

Invisible Boundaries: Diversity in Student Organizations

Phoua Xiong and Katherine McLarty
Supervisor: Chris Chiappari
373 Qualitative Research Methods
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Abstract

Led by our mutual interest in the racial and ethnic divisions on the St. Olaf campus, we chose to focus our research on the social boundaries that limit students from participating in multicultural organizations and events. We conducted interviews with students from a variety of racial backgrounds, focusing on students involved in student organizations. We concluded that the construction of race differs between St. Olaf as an institution and current St. Olaf students. Students express a desire to begin a more open dialogue about race. We also found two potential barriers intergroup dialogue: the color-blind bind and role expectations for multicultural students. The Office of Multicultural Affairs and Community Outreach mediates the structural inequalities for multicultural students, but conceptual change is needed for greater equality to be obtained.

Main Points:

- St. Olaf uses an intragroup solidarity approach racial integration
- St. Olaf students indicate a desire to institute an intergroup dialogue model
- The Color-Blind Bind is a type of cognitive dissonance that impacts interaction between racial groups on the St. Olaf campus.
- There are two main types of MCOs. While both are salient to students, more “interest-based” groups are being founded.
- Multicultural students are prescribed the tasks of educating and diversifying the campus
- Multicultural students experience additional stress and are further isolated from other students
- MACO combats both visible and invisible power structures that create inequality

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Abstract

Led by our mutual interest in the racial and ethnic divisions on the St. Olaf campus, we chose to focus our research on the social boundaries that limit students from participating in multicultural organizations and events. We conducted interviews with students from a variety of racial backgrounds, focusing on students involved in student organizations. We concluded that the construction of race differs between St. Olaf as an institution and current St. Olaf students. Students express a desire to begin a more open dialogue about race. We also found two potential barriers intergroup dialogue: the color-blind bind and role expectations for multicultural students. The Office of Multicultural Affairs and Community Outreach mediates the structural inequalities for multicultural students, but conceptual change is needed for greater equality to be obtained.

Setting

The setting for our study was St. Olaf College located in Northfield, Minnesota. Northfield is approximately forty-five minutes from Minneapolis-St. Paul. The total population of the town is 19,000, including 5,000 college students who attend Carleton College and St. Olaf College. St. Olaf is a nationally ranked liberal arts college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Founded in 1874 by Norwegian Lutheran immigrants, St. Olaf remains tied to its Nordic heritage.

During the 2010/2011 academic year, when we conducted our research, there were 3,156 students enrolled at St. Olaf. The ratio of men to women is 45/55 and the majority of students

identified as white, non-Hispanic (84%)¹. The remaining 16% of students identified themselves as another race/ethnicity², including non-resident international students. St. Olaf ranked 1st among baccalaureate institutions in the number of students that studied abroad in the 2007-2008 school year and 73% of 2010 graduates participated in an abroad program during their college years. St. Olaf takes pride in being at the “forefront of global education.” Since the first abroad program in the 1950’s, the value of being a “global citizen” has become an increasingly important part of the college’s mission (St. Olaf College 2011).

In addition to abroad programs, St. Olaf students can choose from over 190 registered student organizations. The majority of which are categorized as academic, athletic, awareness, multicultural, political, religious, service, and special interest. Student organizations fall under the institutional office of student activities and the Student Government Association (SGA). There are 14 multicultural organizations (MCOs) recognized by SGA. Another institutional branch, independent of the student activities office, is the Multicultural Affairs and Community Outreach (MACO) office. 11 of the 14 multicultural organizations are affiliated with MACO (St. Olaf College 2011).

MACO and the position of Assistant to the President for Institutional Diversity were established by St. Olaf to improve the diversity climate on campus. In the late 1980’s, the college began to institute a series of initiatives that specifically address issues facing “underrepresented student groups.” These initiatives include precollegiate, scholarship, academic, and career support programs.

¹ According to the US Department of Education, individuals are now allowed to self-identify with more than one race/ethnicity.

² The race/ethnicity categories were as follows: Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic, Multiracial, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Nonresident International, American Indian or Alaskan Native, or Race/Ethnicity Unknown.

The explicit intent of MACO:

...Is to promote the intellectual, social and moral development of all students on campus through the advancement and understanding of culture and heritage. Our intent is to raise the cultural awareness of and appreciation for ethnic differences in the St. Olaf campus community by coordinating and planning cultural and educational programming. Our office advises student organizations and individuals who have interests in multicultural services and programming (St. Olaf College 2011)

MACO encourages students to be active participants and share their culture with the St. Olaf community while also providing support services for students of diverse backgrounds. (St. Olaf College 2011).

Multicultural organization events are the primary vehicles through which minority students raise awareness about their culture and clubs will put on themed weeks or months each year, such as Asia Weeks, Africa Week, Native American Weeks, and Black History Month (St. Olaf College 2011).

Even with all these events, student participation and especially white student participation, remains a concern for students hosting multicultural events. As students within this community, we began to contemplate what barriers to participation and interaction that might have been overlooked.

Methodology

We decided to collect data through focus groups, interviews, and observations. Our subjects were primarily students, though relevant members of the administration were included. Our research focused on students because they are the main actors in student organizations. We chose to interview members of the administration because student organizations function under

the guidance of the St. Olaf administration and these staff members also ensure that organizations are maintained despite the constantly flow of students through the organization each year.

We focused on students involved in multicultural organizations (MCOs). Because our research was about race and ethnicity-focused student groups, we sought interviews with students involved in MCOs. We also interviewed students involved in other student organizations (OSOs). We contacted students from organizations in each of the organization categories listed by the SGA: Academic, Athletic, Awareness, Club Sport, Political, Religious, Multicultural, Special Interest, or Volunteer Network program. We then contacted all 11 organizations under MACO.

Our interviews with students from OSOs were meant to provide the perspective of majority students and to determine what behavior was consistent throughout the St. Olaf community and not specific to MCOs. We randomly selected five organizations from the eight categories on the OSO website and contacted the leaders in those organizations to forward the e-mail to their members. We chose five organizations from each category because we were expecting a higher response rate. We contacted MCOs from the Multicultural Affairs and Community Outreach (MACO) page, not the student organizations page. Our decision was based on the idea that MCOs under the MACO umbrella represent socially recognized MCOs and are therefore, more appropriate for our research.

We decided to use focus groups to gain an understanding of collective organizations and group interaction. However, low-response rates and busy schedules made the focus groups impractical. We chose to individually interview the students who expressed interest in our research. Individual interviews were beneficial in that they allowed us to adapt the questions

according to the subject's personal experiences, thereby exploring certain questions to a greater degree than the focus group would have permitted.

However, the interview format did create problems, particularly with vague answers and covert/overt avoidance of questions. The short-term relationship with the subject does not lend itself to full disclosure. Some censorship could be avoided if multiple interviews were conducted and a bond was developed between the interviewer and interviewee. Multiple interviews would also allow the subject time to contemplate questions and expand their answers later on.

Recruitment of subjects was problematic for us. The use of email allowed us to contact a large number of students, but did not create any incentive for them beyond interest. In particular our study lacked the participation from the male student population. A majority of the students we interviewed were female students; we interviewed two male students. Several of the male students we contacted did not show up to their interview.

The interview format and participation problems limited our ability to fully represent the student body as a whole and our findings cannot be generalized to the St. Olaf community. Instead, our results should be understood as a glimpse into student organization life and the possible boundaries that prevent free movement between student groups.

Problem

We began our research with an interest in the participation of students in multicultural organizations on campus. In our search for contemporary literature on the subject, we found a wealth of information relating to educational institutions, diversity, race, gender, class, segregation, integration, multiculturalism, and so forth. Without the ability to properly address all these issues in our work, we had to refine our analytical framework. The result is an amalgam

of sociological concepts, all rooted in the social construction of race. The relevant concepts are divided into two categories: first, race and power and second, diversity on campus.

Race and Power

Social constructionism asserts that reality³ is constructed through social interaction; interaction between individuals and groups creates meaning, these meanings then influence future behaviors. Society is a massive construction of meanings, transmitted through discourse in the form of language, gestures, symbols, and any component of social interaction. Race is a constructed concept within our society. It is a reality to us only because it has become knowledge⁴ within our social and historical context.

The term “race” essentially refers to conceptualized abstract ideas about a culture or nation molded into a tangible set of characteristics. Patricia Hill Collins (2009) suggests that racial characteristics, as well as class and gender characteristics, are often created in terms of their opposites. For example, the “Ole” people interact with a new group of people. The “Ole” notice differences in behaviors, beliefs, etc. They attribute the differences to the short height of the people and categorize them as “race x.” The resulting knowledge of the “Ole” people is that people of “race x” can be identified by how short they are.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), categorization based on physical appearance is due to the threat of differing constructions of reality. When two groups of individuals interact and their constructions of reality do not align, each group attempts to cope by denying the reality of whatever phenomena or interpretations of phenomena do not fit into their universe. Difference

³ Reality is defined as “a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition (we cannot ‘wish it away’)” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:1)

⁴ Knowledge is the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics (Berger and Luckmann 1966:1)

between those who are “black” and those who are “white” is explained by skin color in order to neutralize the threat created by the existence of alternative definitions of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

The labels we apply, such as “race x,” are based on a set of constructed characteristics. Over time, these characteristics become fused with “race x” and the concept of who someone of “race x” is becomes “knowledge” within that society. This process is the social construction of knowledge and racial categories; such as Asian, Middle-eastern, Black, White, are products of social interaction.

Racial categories directly impact perception and structure how we understand the situations we encounter. Even if a person’s gender, social class, or race are not consciously recognized in their definition of self, these categories still influence how that person perceives the world and is perceived by the world.

A great deal of power can be gained if an individual, or a group, control what characteristics are assigned to what race. Historically, race has been used as a tool for the construction of inequality via social processes, norms, discourse and knowledge (Alcoff 2006). Michel Foucault (1972) theorizes the processes of power that work through discourse and knowledge.

Discourse defines reality and individuals define discourse, individuals can accumulate power by defining reality in their favor and by defining reality in a way that oppresses others (Foucault 1972). While Foucault believes in the construction of reality through interaction, he does not believe much in conscious actors, but focuses on structural relationships.

The issue of race prejudice does not exist within members of one group, but based on the position of the group overall and their feelings and relationship toward other racial groups as

discussed in *Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position* by Herbert Blumer. This feeling of racial prejudice is formed through social experience and “racial prejudice individuals think of themselves as belonging to a given racial group” (Blumer 1958:3). The scheme of racial identification is needed as a framework of racial prejudice, for the formation of one’s racial group and other racial group revolve around the formation of their own image or conception of their own group. This image or concept of one’s racial group is the result of experience.

In order to understand racial prejudice, the basic understanding should come from how racial groups form their images of themselves and of others. A way of describing this is through the *collective process*, through who accepted through the media as a spokes person for a racial group and how they conceptualize other racial groups. When one conceptualizes and characterizes other racial groups, it is through the comparison with one’s group and stating the opposites. To this, Blumer said, “It is the *sense of social position* emerging from this collective process of characterization which provides the basic of race prejudice” (1958:4). It all depends on the position of the racial groups within the larger context; this affects their feelings and relationship to the other racial groups.

Within dominant groups, there are four types of racial prejudice that is always in existence, with the first being the feeling of superiority, of being naturally superior or better. This can be seen in the comparison with subordinate groups through condemnatory or debasing traits, placing subordinate people below them. The second feeling is the perception that subordinate race is “an alien and fundamentally different stocks, is likewise always present, placing them beyond, as strange and different. ‘They are not of our kind’ is a common way in which this is likely to be expressed. It is this feeling that reflects, justifies, and promotes the social exclusion

of the subordinate racial group” (Blumer 1958:4). These two feelings bring forth the sense of aversion and antipathy with dominant groups, but combined, they do not create prejudice.

The third feeling is the sense of proprietary claim, where the dominant groups feel they are entitled to certain things or property claims, excluding subordinate people from certain rights or things. Yet, combined with the first two feelings, it still does not explain race prejudices, without the fourth feeling. This last feeling is the “fear or apprehension that the subordinate racial group is threatening, or will threaten, the position of the dominant group” (Blumer 1958:4). Any “acts” or “suspected acts” by subordinate race is considered a threat to the dominant group, for it threaten their exclusiveness. These “acts” are perceived to be “getting out of place” and critical in arousing race prejudice.

These four feelings are based on the arrangement of the racial groups and how they perceive themselves with the rest of the groups. According to Blumer (1958), the dominant groups are more concern about their position vis-à-vis the subordinate group, because this sense of position is at the very heart of the dominant groups. Their sense of dominate position gives them a sense or perception in how they perceive, act and response to things within their group and outside their group It also give individual members a common orientation, giving them the feeling of belonging to that group, allowing them to go under the influence of the group. So it is not within individuals this feeling of racial prejudice, “but in the definition of the respective positions of the racial groups” (Blumer 1959:5). Racial prejudice is nothing more than a defensive reaction to anything that challenge or threaten the sense of the group position and is a way to preserve the position of the dominant group.

The sense of group position among dominate groups come to question when there are any “big event” that develop a conception of the subordinate racial group. According to Blumer,

“The happening that seems momentous, that touches deep sentiments, that seems to raise fundamental questions about relations, and that awake strong feelings of identification with one’s racial group is the kind of event that is central in the formation of the racial image” (1958:6). This brings forth public discussions of a denunciation of the subordinate racial group, finding the subordinate groups as a threat to the dominant group. How these events are defined will create a racial image and a sense of social position (Blumer 1958).

How racial prejudice is perceived and is through intellectual and social elites. They are the key figures to making and influencing changes in the sense of group position and how dominant groups characterize subordinate groups. The need to direct group discussions to better have a sense of where groups are standing, their formation and group image, for the social order is rooted in the sense of social position. Through his observation, Blumer (1958) stated that for this sense of group position to disappear and decrease race prejudice when events are viewed as racial harmony or groups just building a stronger group image for them.

Oppression is full of contradiction in how we perceive things and set out to accomplish them, for everything we see is through the varying amount of oppression and how there are multiple systems of oppression in our lives. Patricia Hill Collins, author of *Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection* said, “...we need new visions of what oppression is, new categories of analysis that are inclusive of race, class, and gender as distinctive yet interlocking structures of oppression” (2009:674). People are more concern in this competitive cycle for attention by comparing and ranking oppression. This need for new way of thinking, would also require for a new way of acting to create changes, starting with change in our daily behavior, by ending stereotyping and objectifying those different from us.

To address this change, we must have new theories about the influence of race, class and gender in shaping the experience of all groups and connect these relationships to our everyday lives and the relationships around us. The way we conceptualize race, class and gender is in terms of their opposites, ranking the differences. They are all important structure of a situation, even though they may not be visible in how people define themselves; they are structured around three dimensions. The first is Institutional Dimension of Oppression; although there are claims along the ideologies of equality, race, class and gender, discrimination lingers around, giving some more privilege to others. Collins referred to slavery as a metaphor of institutional dimension of oppression as she said, “Even today, the plantation remains a compelling metaphor for institutional oppression,” due to the fact that things have not changed much, although not as severe and topic of discussions (2009:677). She also goes on to say:

A brief analysis of key American social institutions most controlled by elite White men should convince us of the interlocking nature of race, class and gender in structuring the institutional dimension of oppression. For example, if you are from an American college or university, is your campus a modern plantation? Who controls your university’s political economy? Are elite white men over represented among the upper administrators and trustees controlling your university’s finances and policies? Are elite White men being joined by growing numbers of elite White women helpmates? What kind of people are in your classrooms grooming the next generation who will occupy these and other decision-making positions? Who are the support staff that produce the mass mailings, order the supplies fix the leaky pipes? (2009:678)

This leads to the next dimension, the Symbolic Dimension of Oppression, which focuses on the use of stereotypical and controlling the image of race, class and gender. They are interlocking nature and are used to dehumanize individuals or groups by denying the reality of their experience, for “when we refuse to deal with race or class because they do not appear to be directly relevant to gender, we are actually becoming part of someone else’s problem” (Collins, 2009, pp.679). We all live with a certain level of institutional privilege and penalty based on the symbolic images applied to us, affecting the choices available to us and the choices we made.

Lastly is the Individual Dimension of Oppressions, which emphasis the fact that we all live in an institution that produce race, class and gender oppression that all of our choices become political acts. We are all affected by this institutional oppression, yet at times, we just don't realize it. Look at the people you socialize with, close friends and partner to see if they look like you, and if they do, "circumstance may be the cause," due to out barriers to connection (Collins 2009). As Collins ended this, she quoted Nikki Giovanni, "We've got to live in the real world. If we don't like the world we're living in, change it. And if we can't change it, we change ourselves. We can do something" (Collins 2009:680). We all have the choice in changing the institutional oppression and discrimination already set in place.

Diversity on Campus

The issue of race prejudice does not exit within members of one group, but based on the position of the group overall and their feelings and relationship toward other racial groups as discussed in *Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position* by Herbert Blumer. This feeling of racial prejudice is formed through social experience and "racial prejudice individuals think of themselves as belonging to a given racial group" (1958:3). In order to understand racial prejudice, the basic understanding should come from how racial groups form their images of themselves and of others. Blumer explains that, "it is the *sense of social position* emerging from this collective process of characterization which provides the basic of race prejudice" (1958:4). It all depends on the position of the racial groups within the larger context that effect their feelings and relationship to the other racial groups.

These feelings are based on the arrangement of the racial groups and how they perceive themselves with the rest of the groups. It is not within individuals this feeling of racial prejudice,

“but in the definition of the respective positions of the racial groups” (Blumer 1959:5). Racial prejudice is nothing more than a defensive reaction to anything that challenge or threaten the sense of the group position and is a way to preserve the position of the dominant group.

Other academics have attempted to discern types or levels of “intergroup relations” within a campus context. Gurin and Nagda (2005) outline the two dominant institutional approaches to diversity, intergroup harmony and intragroup solidarity. Intergroup harmony models overwhelm group identity so that members see themselves solely as individuals or as members of new deracialized groups. Intergroup Harmony models rely on the concept of colorblindness as a “solution” to racial prejudice and discrimination. While student diversity is represented, acknowledgement of racial and ethnic identity is actively diminished. Intragroup solidarity is at the opposite end of the spectrum.

The Institutional Approach to Racial Groups: Intragroup Solidarity

In accordance with the mission statement of St. Olaf, one of its goals is to provide students with an education that includes globalization and broadens their perspective to prepare them for life after St. Olaf (St. Olaf College 2011). As part of this mission, St. Olaf recruits a certain number of multicultural students from around the nation, as well as a certain number of international students to bring their experience to campus and share it with the rest of the student body. Once these students arrive, they are left to “diversify” St. Olaf on their own by way of their presence. Little work is done to encourage interaction between multicultural students and non-multicultural student to increase communication and interaction on multiple levels.

We sought to understand how St. Olaf, as an institution, conceptualizes race. To do so we needed a model to compare the college with. Gurin and Nagda (2005) outline two traditional

models of racial integration, intergroup harmony and intragroup solidarity. Our observations, interviews with individuals in MACO, and review of St. Olaf's policies indicate that the intragroup solidarity model of identity is employed at St. Olaf.

One of our initial questions to students was "how did you initially hear about the organizations/clubs you are a part of?" While the majority of white students who are not in MCOs cited the co-curricular fair, the majority of minority students mentioned upperclassmen they met during the TRiO Student Support Services summer bridge program, a program for first generation, low-income and students with disabilities; the MACO banquet during week one, or the MACO office.

The responses we received suggest that minority students are exposed to a different set of student organizations at a different time in their college careers. Both the summer bridge program and the MACO banquet occur prior to the start of a student's first academic year (MACO banquet is available to returning students as well). Students, who are considered part of the majority are introduced to student organizations at the co-curricular fair after the start of school.

Tajfel's identity model of intragroup solidarity asserts that providing minority with different groups promotes group solidarity (Gurin and Nagda 2005). Group solidarity can help students overcome social inequalities and can provide resources for groups that may lack social power. This identity model is also the basis of ethnic studies and women's studies classes. St. Olaf offers several programs in ethnic studies including American Racial and Multicultural Studies (ARMS), Asian Studies, and Latin America/Latino Studies.

Cultural clubs are also a component of the intragroup solidarity model (Gurin and Nagda 2005). Some of the students we interviewed suggested that having a place to go where people

understood them was appreciated. This echoes the concept of the “racial battle fatigue” that minority students experience on predominantly White campuses. Simultaneously, an equivalent number of students did not perceive a need for a “safe space.”

The Student Approach to Racial Groups: Intergroup Dialogue

Our interviews revealed a transition that seems to be occurring around the concept of race. Members of the St. Olaf administration suggested that the school’s definition of MCO is not evolving with the “changing reality of students.” The shift in MCO type supports this conclusion.

Within the general category of MCO, we found two main forms of organizations. The first type of MCO is based on similarity of racial or ethnic identity. Individuals within the organization seem to have a deep personal connection within that culture or display the physical characteristics associated with that race. The second type of MCO defines its by similar interest(s) in a culture. We found these groups to be recently formed (last three years) and often they represent more than one race.

The first type of MCO reflects the “safe space” concept discussed earlier. We found that few MCOs of this type had students of another race in their organization. In this case, these groups are not meant to be open to the larger community. They are based on racial solidarity build strength by illegitimizing the inequalities that disadvantage their group. The group as a whole could not remain stabilize if they were to let someone in who did not fit the racial category and the entrance of many students from the dominant race, in this case White, could fundamentally weaken the power the group solidarity provides its members.

The second MCO type reflects a different idea of what individuals of a certain race want or need. They are more likely to be open to new members because members from outside of the group's race/ethnicity do not threaten the group identity. These groups do not create group solidarity from similar histories based on race, but rather around like-interests.

The majority of students we talked to supported the incorporation and involvement of students from other racial and ethnic backgrounds in MCOs. One student was especially interested in having in-depth discussions with other MCOs and other student organizations, "I want to understand them better and what they talk about and struggle with and I want them to understand me." Another student wanted to know "what white students think of us." Overall, the students we talked with expressed a desire to have more explicit conversations about race and racial group issues.

These findings signify a disparity between St. Olaf and its students. While the college continues to create initiatives from an intragroup solidarity model, students are eager to embrace what Gurin and Nagda (2005) call the intergroup dialogue approach. The intergroup dialogue approach integrates the concepts of intergroup harmony and intragroup solidarity, while altering the ultimate goal of intergroup relations. Gurin and Nagda explain how, "they focus especially on common dialogic communication process that is intended to develop intergroup understanding, collaboration, and the development of shared identity as socially just people" (2005:21). A successful dialogue would produce satisfy both the students mentioned, "*understanding* of both commonalities and differences between groups."

Barriers to Intergroup Dialogue: Color-Blind Bind

The lack of participation by the non-multicultural students in MCOs and their events indicate that there is this invisible boundary among both group of students. “Multiculturalism” is present, but not fully when students don’t participate in MCOs and their events or even know about them. In our research, we sought to uncover what factors might be holding students back.

In our interviews we heard students express discomfort over the idea of verbally acknowledging a student as of a different race. Asking or making reference to the race of individual who is not your friend “would be prejudice,” said one subject. Our other interviewees did not so explicitly state this belief. But the tone of the interviews suggested insecurity about “what to call someone.” I (Katherine) felt compelled to say “white” first in reference to myself in order to put interviewees at ease.

To better understand what social forces were at work, we searched through literature on recognition of race and the idea of being politically correct. We found that globalization and cultural competency have become highly valued in today’s society and that the liberal movements of the past that supported justice through sameness remain deeply ingrained (Alcoff 2006). As a consequence of these contradictory beliefs Americans are experiencing a type of cognitive dissonance, also known as the “color-blind bind.” This cognitive bind is not reserved for individuals alone, but can also afflict groups and institutions.

Based on our interviews, St. Olaf as a community appears to be struggling with the color-blind bind and discourse has yet to create new ways of understanding race. The consequence of this cognitive bind is difficult to determine. The emphasis on study abroad programs and simultaneous lack of integration on campus is a potential side effect. When students are asked to recognize other cultures, but not be “racist” i.e. differentiate people based on race, the color-

blind bind occurs. To eliminate the bind, a student can go abroad and recognize other cultures in a way that does not suggest racist beliefs. Simply, it is easier to say that someone is Indian in India, than it is to ask someone “are you Indian?” in America.

One way we discovered the cognitive bind could be avoided was through friendship. Non-multicultural students who have friends that are multicultural and part of MCOs are more likely to be involved in MCOs and attend MCO events. We found these non-multicultural students felt like it was “okay” for them to attend events when they had someone they knew there. Suddenly, the outsider student was not “recognizing race,” but supporting someone they care about. Moreover, having a friend of another race lessens students’ fear of being perceived as “racist.” Our findings are confirmed through the decategorization concept. Friendship individualizes people; a friend is no longer considered a member of a larger racial group, but as a unique individual (Gurin and Nagda 2005).

The students that we interviewed, not of multicultural background, said that they were afraid of imposing, intruding. The first reason revolved around conflict, for white students may recognize that they do have more privilege/power and do not like to be reminded. Partly it is uncomfortable for them due to the double bind that exists in discourses on race: colorblindness verses respecting/acknowledging other cultures/multiculturalism and globalization. There are those who struggle with the knowledge that as a white person, they automatically have this privilege and power, but feel that it is not right that they have this power.

The second reason is the loss of power, a feeling that some white students have if and when they do attend MCO meetings and events. When we asked students why they would feel uncomfortable, we would hear the equivalent of “Well I know they wouldn’t actually say I couldn’t be there, but I just feel out of place...” At the same time, a majority of the students take

for granted the power they have as majority members. Their majority status is weakened or gone when they attend MCO meetings/events and are no longer the majority within the situation or environment. Having less power is not comfortable for many white students.

The Role of the Multicultural Student

The concept of “race” is symbolic, our society has constructed the concept of “race” and it represents certain privileges and limitations. The characteristics of a particular race create invisible barriers for an individual of that race. In this section we focus on how our construction of race influences multicultural organizations on the St. Olaf campus.

The term “race” refers to conceptualized abstract ideas about a culture or nation molded into a tangible set of characteristics. Racial stereotypes based on these characteristics are used to control individuals or groups by ignoring any behaviors or traits that fall outside of the stereotype and essentially denying the reality of subordinate groups. Power structures work to maintain one understanding of race over another. Our research suggests that due to our definition of “racial minorities,” a power process exists that maintains the segregation between minority and majority students at St. Olaf.

We all live with a certain level of institutional privilege and penalty based on the symbolic images applied to us that in turn affect the choices available us. One’s race is a “symbolic image” and comes with privileges and penalties attached. In our research, we found that students prescribed a minority race label experience penalties in the form of implicit expectations.

The first expectation is “diversification.” According to the mission statement of St. Olaf, one of the school’s goals is globalization, to diversify itself. Students of multicultural

background are encouraged and recruited to come to St. Olaf through the establishment of programs like MACO.

A certain number of multicultural students are recruited every year and this small number of attendance puts extra pressures on students to inform the majority of the student population of their history, culture and value, thereby enriching the education of all students at St. Olaf.

As advocates for their culture, minority students experience stress that is above and beyond that of the white students. One individual expressed concern that the number of events MCOs felt they had to put on led to “tired members and overworked groups and no time to enjoy being with each other or talking to each other.” Time is taken away from students more personal needs or interests.

The stress on MCOs also seems to affect the cohesiveness of the larger multicultural community. Students spend much of their time planning events for their own organization and have little time to spare to attend and support events put on by friends in other MCOs. Multicultural students devote huge amounts of time and energy to events meant to inform the larger campus. This job is prescribed to them because of their minority status. Expecting multicultural students to be the (largely sole) advocates for their culture, the St. Olaf institution is perpetuating an unequal power structure that penalizes multicultural students.

Isolation is another consequence of being a multicultural student. During our interviews, we asked students to list all the student organizations they were apart of. Students in MCOs were often involved in multiple MCOs, but were rarely part of another type of student organization. In conjunction with the time and energy spent on events, minority students simply do not have time available to be involved in other student organizations. One interviewee noted that if multicultural students were part of other organizations it was for “academic purposes.”

It is important to note that segregation between MCOs and the rest of the student body is not only an issue at St. Olaf. A study by Grasmuck (2010), shows that though there are more minorities on college campuses, intergroup collaboration is infrequent. This growing concern is not being acknowledged and it will continue to hinder MCOs and limit a “true” diversification of campus life. After all, as Grasmuck says, “...segregation is a barriers to racial integration because it undermines efforts to establish institutional norms of intergroup acceptance.” (2010:186).

The Role of MACO

The MACO works in two important ways to counteract racial inequalities that exist in the larger social system. First, MACO encourages students to promote cultural awareness. The definition of a particular race can be altered if members of that racial group (and their supports) re-define what it means to be Thai, African, or Latino. However, the full burden of educating the St. Olaf should not be placed on minority students.

The second way MACO combats racial inequality is by working within the current structural system, rather than against it. MACO encourages the development of important skills, including leadership and communication, which increase the total social capital available to students. Increased social capital empowers multicultural students within the unequal system. It is a place of familiarity and safety for these students, allowing them to network with each other.

Summary/Conclusion

Synthesizing our findings, we believe that St. Olaf’s concept of race is in transition, as an institution and as a community. We recognize that our findings are not generalizable to the full student body, our findings are important to trends present on the St. Olaf campus. Taifel’s model

has its place, but race and ethnicity are flexible, ever fluctuating concepts and therefore, the approach to eliminating inequality must also constantly be adapted. We find that St. Olaf's structural assumptions about race no longer align with the perceptions of its students and in order to move forward, the structural must change.

We find that MCOs are already beginning to change. Students looking for a club that reflects their understanding of race are founding their own, based more on interest in a culture than on a need for safety from the outside culture. Students in MCOs feel the organization is not reaching out enough and desire a transition to an intergroup dialogue model of group interaction.

We also note a potential barrier to intergroup dialogue with the color-blind bind. St. Olaf and its students are struggling with how to talk about race without risking classification as racist or unjust. While the school is in transition, the symbolic power of race is a strong force on campus and minority student bear the brunt of the responsibility to educate St. Olaf about their culture.

Our findings are not meant to paint a negative picture of St. Olaf College. We live in an institution that produces a certain conceptualization of race, but we can change that concept through social interactions. As Collins concludes in her article with a quote from Nikki Giovanni, "We've got to live in the real world. If we don't like the world we're living in, change it. And if we can't change it, we change ourselves. We can do something" (Collins 2009:680). We all have the ability to change institutional perceptions of race and create a more equal community.

How to begin making changes is a more complex question. We suggest that St. Olaf should provide leadership training for all leaders of all organizations and clubs to have great leadership, which is lacking in many organizations and clubs. There should be more workshops

to help student groups discuss what they image they want to present and they can do that, especially for MCOs who struggle to reach out to the St. Olaf community. Also, St. Olaf should set the stage for more structural discussions between MCOs and OSO and to allow them to better communicate and join multicultural students in the task of diversifying St. Olaf.

According to Patricia Hill Collins “...we need new visions of what oppression is, new categories of analysis that are inclusive of race, class, and gender as distinctive yet interlocking structures of oppression” (2009:674). While we were unable to study race through the lens of intersectionality, we feel that our study could be used as a component of a three-part analysis of structures of power that surround race, class, and gender.

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