 7 (Faculty Racism). However, it is generally believed that differences in group

variances are not large enough to significantly distort analysis of variance (ANOVA) results when the ratio of maximum variance to minimum variance is less than 4.0 (Howell, 1992). The ratio for Factor 7 was 2.62, suggesting that the heterogeneity of variance was not large enough to compromise the validity of the ANOVA results.

Main Analyses

We conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to test for racial and ethnic group differences on the 11 factors. The multivariate effect was significant, $F(33, 1662.35) = 5.78, p < .0001$. The MANOVA procedure was followed by 11 univariate tests for significance. Significant pairwise differences between groups for each factor were determined using Tukey's honestly significant difference (HSD) tests. Given the number of comparisons conducted, an alpha level of .005 (.05/11 factors) was used to control for familywise error. Statistically significant pairwise differences were found for 8 of the 11 factors (see Table 1).

Results related to general racial and ethnic climate concerns and overall satisfaction with the university are presented first, followed by personal experiences of campus racism, and finally results related to individual comfort level with racially–ethnically similar and dissimilar people on campus. In addition to the group differences reported, significant univariate results are reported in the following sections.

Perceptions of general racial and ethnic climate. African American students perceived and experienced significantly more racial conflict on campus and racial–ethnic separation than did Asian American and White students: Factor 1, $F(3, 536) = 6.62, p < .0002$. African American students perceived significantly more interracial tension in the residence halls than did White students: Factor 5, $F(3, 401) = 5.41, p < .001$. White students reported significantly greater faculty and student re-

spect for different racial and ethnic groups than did African American and Asian American students: Factor 8, $F(3, 547) = 10.39, p < .0001$. Finally, White students experienced significantly greater overall satisfaction with the university compared with African American and Asian American students: Factor 11, $F(3, 557) = 5.67, p < .0008$.

Personal experiences of campus racism. African American, Asian American, and Latino/a students were significantly more likely than their White counterparts to experience pressure to conform to racial and ethnic stereotypes regarding their academic performance and behavior, as well as to minimize overt racial–ethnic group characteristics (e.g., language and dress) in order to be accepted: Factor 4, $F(3, 532) = 50.93, p < .0001$. Asian American and African American students experienced this pressure to a significantly greater degree than Latino/a students did. African American and Asian American students reported a significantly greater degree of faculty racism compared with White students, with African American students reporting significantly more faculty racism than Latino/a students: Factor 7, $F(3, 571) = 9.16, p < .0001$. White students similarly reported significantly fairer treatment by faculty, teaching assistants, and students compared with African American and Asian American students: Factor 6, $F(3, 567) = 6.39, p < .0003$.

Racial–ethnic comfort. African American and Latino/a students expressed a greater degree of comfort with both racially–ethnically similar and different faculty and students compared with White students: Factor 2, $F(3, 518) = 5.78, p < .0007$.

DISCUSSION

Results indicated that significant racial and ethnic group differences exist regarding perceptions and experiences of

TABLE 1

Racial and Ethnic Group Differences

Factor	African American		Asian American		Latino		White		Significant Differences
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
1. Racial Tension	11.76	3.08	10.54	2.87	10.76	3.03	10.29	2.98	AF > A, W
2. Cross-Cultural Comfort	27.95	3.94	26.75	3.48	28.10	3.73	26.42	4.31	AF, L > W
3. Diversity Awareness	7.03	1.55	7.36	1.83	7.32	1.62	7.29	1.65	
4. Racial Pressures	11.21	2.61	10.81	2.79	9.24	2.79	8.00	2.54	AF, A, L > W; AF, A > L
5. Residence Hall Tension	2.18	0.85	2.01	1.00	1.98	0.89	1.76	0.79	AF > W
6. Fair Treatment	11.71	1.76	11.71	1.94	12.17	1.61	12.43	1.91	W > AF, A
7. Faculty Racism	3.44	2.02	3.15	1.73	2.74	1.29	2.61	1.25	AF, A > W; AF > L
8. Respect for Other Cultures	7.60	1.72	8.04	1.68	8.05	1.75	8.63	1.74	W > AF, A
9. Lack of Support	6.60	2.07	6.95	2.29	6.62	1.97	6.63	2.36	
10. Comfort with Own Culture	7.36	1.64	7.42	1.53	7.88	1.51	7.10	1.72	
11. Overall Satisfaction	17.93	3.23	17.83	3.27	18.70	3.64	19.14	3.42	W > AF, A

Note. AF = African American (n = 136); A = Asian American (n = 130); L = Latino (n = 77); W = White (n = 235).
*p < .005.

the campus cultural climate. African Americans consistently reported more negative experiences compared with Asian American, Latino/a, and White students. Specifically, African American students experienced greater racial–ethnic hostility; greater pressure to conform to stereotypes; less equitable treatment by faculty, staff, and teaching assistants; and more faculty racism than did other groups. This is consistent with previous research, indicating that African American undergraduates perceive and experience significantly more racism on campus than do their counterparts who are not African American (Cabrera & Nora, 1994; Hurtado, 1992; LaSure, 1993; Sedlacek, 1987). The present study highlighted the particular dimensions of these students' experiences.

Asian American and Latino/a students also reported experiences of stereotyping and prejudice in the form of limited respect and unfair treatment by faculty, teaching assistants, and students; and pressure to conform to stereotypes. However, compared with other racial–ethnic groups (students of color) on campus, Latinos/as experienced the least racism and experienced a campus climate relatively free of racial and ethnic conflict. Several factors may account for these findings. First, at the university from which the sample was drawn, Latinos made up approximately 6% of the undergraduate student body, compared with 14% for African American students, and 12% for Asian American students. The limited number of Latino/a students on this campus may prevent them from being perceived as a threat or as competitors for resources, and thus less subject to discriminatory behavior. Different results may be found on campuses with a larger Latino/a enrollment and with more overt anti-immigrant or anti-ethnic minority sentiment. Results may also reflect that Latinos are considered an ethnic group rather than a racial group. The lack of ostensible, physical racial characteristics may render many Latinos less subject to discrimination than other minorities, such as Asian American and African American students (see Helms, 1995). Alternatively, given the need to negotiate the rules of conduct of Anglo-American culture in U.S. colleges and universities, including use of the English language, Latinos/as who attend and remain in college may be more acculturated than their peers who do not attend college (Baron & Constantine, 1997). As such, they may report a greater level of adjustment in college and university settings than do their nonacculturated peers. This is consistent with previous meta-analytic research demonstrating that Latino/a student's familiarity and comfort with Anglo culture is positively related to less stress experienced in predominantly Anglo universities (Quintana, Vogel, & Ybarra, 1991).

It is also noteworthy that of all groups, Latinos reported greater (i.e., higher means) comfort with their own cultural background as well as with individuals who are culturally different. These students' acceptance of self and others may buffer the negative effects of discrimination. In fact, positive attitudes toward culturally different others and a secure ethnic identity seem to be associated with lower levels of stress on campus among Latino/a students (Quintana et al., 1991).

White students consistently reported less racial tension, few expectations to conform to stereotypic behavior, an experience of being treated fairly, a climate characterized by respect for diversity, and the most overall satisfaction. Despite reports of interracial tension and discrimination on campus by students of color who make up approximately one third of the study body, White students seem relatively immune from such a hostile climate. White students not only experienced limited discrimination, they also seemed to lack a recognition that interracial tensions and conflict exist for a significant portion of the student body. This last finding is consistent with previous studies that demonstrate significant discrepancies between White and minority student's perceptions of interracial tension and university support for students of color (Cabrera & Nora, 1994; Loo & Rolison, 1986; McClelland & Auster, 1990).

Counseling Implications

Counselor awareness of students' particular perceptions and unique experiences is essential to providing counseling services that meet the needs of a diverse student body (Bishop, 1990; Stone & Archer, 1990). Understanding students' unique experiences and those contextual variables that may perpetuate psychological stress provides the basis for ethical and accurate assessment procedures (American Psychological Association, 1993; Sue et al., 1992). The campus environment may contribute to the particular types of difficulties that students present at counseling centers. Continual exposure to a hostile educational climate, marked by racial tension and stereotyping, may adversely influence the academic achievement and psychological health of students of color. White students' lack of awareness or denial regarding racial and ethnic intolerance may result in their tendency to discredit reports of bias and discrimination by students of color. Denial or minimization of racism may create additional stress for students of color who often have limited outlets for valid expressions of frustration. Counselors must attend to the connection between perceptions of discrimination and clinical issues, such as anxiety and depression (Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994). Counselors may also want to routinely assess the degree to which African American students' academic adjustment and psychosocial functioning is affected by expectations to conform to racial and ethnic stereotypes and minimal social support. Similarly, the relationship between experiences of residence hall tension and one's academic and social adjustment may be a critical area of assessment for students.

An understanding of the particular experiences and perceptions of African American, Asian American, Latino/a, and White college students may also influence the development of culturally relevant and effective interventions. Counseling strategies may be indicated that both increase students' ability to effectively respond to racial and ethnic stereotyping and maintain or increase their academic self-efficacy to buffer the impact of denigrating expectations and discouraging feedback. Similarly, counselors may fa-

cilitate African American, Asian American, and Latino/a students' exploration and pursuit of alternative sources of assistance and social support. Educational approaches that encourage students to pursue appropriate venues for reporting racist experiences and seeking redress may also be indicated.

Because of the connection between environmental factors and social and psychological functioning (Wandersman & Nation, 1998), interventions that do not attend to students' social milieu may have limited effectiveness. Actively supportive, nondiscriminatory campus environments are associated with greater satisfaction in college, better adjustment, and persistence through graduation. This is particularly the case for students of color (Kuh et al., 1991; MacKay & Kuh, 1994; Nettles et al., 1986). The pursuit of more proactive intervention strategies that extend beyond individual or group counseling efforts is warranted. This includes conducting outreach programs, developing mentor programs, and serving as liaisons between faculty, administrators, and students.

Ponterotto (1991) discussed the social responsibility of counseling professionals to lead efforts to improve interethnic and interracial relationships. Counselor educators' unique training in preventative approaches to healthy development is relevant to promoting students' sense of connection with the university. Programming efforts must thus target potential areas of stress for students of color. One such area includes faculty racism. The significance of positive and supportive relationships between faculty, administrators, and students to the academic achievement of students of color has been demonstrated (Watson & Kuh, 1996). Outreach efforts that increase faculty and staff awareness of both subtle and more overt manifestations of prejudice and race-based discrimination are necessary to increasing students' comfort level both in and out of the classroom. Faculty orientation programs may include workshops on instructional equity. Counselors can also serve as informational consultants to faculty interested in culturally relevant course materials (Ponterotto, 1991). In addition, coordinating mentor programs that match new students with ethnically and racially similar faculty, staff, and students may provide students with needed academic and social support (Thile & Matt, 1995).

The results suggest a need for counselors to provide university programming that focuses on creating an accepting and comfortable campus climate in which biases are challenged and differences are understood and appreciated. White students' lack of awareness of racism may result in resentment toward students of color for diversity programming that is perceived as unnecessary or designed only for racial and ethnic minorities. Such misunderstandings and misperceptions often foster interracial and interethnic conflict. Campus programming to increase White students' awareness of both subtle and overt manifestations of bias could include providing information about the sociocultural history and background of diverse groups on campus. Incorporating such information into orientation programs can promote cultural awareness and sensitivity at the onset of students' university experiences. This may reduce stereotyping that results from a limited understanding of others as well as minimize pressures on students of color to conform to expectations or "hide" their differences. Workshops for White students that explore the significance of race in people's lives and the relationship between race and privilege may increase their sensitivity to the experiences of students of color and encourage them to assume a role in influencing the university's academic and social climate. Programming efforts that facilitate contact between students of diverse backgrounds, such as cooperative learning activities, may also be used to increase White student's comfort level with racially–ethnically diverse faculty and students and promote positive university environments (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Pate, 1988).

Counseling efforts must ultimately send a message to students that exposure to differences is enriching, leads to flexibility in thought and action, and results in personal and professional advantages in an increasingly interdependent and diverse world.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study exist. First, the CACQ is a self-report measure. The actual experiences of these students were not observed. However, campus diversity programming efforts were initiated in repose to actual incidents of racial and ethnic conflict. The existence of these incidents lends validity to the students' self-reports. Second, the study was conducted on one university campus and the results may not generalize to demographically different campuses, such as those with a larger Latino/a student body or that are more racially and ethnically homogeneous. However, the fact that results were obtained from students attending a single institution, as opposed to multiple institutions, strengthens the internal validity of the study. Third, there is the possibility of Type I error because of the number of post hoc tests conducted. However, given the practical significance of developing a more comprehensive understanding of diverse students' perceptions of the campus cultural climate, we were more concerned with missing existing relationships and making a Type II error versus a Type I error (see Pedhazur, 1982).

In addition, it must be recognized that existing differences within racial and ethnic groups may affect perceptions and experiences of campus cultural climate. Such individual differences include level of racial or ethnic identity, level of acculturation, and socioeconomic status (Helms, 1994; Padilla, 1980; Phinney, 1990). Gender differences may also influence results. For example, women of color who experience both racism and sexism often report exposure to multiple forms of oppression that differ from those experienced by their male peers (Carter, Pearson, & Shavlik, 1987; Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994; Fleming, 1983). Moreover, gender differences may vary within each racial or ethnic group. Future investigations may explore the relationship between these individual differences and students' perceptions and experiences of the campus cultural climate.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, the results enrich the understanding of students' experiences of the multiple dimensions of the campus racial and ethnic climate. Tailoring campus services and programs to meet the unique needs of a diverse student body is clearly indicated.

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