College students' attitudes toward interracial relationships: Variations by student race and campus type

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: In this study, variability in college students’ attitudes toward interracial dating and marriage relationships as a function of student race and campus type (predominantly White vs. ethno-racially diverse) was examined.

Methods: Undergraduate students ages 18-24 were recruited from a large public multi-campus university in the Northeast. Using an online survey, students (N = 231) provided demographic information (e.g., gender, age, family income) and reported on their interracial relationship history and attitudes toward dating and marriage relationships.

Results: Analyses of variance revealed significant differences in students’ attitudes toward interracial dating and marriage depending on students’ race and the type of campus they attended. White students enrolled at ethno-racially diverse urban campuses reported significantly lower approval of interracial dating and marriage relationships than their White peers at the predominantly White main campus and their peers of color at the predominantly White campus and the ethno-racially diverse regional campuses.

Conclusions: The findings highlight the role that the particular geographical-cultural profile of campuses plays in college students’ attitudes toward interracial relationships when considered in tandem with students’ racial background.

Keywords: attitudes; college students; dating and marriage; interracial relationships; race
In recent decades social acceptance and prevalence of interracial relationships, particularly among younger generations, have grown considerably. Despite these trends, research suggests some variation in college students’ attitudes toward interracial relationships. In addition to relationship type (dating vs. marriage; Field, Kimuna, & Straus, 2013), student and campus characteristics explain some of this variation. It is less well understood, however, how students’ racial background in combination with the type of campus they attend shapes students’ attitudes toward interracial relationships. We address this gap in the literature by examining variation in college students’ attitudes toward interracial dating and marriage, respectively, as a function of the joint influences of student race and campus type (predominantly White rural main campus vs. ethno-racially balanced urban regional campus).

1. Predicting College Students’ Attitudes toward Interracial Relationships

The proportion of individuals who reported acceptance of interracial relationships rose from 48% in 1987 to 83% in 2009, (Wang, 2012). The Millennials (i.e., those coming of age in the 21st century) are especially accepting of interracial relationships (Pew Research Center, 2010). Interracial dating and marriage are also more prevalent among younger generations compared to older generations (Wang, 2012). In addition to these social trends, developmental theory also points to the importance of investigating college student attitudes toward interracial relationships. Coinciding with emerging adulthood (18 -25 years) the college years represent an important developmental period during which youth engage in identity exploration not only in terms of career paths, but also regarding romantic relationships and worldviews (Arnett, 2000). Finally, interracial interactions have also been linked with a variety of positive outcomes among college students (e.g., college satisfaction and closeness to other races, Bowman, 2013).

1.1. Racial Background

Past research has revealed some variation in students’ perceptions of interracial romantic relationships (e.g., Field et al., 2013). For example, research indicates that individual attitudes toward interracial relationships vary depending on one’s racial background, although findings regarding the nature of these differences have been mixed. Some studies suggest that relative to other groups, Whites are less likely to engage in interracial relationships (Herman & Campbell, 2012; Yancey, 2002). Studies of college students, however, revealed that Black students were less approving of interracial relationships than their White peers (e.g., Field et al., 2013). Furthermore, Robnett and Feliciano (2011) found that Latinos’ and Asians’ dating preferences were actually similar to Whites’ in that all were more likely to exclude Blacks as potential online dating partners.

1.2. Campus Type

Physical proximity facilitates formation of social relationships between individuals (Blau, 1977). As such, as college campuses become more ethnically and racially diverse, they provide increasing
opportunities for interracial interactions including romantic relationships. Students’ acceptance of interracial relationships, however, varies depending on the racial composition of the institution they attend. For example, prior research revealed that at historically Black colleges, students reported less approval of Black-White interracial relationships than their peers did at predominantly White institutions (Field et al., 2013).

Ecological theory suggests that individual characteristics and environmental influences interactively shape development (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Thus, college students’ racial background in tandem with the type of college campus they attend likely informs their attitudes toward interracial relationships. Yet, it is less well understood how attitudes toward interracial relationships differ as a function of the joint effects of students’ racial background and campus type. Therefore, extending past research, which focused on the racial composition of a university, the current study examined how different types of campuses within the same university would predict variation in college student attitudes toward interracial dating and marriage.

### 1.3. The Current Study

In the current study, using a sample of undergraduate college students enrolled at a large, multi-campus public university, we examined variation in student attitudes toward interracial relationships as a joint function of students’ ethnic-racial background and campus type. The university’s main campus has a large, predominantly White, student body most of whom reside on campus. It is located in a rural area of the state. In contrast, located in an urban setting, the regional campus is small and it has an ethno-racially more balanced student body the majority of which commutes to campus.

Guided by ecological theory and past research, we hypothesized that relations between student race and student attitudes toward interracial relationships would depend on the type of campus students attend. To account for variability in college students’ attitudes toward interracial relationships, we also controlled for individual and contextual characteristics such as gender. Some studies have revealed that women are less approving of interracial relationships for themselves than men are (Herman & Campbell, 2012; see Field [2013] for non-significant gender differences) and that they are less likely to interracially date than men (Yancey, 2002). Moreover, we accounted for age because past research has revealed that younger individuals are more likely to date and marry interracially than older individuals (e.g., Wang, 2012); and for childhood neighborhood racial composition given that several studies suggest that exposure to ethnic-racial diversity prior to college is associated with more accepting attitudes toward interracial relationships. For example, those who have attended integrated schools or lived in integrated neighborhoods were more likely to have dated members of different races (e.g., Yancey, 2002). Finally, we also controlled for interracial dating history considering that college students’ attitudes toward
interracial relationships have been found to differ by the type of relationship they had in the past (same-race or cross-race; Field, 2013).

2. Method

2.1. Sample

Undergraduate students ages 18-24 were recruited from a public multi-campus university with a total student enrollment of over 25,000 located in the U.S. Northeast. The main campus has about 18,000 undergraduate students, it is situated in a rural area, and it has a predominantly White student body (66% White); the regional campuses are small ranging from 550 – 2,100 students per campus, they are located mostly in urban areas, and they tend to have more racially balanced student bodies (55% students of color). After excluding students who did not finish the survey (n = 25) or did not meet eligibility criteria (n = 9), the final sample consisted of 231 participants (81% female, M = 20.04, SD = 1.42; 81% US born; 58% (n = 134) enrolled at the main campus). The overall sample was ethno-racially diverse (41% White, 11% African American, 12% Hispanic, 18% Asian, 12% multiracial, and 4% “Other”). A higher proportion of non-White participants were enrolled at a regional campus than at the main campus (64% vs. 52%). Sixty-three percent of participants on the main campus reported $50,000 or higher in family income (vs. 47% at a regional campus). Participants were equally distributed in terms of year of school.

2.2. Procedure

A study announcement with the embedded link to the online survey was distributed to students via daily electronic campus newsletters. Faculty members were also asked to advertise the study with their students. Participants reported on their demographic background (age, gender, race, family income, relationship status, partner race, racial composition of childhood neighborhood), and they indicated their approval of dating and marriage relationships of Asian-White, Hispanic-White, and Black-White interracial couples, respectively. The University IRB approved this study. Students did not receive compensation for their study participation.

2.3. Measures

Students’ attitudes of interracial dating and marriage. Students’ attitudes toward interracial dating and marriage were assessed using items adapted from the Cross-Group Relationship Scale (CGRS; Field et al., 2013). Participants rated their agreement with six statements on a 4-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree). Items included “I think it is good for (Blacks/Hispanics/Asians) and Whites to date,” and “I think it is good for (Blacks/Hispanics/Asians) and Whites to marry.” The three dating items were summed to create the attitudes toward interracial dating scale score (α = .95); the three marriage items were summed to create the attitudes toward interracial marriage scale score (α = .93).

Campus type. Campus type was coded as 0 = main campus, 1 = regional campus.
Student race. Participants indicated their race by choosing one or more of the following categories: American Indian/Eskimo, Aleut, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black/African American, White/Caucasian/European American, Latino/Hispanic, Multiracial, and Other. We used a dichotomous version of this variable (0 = non-White, 1 = White).

Control variables. We controlled for gender (coded as 1= female, 2 = male); age (in years); childhood neighborhood racial composition (1= mostly White, 2 = mostly minority, 3 = ethno-racially diverse); and past history of interracial dating (yes = 1, no = 2).

3. Results

To examine variability in college students’ attitudes toward interracial dating and marriage, we conducted analyses of variance (ANOVA) using the GLM procedure in SAS separately for dating and marriage attitudes. For each outcome, we tested the main effects of student race (White/Non White) and campus type (main campus/ regional campus), their interactions (race X campus type), and controlled for gender, age, history of interracial relationships, and childhood neighborhood racial composition.

Table 1. Generalized Linear Model Results for College Students’ Attitudes toward Interracial Dating and toward Interracial Marriage Relationships with Gender, Interracial Dating History, Childhood Neighborhood Racial Composition, and Age as Controls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Attitudes toward Interracial Dating</th>
<th>Attitudes toward Interracial Marriage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>df</td>
<td>MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student race</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus type</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student race X campus type</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interracial dating</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood race</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. df = degrees of freedom; MS = Mean Squares; F = F values; p = p value.

As shown in Table 1., after accounting for these characteristics, the analyses revealed significant group differences in students’ attitudes toward interracial dating, $F(8, 210) = 3.04, p = 003$, and in their attitudes toward interracial marriage, $F(8, 211) =$
2.26, \( p = 0.0248 \). The interaction of student race and campus type was significant in both models, which suggested that students’ race in combination with the type of campus they attended explained some of the differences in student attitudes toward interracial dating and marriage relationships.

To better understand the nature of these group differences, we tested mean differences in student attitude scores across four groups of students (group 1: Whites students at the predominantly White, large, rural, main campus; group 2: White students at an ethno-racially balanced, small, urban, regional campus; group 3: students of color at the predominantly White, large, rural, main campus; and group 4: students of color at an ethno-racially balanced, small, urban, regional campus).

Table 2. Summary of Mean Scores (Standard Errors) of Attitudes toward Interracial Dating and of Attitudes toward Interracial Marriages by Student Race and Campus Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean scores (SE) of attitudes toward interracial dating</th>
<th>Mean scores (SE) of attitudes toward interracial marriages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Main campus before Regional campus</td>
<td>Main campus before Regional campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White students</td>
<td>10.46 (.27)(^a)</td>
<td>10.08 (.30)(^d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9.46 (.32)(^abc)</td>
<td>9.26 (.36)(^def)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White students</td>
<td>10.35 (.27)(^b)</td>
<td>10.02 (.30)(^c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.57 (.25)(^c)</td>
<td>10.37 (.28)(^f)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Mean scores with the same superscript are significantly different from each other.

\( ^a \) = Mean score difference is significant at \( p = .006 \); \( ^b \) = Mean score difference is significant at \( p = .017 \); \( ^c \) = Mean score difference is significant at \( p = .003 \); \( ^d \) = Mean score difference is significant at \( p = .039 \); \( ^e \) = Mean score difference is significant at \( p = .064 \); \( ^f \) = Mean score difference is significant at \( p = .008 \).

As shown in Table 2, White students enrolled at an ethno-racially balanced, small, urban, regional campus were the least approving in their attitudes toward interracial dating. Their mean attitude scores were significantly lower than those of students from the other three groups. In contrast, students of color did not significantly differ in their mean scores by campus type, nor did their mean scores differ from those of White students at the large, predominantly White, rural, main campus. Regarding attitudes toward interracial marriages, White students’ mean...
scores at an ethno-racially balanced regional campus were only marginally different from those of non-White students at the main campus even after gender, age, childhood neighborhood racial composition, and interracial dating history were accounted for (see table 2). No other significant group differences were found.

4. Discussion

Ecological and developmental theories highlight the salience of interracial interactions for college student development. The current study extended the literature on interracial relationships by examining college students’ attitudes toward interracial dating and marriage relationships, respectively, and by exploring how students’ race in tandem with the type of college campus students attend shapes their attitudes. The findings underscore that in understanding college students’ attitudes toward interracial relationships, in addition to students’ own racial background, the nature of the college campus must also be considered.

In our study, White students had significantly lower mean acceptance scores of interracial romantic relationships than students of color. These results are in line with the finding that Whites in general are less approving of interracial relationships than people of color (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2010). However, they stand in contrast to the results of studies of college students in which White college students were found to be more accepting of these relationships than Black students (e.g., Field et al., 2013). Adding to this literature, the current findings indicate some nuances in White students’ attitudes toward interracial dating and marriage relationships. Specifically, in this study White students who attended a small, racially balanced, urban, regional campus were the least approving of interracial relationships. This finding is somewhat inconsistent with the results of a large longitudinal study of 3,098 students across 28 universities, in which Bowman (2012) found that for White students, greater structural diversity (i.e., proportional representation of specific ethnic-racial groups) was linked with having close interracial friendships and interracial romantic relationships. However, in the Bowman study, this association was not significant for African American and Latinx students.

Our findings suggest that the “social location,” i.e., the particular matrix of demographic features (racial makeup and size of the student body and geographic location) that characterizes a campus, plays a role in college students’ acceptance of interracial romantic relationships. The finding that White students on a racially balanced, small, urban, regional campus were the least approving of interracial relationships suggests that the ethnic-racial diversity of a campus may not necessarily have a positive effect on White college students’ attitudes toward intimate relationships across race, if a campus has a small student body where the pool of potential intimate partners may be perceived to be limited. Another possible explanation might be that White students on a racially balanced, small, urban campus may not necessarily form cross-race
friendships, which may in turn negatively affect their attitudes toward interracial relationships. For instance, Perry (2013) found that the effect of interracial contact on Whites’ attitudes toward interracial marriages was mediated by interracial friendships. Thus, it is possible that White students on small, racially balanced urban campuses, particularly if the campus is a commuter campus, which was the case in our study, are on campus mostly to attend classes, but leave campus after classes end, which reduces their opportunity to forge friendships with students outside their race despite the fact that they attend a setting where cross-race interactions occur frequently.

In contrast, a small ethno-racially balanced urban campus has beneficial effects for students’ of color social attitudes given that in our study non-White students on such a campus had the highest mean scores for approving interracial dating and marriage relationships, respectively. We must note that although these mean scores were higher for non-White students, they did not significantly differ across campus type. This finding is in contrast to some previous work in which variation in ethnic-racial minority college students’ attitudes toward interracial romantic relationships was examined as a function of college type. For instance, in a study of African American college students, Stackman, Reviere, and Medley (2016) found that students were less supportive of interracial dating relationships at historically Black colleges or universities (HBCUs) than their counterparts at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Sampling differences might explain these divergent findings. First, our sample of non-White students included Black students as well as Asian and Latinx students, whereas Stackman et al. focused only on Black college students. Because of the lack of power, we were unable to test racial subgroup differences. Second, our sample of college students were drawn from the same institution, albeit from multiple campuses, whereas Stackman and colleagues drew their sample from two distinct types of higher educational institutions: HBCUs and PWIs.

Finally, our findings must be understood in consideration of some limitations. This study utilized a non-random sample of college students, therefore, findings may not generalize to the entire college student population. Moreover, given that the majority of participants (81%) were female college students, findings may not generalize to a sample that is gender-balanced or consists of mostly male students. Nonetheless, the current findings highlight the role that the particular geographical-cultural profile of campuses plays in college students’ attitudes toward interracial relationships when considered in tandem with students’ racial background. Furthermore, because the sample size precluded us from conducting more in-depth within-group analyses in this study, future research should examine students’ attitudes toward specific interracial couple combinations, and how these attitudes differ among specific racial groups such as Latinx, Asian, Black, and White students.
References


