

Running Head: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

Undergraduate Psychology Students Perceptions of the Multicultural Environment within their  
Department

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Abstract

Individuals who belong to cultural/ethnic minorities or who identify as LGBTQ are underrepresented among U.S. psychologists. This trend has been conceptually linked to U.S. psychologists' historical inattention to issues that are relevant to these populations. As the foundation of a broader effort to empirically explore the relation between psychology faculty perceptions and the experiences of psychology students who are either LGBTQ, belong to ethnocultural minority groups, or both, this study explored the training experiences of 8 undergraduate psychology majors or minors using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Results point to significant student concerns regarding the inclusiveness of their training experiences both broadly and across four specific domains. This research provides an initial assessment of the perceptions of inclusiveness in their learning experiences among psychology undergraduate students belonging to two historically marginalized groups.

## Introduction

Psychology in the United States (U.S.) often is criticized for a lack of ethnocultural minority representation in two related areas: the focus of its inquiry and the demographic makeup of psychologists (Suinn & Borrayo, 2008). In terms of its focus, beginning in the 1970's, historical reviews of psychological inquiry have highlighted the fact that, consistent with patterns of observed in U.S. society, psychologists have largely ignored issues of importance to ethnic minority populations (Guthrie, 1976). More recent critiques suggest that this pattern continues to be prevalent to date and that –as the proportion of the U.S. population that belongs to ethnic or cultural minority groups continues to grow- the knowledge base of U.S. psychology risks becoming obsolete and inadequate (Hall, 1997).

In terms of the demographic representation of individuals belonging to ethnocultural minorities among psychologists, recent research has identified a phenomenon labeled a “pipeline problem,” whereby - beginning at the undergraduate level- the enrollment of individuals belonging to these groups into psychology training programs falls below their proportion of the U.S. population (Maton, Kohout, Wicherski, Leary, & Vinokurov, 2006). This disproportionality increases at each subsequent step in psychology training such that, as of the most recently available data, individuals belonging to ethnocultural minorities comprised 31.7% of the overall population, 24.3% of undergraduate enrollment in psychology degrees, 21.5% of individuals receiving a master's degree in psychology, 20% of individuals receiving a PsyD, 14.8% of individuals receiving a PhD in psychology, and 12% of faculty on psychology programs (Maton et al., 2006).

Many experts have pointed to the likely relation between these two problems of underrepresentation: the lack of relevant content makes psychology unappealing to members of

ethnocultural minority groups, and their lack of interest in psychology helps perpetuate the inattention to content relevant to ethnocultural minorities (Maton et al., 2006; Suinn & Borrayo, 2008). In response to these troubling trends, the American Psychological Association (APA) began developing and publishing a series of guidelines for the promotion of diversity within psychology (e.g., APA, 2000, APA, 2003). Among other suggestions, the most recent version of these guidelines enjoins psychologists to “recognize the importance of multicultural sensitivity/responsiveness, knowledge, and understanding about ethnically and racially different individuals” (i.e., Guideline #2), “employ the constructs of multiculturalism and diversity in psychological education” (Guideline #3). Additional efforts taken by the APA include mandating the inclusion of coursework in multiculturalism and diversity as a requirement for certification of graduate programs in professional psychology (Maton et al., 2006), publishing guidelines for the recruitment, retention, and promotion of individuals belonging to ethnocultural minority group (APA, 2008), highlighting exemplary efforts in the recruitment and retention of ethnoculturally diverse students (e.g., Rogers and Molina, 2006), and financially supporting the promotion of ethnocultural minorities to leadership positions within the association’s governance structure (Suinn & Borrayo, 2008).

As the data described when introducing psychology’s pipeline problem suggest, despite the relative success of efforts such as those listed above, U.S. psychology continues to suffer from underrepresentation problems. These data are complimented by written accounts of ethnocultural minority psychologists at various levels of training suggesting that, with some exceptions, their subjective experience within the field of psychology is one fraught with challenges and the experience of marginalization (e.g., Acevedo-Polakovich, 2007; Fish, 2000; Vazquez et al., 2006). Moreover, although it is arguable that the APA’s efforts provide an

appropriate response at a policy level, it is the successful application of these policies within specific psychology department across the country that will ultimately render a solution to the representation problems prevalent in U.S. psychology. For this reason, the current project will focus on examining the perceptions of undergraduate students who belong to ethnic/cultural minorities within one specific department, located within a mid-sized doctoral degree granting Midwestern public university.

Although data examining the experiences of undergraduate psychology students of color at this university are not currently available, Hardwick and Haddad (2008) recently examined the experiences of undergraduate students of color at this university using a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach. The quantitative portion of their study compared perceptions and experiences of campus climate of 366 undergraduate students of color to those of 357 of their European American peers, identifying several important differences. First, independent of race/ethnicity, students recognized a value for diversity in higher education. Specifically, across groups about 90% of students agreed “that student’s are better prepared for later life when they attend a university where there is a good deal of diversity”. Importantly, there were no statistically significant differences between racial/ethnic groups in these patterns. Second, compared to European American students, students of color reported greater interaction with individuals who did not belong to their same ethnic group and greater involvement in diversity-related experiences. Over twice as many students of color (51%) as European American students (24%) reported currently having contact with people who were racially/ethnically different than themselves. This is perhaps not surprising when it is considered that students of color also were more likely than European American students to have experiences with people from ethnically diverse backgrounds prior to college (66% vs. 24%). Additionally, students of

color were more likely than their European American counterparts to attend diversity-related events (83% vs. 68%) and to make use of a diversity-related campus office (66% of students of color reported used all five diversity-related offices listed in the survey while 78% of European Americans used either one or none of them). Third, students of color also reported more intimate contact with ethnically and racially diverse people in comparison to their white peers. When asked about “the three friends they now spend time with,” a little over half of the students of color responded that each of those friends were of an ethnicity different from their own. This compares to 36.6% among European American students. Finally, European American students were less likely than their ethnic/racial minority peers to have been asked to act as a de-facto spokesperson for their racial/ethnicity group (58% vs. 86%).

In order to enrich their interpretation of these survey findings, Hardwick and Haddad (2008) also conducted a qualitative analysis based on data obtained during semi-structured interviews with fifteen students of color (nine females and six males; thirteen identified as African American, one identified as Asian and one identified as Hispanic or other). The interviews focused on four aspects of students of color’s experiences. The first of these aspects was the quality of their experiences within the classroom and at diversity-related events. Results suggested that most students had experienced negative incidents concerning race or ethnicity (e.g., use of inoffensive language by classmates or instructors, etc.). A second aspect examined by Hardwick and Haddad (2008) involved the role of their race/ethnicity within the classroom. Most participants reported that being a member of an ethnic/racial group had at times negatively impacted their experiences in the classroom. Participants were also asked to discuss their feelings of inclusion versus exclusion outside of the classroom. Results suggested that most participants were active participants in Registered Student Organizations, and that this participation seemed

fueled by two motivations: (1) Being in an inclusive environment that included people they perceived as similar to themselves, and; (2) Professional advancement. Finally, the last aspect of these students' experiences that was examined involved their perception of whether there were specific ways in which the campus diversity environment could be improved. Students felt multicultural events should be advertised more noticeably and that a greater focus on campus inclusiveness could highlight all areas of diversity.

As a whole, Hardwick and Haddad's (2008) findings suggest that the experiences of undergraduate students of color at the university that is the context for the proposed study differ markedly from those of their European American counterparts. Specifically, students of color appear to have greater exposure to individuals who are ethnically different from themselves and to participate more actively in diversity-related events. Although students of color tended to have an overall positive evaluation of their educational experience, most had either witnessed or directly experienced negative events related to race or ethnicity both in the classroom and in co-curricular activities. Although these findings help us understand the overall environment of the institution that the psychology department at the focus of this study is located in, they cannot be directly generalized to it.

## Method

### *Participants*

Potential participants were contacted via email and direct mail describing the research (including inclusion criteria) and asking them to contact the researchers if they were interested in participating. Participants who responded were scheduled to participate in a group protocol administration. Eight individuals who were psychology majors or minors at the university being studied and who self-identified as belonging to an ethnic/cultural minority group volunteered to

participate in this study. When participants arrived to complete the research, researchers provided them with an IRB-approved consent form and asked to read the form and make sure to have any questions answered by the researchers before they signed to indicate their willingness to participate. After consenting, participants completed each of the measures described below and then participated in semi-structured focus group discussion about their experiences as undergraduate psychology students.

### *Measures and Research Procedures*

*Background Questionnaire.* Participants completed a demographic questionnaire that asked for information on their gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, their cultural and/or ethnic background, their age, the approximate number of psychology courses they've taken, and their status as a psychology major or minor.

*Revised Multicultural Environments Inventory* (MEI; Pope-Davis et al., 2000). Participants completed a version of the MEI revised for use in this study. The MEI is a questionnaire designed to assess respondents' perception of the extent to which an academic environment and curriculum reflect multiculturalism and diversity. Participants used a five point Likert-type scale ("1 = Not at all," "5 = A lot") to indicate the extent to which each of 27 statements (e.g., "I believe that multicultural issues are integrated into coursework.") is reflective of their experiences in that environment. Participant responses were then used to calculate two separate types of scores. The first of these, *curriculum and supervision*, is calculated by averaging responses to 11 specific items and represents the extent to which multiculturalism is incorporated into curricular and supervision issues (e.g., "All course evaluations ask how/if multicultural issues have been integrated into courses."). The second of these, *climate and comfort*, is calculated by averaging responses to 11 specific items and represents the

respondents' perception of the overall academic climate and their personal feelings within it (e.g., "There are faculty with whom I feel comfortable discussing multicultural issues and concerns"). Each of these scales has shown adequate internal validity in previous research (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$  for both scales respectively).

To be consistent with the purposes of the current study, the MEI was modified to separately assess perceptions about the academic environment's reflection of LGBTQ issues (e.g., "I believe that issues relevant to LGTQ groups are integrated into coursework") and perceptions about the academic environment's reflection of ethnic/cultural minority issues (e.g., "I believe that issues relevant to cultural/ethnic minority groups are integrated into coursework"). As such, four overall scales were calculated in the current study (e.g., LGBTQ Climate and Comfort, Ethnic/Cultural Climate and Comfort, etc.).

*Semi-structured Focus Group.* After all participants completed the measures described above, it was explained to them that researchers hoped to have an open group discussion with them about their experiences as undergraduate psychology students. This group discussion was facilitated by a trained researcher who introduced four sequential topics: (1) Overall experiences as psychology students of color; (2) Classroom experiences (including course content) in reference to issues of diversity; (3) Strengths and weaknesses of their experience as undergraduate psychology students, and; (4) Their perception of the similarities and/or differences between their own experiences and those of European American students.

## Results

### *Participant Background*

Six of the eight focus-group participants were female. Each of the females self-identified as African American. One of the males self-identified as African American and the other as

Latino. The average age of the participants was 21.42 years ( $SD = 1.13$ ). Seven of the participants reported being psychology majors while one was a psychology minor. On average, participants had completed 11 psychology courses ( $SD = 2.44$ ). Average scores on the MEI-R based scales are summarized in Figure 1. As can be observed, average participant responses to the comfort and climate items were consistent with moderate agreement. In contrast, average participant responses to the curriculum and supervision items fell between disagreement and moderate agreement. As a whole, background characteristics of the group suggest that participants were relatively advanced in their psychology studies, felt the climate of the department moderately represented ethnic/cultural minority and LGBTQ issues, and felt that the psychology curriculum and their supervision experiences did not even moderately reflect ethnic/cultural minority or LGBTQ concerns. Participants were mostly female (6 out of 8) and primarily African American (7 out of 8).

### *Focus Group Analysis*

After focus group discussions were transcribed, transcripts were analyzed using a variant of Marshall and Rossman's (1995) qualitative analysis procedure. Initially, two researchers independently reviewed the transcript looking for potential themes and developing definitions for these potential themes. These two researchers then met to compare themes and definitions, and a final list was created through dialogue and consensus. Next, these two researchers independently examined the transcript for occurrences of the agreed upon themes. When convergence estimates were calculated, researchers agreed on 57% of identified theme occurrences. All discrepancies were clarified through dialogue and consensus, rendering a final count of 127 occurrences. The two original researchers and an additional member of the research team then examined the themes to look for over-arching categories or patterns among them. Four such categories were

identified: Departmental Issues, Classroom Issues, Advising, and Research Issues. Each of these categories, and the themes they include, are described in dedicated sections below.

*Department level issues.* Five specific themes pointed to training issues within the psychology department that, though affecting students, do not occur in the context of classroom instruction or academic advising. The themes grouped within this category accounted for 49 of all observed instances. Each of these themes is described below.

A first theme, *unclear rationale for prerequisites*, reflected participants' perception that prerequisites for courses were not thoughtfully considered such that they infrequently related to a subsequent course's content (e.g., "And when I'm taking these classes nothing from those classes comes up at all."). *Impractical curriculum*, a second departmental-level theme, reflects participants' perception that the training received through the undergraduate psychology curriculum had limited practical application beyond preparation for graduate or professional training (e.g., "You know, you've taken 285 but you're learning how to do an experiment by looking at a PowerPoint slide."). This was particularly concerning to participants as they held the belief that most psychology students will not go on to graduate or professional training (e.g., "Because when we graduate, I don't know if they just think like we'll get the general overview of psychology in undergrad and then maybe if we go into grad school, if you chose to you get more specific"). *Unclear course difficulty* refers to participants' perceptions that the lack of information regarding course difficulty (e.g., average grades etc.) causes students unnecessary strain, particularly in difficult courses (e.g., "But I didn't know that and all it took was for the professor to tell me was that the curve of the class this is where it stands.").

The next departmental-level theme, *departmental invisibility*, reflects participants' perception that students remain unaware of the department's services, supports, opportunities,

and events, and that this lack of awareness has to do with ineffective dissemination strategies (e.g., “I get emails all the time from the school of business. School of business is having meetings with students every day to figure out what those business students wants to do. And I’ve never seen anything for psychology come up.”). Finally, the theme *unconcern for faculty teaching quality* reflects participants’ perceptions that student evaluations of faculty’s effectiveness were not sufficiently weighed in faculty tenure and promotion decisions (e.g., “So I just think that whoever is over the psychology department should make them be like more approachable.”).

*Classroom Setting.* Nine specific themes focused on the classroom experiences of ethno cultural minorities and accounted for an additional 56 of all instances. Three themes within this category helped expand on quantitative findings suggesting that, as a group, participants did not feel issues relevant to ethnic/cultural minorities were adequately addressed in the psychology curriculum. A first theme, *marginalization of ethnic groups*, reflects participants’ perception that ethno cultural issues are only covered in specialized classed and nonexistent in general classes (e.g., “They only bring it up if you’re in a class already about a minority”). A related theme, *individual attempts*, represented reflected participants’ perceptions that individual faculty do attempt to incorporate diversity issues, but that these attempts are not reflective of overall curricular efforts (e.g., “There are a few professors that do incorporate diversity into their curriculum. So I guess that’s one thing but it’s not the entire department.”). Similarly, the theme *attempts made* reflected participants’ perception that professors do make attempts to incorporate diversity issues into the classroom and coursework if a member of a minority group is in the classroom (e.g., “...because if I was sitting anywhere else if people looked at me and be like ‘Oh how do you feel about?’”).

Three additional themes within this category focused on participants' perception of faculty's teaching and interpersonal demeanor. , *Impractical teaching focus* reflected participants' perception that classroom instruction across the department is focused on memorization of facts often of little relevance to practical issues (e.g., "And that's cool too but it's not enough to really be hands on because the second semester I'm just regurgitating the information again."). Participants viewed this mode of instruction as unchallenging (e.g., "It's really irritating because then you don't feel like you're being challenged"). The next theme in this category, *just a number*, reflects participants' perceptions of being treated in an impersonal manner by departmental faculty and personnel (e.g., "It's like 500 hundred students in the psychology program. I mean like, 'oh what makes Henry so special?'"). A related theme, *same experience*, helped clarify that participants' perceived that that both majority and minority students are treated like a number (e.g., "So in that way I think they treat us like just like they treat everybody else which is like a random student").

Two more themes appeared to reflect participants' personal experiences in the classroom. *Low numbers* referred to their perception of a limited representation of ethno cultural minorities in psychology classes (e.g., "I have always been the only black person in all my classes, so after 3 classes I just stopped looking for black people and I just went to class.") and *speaking for the group* described their perception of being asked to speak for the group people assume they represent (e.g., "...because if I was sitting anywhere else if people looked at me and be like 'Oh how do you feel about ...?'").

The last theme in this category appeared to encompass three separate but closely related experiences. The first of these, *no one gets it*, reflected participants' perception that when issues

related to ethnic diversity were addressed in class only the professor and the minority students fully understood them (e.g., “But I don’t know if it was kind of hard for the rest of the class to follow when he would bring it up.”). . This phenomenon was seen as closely related to participants’ perceptions as reflected in the subtheme *majority students are inattentive to diversity* (e.g., “[When diversity material is addressed in class] ... You see boys checking out their nails like they check out their nails all the time.”). Finally, the third subcomponent of this experience, *majority’s effect on faculty*, reflected participants’ perceptions that the majority students’ lack of interest eventually had a negative effect on faculty’s motivation to present diversity issues (e.g., “if the kids don’t care, then the teachers can be like ‘well I tried and the kids don’t care so why bother trying again?’”).

*Advising.* The next category includes four specific themes focused on professional student-faculty interactions, often around signing the university’s major and/or minor form. The themes grouped within this category accounted for 28 of all observed instances. The first of these themes, *one track advising*, reflects participants’ perceptions that faculty advising focuses on a narrow set of career paths, with little to no discussion of alternatives for educational and career options (e.g., “Like I can go to another department where I signed my second major and I got alternatives for things that weren’t in that field but were related.”). Related to the previous theme, *unhelpful advisors*, reflected participants’ perceptions that advisors provide only a minimum of support (e.g., [in reference to a departmental advising event] ... “but the whole point of it was 100 people get together you sign your major and get 5 minutes with a professor.”). Shedding further light on participants’ perceptions of advising interactions, the theme *impersonal and uninvolved* reflected perceptions that required student-faculty interactions outside of the classroom, in particular the signing of major/minor forms, were often given little

importance by faculty. Because these interactions are given high importance by students, this often results in a perception of faculty as uninterested in the students' professional development (e.g., "When I signed my major it was just like oh you know 'What do you want to do?' And if you don't know they don't try to help you.").

Participants' preference to have more contact with their advisors was reflected in the next theme included in this category, *mandatory face to face advising* (e.g., "I just feel like they need to make it mandatory for every psych student to meet with an advisor because I have never met with an advisor here at [INSTITUTION NAME] in my life."). *Student to student advising*, conveyed participants' perceptions of receiving more career and educational advising from other psychology majors and minors than from the faculty (e.g., "Just let it be said that I've had more advising from my friends in the psych department than I've had from the actual faculty that are here and it came out and worked out.").

*Importance of Research Involvement.* The final two specific themes identified in this research focused on the important role that research involvement plays in enhancing the access to opportunities within the department. These themes accounted for 6 out of all observed instances. The first of these themes, *no discrimination in research*, reflects participants' perceptions that there is an improved quality to student-faculty interaction when these center around research involvement (e.g., "I was going to say that with research I've never had a problem."). The second, closely related theme, *research creates opportunity* reflects participants' perception that involvement in research is the primary tool to build good professional relationships with department faculty (e.g., "I think that everybody else is doing research and getting to know professors who are helpful.")

## Discussion

This study used a mixed method approach to examine the experiences of ethno cultural minorities in an undergraduate psychology program at a public four year Northern Midwest Ph.D. granting university. Eight participants completed a revised version of the Multicultural Environment Inventory (MEI) and participated in a semi-structured focus group discussion. Qualitative analysis of the focus group transcript led to the identification of twenty-four themes, which were later grouped into four broader categories. Each of these thematic categories will be discussed in a dedicated subsection, followed by a final section discussion implications and directions for future research that cut across categories.

### *Department Level Issues*

Participants identified an array of organizational and procedural issues that seem to adversely affect their experience as psychology majors or minors. Interestingly, contemporary scholarship on cultural competence points to the importance of addressing said issues when attempting to create culturally competent environments. For instance, Hernandez et al. (2009) have highlighted the important role of policies and procedures in creating service cultures that are responsive to the needs of their target populations. Confirmation of current results through future research on broader samples of the student population would highlight the need for new policies and practices that better serve students needs (or needs of an important segment of the student population).

### *Classroom Setting*

A variety of themes were identified in this study suggesting that participants perceive a variety of efforts being made toward integration of ethnic minority issues in the curriculum, but find that these are of limited effect. Efforts perceived by the participants included attempts by

individual faculty, the offering of specialized coursework, and attempts made to address diverse perspectives when students of color were part of a class (often by asking a student to serve as a defacto spokesperson for ethnically diverse individuals). Participants believed that these limited efforts in part arose from European American students' failure to give importance to issues of diversity, which may fail to reinforce faculty who attempt to introduce these issues into their classes.

To be certain, the experiences and perceptions of participants in this research do not appear to be uncommon. As stated in the introduction, there is ample documentation of these types of experiences across levels of psychology training (e.g., APA 2009, CNAPNEEMI 2009, etc.). Moreover, participants' offer an interesting hypothesis about the relationship between the demographic makeup of the classroom and faculty's motivation to create inclusive learning experiences that is consistent with psychological understanding motivational factors and systemic influences. Nevertheless, in its *Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists* the American Psychological Association (2002) clarifies the leadership role that psychologists must take in the creation of inclusive classrooms and professional environments.

In a recent document, Belgrave (2009) suggests that ensuring all course material (including books and graphics presented in class) as a basic strategy for creating inclusive classrooms that project a more positively view of people of color and their contributions of the world. This stance has been the foundation of exemplary efforts in curricular revision such as Whittier College's Diversity across the Curriculum in Psychology Reform (documented in APA 2009). Such an approach may be helpful in ensuring that all students are presented with an inclusive educational experience.

*Advising*

Participants in the current study painted a picture of advising interactions that are unhelpful to students and many times appear burdensome to faculty. However, participants did not allude to an effect of cultural or ethnic differences on these interactions. Nevertheless, should European American students be found to hold markedly more positive interactions, this would raise questions about faculty's cultural competence. As was the case with findings regarding classroom experiences, these difficulties would not be altogether unexpected. As Belgrave and others have highlighted (e.g., APA 2009) among individuals currently in faculty positions, a large proportion have never been provided with their training on how to effectively work cohesively with people of color. This study's participants' concern over the poor quality of the advising experiences should certainly serve as motivation to enhance the interaction between students and professors when advising.

*Research Involvement.* Participants identified involvement in faculty research as an accessible approach to building relationships with faculty that facilitate access to resources. Compared to other domains of their experience with faculty, this appeared to be a generally positive experience. As such, should this pattern be corroborated among broader samples of their peers, students should be amply encouraged to become involved in research. This finding, along with others, presents indirect evidence of a departmental culture that—at least among faculty—may be strongly focused on research above other domains of faculty performance.

The current research is exploratory in nature and based only on a small sample of student (equivalent to approximately 5% of the population of undergraduate psychology majors who identify as students of color). This small sample size severely limits the ability to make a generalizations about the source population. Though potentially informative, findings from this

study as best interpreted hypothesis about perceptions and experiences among the population from which the sample was drawn.

#### Overall Implications and Directions for Future Research

Current findings point to potential areas of significant concern regarding the educational experience of undergraduate students of color within the psychology department. Given the limitations of the exploratory methodology employed in this study, an important direction for future research is the examination of the perceptions and experiences among broader samples from this population, possibly employing survey procedures that allow for the quantitative examination of hypotheses generated from this exploratory study. Specifically, future research would do well to examine student experiences in the four broad domains identified in the current study: Classroom experiences, research involvement, academic advising, and departmental policies and procedures.

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Figure 1. Average Scores on MEI-based Scores

