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Timothy B. Smith  
*Brigham Young University, tbs@byu.edu*

Raquel Bowman  
*Brigham Young University*

See next page for additional authors

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RACIAL ATTITUDES AMONG ASIAN AND EUROPEAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS: A CROSS-CULTURAL EXAMINATION

TIMOTHY B. SMITH
RAQUEL BOWMAN
SUNGTI HSU
Brigham Young University

College campuses are becoming increasingly racially diverse and may provide an optimal setting for the reduction of racial stereotypes and prejudices perpetuated in society. To better understand racism among college students, this study evaluated the attitudes of Asian and White European Americans toward several racial out-groups. Participants completed a survey containing the Social Distance Scale, and differences between participants' ratings of their own race were contrasted with their ratings of other races. Findings revealed strong preferences for social affiliations with members of their same racial background, with attitudes towards out-groups differing as a function of the race of the participant. Asians were much more likely to feel comfortable socializing with Whites than Whites were with Asians. Continued research regarding cross-cultural differences in inter-group relations on college campuses is encouraged.

Racial diversity on college campuses has increased over the past several decades, with overt racial conflicts giving way to more subtle tensions (e.g., Sydell & Nelson, 2000). Although overt racism is no longer commonplace, contemporary colleges and universities tend to have institutional cultures that deny or minimize racial inequities, pressure students of color to assimilate to White culture, maintain racial hierarchies, superficially address racial issues, and resist addressing genuine diversity (Corcoran & Thompson, 2004). This kind of climate benefits students who comply with the racial status quo but negatively impacts the academic success of racial minority students (van Laar, Siderius, Rabinowitz, & Sinclair, 1999). Even though institutions of higher learning are becoming more demographically diverse, racial tensions and inequities may continue to affect some college students.

College students' experiences of racial issues differ substantially across race (e.g., Buttny, 1997). For White students from racially homogeneous backgrounds, enrollment in a demographically diverse university may represent their first meaningful exposure to multiculturalism. This encounter with racial diversity can either diminish or solidify racial stereotypes that White students have regarding other racial groups (e.g., Helms, 1990; Pettigrew, 1998). Oppositely, for college students from historically oppressed racial groups, colleges and universities may represent the institutionalization of White culture, not necessarily reflecting their values nor rewarding their contributions. Students of color often feel alienated and mistreated on
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predominantly White college campuses (Foster, 2005).

Given these dynamics among students from different racial backgrounds, it is not surprising that students may experience racial tension in some large public universities (Coopwood, 2000). However, what is surprising is that these tensions may be increasing over time (McCormack, 1995) in a possible reversal of the trend for diminished racial tensions in previous decades. Research into racial attitudes of college students can improve understanding regarding contemporary racial dynamics and therefore inform interventions designed to improve interracial relations on campus.

For many reasons, research regarding racism has focused on the power and privileges of White European Americans (e.g., Smith, 2004). Although much of this research has been in contrast to Blacks/African Americans (Hall, 2002), few research studies have examined the racial attitudes of other racial groups such as Asians and Latinos (Kohatsu et al., 2000). Characterizing racism in terms of Black/White relations avoids some harmful misconceptions (i.e., blaming historically oppressed racial groups for racial biases actually perpetuated and reinforced by White sociopolitical systems), but it does not provide an accurate picture of interracial relations, particularly on multicultural college campuses. Specifically, portraying racism as a Black/White dichotomy reifies “the rhetoric of hierarchy within a single species and in fact provides a conduit for the continued social, economic, and political oppression of all” (Hall, 2002, p. 110). Clearly, research should address interracial relations from multiple perspectives, including those from groups currently underrepresented in the literature.

Asians and Asian Americans comprise an increasing percentage of college students, with greater proportional representation than any other racial/ethnic group (e.g., Hune, 2002). It is therefore particularly important to understand the perspectives and experiences of these students. Asians in North America do experience racial prejudice, in some instances as aversive as that reported by other racial groups (Biasco, Goodwin, & Vitale, 2001). Experiences with racism clearly shape Asian American identity (Alvarez & Helms, 2001). Internalized stereotypes and racism constrict identity development and negatively impact collective self-esteem (e.g., Rahimi & Fisher, 2002). Moreover, the threatened self-esteem that accompanies experiences of prejudice and social segregation often leads to prejudice against out-groups (Verkuyten & Masson, 1995). Prejudice against one’s own racial group typically results in prejudice expressed toward other racial groups. Hence, Asian college students are not only at risk for negative outcomes associated with received prejudice, but they may also protectively segregate themselves from other racial groups and thereby maintain racial hierarchies reinforced in the wider society.

Several recent studies have found evidence of negative racial attitudes among members of historically oppressed racial groups (Biasco et al., 2001; Hall, 2002; Kohatsu et al., 2000; Lowery, Hardin, & Sinclair, 2001). Studies specifically con-
duced with Asian American participants have demonstrated that like any other group, Asian Americans tend to show a greater preference for members of their own racial background (e.g., Lee, 1993). At least one cross-cultural comparison study has found that Asian Americans may be the least comfortable in interacting with other racial groups (Mack et al., 1997). Another study showed that when Asian Americans and African Americans increase their interactions, racial tension increased (McCormack, 1995). Lowery and colleagues (2001) found that Asian Americans were more likely than European Americans to exhibit automatic prejudice in the presence of a Black experimenter, but they suggested that this finding could be explained by a tendency for Asian Americans to experience less social pressure to express “politically correct” views than European Americans. Overall, this research has focused on Asian Americans’ perceptions of Blacks/African Americans, thereby maintaining the racial dichotomies characteristic of racism research. Clearly, additional research is needed about interracial relations among Asian Americans and other historically oppressed racial groups (Hall, 2002).

**Method**

Participants were 575 White college students and 122 international college students from East Asia (China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan) attending a public university in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. White participants were 199 males and 376 females, ranging in age from 18 to 56 years ($M = 20.3; SD = 1.8$). Asian participants consisted of 60 males and 62 females, ranging in age from 18 to 44 ($M = 24.8; SD = 3.1$). Participants received a survey in introductory social science classes and via postal mail with a subsequent follow-up reminder letter. The survey contained demographic questions and a modified version (Byrnes & Kiger, 1988) of the Social Distance Scale (Bogardus, 1933), a widely used measure of attitudes toward racial/ethnic groups (Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites in this particular study). The internal consistency reliability coefficient for the SDS was .95 in this study, with multiple reports of construct, content, and convergent validity provided across several decades (e.g., Campbell, 1953; Smith & Dempsey, 1983). To conduct comparative analyses across Asian and European American participants, Social Distance Scale scores from the person’s own racial group (Asian if they were Asian) was subtracted from the scores of the person’s rating of other racial groups (i.e., African Americans). The difference between participants’ ratings of their own racial group vs. other racial groups was the variable evaluated in this study.

**Results**

To estimate the magnitude of the discrepancy between participants’ level of comfort interacting with members of their own race compared to their comfort interacting with members of other races, we calculated standardized mean differences (Cohen’s $d$) on the Social Distance Scale scores (see Table 1). Participants were consistently more comfortable associating with members of their own race than with members of other racial groups (only 6.5% of participants indicating feeling as com-
Table 1

Standardized Mean Differences (Cohen’s d) in Social Distance Scale scores between Participants’ Ratings of Their Own Racial Group vs. Racial Out-Groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Out-group</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Asians</th>
<th>Whites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African Americans/Blacks</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Americans/Latinos</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Americans/Asians</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Americans/Whites</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td></td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: NA = Not applicable. Analyses were conducted contrasting participants’ level of comfort with their own racial group with their level of comfort with other racial groups.

Fortable or more comfortable with individuals from racial groups different from their own). The greatest difference in ratings (indicating highest levels of racial prejudice) was with Asian participants’ ratings of African Americans/Blacks, and the lowest differences in ratings (indicating the lowest levels of racial prejudice) was with Asian participants’ ratings of Whites. Because racial attitudes may differ across participant age and gender and because the samples of Asians and European Americans differed from one another in terms of their average age ($F = 296.5$, $p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 1.57$) and gender composition ($F = 9.2$, $p = .002$, Cohen’s $d = .29$), participant age and gender were used as covariates in the inferential analyses involving the Social Distance Scale. A multivariate analysis of covariance conducted for participants’ ratings of all racial groups on the Social Distance Scale reached statistical significance (Wilk’s Lambda = .94, $F = 13.2$, $p < .001$, partial Eta squared = .06). Univariate analyses revealed no statistically significant differences in Asian vs. European American participants’ ratings of Hispanics/Latinos. However, Asian participants reported being less comfortable than European Americans in socializing with African Americans/Blacks ($F = 3.9$, $p = .049$, Cohen’s $d = .24$), and European American participants reported being less comfortable socializing with Asians than Asians were with socializing with European Americans ($F = 6.0$, $p = .014$, Cohen’s $d = .30$).
Discussion

Participants in this research study expressed greater preference for socializing with individuals of their own race than with individuals from other racial groups. Although these data are to be expected given extant theories of social behavior (e.g., Tajfel, 1978; Kohatsu et al., 2000), the finding indicates a continuation of racial prejudice among college students in contemporary society. The effect sizes reported in Table 1 were all of large magnitude using Cohen’s guidelines for interpreting effect sizes (1988). The differences were also large in practical terms. Relative to the scaling used in this study, participants feel “comfortable” with individuals of their own race but “neutral” (neither comfortable nor uncomfortable) when interacting with members of other races. Although we evaluated only attitudes about social interactions and not social interactions themselves, it is likely that these large differences in participant comfort levels will impact inter-racial interactions to at least some degree (Plant, 2004).

The results also indicated that racial attitudes differ moderately across race, depending upon which racial out-group is being evaluated. White college students in this research study were least comfortable interacting with Hispanic/Latinos and most comfortable interacting with African Americans/Blacks. These findings may be due to the fact that interracial relations vary greatly by geography and social context. Typically the strongest racial tensions occur when groups are in direct competition for resources (Esses, Dovidio, & Jackson, 2002). Data for this particular study were collected in the Rocky Mountain region of the U.S., where Hispanic/Latinos comprise the largest ethnic minority group and where White participants are likely to perceive Hispanics/Latinos as being in competition with them for existing resources. Furthermore, Whites’ interactions with Hispanic/Latinos may reinforce stereotypes or be too superficial to change pre-existing stereotypes (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998).

Oppositely, because there are proportionately few African Americans in the Rocky Mountain region, Whites in the region may not perceive them as a collective threat to White culture and privileges. In this study, the White students’ perceptions about African Americans/Blacks may be based less on their personal experiences than on vicarious media images (e.g., pop music stars and professional athletes), as described in Janet Helms’ (1990) first stage of White racial identity development. However, because neither the quality of inter-racial interactions nor the perceptions of threat were directly assessed in this study, these explanations would need to be evaluated in future research.

Asian participants in this study were most comfortable interacting with Whites and least comfortable interacting with Blacks. These results are similar to those found in other studies (e.g., Lowery et al., 2001; Mack et al., 1997; McCormack, 1995). The results may be partially explained by the fact that Asian media generally portrays Whites as attractive and successful (Dixon, Azocar, & Casas, 2003), with adherence among Asians to White culture symbolic of high socio-economic status. Oppositely, media images and
stereotypes in Asian societies regarding Blacks may be less than positive (Dixon et al.). Negative media images, stereotypes, and lack of personal contact experience are all possible explanations for Asian students being least comfortable interacting with Blacks (Kohatsu et al., 2000).

Acculturation is another factor associated with Asian students’ attitudes toward Whites. Many Asians may feel a need to adapt to White culture, and some international students may use their acquired knowledge of White culture to distinguish themselves after returning to their own countries (Mattar, 2004). However, some students may feel conflicted or marginalized between the two cultures (Henry, Stiles, & Biran, 2005), and some may not have any desire to acculturate because they view their residence as in the U.S. as temporary or because they strongly prefer their own culture (Utsey, Chae, Brown, & Kelly, 2002). Because this study did not explicitly evaluate the acculturation level of the participants, future research will be needed to verify the influence of acculturation on inter-racial interactions.

Overall, the results of this study support the value of interventions on college campuses designed to enhance interracial relations. Multicultural college campus environments can be helpful in promoting multicultural interaction skills and reducing the salience of racial boundaries reinforced in the larger society. College students’ racial attitudes can be influenced by their personal experiences interacting with members of other racial groups (Van Laar, Levin, Sinclair, Sidanius, 2005). However, for college campuses to have a positive impact upon interracial relations, they must maintain climates and systems that explicitly promote interracial understanding (e.g., Pettigrew, 1998).

References


