2013

Race and Social Class Relations at Trinity and Beyond

Isabelle Boundy
Trinity College

Race and Social Class Relations at Trinity and Beyond

Isabelle Boundy

College is ideally a time when young people broaden their horizons, gain new experiences and, for perhaps the first time, interact with individuals of backgrounds different from their own. But, meeting new people of different backgrounds can be intimidating or uncomfortable, especially when one feels subject to preconceived notions or stereotypes. Paradoxically, college campuses like Trinity's may be places of greater segregation and social division than of integration and harmonious living and learning. Thus, the ideal image of college as a time for broadened horizons and greater understanding of different viewpoints may be truer in theory than in practice.

To investigate this topic, our seminar, Color and Money: Race and Social Class, conducted an interview-based study of students' perceptions of race and social class at Trinity. Our interview guide posed ten open-ended questions and three demographic questions that explored topics such as personal awareness, social interactions, and other students' assumptions regarding racial and social class differences at Trinity. The Office of Institutional Research and Planning provided our professor with a stratified random sample of fifty-five sophomores from the Class of 2016, categorized by race (white or non-white) and first-year financial aid status (receiving or not receiving). Our professor sent personalized email invitations to this group, and each student was assigned to conduct an interview with all who responded and agreed to participate. The typical interview lasted about ten minutes and was transcribed by the interviewer. The final sample consisted of eighteen interviewees: ten students who received financial aid (four white and six non-white), and eight students who did not receive financial aid (four white and four non-white). All names are pseudonyms and personally identifiable details have been masked, in accordance with the research ethics confidentiality agreement approved by the Trinity College Institutional Review Board.

The data and perspectives presented in this study show significant social divisions on Trinity's campus– divisions on the basis of both race and socioeconomic class. When confronted with different cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives, students tend to surround themselves with others who share similar backgrounds, cultures, and viewpoints. Rather than acting as an incubator for the mixing of customs, cultures, and ideas, college campuses like Trinity's instead can become rot with division, cliques and, homogeneity.

A common theme that emerged from the interviews was the observation of self-segregation and racial divisions in Mather Dining Hall. Five out of eighteen interviewees noted racial divisions inside and outside the main dining hall. Notably, all five of these students happened to be non-white, making up half of all the non-white students interviewed. Kristen, an Asian student receiving financial aid, described the Mather dining hall as "very segregated in terms of [the] seating area," noting what she and others perceived as the "sports side" and the "minority side" (Kristen, 18). Other interviewees reported being most conscious of their race in Mather dining hall, feeling unsure of where they should sit. Kristen even admitted to avoiding Mather altogether and choosing other campus dining options to escape the segregation in the main dining hall (Kristen, 18). Outside of the dining halls, interviewees reported signs of racial segregation as well. Kaylie, a Black and Hispanic student receiving financial aid, noticed "that Black people in general… they tend to hang out together…" (Kaylie, 37).

Beverly Daniel Tatum offers a possible explanation for such divisions as she explains the racial identity development processes for both black and white individuals in her book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*. Tatum posits that for many black individuals, encounters with racism lead them into the second stage of racial identity development, appropriately called the "encounter" stage. This stage of racial identity development is characterized by the active desire to surround oneself with those who have shared similar experiences (Tatum, 56). Furthermore, desires for self-segregation are heightened during the next stage of racial identity development, the "immersion/emersion" phase. During this stage of racial identity development, one views races other than one's own as simply irrelevant (Tatum, 76). Moreover, the "immersion/emersion" phase is very typical of college students; Tatum herself notes being so deeply in the "immersion/emersion" phase while in college that, to this day, she "can't remember the name of one White classmate" (Tatum, 75). The prevalence of the "immersion/emersion" phase on college campuses in general could further explain the self-segregation observed in Mather dining hall.

As previously noted, an encounter(s) with racism is a necessary catalyst for black individuals to enter into the "encounter" stage. And while one might not want to admit it, potential catalysts are certainly present on Trinity's campus. When asked whether or not people at Trinity had made assumptions—whether correctly or incorrectly—about his race, Fred, an African American student receiving financial aid, mentioned being stopped by campus safety and, on more than one occasion, being asked to present his Trinity ID. Fred states, "Well, I assume it's because [I'm African-American]… they'll [Campus Safety] stop and ask me if I go to school here, questions like that…" (Fred, 23). Such interactions were not limited to African American men. Yvonne, an African American female student receiving financial aid, noted being asked to present her Trinity ID card while ordering at the Cave– a practice that is atypical. Moreover, Yvonne recounted an incident in which she misplaced her Trinity ID card, and had to ask a fellow student to let her into her dorm– a common request between students. However, presumably because of Yvonne's race, the student feared Yvonne might try to rob the dormitory and refused to let her into her dorm (Yvonne, 21).

While no other interviewees of color reported such blatant encounters with racism, several reported feeling in some way isolated from or judged by White students. Victoria, an Asian, non-financial aid student adopted by a white family, claims, "at times, people may have made jokes or assumptions about me" (Victoria, 26). Juan, a Hispanic student receiving financial aid, told the following story about when his freshman year roommate moved out at the end of the school year:

> … [T]oward the end of the year when everybody is leaving, they'll put a sign on the door saying that anything that hasn't been taken out, anything that is still in the dorm that wasn't originally a part of the school when you moved there is gonna be taken out (05:58). Toward the end of the year, this person, they left, in our room, they left their stuff, and I didn't have his phone number because I had a new phone. So I like had to call his father and tell him that his stuff was going to be taken away if they didn't come and pick it up. I had to call his father's office. And I feel like a lot of that had to do with their perception of me. And I feel like had I been a Caucasian maybe I wouldn't have had to do that because they would've automatically assumed that the school took it (06:40). Whereas, certain aspects of my interactions with his parents made me feel like they would've assumed that I took the stuff after the sign had been removed (Juan, 5).

Moreover, Kaylie, a Black and Hispanic student receiving financial aid, reported culture clashes

and feelings of disjointedness between her and her roommate, a white southerner. Kaylie described her roommate as having "her own sense of culture" (Kaylie, 37) that she did not always understand. Kaylie claimed these differences in culture occasionally resulted in disagreements and that these cultural divisions were not anything she believed would change or be alleviated in the future (Kaylie, 37).

Based on these feelings of isolation and unnecessary anxiety (as demonstrated in Juan's case), it is understandable why students of color would seek solace among individuals who share their experiences and culture.   These sentiments were most clearly summarized by Andres, a Hispanic student receiving financial aid, as he claimed:

> …[Y]ou could say that like, 'oh all those minorities aren't trying to meet white people, or they're not trying to meet other people different from them.' Or, you can say that they're just trying to be friends with people who are similar to them, which is another way to view it because there are so few of them you might as well be friends with the people that are most similar to you (Andres, 14).

In addition to divisions on the basis of race, our interview study produced substantial evidence of social divisions on the basis of socioeconomic class. Eleven of eighteen students interviewed noted social divisions on the basis of socioeconomic class, claiming "it defines who people hang out with; it defines who people talk to more often" (Andres, 12). Moreover, seven of the eleven interviewees to note socioeconomic social divisions were students receiving financial aid. Abe, a White (Middle Eastern) student receiving financial aid, noticed "[n]ot a lot of people from the lower social class hangout with the higher/upper social class, and not a lot of people from upper class hang with socially lower…" (Abe, 45). Luisa, a Hispanic student paying full tuition, felt, "Trinity's really cliquey in the aspect that, like, they [wealthy students] won't approach someone who they perceive as, um like, in a less economic standing…" (Luisa, 8).

Five of the eleven interviewees who spoke of socioeconomic divisions on campus cited clothing as the primary factor used in determining one's perceived socioeconomic class.   All five of these students receive financial aid. Kaylie (who, as discussed above, mentioned race related cultural tensions with her roommate) observed students on Trinity's campus, "attempt to wear same kinds of clothing and same brands and tend to stick together" (Kaylie, 36). Kaylie stated that if she, or anyone else, does not wear the "right" clothes, wealthier students will assume her to be of a lower social status and will refuse even to talk to her (Kaylie, 36). Yvonne, an African American student receiving financial aid, agreed that how she dressed or what she looked like on a day-to-day basis determined who did or did not speak to her, who did or did not open doors for her, etc (Yvonne, 20). Yvonne admitted to trying to work this pattern of behavior in her favor, occasionally splurging on expensive brand-name items and attempting to dress and carry herself in such a way that people might assume her to be of a higher socioeconomic class (Yvonne, 19-20). And, Yvonne is far from alone. Abe also admitted to dressing up so that people might think he is from a higher socioeconomic class (Abe, 45). Thus, social hierarchy on campus resulting from socioeconomic divisions among students is a significant source of anxiety for students who feel they cannot compete.

While clothing may be the first indicator of one's socioeconomic status on campus, seven of the eleven interviewees who identified socioeconomic divisions on campus agreed that divisions were most evident with regard to nightlife, when social class influences what one is able to do with his or her friends (Kaylie, 36).   Luisa identified situations in which some of her friends were left behind on weekend trips to New York City or dinners off campus because they

either had to work or could not spare the necessary expenses (Luisa, 8). Victoria (previously mentioned as a victim of race-related jokes) mentioned wealthier students had greater access to sports clubs, and several even had cars on campus, allowing for greater social opportunities than those available to students with lesser means (Victoria, 24).

Such social divisions brought about by socioeconomic class and its implicit social opportunities are consistent with Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton's theory of social class and organizational analysis. Under their theory, college experiences are shaped by individual characteristics and resources associated with class background, and organizational characteristics of the college itself (Armstrong and Hamilton, 7-8). Therefore, certain students of higher socioeconomic classes are generally afforded greater social opportunities than students of lower socioeconomic classes.

Even though college is ideally a time of broadening horizons and exposures to new people, perspectives, and cultures, the data suggests that this is not always the case. According to quantitative and qualitative data presented in our seminar's interview study, the prejudices that many students bring to Trinity's campus lead many minority students to engage in self-segregation. Moreover, socioeconomic differences and lack of understanding from the higher socioeconomic classes with regard to the lower result in further social divisions. Based on these accounts from Trinity students, it appears that with regard to race and socioeconomic class, Trinity students "tend to stick to people who are similar to them" (Andres, 14).

Bibliography

Beverly Daniel Tatum, "*Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" and Other Conversations about Race*, revised edition (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton, *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2013)