

Interracial Interaction and Social Self-Concept

Meechai Orsuwan

Abstract—This study examines the impact of interracial interactions on students' social self-concept across racial/ethnic groups four years after they enter college. Our study finds significant changes in the social self-concepts of White, Native American, African American, Latino/a, and Asian American students from 1999, when they entered college, to 2003. As expected, the social self-concepts of students who engage in interracial interactions tend to improve over time.

Keywords—interracial interaction, social self-concept

I. Introduction

The modern zeitgeist of racial and ethnic diversity in American higher education reflects the impending demographic changes facing our society. Research data suggest that over 30% of college enrollment consists of students from racial/ethnic minority groups (NCES, 2008). Understanding the multicultural context of college is imperative when we want to learn about the experiences of minority students and their educational outcomes, including changes in their self-concepts (Antonio, 2001; Cole, 2007).

The purpose of this multi-institution, longitudinal study is to examine, through regression analyses, the influence of interracial interactions on students' social self-concept across racial/ethnic groups. That is, does interracial contact on campus affect students' social self-concept? If so, are the relationships between interracial interactions and social self-concept conditional upon race/ethnicity? This research makes two important contributions to research on race/ethnicity. First, it explores the effects of interracial interactions on social self-concept in the study. Second, this study employs interaction analysis, which allows it to conduct a much more in-depth analysis on race relations and to examine how interracial interactions on campus affect the social self-concepts of several ethnic groups of students: African American, Asian American, Latino/a, White, and Native American. The assumption, however, is that self-concept changes as a result of college, and that the direction of that change is positive across racial/ethnic groups.

II. Literature Review

Social self-concept is another pivotal domain of self-concept that is associated with academic achievement, college adjustment, and persistence (Marsh & Craven, 2006). Socially related self-concept is one's perception of his/her social competence with regard to social interaction with others and the social world within the social context of learning

environments. The level of students' social self-concept is dependent upon successes and failures in social and academic endeavors in an academic setting. Unlike intellectual and academic self-concept, social self-concept tends to be more closely related to the extent to which a student is incorporated into the social structure of the college. As a result, possessing a strong social self-concept is particularly important for minority students to overcome the stress of life events and the stigma of being labeled different. In their study considering the intersection of race and gender, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) find little difference in the factors affecting students' academic and social self-concept. It is the magnitude of the effects that is most notable.

The racial composition of a campus offers one way of identifying salient differences in the academic self-concepts of specific racial/ethnic groups. Other researchers argue that examining subenvironments (e.g., student-faculty interactions, peer involvement) within each type of institution (i.e., PWCUs and HBCUs) may have the most "promise of detecting" (Cokley, 2003, p. 150) the differential effects of college on the intellectual self-concept of various racial/ethnic groups (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). This study uses data collected from White colleges and universities (i.e., PWCUs) because they offer a relatively clear way to interpret informal interactional diversity (i.e., interracial interactions) for majority (i.e., White) and minority students.

Meechai Orsuwan/Faculty of Education
Kasetsart University
Thailand

III. Theoretical Framework

Conceptually, social participation and involvement theory, as they are constructed within complex social structures, provide an important theoretical foundation for the analyses in this study. For instance, social participation is operationalized through informal interactional diversity as measured by racial/ethnic campus engagement, whether the student had a roommate of different race/ethnicity, and whether the student socialized with someone of a different ethnic group. These measures of social participation are considered significant determinants for developing student-faculty interactions (Cole, 2007) and a significant factor affecting student-learning outcomes (e.g., intellectual engagement and self-assessment of academic skills; Milem et al., 2005). According to Gurin et al. (2002), informal interactional diversity should have a positive impact on students' educational outcomes. When students use active

thinking in complex social environments, they are likely to benefit in their intellectual engagement and growth. Social participation, however, suggests that ethnic-specific interactions and interracial interactions likely have a differential impact on minority students, particularly on their subjective sense of integration into campus life.

IV. Methods

A. Sample and Instrument

This longitudinal examination is primarily concerned with the differential effects of interracial interactions on students' self-concept across racial/ethnic groups. Differences in the type of college experiences that affect self-concept and students' sense of self as they enter and leave college are also examined. Drawing on previous research, this study considers peer interactions in academic-related activities, informal interactional diversity, and students' contact with faculty to be important college experiences that are related to students' self-concept. Institutional characteristics (i.e., type), student background characteristics (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, level of parental education, and high school GPA), and a pre-test that measured self-concept during the first year are included as control variables (Berger & Milem, 2000). According to Berger and Milem (2000), the impact of college on students' self-concept can be effectively examined by analyses that include student characteristics, type of college, and student involvement behaviors.

B. Variables and Data Analysis

Two data points were used in this study: (1) students' first year data collected with the Student Information Form (SIF; 1999); and (2) students' fourth year data collected with the College Student Survey (CSS; 2003), which was a follow-up survey mailed home to students who had completed the first year survey (SIF). The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) collected the data for its Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP; see Astin, Korn, Sax, & Mahoney, 1994; Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000 for detailed sampling procedures). CIRP survey data include a variety of information primarily on the involvement of students within their college environments and the perceived changes they report in their self-growth, development, and viewpoints.

Descriptive statistics, *t*-tests, an ANOVA, a post-hoc Scheffé test, and multivariate regressions are used to examine the research questions set forth in this study. Descriptive statistics are used to present important student characteristics and background variables needed for determining differences and similarities in the degree of interracial interactions across racial/ethnic groups (see Table 1). An ANOVA test is conducted to determine whether significant differences in degrees of interracial interactions and social self-concept exist across racial/ethnic groups. The post-hoc Scheffé test, which is sensitive to sample size, is used to discern which groups are significantly different from one another. Furthermore, a series

of *t*-tests is conducted to determine whether the means of students' self-concept in their first and fourth years are significantly different.

V. Results

The interaction-effects model of students' social self-concept has four significant interactions (*Native American x Participated in racial/ethnic student organizations*, *Black x Participated in racial/ethnic student organizations*, *Asian American x Engaged in racial/ethnic college activities*, *Latino x Took racial/ethnic courses*). That is, participating in a racial/ethnic student organization is particularly important for African American students to develop their social self-concept ($\beta = .366, p < .01$). However, taking part in a racial/ethnic activity seems to hinder the development of Asian American students' social self-concept ($\beta = -.208, p < .10$). Our analysis also implies that Latino/a students' social self-concept is lower than that of other racial groups when they have taken racial/ethnic courses ($\beta = -.211, p < .10$). Collectively, the four two-way interaction variables have a significant impact on students' social self-concept, as indicated by the significant F-test ($\Delta F = 3.649, p < .05$) (not tabled). This implies a significant improvement in the explanatory power of the main-effects-only model. The interaction effects add 2.1% for the variance for students' social self-concept.

Table 1. Main-Effects and Interaction-Effects Model Predicting Students' Social Self-Concept

	Social Self-Concept			
	Main effect (3)		Interaction (4)	
	B	SD	B	SD
Female	-	-	-	-
	.243***	.017	.243***	.086
Attended a public college/university	.086***	.032	.088***	.017
Father's education	.003	.004	.003***	.032
High school GPAs	.039***	.007	.039	.004
Previous self-concept (1 st year)	.362***	.011	.361***	.007
African American	.053	.048	-.028	.011
Native American	.024	.065	.022	.094
Asian American	-.072*	.041	.551	.085
Latino/a	-.069	.042	.026	.353
INTERRACIAL INTERACTION				
Engaged in ethnic activities	-.021	.051	-.009	.055
Socialized with people of different race/ethnicity	-.038	.043	-.037	.051
Attended racial/ethnic workshops	.051***	.019	.050*	.043
Took racial/ethnic courses	.049***	.017	.056***	.019
Had a roommate of different race/ethnicity	-.023	.018	-.018	.018
Participated in ethnic student organizations	-.017	.026	-.037	.018
INTERACTION				
<i>Black x Had a roommate of different ethnicity</i>				
<i>Black x Racial workshop</i>				

VI. Conclusion

The college environment appears to vary in its impacts on students' social self-concepts. Formal and informal interracial interactions appear to benefit minority students' social self-concept, although one type of interaction may be a better choice than another for students of certain ethnicities. In conclusion, the structural or racial/ethnic diversity of the college campus matters. This is not only because minority students provide opportunities and context for interracial interactions to occur, but the multicultural context that their presence brings changes the college environment. This change affects the differential educational gains that develop out of the college experience. As reported in this study, minority students' self-concept improves as a result of various interracial contacts in college. Simply identifying race as significant in educational gains no longer suffices. Much more in-depth analyses are critical if we want to understand race relations on today's dynamic and diverse campuses. Empirical research, as a result, must be more conceptually grounded and use disaggregated data to better address the changing racial/ethnic climate of higher education.

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