Title: Mapping exclusion in undergraduate psychology: Towards a common architecture of the minority student experience.

Department: Psychology
Dates: October 05 - October 07 and ongoing dissemination
Institution: University of Westminster
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Abstract on application:
This project aims to document and analyse the experiences of minority students (black and ethnic minority, lesbian, gay and bisexual students) who have studied/are studying psychology at University/HE level. Using a qualitative approach, informed by Grounded Theory techniques, students will be interviewed concerning their experiences in relation to 1) their expectations, 2) the curriculum, 3) their personal and social environment and 4) learning and teaching (departmental) environment. There is a particular focus on psychology’s treatment of race, ethnicity and sexuality/sexual identity within its subject matter and the ways in which students relate to the discipline in general, and the department in particular. Findings will be disseminated and presented as a foundation for intervention strategies, including increasing staff and student awareness, curriculum design, staff training and other strategies for inclusive learning and teaching practices.

Aims and objectives of project:
(a) Clear objectives to achieve the aim of the proposal.

1) To document and analyse (using a qualitative framework) the accounts, experiences and concerns of minority students who are studying or who have recently studied psychology at University/HE level

2) To compare and contrast experiences between lesbians, gay men and black and ethnic minority students with a view to understanding the possible common architecture of the minority experience
3) To sample students from within the University of Westminster and other psychology departments in the UK

4) To disseminate/evaluate the results via a day seminar/workshop at the University of Westminster and other appropriate national/international conferences/meetings.

(b) The expected impact on students and staff.

We hope to use the results from this work to encourage wider debate and inform/support change in psychology, at both the discipline and institutional levels. For example, we would hope to encourage and inform practices of inclusion in the curriculum and throughout assessment procedures (c.f. Reed et al, 2005), as well as at the level of university departments/teaching and learning environments in general.

Within the department at Westminster we will disseminate results in a day seminar/workshop (for both students and staff) and the study will form the basis for a future (separate to this proposal) follow-up development of an online resource pack/support forum which would also include support for staff training. (We plan to develop these resources at a national level at a later date and would welcome input from the Academy).

This project ran from October 2005 to October 2007, though publication and dissemination of the outcomes and results are still ongoing.

Outcomes:

Research project report:
Increasing diversity among student populations in Higher Education has become a much discussed topic in recent years. In particular, the needs of socially and economically excluded groups - who traditionally have been less able to participate in higher education – have become a subject of concern, especially with respect to non-completion rates. Unfortunately, relatively little is known about the learning and teaching experience of such students in UK universities with the consequence that policy and other interventions are difficult to concretely formulate and effectively implement.

Aim:
To investigate possible common architecture of the minority student experience in Higher Education Psychology.

Design:
The study utilised a qualitative approach informed by grounded theory principles (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This framework is ideally suited to the uncovering of participants’ experiences, viewpoints and understandings of the topic under investigation. Confidentiality was guaranteed & maintained throughout the study for all participants, as well as in relation to the universities at which they had studied.

Participants:
A total of 27 lesbian/bisexual females, 25 gay/bisexual males, & 26 African/Caribbean and Asian psychology undergraduate students took part in the study. Students were studying or had studied at 14 different UK universities.

Procedure:
The interview protocol was based upon the authors’ previous research and was adapted for use over the three minority student groups. This was designed to allow participants maximum space and flexibility in saying whatever they wanted to in a safe and trusting environment. Data was gathered through one to one informal interviews. A semi-structured framework was adopted for questioning. Interviews were either face to face or by telephone.

Results 1 – Common architecture:

1. Students experienced varying degrees of marginalisation in the form of discrimination, homophobia and oppression of identities other than the ‘white male heterosexual norm’.

2. Despite this, there was an overall loyalty to psychology as a discipline and high expectations of what it could offer in terms of career and personal development.

3. Students occupied several contrasting juxtapositions in their appraisal of psychology, e.g. disillusionment vs. cautious optimism.

Results 2 – Expectation & Coping:

1. Coping strategies were developed to counteract a lack of inclusion in the curriculum, in the teaching and learning environment and in the social milieu.

2. Participants reported some lack of relevance of the curriculum to their lives, at a deeper level there appeared to be a lack of voice and representation for minority groups.

3. Separation between university and domestic lives was evident.

4. Almost without exception, there was an overall initial expectation that a liberal and progressive environment would pervade a university setting.

Results 3 – Differences:

1. The sense of ‘otherness’ is experienced differently and possibly more significantly by black students.

2. Gay men are more affected by social exclusion and mere toleration than lesbians.

3. Lesbians identified more areas of psychology’s inappropriateness to their lives, problematising the notions/values of empiricism, androcentrism and sexism.
4. Bisexual identity and lifestyle is the most excluded and under-researched and therefore the least understood.

5. There was a sense that the impact and intersection of multiple minority identity positionings is only cursorily engaged with by psychology and is thus the most invisible.

Conclusions:
Psychology as a discipline, and Higher Education in general should:

1. Acknowledge the detrimental exclusionary impact of ‘institutional homophobia’ & ‘institutional racism’ on minority students in Higher Education today and the ways that such exclusion is multi-layered.

2. Develop policies which will encompass the diversity of its student population into its social, teaching and learning practices

3. Implement strategies that will enable a more inclusive experience for minority students

We believe most practitioners in Higher Education would endorse these recommendations however what is crucial is to develop concrete policies and training/education strategies via the evidence ourselves and others are beginning to document.

Departmental training and enhancement:
The team held a departmental (and school-wide) consultation day (6/12/06) based upon the ongoing results of our research. In addition to members of the Psychology department the event was also attended by staff members from other departments and programmes including Sociology, Social Science and Cognitive Science.

This event included presentations of research findings and linked recommendations followed by discussions and workshops focusing on understanding and improving the minority student experience in our departments.

We also circulated our conference and journal papers both within our department and nationally and internationally as follows:

Papers published and in review:


Conference presentations:


