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Climbing the Academic Ladder As a Student of Color and its Effects on Family Life

Introduction

The St. Olaf College population has experienced a great amount of turmoil around the topic of race, especially in the last six months. In the spring of 2017, protests erupted on campus after a series of incidents involving derogatory notes targeting black students. These actions of racial insensitivity sparked debates about race in classrooms, dorm rooms, the cafeteria, and especially within the administration. Through the work of a student-formed group, The Collective for Change on the Hill, a List of Demands accompanied by Terms of Engagement were presented to the administration that insisted upon institutional changes to be made in order for a more inclusive and anti-racist campus.

While some may say that the course of actions taken ultimately led to a success for students of color at St. Olaf, it was a deeply emotional and distressing experience as well. For many white students, it was a time that opened their eyes to all the racial issues that have been going on throughout the history of this college. For students of color, like myself, it was a time that we were made acutely aware of our appearance and presence on campus. Almost everyone at least acknowledged that race exists on this campus as well as everywhere else in the United States, and that was a huge step for this Minnesotan, passive population to take.

I bring the events of spring 2017 back to light not because it will be my sole focus, but because I believe that it allowed for the topic of race to be on the table as a valid discussion. Even though race clearly still existed before this point, it seemed rare for students and professors to speak as openly and candidly about the topic as they do now, in the fall of 2017.

Methodology

At the start of brainstorming for this ethnographic research project, I played with the idea of interviewing white students of St. Olaf to get their take on the events of last spring and how they affected their outlook on race relations on campus and off. However, a thought was hanging over my head that would not pass; it would be easy to interview white students about this. Who I truly wanted to hear from were students of color on campus, whose voices aren't always heard as loudly or as often.

After determining this focus of population, I decided to narrow down my research to investigate not only feelings as a student of color, but how academia (and now college) has shaped their upbringing and family relationships. In his article *The Achievement of Desire*, Richard Rodriguez articulates what it is like to work your way up the academic ladder as a student of color in the working class. His view of academia is generally a negative one — he says that it drives children of immigrant families away from their parents and morphs them into an image that is acceptable in a white world. “Education requires radical self-reformation” (Rodriguez 325).

While reading this piece, I grew more and more curious if this view of education could be found in the students of my school. As a private liberal arts college, St. Olaf a place that is largely unattainable for many people depending on their race and class. St. Olaf is also becoming

more and more diversified, drawing from almost every state of the country and a large number of countries around the world. St. Olaf should be more accessible for students of color coming from a working class or lower-middle class family, but I was fascinated to find out more about how the minority student population became able to attend this school. Getting into and going to college is largely seen as something of a success, and something to be proud of. According to Rodriguez, however, the journey through the academic world can also be a tiring and toxic process that requires students to choose between family and schooling, especially when they come from a family of color in the working class. St. Olaf is the perfect environment to learn more about whether this is a common experience for students of color.

As a Chinese-American woman who was raised in a white household, I have been allotted many privileges that other students of color at St. Olaf could not experience. In addition, I am constantly grappling with my place in the Asian community; a community that in many ways has succeeded in America. Part of the reason I decided to focus on the family lives of students of color is because I never had that background of living with a family of the same race as me.

In order to conduct my research, I interviewed three students who identified themselves as people of color. One was a freshman, one a sophomore, and one a junior. Two of the students identify as female, one of them identifies as a male. Both the females identified themselves as Latina, and the male as black. All three students are from varying class backgrounds, as will be discussed later on. Two students are from Chicago, Illinois, and the other student is from Houston, Texas. The students who I interviewed were friends, acquaintances, or students who responded to a post that I made on the St. Olaf students of color Facebook page.

Terminology

In order to proceed in a discussion regarding race and class, these two loaded terms must be defined. Will Barratt's excerpt from *Social Class on Campus* articulates that class can be observed through multiple models; macro-level sociological, economic, and cultural (Barratt 14). I would argue that in this study, class is specifically discussed through an economic and cultural lens. Barratt also claims that class, whether it be social, cultural, or economic status, shapes how you view and move through the world. "We create our own lives with what is familiar, and class is one of the features of our lives that drive who we spend time with and what we do and what we eat and what we drink" (Barratt 14). Race is a more difficult concept to define, due to the fact that race is a purely social concept with no biological justifications. Nevertheless, Cornell and Hartmann flesh out a mostly comprehensive definition of what we refer to as race: "A human group defined by itself or others as distinct by virtue of perceived common physical characteristics that are held to be inherent" (Cornell and Hartmann 25).

Findings and Analysis

Family Life and Upbringing

I began my interviews with a series of questions regarding the student's family dynamic in relation to academia. I wanted to determine whether a certain type of rhetoric about college coming from the student's parents affected their motivation to enter higher education. All three students said that their parents expressed a desire for them to attend college. Jason, a black male student from Chicago, especially emphasized how much the importance of being highly educated played a role in his upbringing. "Family life was very centered around education, since [my] family is first generation [from Nigeria]. It was highly stressed that the only way to make it here

is to be highly educated... [my parents] were like, 'If you're not going to college, you're not my son.'" This answer was extreme compared to what Anna, a Latina student from Chicago, had to say. "They always thought it was very important; my mom always wished that she had continued going to school, so from the time we were starting to go to school, the goal was always to get us to go to college. They always thought that was really important." Beth, a Latina student from Houston, gave a similar answer to Anna, saying that her parents thought that it was important since they themselves didn't get the chance to pursue higher education.

Both Beth and Anna have at least one parent who did not attend college, whereas both of Jason's parents attended multiple colleges and universities in Nigeria, London, and the United States and have multiple degrees. This could be a factor in the way Jason's parents view the importance of college; both his mother and father understand the privileges that higher education provided them (his mother is a lawyer, father is network manager for the City of Chicago), and in turn they passed down that cultural capital to Jason and his three older siblings (older sister is a lawyer, older brother works in IT for the Sears Tower, other older brother is in his third year of graduate school). For Anna and Beth's parents, it is indeed important to them to send their kids to college, as the interview responses showed. But the impact of higher education is not as actualized due to the fact that it wasn't a reality for them. It would logically follow that Jason's parents' strictness about receiving a college education is founded in personal experience that Beth and Anna's parents cannot access. This observation would correspond with Rodriguez's claim that it is significantly more difficult for students of color who want to pursue higher education but don't have parents who can personally speak to those experiences.

Social Identities

After discussing the students' family lives, I asked them to identify themselves in terms of race and class within the schools and neighborhoods in which they grew up. I wanted to know whether their peers in school were helpful or detrimental to be around when applying for colleges, and whether the interviewees felt any certain pressures due to their racial and/or economic standing.

Starting with class, I had a variety of responses from the students. Beth described her family as low income due to the fact that both her parents are immigrants from El Salvador and did not receive a college education. Anna never put a label on her family's class standing, but rather described her family's economic situation through what they could provide (ie. food on the table, clothes, college education). She said of her family's situation, "We didn't have everything that we wanted, but we had everything that we needed." On the other hand, Jason placed his family in the upper-middle class. He justified this classification due to the fact that they have three kids currently in college and one out of college, plus his mother's position as a lawyer.

In response to a question about whether or not race played a big role in their upbringing, the three interviewees had varying degrees of awareness regarding their race in society. Beth flat out said no, and that race didn't play a large role in her life until she got to college and recognized herself as a person of color compared to the rest of the population. This I suspect is due to the description she shared of her school population and neighborhood; the majority of her peers were also Hispanic and Latino, meaning that everyone was more or less on the same racial playing field and it didn't have to be acknowledged regularly. Even though Anna also grew up in a neighborhood surrounded by people of her racial background (Mexican/Latina), she said that

yes, race played a large role in her upbringing due to the traditions and culture that makes her Mexican. It appears that race means something slightly different to Anna than it does Beth. To Anna, race and ethnicity seem to be intertwined, while Beth thought of race as a strictly physical attribute. I don't doubt that Beth also grew up with strong Hispanic customs and traditions, but in her mind these do not define your race.

Jason had a much different take on the way race affected his life. He shared an anecdote about the first time he recognized his race, and he makes a point at the end about a black role model that influenced his academic interests.

The first time I was aware of my race was in elementary school, I was one of the black kids in the school, I had a writing class by a woman named Ms. King, and one day after class she pulled me aside and she was like 'I'm gonna give you extra work,' and I was really mad about this. I said 'Why do I have to do this?' 'You're going to learn eventually that in society, since you're black, you're going to have to work twice as hard to get the same amount of credit, so I'm giving you this extra work to prepare you for the rest of your life.' And then I was in a gifted science class and the teacher was African American, and then I got really close to her, and she was a scientist, and I love science. And so she was a big part of my inspiration to keep going higher in STEM.

I found these distinct memories extremely interesting in relation to the focus of my research. Instead of a parent or other family member having this deeply complicated and difficult conversation with Jason about his race, it was an elementary school teacher. That is not to say that Jason's parents didn't also have this discussion with him, but this particular story is the one that came to mind when asked about race. The story at the end takes place in a school setting as well; a black science teacher making a strong connection with Jason and inspiring him to pursue science as a career. This line of thinking goes perfectly with Rodriguez's claim that "The kind of allegiance the young student might have given his mother and father only days earlier, he transfers to the teacher, the new figure of authority" (Rodriguez 322). Jason's teacher taught him

that in order to succeed as a black man in society, he must do twice the work as anyone else, and she taught him this lesson in the context of school and homework. However, the distancing between Jason and his parents isn't exactly parallel to Rodriguez's account, since Jason has two extremely well educated parents who are fluent in the academic world. Rodriguez "[couldn't] afford to admire his parents" because they were not highly educated or well versed in academia, and therefore couldn't coincide with Rodriguez's goals.

Life at St. Olaf as a Student of Color

I spent a small portion of the interviews discussing experiences and feelings the students have had while being a St. Olaf student. Almost all of these answers were similar to one another. When asked to what extent the students feel like they fit into campus life, all of them said that they fit into the certain group of friends that they surround themselves with, and those friends are also students of color. All three interviewees also affirmed that they have felt uncomfortable on campus due to their race. Although this section did not directly pertain to the students' family relationships, it was a good chance for the students to reflect on their identity as a college student.

Current Family Life

My last segment of my research asked the participants to reflect on their family life now that they are college students. All three of them expressed that their parents are interested in what they do in college, but it's impossible for them to fully understand everything happening in their lives anymore. For Jason it sounded as though his parents being somewhat uninvolved in his college activities doesn't differ much from how invested they were in his high school activities. For Anna and Beth, the distance between their college lives and family lives are much deeper.

Because neither of Beth's parents attended college, it is difficult to truly connect with them and make them understand her experiences. "It's hard to explain [college] to your parents since they didn't attend college, they didn't finish high school, and... [my sisters and I] try our best to explain what we're doing, but it's also challenging, since they wouldn't understand." Anna expressed a similar disconnect between her college life and family life.

Despite their parents' inability to fully grasp their college lives, the interviewees did not speak about their families with disdain or disappointment, as Rodriguez does. On the contrary, they all expressed a gratitude for the sacrifices their parents have gone through to allow them the privilege to go to college. Beth explained what her college education means to her: "At least for me, it's more like my way of giving back to my parents for literally moving countries and all the sacrifices they've done. In my perspective it's more like for them. But also for me, to provide for them as well." Anna and Jason did not specifically explain their gratitude, but it was apparent from their responses about being back home with their families that there was not any animosity or divides drawn between them now that they are in college.

One distinct parallel between all three interviewees was the way they expressed how their parents reacted to their choice of majors/minors/concentrations. Jason plans on double majoring in Biology and Studio Art on a Pre-med track, Anna is double majoring in English and Sociology with concentrations in Race and Ethnic studies and Family Studies, and Beth is a Sociology/Anthropology major. When asked whether their parents approve of their decision (or whether they know at all), all three students brought up a common objection that their parents held; the concern about what type of job they will be able to get with the major they have chosen. For Jason, even though he has included biology and plans to be a psychologist, he fears telling

his parents about the double major involving art, since in his parents eyes art is not valued in society. Anna's parents don't believe that she will be able to find a job as an English major, and questions what she's learning. Beth expressed that while her parents want her to pursue her own interests, they also want to make sure she has a back-up plan in order to support herself financially. This commonality between parents of color who are first generation or recent immigrants makes sense; they want their children to have a stable and happy life in this country, and their ideas about "success" possibly don't line up with a liberal arts education philosophy.

Conclusion

The discussions I had with my peers were extremely enlightening and fruitful for the sake of this research topic as well as for my own personal understanding of the student population on this campus. The data that I collected from this sample shows more variances from Rodriguez's article than similarities; none of the students detested their parents as Rodriguez did, the students seemed to retain their home cultures, languages, and values. In fact, the students primarily expressed gratitude for the sacrifices that their parents made in order to live in this country and send them to college. Even though it is difficult for all the interviewees to reconcile their academic and family lives, they appeared to have mastered the ability to balance them both instead of sacrificing one of them for the other.

My interviews with Jason, Beth, and Anna helped me sort out the ways in which your external identity interacts with your culture and upbringing, and how these things don't have to be linked to be valid. My hope is to continue to understand the experiences of the students around me, and to use my personal perspective and privilege to heighten the voices of others who may not be heard.

Works Cited

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