6. EXPECTATIONS OF CAMPUS RACIAL CLIMATE AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

A review of the literature examining black students’ attendance at predominantly white colleges and universities yields a wealth of information about their social and economic characteristics (Ballard, 1973; Blackwell, 1982; Davis, 1991; Hall & Allen, 1982; Nettles, 1988; Peterson et al., 1978), transitions from high school (Epps, 1972; Fleming, 1984; Peterson et al., 1978; Thomas, 1981; Willie, 1981; Willie & McCord, 1972), levels of adjustment (Allen, 1981, 1984, 1992; Epps, 1972; Fleming, 1984; Gibbs, 1974; Napper, 1973; Pitts, 1975), and academic achievement (Allen, 1981, 1992; Prillerman, Myers & Smedley, 1989). Moreover, additional work has explored the quality of relationships and social interactions between black and white students in the university setting (Semmes & Makalani, 1985; Willie, 1981). Most recently, Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1996) examined the racial alienation and isolation experienced by African American students attending predominantly white colleges and universities. They found that although whites routinely deny the existence of racism on campus, black students report insensitive and differential treatment by white students, faculty, and staff. Thus, from the perspective of black students, the racial climate is often viewed as tense.
Despite these studies, gaps in the literature still exist. Less is known about the relationship between black students’ expectations for interracial relations and their satisfaction with general campus life. The present study extends this line of research by examining how black students’ expectations of the racial climate on campus influence how they evaluate the quality of interracial interactions and how this relationship affects the extent to which they feel a part of general campus life.

Recent work indicates that African Americans attending white universities vary significantly in the levels and types of social experiences they have had with nonblacks. While some students have spent the majority of their childhood and adolescent years in predominantly black neighborhoods and schools, others have had a wider range of pre-adult integrative experiences (Moore & Smith, 1999; Smith & Moore, 2000). Variation in exposure and orientation to predominantly white settings may shape black students’ expectations of interracial social interactions. To the extent that a disjuncture exists between students’ expectations and their experiences on campus, their adjustment to general campus life may be more problematic relative to those whose expectations are in line with their previous interracial experiences. Individuals are more likely to be satisfied with their relationships and find their own niche in the larger community when their expectations are met. Unmet expectations regarding the types of social interactions that students anticipate having in college may result in disillusionment and dissatisfaction with life on campus, and may negatively affect their opinions about nonblack students, the types of friendships they develop, and their overall happiness with the university social milieu.

To investigate the relationships that exist between students’ expectations of the campus racial climate, the nature and quality of interracial interactions, and their social adjustment to general campus life, we address three questions. First, what factors influence black students’ expectations for the quality of race relations prior to attending a predominantly white university? Second, how do their expectations coincide with actual experiences with nonblack students once enrolled in the university? Third, how do their experiences affect subsequent opinions about nonblack students, the types of social groups formed, and the extent to which they fit into the university environment?

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

**Sample**

Our sample is drawn from the population of black undergraduates attending “Big City University” (Big City U or BCU) during the 1995–1996 academic
The study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, we distributed a fifteen-page mail-in questionnaire consisting primarily of closed-ended questions to each of the 134 black undergraduates, representing 4% of the total undergraduate population. Our 76% response rate yielded completed surveys for 102 students. This paper primarily analyzes data from the second phase of the study, which consists of in-depth interviews with a smaller sample of respondents who completed the mail-in survey. The subsample was chosen to represent the opinions of distinct groups of respondents in the general survey. Rather than randomly sample participants, we stratified them into four groups to obtain a variety of perspectives and experiences from the black student body:

(1) Those who reported their racial/cultural identification as biracial, multiracial, foreign-born, or members of an ethnic group, regardless of racial composition of friendship group.
(2) Those who responded that all or most of their friends on campus are black.
(3) Those who responded that half or some of their friends on campus are black.
(4) Those who responded that few or none of their friends on campus are black.

From these four groups, respondents were chosen at random and invited to participate in in-depth, face-to-face structured interviews. In all, we interviewed 30 students.1

DATA AND METHODS

To learn more about the experiences and perceptions of African American students at Big City University, we asked about topics relating to their experiences prior to attending college, their expectations of the racial climate on campus, how their expectations have impacted their integration into the general campus community, and the extent to which their ideas have changed about race and race relations since attending college. Specifically, to determine the extent to which students felt a part of the general campus community, the mail-in questionnaire stated the following: “Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement: I feel part of the general campus life, as far as student activities and government are concerned.” Responses ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” and were recoded into the categories “agree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” and “disagree.”
About campus race relations, we asked the following questions: (1) “When you first enrolled at this institution, how did you expect the racial climate on campus would be?” Responses ranged from “much more friendly than it is” to “much more hostile than it is,” and were recoded into “more friendly,” “unchanged,” and “more hostile.” (2) “We are interested in the ways in which your ideas have changed about race and race relations since attending college. Which of the following best describes what has happened to you?” Responses ranged from feelings being “much more antagonistic to people of other races” to “much friendlier toward people of other races,” and were recoded into “more antagonistic,” “unchanged,” and “friendlier.” (3) Responses to “My attitudes about racial separatism and integration reflect” ranged from “much stronger belief in separatism” to “much stronger belief in integration,” but were recoded into “stronger belief in separatism,” “unchanged,” and “stronger belief in integration.” Similar open-ended questions were asked during in-depth interviews to provide context to survey results.

This study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis. Using survey data, simple statistical analyses are conducted to present a general overview of patterns of relationships uncovered. However, the bulk of this study relies on analyses of in-depth interviews to provide context for understanding the root of students’ expectations of the campus racial climate, whether or not their expectations were met and why, and the consequences of the disjuncture between expectations and experiences for interracial relations.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics indicate that while 33% of African American students felt part of the general campus life and 17% were neutral, 51% of students disagreed with the statement that they felt part of the general campus life. Indeed, over one-fifth of the total responded that they strongly disagreed. When asked, “How did you expect the racial climate on campus would be?” 43% of students reported that they expected the racial climate to be friendlier, 46% expected that it would be about the same, and 11% expected more hostility. Since attending college, 27% of students reported more antagonistic feelings towards people of other races, 51% indicated that their feelings had not changed, and 22% reported that their feelings had become friendlier. Twelve percent of students also indicated that their attitudes about racial separatism had become stronger, 56% reported no change, and 32% recorded much stronger beliefs in racial integration.

To better understand the relationships between feeling part of general campus life on one hand and feelings about race and race relations on the other, we
employ analysis of variance tests of association (see results displayed in Table 1). For breadth of discussion, we shall refer to those who agreed with the statement that they felt part of the general campus life as “integrated students,” those who neither agreed nor disagreed as “neutral students,” and those who disagreed as “alienated students.” A significantly greater percentage of alienated students reported that they expected the racial climate on campus to be friendlier than what they encountered upon arrival, compared to integrated and neutral students. While 24% of integrated students and 29% of neutral students expected a friendlier racial climate, almost 60% of alienated students had such expectations. Moreover, alienated students were also more likely to report feeling more antagonistic towards people of other races since attending college. Forty-one percent of alienated students reported that their ideas about race and race relations had become more antagonistic compared to only 15% of integrated students and no neutral students. Finally, relative to neutral students, none of whom reported having stronger beliefs in separatism, significantly more

Table 1. Analysis of Variance: Expectations, Feelings, and Attitudes about Race Relations on Campus for Integrated, Neutral, and Alienated Students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I feel part of the general campus life, as far as student activities and government are concerned.</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expected the racial climate would be:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More friendly than it is</td>
<td>0.24a</td>
<td>0.29a</td>
<td>0.59ab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the same/Unchanged</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More hostile than it is</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My feelings are:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More antagonistic to people of other races</td>
<td>0.15a</td>
<td>0.00a</td>
<td>0.41ac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchanged</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.71b</td>
<td>0.37b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More friendly toward people of other races</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My attitudes about racial separatism and integration reflect:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stronger belief in separatism</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.00a</td>
<td>0.20a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchanged</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stronger belief in integration</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Two groups differ significantly ($p < 0.10$).
a Two groups differ significantly ($p < 0.05$).
ac Two groups differ significantly ($p < 0.01$).
alienated students (20%) indicated that since attending college, their attitudes reflected a stronger belief in racial separatism.

These data suggest that expectations about the racial climate on campus significantly impacted the extent to which students felt part of general campus life. Those for whom expectations fell short were significantly more likely to feel alienated from the general campus community. Moreover, since attending college, their feelings towards people of other races had become more antagonistic, and their attitudes were more likely to have changed to reflect a stronger belief in racial separatism.

In the next section, we sorted students into two groups. “Divergent” students are those whose experiences fell short of their expectations. Conversely, students grouped in the “convergent” category are those whose expectations were consistent with their campus experiences. Employing in-depth interviews of the subsample of 30 students, we provide a context for understanding why the expectations of divergent and convergent differ, and we discuss the consequences of differing expectations for feeling part of general campus life.

**DIVERGENT STUDENTS: EXPERIENCES FELL SHORT OF EXPECTATIONS**

*Pre-College Expectations*

A common assumption about divergent students might be that they had been raised in predominantly black communities with little to no exposure to interracial settings. This was not true of the students interviewed. That they had spent some time in interracial settings was not unusual. Many had attended high schools outside of their neighborhoods or had resided in integrated neighborhoods during their later teenage years. Therefore, they had some experience with nonblack peers in mixed-race or predominantly white settings. However, to the extent that they were familiar with interracial communities, it was only due to having spent a significant portion of their childhoods in predominantly black neighborhoods and schools, embedded in networks primarily composed of African Americans. Thus, while our typical divergent student had experienced relationships of a superficial nature with nonblacks, their closest, most intimate relationships and experiences were with other African Americans. The black community represented their social and emotional center, and most of what they knew of the world had come from this center.

College enrollment marked a rebirth, however. Divergent students viewed the opportunity to attend Big City University as a chance to nurture personal growth and cultivate individual identities. Their affiliation with this elite
institution afforded them the new and different experiences that they hoped would lead to an appreciation of differences as well as a broadening of their understanding of the world. They enrolled excited about the possibilities that the future held.

Paramount to the process of enlightenment was interracial dialogue and exchange. While divergent students had been taught much about the impenetrable racial boundaries that existed, they believed that at prestigious institutions such as Big City U where individuals were intelligent, well read, and socially aware, interracial distance and distrust would be replaced by dialogue and open-mindedness. In a more substantive way than they had previously understood, these students wanted to know about people of other cultures and lands, and they wanted others to know about them. Ned, a fourth-year student at the time of the interview, had been raised in a predominantly black, lower-middle class community in a city not far from Big City. He was eager to form close, interracial friendships as well as to engage in intellectually stimulating discussions with people from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. He had no intentions of restricting his social activities to any one group. As he described his hopes as a first-year student at BCU, his enthusiasm was palpable. He explained,

I was kind of excited when I first came here, ‘cause it was like my first time being in the school. Honestly I didn’t do like a lot of social things in high school. You know, I guess I didn’t develop that way. But when I came here, for some reason I felt like I had room to grow. I was able to develop my personal identity. I really appreciated life, you know, the cultural diversity and everything. And you know, I would like ask people, “What was it like in India?” “What was it like in China?” “What do you do to have fun?” You know, things like that. I did a lot of that my first year, you know.

Like Ned, Connor enrolled believing that he would be able to make friends with anyone. Having attended a “fairly mixed community,” both racially and economically, Connor was not unaware of racial conflicts that could arise. Indeed, because he assumed that many of his white peers had limited experiences with other-race groups prior to enrollment, he expected to encounter some prejudice and misunderstanding. However, he took for granted that at an institution like Big City University, liberal sentiments and open-mindedness would prevail. To the extent that prejudice and misunderstandings existed, these would be small obstacles to overcome toward the development of interracial friendships. With some introspection, he stated,

I don’t think I was blind to the fact that, you know, racism exists. I wasn’t coming in thinking that it was going to be like this idealistic-like utopia where nobody cares. But at the same time, I thought it was going to be a lot more different than it ended up being. I thought it was just going to be more integration in terms of students, and when I came here, it was very segregated in terms of race first and then class.
The communities from which Ned and Connor arrived were sufficiently different from BCU, both culturally and demographically, so their hopes for greater racial tolerance and acceptance were understandable. However, great expectations were not only the province of those unfamiliar with such elite institutions. Although Ramona was raised in a black, working-class community, she attended high school at an elite, private, out-of-state boarding school, which was very similar to Big City University in racial composition, class, and culture. Having characterized her white peers in high school as narrow-minded and completely intolerant of dissimilar cultures, Ramona did not expect a utopian community at BCU either. However, given the change in settings, she reasoned that with age and education came greater tolerance of alternative perspectives. Thus, she was optimistic about the possibility for quality, substantive interracial dialogue and exchange. She explained, “I thought that, well, they’ll be older, and it is higher education, and maybe they’ll be more open-minded, you know, and that sort of deal.”

Unfortunately, divergent students told of experiences that fell far short of their great expectations. Instead, their noteworthy enthusiasm was replaced fairly quickly with pessimism, born from the following perceptions: that dialogue on issues relating to race were almost nonexistent; that negative stereotypes about African Americans were pervasive among faculty, staff, and other-race students; and that their status as students was constantly challenged. Students who arrived at BCU expecting personal growth through friendships with people socially, culturally, and economically dissimilar became disheartened by what they perceived to be, at best, shallow interracial interactions.

Failed Expectations

[White students] were not as prepared to listen to [my stories] as I was prepared to listen to what they had to say (Ned).

The Lack of Dialogue on Issues of Race

Many divergent students enrolled at BCU with the expectation to intellectually engage, and be engaged by, other-race students about important issues and experiences, which included race relations and racial inequality. The purpose of this dialogue was often twofold. First, they hoped to challenge the thoughts and preconceived notions of their peers, and they were interested in understanding viewpoints different from their own. Just as important, however, was their desire to be challenged intellectually while having their viewpoints understood and validated.
However, such exchanges were the exception rather than the rule. As Ned explained, “[White students] were not as prepared to listen to [my stories] as I was prepared to listen to what they had to say.” These students found in short supply the intelligent, open-minded, socially aware students whom they expected to find on campus. Thus, instead of challenging dialogue, they were usually met with silence, and instead of understanding and validation, they felt their viewpoints and unique experiences were disregarded. Ramona, who believed that dialogue between black and white students was most often stunted, explained that while she would not call white students racists, she thought that their typical reactions to her stories of racial insensitivity were inappropriate. Such replies as “Oh, don’t worry. Let it go” did nothing to comfort her. These words further alienated her, which only reduced the likelihood that she would consider them friends. She exclaimed,

We’ve been letting it go for centuries! And I mean they can’t understand. Not to say that you can’t be friends with someone that can’t understand, but you need a friend who, you don’t have to agree with them all the time, but who can at least sympathize with what you’re going through, who can say “Well, I understand and I’m going to be there for you.” But they can’t do that.

Ned was also constantly disappointed by the quality of his social interactions with nonblack students. When he broached issues of race and class that were important to him, he perceived hesitation on the part of white students to engage in these discussions, hesitation that he felt was brought about either by their inability or unwillingness to understand or discuss the role of race in creating and maintaining structural inequalities in society. When asked why he felt this way, Ned recounted a typical occurrence,

Okay, let’s say I would start talking about [racial bias], and it would just get quiet, you know. It would be like no interaction. You know what I’m saying. It would be like, “Oh. Okay. I guess he’s mad. I guess he got something to say.” If I see something on TV, ‘cause it’s always something on the news I get mad about, I can’t jump up and say, “Man, that’s BS,” or something like that. “If he was white, or if he was black, it wouldn’t have been that way.” I couldn’t do that. I mean I could but communication would just basically stop.

As a result, he began to feel uncomfortable articulating his ideas to his white counterparts for fear they might squirm from discomfort. As with Ramona, a general feeling emerged of resentment and distrust towards non-blacks.

Still, Ned’s experience was not completely devoid of challenging and fulfilling interracial dialogues. After his second year, he met another student, white and male, with whom he developed a friendship. In this person, he found someone whom he believed to be intelligent, open-minded, and socially aware, someone willing to listen to and validate his ideas, opinions, and experiences.
From this relationship, he better understood the “white perspective” and felt as if he had grown from the experience. He recounted,

He seemed like he was ready to listen, you know, and I only know a couple that are like that, you know, that are willing to even listen and give some give-or-take, or not be afraid to say the wrong thing, or something like that. And he just has a natural curiosity to just figure out why people get upset, or something like that. So, we would just talk, and we would talk for a long time. He would reason [racial issues] out. He would reason out the way white people saw it, and I would reason out the way black people saw it, you know, for the most part. That’s what would happen. So, I mean, he basically told me, if you come screaming and yelling in anybody’s face about you know, “you did this, you did that,” they’re going to naturally get defensive about it. I guess I learned a lot from that relationship.

Ned’s description of this and other interracial interactions revealed his need not only to be heard and understood, but also to hear and understand the perspectives of others. In other words, he was not just seeking a forum to express his opinions of racial insensitivity and bias. His satisfaction derived from dialogue that lacked the silence, disregard, and defensiveness that typified his interactions with other nonblack students and the personal growth that such an exchange produced.

Divergent students enrolled in Big City University with high hopes to bridge the racial divide through open-mindedness and intellectual exchange. However, their interactions with non-black peers typically did not meet their expectations. Instead, they reported that other-race students, especially whites, were unapproachable, usually responding to their efforts to communicate about sensitive issues with silence, disregard, and/or defensiveness. Feeling stunted by other-race students whom they believed to be unwilling or unable to engage about anything but on the most superficial level, divergent students became distrustful and distant, halting further attempts to reach out to those dissimilar to themselves. As Michelle, a fourth-year student, explained,

It’s like you start out, you know, open to everybody and do things to reach out to people, but then if they don’t reach back, you know, after you take the initiative, then you get that kind of sting, kind of get further away. And I think you kind of seek out the people who are going to be more open to you. You kind of test your waters. You kind of react to it. You kind of work off of what they’re giving you, and so if they’re not giving you anything, you kind of keep going.

Then I’m walking down the hall and he’s like following me around the dorm asking me what I’m doing, acting like I was going to go wild and do something to her (Ramona).

Pervasive Negative Stereotypes
Great expectations were also shattered after students had encountered pervasive racial stereotyping on campus. Divergent students entered BCU expecting their
peers and professors to be open-minded, socially aware, and even progressive with regard to issues of race. What they found upon enrollment were faculty, students, and staff who held negative stereotypes about black students that harmed interracial interactions across campus from classrooms to cafeterias and dormitories. These typecasts generally reflected those held about the larger African American community and ranged from stereotypes about criminal activity and a propensity for violence to assumptions about their intellectual ability and work ethic.

Common among divergent students were accounts suggesting that professors treated black students differently and had different expectations of them relative to their white students. According to our divergent students, some professors assumed that their black students were entering their courses with significant socioeconomic disadvantages that would negatively affect their performance in class. Furthermore, they felt that it was not unusual for their professors to question black students’ work ethic. When they performed well, professors either saw them as exceptions to the rule or expressed doubts that they had completed assignments unaided. When asked about professors’ views toward black students, Ramona replied,

[That] you’re probably poor, you know. You probably were at the top of your class at your school, but your school probably was some little rinky-dink, run-down, public school that didn’t have all the resources that these private or parochial schools, or these white, middle-class communities may have. And um, that basically you’re here and some of you may work hard, but a lot of you are going to try to get over because you can always throw the race card, you know.

When students believed that professors were uncomfortable with black students or underestimated their abilities, it resulted in poorer quality interactions between them. Students were less likely to ask questions in class or to attend office hours for fear of validating professors’ negative opinions. For instance, Timothy, a second-year student from Big City, suggested that these very stereotypes had negatively impacted his relationships with some faculty members. Reflecting upon his own experiences, he recounted, “I’ve been in classes where the instructor is obviously staring at me constantly throughout the entire thing, and whenever I go to talk to him about whatever, if I have a question, he looks slightly uneasy or just completely demeaning.” As a result, Timothy, and students like him, felt excluded from the learning process and did not benefit from their classes as much as they would have liked.

However, the effects of stereotypes were not only played out in the classroom. Occurrences were common anywhere interracial contact took place, including in dormitories and around campus. Widespread are stories of white coeds so frightened of their black male counterparts that they go out of their
way to avoid them. However, black coeds were also perceived to be confrontational at the least, and at worst, violent. Ramona recounted an incident in which she was preparing to relocate to another room on her dormitory floor. After she had already begun her move, the resident head informed her that her new roommate had changed her mind, so Ramona could no longer move into the room. Upset by this news, Ramona started to walk away. She gave the following account of events:

[The resident head] comes out of nowhere and says to me, “Don’t do anything. Don’t go down there [to the other student’s room] and don’t you do anything. Just calm down. Maybe you should stay in your room, and you know, don’t do anything!” Then I’m walking down the hall and he’s like following me around the dorm, asking me what I’m doing, acting like I was going to go wild and do something to her. And I just couldn’t understand that, and I was like, that was purely racial. He thought just ‘cause I was black, I was upset and was going to attack someone.

Ramona interpreted the resident head’s actions to mean that he was worried she would express her disappointment and anger through physical confrontation, an expectation colored by his perception that blacks deal with conflict violently. Ramona hypothesized that had she been a white student, the resident head would not have responded to her in the same way.

Regarding issues of race and race relations, divergent students would probably not be considered naïve. They were well aware of the common stereotypes held about African Americans and, in some cases, had already been confronted with stereotypes and had learned to deal with them. Nonetheless, they believed that at an elite institution such as Big City University, the faculty, staff, and students would be different from most others, that they would be more open-minded and socially aware. They would not fall prey to the popular and negative perceptions of African Americans. Unlike most others, they would deal with students of color as individuals with unique perspectives to offer the university community.

Divergent students argued that soon after arriving, they discovered that negative stereotypes on campus were far more pervasive than they had expected. In classes, they were met with professors and students who assumed that they were from low socioeconomic backgrounds, that the schools they attended were inferior, and that they were ill-equipped to handle the heavy course loads and rigorous material required of students. On the street, white coeds appeared frightened by their black male counterparts, and in the dormitories, black students were perceived to be too confrontational. Overwhelmed with these negative perceptions about them, divergent students felt little a part of the general campus community.
I know it’s sad, but I don’t really feel comfortable here, like nothing is mine. Even though I’ve been here for four years, I don’t feel like this is my school. (Paul)

A Denial of Their Status as Students

In part a function of superficial interracial dialogue, in part a function of pervasive negative stereotypes about African Americans, divergent students felt alienated from the general campus community. The feeling that they did not belong and that the university did not belong to them, only compounded their alienation. They enrolled at Big City University expecting a relatively small black undergraduate population, and many considered how this would impact them socially and psychologically. However, few expected their alienation to be as profound as they had experienced it. In the classroom, they complained of inherently racist curricula that promoted ideas of whites’ superiority, and they described their frustration at being the token voice for the “black perspective.” Outside the classroom, these divergent students lamented their invisibility on campus, and they expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of safe space for black students to relax and unwind. For those frequently stopped and interrogated by university police, or those troubled by these occurrences, they identified less as students and more as unwelcome visitors.

The classroom was one arena in which divergent students felt alienated. As discussed earlier, the classroom represented a place where students’ and faculty’s negative stereotypes were exposed. However, their alienation was also born from two other sources, course content and classroom discussion. Divergent students expressed frustration, anger, and resentment towards professors who would include in their syllabi readings that affirmed bigoted perspectives, which rationalized racial inequalities. The intensity of their feelings was only heightened by the lack of any alternative views to provide intellectual balance. Connor, a third-year student at the time of interview, described his process of becoming part of the general campus community, one that consisted of befriending others and finding a social and academic niche. However, one major facet of student life disturbed him. He recounted,

Especially after first quarter, I felt like a lot of the things I was studying were almost racial. Like for instance, I remember Emmanuel Kant. We studied him in Philosophical Perspectives, and the professor was talking about how [Kant] said whites were superior and all this stuff. And I was like, “Man, why we studying this then, and if we are, why can’t we have someone that’s giving maybe an opposing view or something,” you know what I’m saying.

Like other divergent students, Connor was also disheartened by the expectations that professors and other-race students had about the role that black
students played in classroom discussion. They complained that they either felt completely ignored, or their opinions were only sought during discussions involving some underlying racial component. Connor reported a typical experience during classroom discussions.

A lot of times when I’m in class with them, I might be the token opinion just because I’m black and people are like, “What is your opinion on this issue?” and it will usually be racially motivated. But it bothers me just the fact that they come to me, you know. If I want to offer my opinion, that’s one thing. But it’s almost like they’re expecting like, since I am black, that I have to offer something.

In some ways, Connor’s reaction to requests for his opinion may seem inconsistent with divergent students’ desires to be heard. On the one hand, they want others to listen to their ideas and opinions and to validate their experiences; on the other hand, they are easily offended when nonblacks ask for their viewpoints. However, Connor’s frustration stemmed from his perception that nonblacks only took notice when it suited them, such as when they wanted the “black perspective.” Otherwise, he found that his ideas and opinions were generally ignored. Experiences like these contributed to the feeling among divergent students like Connor that BCU did not “belong” to them; it belonged primarily to white students towards whom they believed the university was geared.

Experiences outside of the classroom also created feelings of alienation from the general campus community. Pervasive among the divergent students was the sense that unlike white students, black students had few places on campus to call their own. For instance, while white students had fraternity and sorority houses, no space existed for black organizations of any kind. This frustrated Paul, a fourth-year student, who described campus life as “horrible” for black students. He explained,

Yesterday, I was walking from class and passed that little fraternity row. All them white students were sittin’ on lawns, on top of roofs, music playing and just relaxing, ‘cause this is basically their school, you know what I mean? And I was thinking, “Look. We don’t have anything like that.” I mean, you just feel so alienated and so isolated. I mean, nothing is really yours. I know it’s sad but I don’t really feel comfortable here. Like nothing is mine, even though I’ve been here for four years, I don’t feel like this is my school. I just feel kind of isolated.

While the divergent students perceived that the university provided ample resources to cater to the needs of the white students, they felt as if they were completely ignored. No space had been provided for them. Thus, in their minds, BCU could not be theirs in the way that it was for white students. If the university did belong to them as well, why could they not share in its resources?

Moreover, why were they made to feel so unwelcome? Not uncommon among divergent students, especially males, was the claim that the university police
frequently stopped them. They explained that because they were black, officers
assumed they were suspicious, often ignoring key markers that signaled that
those in question were students. To name a few, markers included backpacks,
student ID cards, and the university sticker for those who drove cars. If black
students failed to carry these all-important markers, at the very least they risked
others avoiding them by crossing to the other side of the street, for instance.
As a weary Connor explained, “I almost see myself as not being a student
’cause people will see me walking down the street and they won’t think I’m a
student. I’ll have people cross the street on me, you know. Things of that
nature.” At most, however, they were in danger of being stopped and interro-
gated by the university police. Without his backpack, Timothy recalled,

I suddenly become a very dangerous individual. People will start crossing the street [and]
campus police are like looking. They sit at the green light a little longer and are looking,
and that’s very distressing, you know. They tell everyone during the orientation, “You know
you don’t want to go out too late at night,” and then it’s like they’re saying, “Watch out
for the black people in [the neighborhood].” But for us, it’s like, “Watch out for the
University Police in [the neighborhood],” so you’ve got to use extra caution, especially
when you’re driving. A buddy and I used to get stopped all the time, even though you have
this little Big City University sticker.

While these accounts are no different from those told by many black males,
the anger, frustration, and resentment they express are intensified because the
elite school they attend employs the officers who routinely detain them, targeting
– as they see it – all blacks in the area, including its students, as potential
suspects. They could not feel welcome at an institution that, more often than
not, made them feel like outsiders.

Growing Pessimism about Race Relations

Among black students, feelings of alienation were not uncommon. Over half
indicated that they did not feel part of the general campus community. In past
studies, this alienation has often been interpreted as a culture clash, with that of
black students differing significantly from that of the institution and other-race
peers. Their alienation has also been viewed as a response to the racism
pervasive across campuses of predominantly white universities. Although we do
not argue that the latter two are factors, we contend that these were not
necessarily the driving force behind students’ distance toward the general campus
community. Many of the divergent students understood that they were arriving to
campus with backgrounds significantly dissimilar sociodemographically from
those of other-race students. However, divergent students trusted that despite the
significant cultural and economic differences that existed, open-mindedness,
social awareness, and the desire for intellectual exchange would result in friendships that transcended race. They later found untrue their assumptions about their classmates and the institution.

Their experiences on campus fell far short of their expectations. Indeed, 60% of alienated students in our entire sample reported that when they first enrolled, they expected the racial climate on campus to be friendlier than it was, 41% of alienated students reported that they had become more antagonistic to people of other races, and one-fifth reported that since enrollment, their attitudes reflected a stronger belief in racial separatism. Thus, we suspect that a significant catalyst towards alienation from the general campus community was, in part, the disjuncture between their great expectations and their negative experiences.

Perceiving a lack of serious dialogue around issues of race, a pervasiveness of negative stereotypes about African Americans, and a denial of their status as students, divergent students’ ideas changed about the campus racial climate, becoming more pessimistic and distant towards people of other races. Whereas they were once eager to form close, interracial friendships as well as to engage in intellectually stimulating discussions with people from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, these students now became detached and reserved, once again focusing all of their attention on their black center. Numerous examples exist. Ned stated that although he used to feel comfortable with the general campus community, he no longer did. Consequently, his focus had shifted towards his relationships with other African Americans. Connor revealed that after viewing interactions in which white students were reluctant to talk about race, he began to accept these interactions as representative of that racial group. Moreover, he felt that stereotypes about black students had hardened him in some ways, becoming, in his own words, less open-minded to white students compared to how he felt upon arrival at BCU. He explained, “I’m almost stereotyping the professor and just saying that they’re an ass before I even meet them, and that’s not cool. So, yeah, [stereotypes] have callused me to the point where I might be judgmental and prejudge someone.” As a result of her alienating experiences, Michelle often turned to family and friends. She stated, “I just have to remember and think to myself and reinforce that I am here, and that regardless of whether people want to validate my existence, I’m self-validating. My family acknowledges my existence, and my friends do as well.” Other divergent students reported similar responses of being increasingly reluctant to socialize with nonblack students on anything but the most superficial level and having decreased trust when interacting with professors in class. This inability to connect, combined with a belief that their interests were not being served by the organizations and general social structure of the college, resulted in their
unmet expectations that led to their alienation from nonblacks and their retreat to predominantly black social systems for validation and intellectual and social exchange.

CONVERGENT STUDENTS: EXPECTATIONS CONSISTENT WITH EXPERIENCES

Pre-College Experiences

Among those students who accurately surmised the state of race relations on campus, we found that in substantive ways, their pre-college experiences exposed them to racial environments mirroring those present at Big City University. Many were raised in predominantly white communities and were accustomed to being the only person of color in their classes or one of a handful of black students in their high schools. Likewise, it was not unusual for them to reside on neighborhood blocks where their families represented the only family of color and one of few black families living in their community. Comments like Amy’s were fairly common: “The community I grew up in was a pretty upper-class community. We were and still are the only black family to live there, and actually one of two minority families. There’s an Indian family that lives next door to us, but besides that, it’s all white.” Consequently, when asked to compare her high school to the university, Amy reported, “It’s pretty much the same. In my high school, there was not a large percentage of African Americans, and there aren’t here. There was a large percentage of Asians in my high school and South Asians like there are here.”

From Seth, a similar picture of white, racial homogeneity emerges. Describing his community, he stated,

It’s mostly white, half Christian, half Jewish. It’s similar to the make-up of [the university] in the sense that it’s largely white. The next largest population would be Asian American, the next largest at about 1% would be African American, and then half of a percent is Hispanic.

Therefore, when asked how he expected the racial climate on campus would be, Seth responded, “I didn’t really think about it. I mean, I grew up in an all-white high school, and I knew [Big City University] was gonna be similar.”

Missing from the discussions of convergent students like Seth and Amy is the culture shock described by students whose expectations of campus race relations were not met. Because they had generally grown up around whites and were accustomed to being one of a few people of color, the transition from high school to college offered no surprises in terms of how they expected to be received by whites and nonwhites alike. Several students explained how their
prior experiences in predominantly white communities buffered them from the culture shock experienced by their divergent counterparts. Rhonda explained,

> I think the transition was very easy because, like I said, I went to private school for three years. There was no culture shock or anything. ... I’m used to seeing five black people and 100 white people, and perhaps it bothers me on some level, but I’m so accustomed to it that it doesn’t create any insecurity in me. I don’t feel like I need to just run to the closest black person and hold on to them. ... I found out how to be independent and feel like I can be self-sufficient, because if there’s only five black people and you don’t like any of them, and you’re in school with 600 kids, you’d better learn how to depend on something!

Although some convergent students were not raised in such communities, they had attended predominantly white, private high schools outside of their home communities or magnet schools in which they were tracked into predominantly white classes. For example, Mia had been raised in a black, primarily low-income city in Indiana, but she attended a predominantly white preparatory high school that was located out-of-state. When asked about her transition from high school to college, Mia explained, “I think it was the best thing I ever did for myself. I think I was very prepared for here, and it didn’t keep me from doing what I knew that I could do here. When I came here, I wasn’t like, ‘Oh my God, all these white people.’ No, I wasn’t in culture shock.”

Keisha was also raised in a predominantly black community of low-to-middle socioeconomic status, one that, according to her estimation, housed a substantial white minority of approximately 25%. She also attended a high school in which more than three-quarters of the student body were black. However, with a magnet program designed to recruit white students from the suburbs, Keisha’s high school also contained a substantial white minority, many who took the special classes offered under the magnet program and were tracked into classes that were overwhelmingly white. As a participant in the magnet program, Keisha was tracked into predominantly white classes as well and rarely interacted with the majority black student body. Thus, although she attended what many would consider a racially integrated high school, in essence, she primarily interacted with white students. Consequently, for both Mia and Keisha, their high school experiences prepared them for the racial climate they encountered upon enrollment at Big City University, even though they were raised in neighborhoods substantively different in many ways from the university community.

**Prior Experiences of Racial Alienation and Isolation**

Although not the case for all, analyses of in-depth interviews suggest that some convergent students had more accurate expectations of the racial climate on campus because their pre-college experiences prepared them for a lukewarm
racial climate. In predominantly white environments, the racial climate usually took three forms. First, among those thoroughly embedded in predominantly white networks, the racial climate could be described as subtly insensitive to issues of race. The primary causes of such insensitivity were whites’ assumptions about African Americans’ lifestyles and their deeply held, negative opinions about interracial relationships. Lissette recounted an experience during her senior year of high school in which she was made to feel alienated:

I had my group of friends, which was okay, but there was always something they just couldn’t understand. I remember the prom was a big problem. I talked about the prom with my friends, and I was like, “So, who do I ask to the prom you guys?” [They responded,] “You know, you can go with friends. You don’t have to go with a date.” And someone who wasn’t even in my group of friends said, “There aren’t really many black people for you to ask, so how are you gonna go?” I don’t know. Race relations were kind of . . . tense.

Although Lissette had considered these individuals to be close, personal friends, people with whom she spent a great deal of time, she was frequently reminded of her status as an outsider, someone who never quite fit. Individuals experiencing this insensitivity felt like outsiders in their own communities and within their own friendship networks.

Second, the racial climate encouraged almost complete racial separation. Indeed, some convergent students described situations in which they were completely rejected, not only by the white majority, but also by the black minority with whom they infrequently came into contact. Seth is one such example. He recounted,

When I was at school, I was the only black kid and I encountered racism there, so I didn’t really fit in, and then when I belonged to different social organizations like Jack and Jill . . . I didn’t really fit in sometimes. I went to an all-white school, and when I would go play basketball down in Everhart – you know, I belonged to a church in Everhart – we would play Everhart in basketball games, and at those, a large group of [black] kids [were] waiting to harass me when I got off the bus, or during warm-ups call out my name and call me a sell-out. So back then, I had a real problem in that I never really fit in at the school I was in, and I never really fit in. People always had complaints about this, “You’re not this,” or “You’re too that,” and that gave me problems.

Similarly, Amy, a biracial student in her first year of study, described her experiences of alienation from both whites and blacks. She related the following:

I guess I don’t really seem enthusiastic about my town because it’s, I mean in my youth it was a very nice place, but because of me being different, not black and not white, I was just somewhere in the middle and basically the only one as far as maybe until I got to high school. And I guess in a way people didn’t really reject me, but my peers didn’t pay that much attention to me. I was pretty much a loner through my childhood. . . . It’s a very split town in a sense. Very white, very much predominantly white, conservative, Republican type. I wouldn’t necessarily say . . . no, not at all racist. But I know that many parents,
many families, they just kind of stick to their own race. Everyone wants to integrate and things like that, but still, one section of town is predominantly black, one section is predominantly Latinos, and the rest is white, you know. But I guess that would be everywhere, ‘cause I mean that’s a problem you see everywhere.

Later, she further explained her experiences of alienation:

I know like the African American students, the typical question would be “Are you white or something? Like what are you mixed with?” but never really acceptance. And then with Caucasians, it wasn’t necessarily questioning, it was more like “She looks kind of weird. Let’s just keep her on the side.”

Thus, upon enrolling, students like Seth and Amy had few preconceived notions that the racial climate would offer much in the way of open-mindedness between individuals and groups representing different races and cultures. They knew from personal experience that on many levels, interracial interactions were often strained and tense. They also believed it unlikely that this climate would change to reflect more openness on issues of race. Therefore, in contrast to divergent students, upon their arrival on campus, convergent students did not make a concerted effort to cross racial divides. Instead, they sought to find a niche in which they could thrive socially and academically.

Finally, some convergent students reported feeling very little, if any, racial alienation and isolation from their white and black peers. Instead, they negotiated their social circles with general ease. However, these students did point out that even though their friendship networks consisted of both black and white friends, often these friends were not friends with one another. In other words, their friendship networks were integrated and yet segregated. To the extent that race became an issue for these students, it was due to the tension involved with negotiating separate social circles because, on the basis of race, friends in one circle were too uncomfortable interacting with friends in the other.

Hence, it appears that convergent students had more accurate predictions of race relations on campus because, unlike their divergent counterparts who generally had limited interactions with whites prior to college attendance, they had experience negotiating their daily lives in majority white settings. The experiences of racial insensitivity, alienation, and isolation that they encountered on a daily basis fed their expectations as they enrolled at the university. Having lived most of their lives in this type of environment, some knew that, to a great extent, their unique experiences would not be heard nor were they likely to be validated in a predominantly white context. Moreover, having seen different race groups live separate lives within the same community, these students expected relations to be tense. They expected blacks, whites, Asians, and Latinos to interact largely in separate social circles with little room for interracial contact and communication.
Contrasting Divergent and Convergent Students from Predominantly White Communities

Among the students whose expectations were not met were some who had also spent a great deal of time in predominantly white communities. Why did their expectations differ from those of students like Mia and Keisha, who accurately estimated the state of race relations on campus? The difference lies in their racial orientation. While divergent students were racially oriented towards other blacks, meaning their racial and cultural identities were centered in the African American community, convergent students were oriented towards the white communities in which they had been raised: their core friendship groups consisted of whites; their tastes and preferences in such areas as music and style of dress mirrored those of whites; and their social and political views on racially sensitive topics, such as affirmative action, generally appeared consistent with those of the white majority.

Unlike divergent students from predominantly white settings, convergent students were much less likely to actively seek out other black students on campus for social support and interaction. For these students, race was not the primary marker of friendship compatibility. Instead, their friendships were formed because of proximity (many developed friendships with those who lived on their dormitory floor) and shared interests. Camilla is a prime example. During her first week on campus, she formed lasting relationships with students who resided on her dormitory floor, without regard to race. She explained,

My very closest friends are Filipino and white, Korean-and-white mixture, black, Hispanic, you know, that kind of deal. So it looks like a Benetton ad, seriously. And we always joke about that. It’s just the people that I happen to have the most in common with in the first week that I came here, and we just meshed together.

Likewise, Keisha’s closest friends were individuals who resided on her dormitory floor, or who participated with her in the university theater group. When asked about her core group of friends, she stated, “Basically, it’s just my roommate from last year, one of the people from the theater group, and, well, no, two other people from the theater group, and one of my friends who’s on leave of absence for this year.” As Keisha continued to describe her friendship network, we learned that both her roommate and her friend from the theater group were white, while her friend on leave was biracial. Keisha hypothesized that although many friendships were formed with race as a basis, most students developed friendships with floor-mates, and still others’ networks consisted of individuals who participated in similar organizations, such as the theater group. Thus, for Keisha, Camilla and students like them, race was not an important
identifying marker of friendship. Instead, proximity and shared interests were the factors predicting with whom they developed friendships.

Differences in tastes and preferences marked another difference between divergent and convergent students who spent a great deal of time in predominantly white communities. These differences extended to many aspects of their lives, but were most salient in their entertainment preferences. While divergent students enjoyed music primarily by African Americans, such as rap, hip hop and R&B, convergent students preferred music by alternative artists or popular music that caters specifically to white audiences, such as Hootie and the Blowfish and Alanis Morissette. In addition, while divergent students favored movies written, directed and acted by African Americans, convergent students made their movie choices based on other criteria, such as the film’s critical acclaim. Thus, while divergent students made choices that signaled a black orientation, convergent students were more likely to make choices that reflected those of the white majority.

Divergent and convergent students also differed in their opinions about social and political issues. Issues of contention ranged from interracial dating (problematic for divergent students, a non-issue for convergent students) to affirmative action and were the basis for many intraracial conflicts on campus. Unlike many divergent students who supported affirmative action mandates and actively sought to improve the numbers of African American students on their predominantly white campus, convergent students were not so enthusiastic. They often assumed that affirmative action only worked to recruit minority candidates who lacked the preparation, intelligence, and work ethic of more deserving applicants. While describing her frustration with the Black Students Organization, Rhonda recounted an incident in which the BSO attempted to mobilize African American students to recruit prospective black students:

And what strikes me as funny is now, BSO sends emails out about what they’re doing, you know, coming out for certain meetings and things. It just intrigues me that when they send out emails recruiting, they always say, “We need more African American faces on this campus.” It’s almost like, well, if all we need is a face, we can just pick out anyone on the street. I mean, they never say, “Well, let’s go recruit because we need more bright African Americans.” It’s a smart African American face, African Americans that do this or that, you know. We need more individuals who can come to this university and add something to it. They never say anything like that, just more, “We need more representation.”

While many divergent students believed that greater African American representation connoted greater representation of intelligent, qualified African American students, convergent students such as Rhonda often assumed that the abilities of black students were questionable. This is particularly interesting in light of the fact that the prospective students targeted for recruitment were those
whose applications for admittance had already been accepted by the university. In this way as well, convergent students mirrored more the beliefs, opinions, and stereotypes held by the white majority rather than by the black minority. Thus, while some divergent students lived in the world of whites and found ways to navigate their social and academic lives successfully within and among white peers, they did not consider themselves to be a part of that world. In contrast, convergent students knew, understood, and felt comfortable in predominantly white environments.

That convergent students shared more with their white peers socially, culturally, and politically than did divergent students indicated that their experiences would likely have been more consistent with their expectations. However, the commonalities shared between the convergent and their white peers had additional effects and thus consequences for how they responded to the campus racial climate. First, they were generally far less sensitive to issues of race than were their divergent counterparts and therefore were less likely to interpret incidents in racial terms; they did not assume that most conflicts between whites and blacks were racially motivated. In such cases, affronts could result not because individuals were necessarily racist, but because they were equal opportunity offenders. Second, to the extent that the convergent students experienced racial insensitivities, the frustration and disappointment that resulted were not enough to end their interracial friendships. Instead, they often overlooked racial insensitivities – viewing racial slights as isolated incidents rather than as occurrences indicative of systemic racism – because the similarities they shared with their white peers far outweighed any prejudiced behavior. Furthermore, to do otherwise would have jeopardized the somewhat delicate balance they managed to achieve while living in predominantly white communities. Research abounds investigating how African Americans culturally dissimilar from the white majority cope under racially alienating circumstances. More studies need to be conducted that examine how African Americans who strongly identify with the white majority because of shared cultural, social, and political experiences and ideologies interpret, respond, and cope under similarly alienating circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Our study extends the line of research that deals with the social adjustment of black students at predominantly white colleges and universities. We explore how students’ expectations of interracial relationships and the campus racial climate affect their satisfaction with general campus life. We address three
questions: What factors influence black students’ expectations for the quality of race relations prior to attending a predominantly white university? How do their expectations coincide with actual experiences with nonblack students once enrolled in the university? Finally, how do their experiences affect subsequent opinions about nonblack students, the types of social groups formed, and the extent to which they fit into the university environment?

We found that expectations about the racial climate on campus significantly impacted the extent to which students felt part of general campus life. Those for whom expectations fell short were significantly more likely to feel alienated from the general campus community. Moreover, after enrolling in college, their feelings toward people of other races became more antagonistic, and their attitudes were more likely to change reflecting a stronger belief in racial separatism. A combination of unsatisfying interactions with white students, faculty, and staff affected their views about the racial climate at the university. They entered college with expectations of developing close relationships with others unlike themselves. However, the difference between their pre-college expectations and actual experiences with others at the university had significant and negative consequences for subsequent interactions as well as their overall quality of life while in college. Students whose expectations were met had more accurate predictions of race relations on campus because they had had prior experiences negotiating their daily lives in majority white settings. Having seen different race groups live separate lives within the same community, they expected blacks, whites, Asians, and Latinos to interact largely in separate social circles with superficial interracial contact and communication. Because their expectations were met, they had higher levels of satisfaction with general campus life.

NOTE

1. Both interviewers were African American women.

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