Mapping Exclusion in Undergraduate Psychology: Towards a Common Architecture of the Minority Student Experience

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Introduction

This chapter addresses the issue of diversity in higher education (HE) within the context of the experiences of psychology students with ethnic and sexual minority identifications. Although recent years have seen an increased focus in the UK on equality of access and the promotion of a policy of widening participation in HE, especially with regard to Black and minority ethnic (BME) students and those from residential areas which have a higher representation of people with lower incomes (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2000; Zinkiewicz and Trapp, 2004), we still have only a limited understanding of the learning and teaching experiences of minority students in UK universities. Here we explore the experiences of minority students with a particular focus on UK university psychology departments and make reference to two recent studies carried out by the Westminster Diversity in Education Research group, which explored the experiences of BME and sexual minority (male Gay and Bisexual (GB)) psychology students. Primarily, we seek to identify commonalities in the ways that students from these groups are positioned and framed through their teaching and learning experiences of psychology. We also aim to address the questions: Does psychology, through its teaching and learning practices, at both the individual and institutional levels, properly and meaningfully encompass the diversity of its student population? How can psychology (and other disciplines/institutions) facilitate an inclusive and rewarding learning experience for minority students? Although our research specifically
focuses upon the discipline of psychology and its related (evidence-based) practices (e.g. educational, clinical and counselling psychology), our research has implications for HE more generally, which we discuss later.

While widening participation is a laudable initiative, there are growing concerns that minority students, once they enter HE, experience a range of challenges and problems. Existing literature, primarily from the USA, has repeatedly shown that these problems are many and varied, and include general discrimination, for example, on the basis of ethnicity or sexual orientation; difficulties of expression in classroom interaction with majority students; feelings of fear, isolation and alienation; and discomfort and detachment involving the curriculum (e.g. Feagin and Sikes, 1995; Rhoads, 1995). Research suggests that minority students continue to face challenges that are additional to the regular problems and stresses that all students experience as part of their learning, and shows that the overall impact on the student may range from struggling within a sometimes unfriendly, unsupportive and alienating university environment, to dropping out of their degree altogether, (Ortiz and Santoz, 2006; Reid and Radhakrishnan, 2003). We begin with a brief survey of relevant literature in relation to the two groups we discuss in this chapter, BME and male GB students.

BME students

In the USA, a study by Kraft (1991) found that the interaction between mainly White faculty and minority students was problematic for Black students. Similarly, Love (1993) showed that ‘The experience of Black students in White institutions is substantially and qualitatively different than the experience of White students in White institutions.’ Furthermore, Feagin and Sikes (1995, p. 93) argued that ‘a university setting…[would appear] to be a cosmopolitan place generally free of overt racial discrimination…yet the reality in all parts of the country seems to be that some White and other non-Black professors can create major hurdles’.

A focus on the experiences of BME students studying psychology is particularly interesting given that psychology has made strenuous attempts to study racial prejudice as evidenced by the wide range of theoretical explanations of racial prejudice disseminated over the past 60 years or so. At the same time, however, it has been argued that psychology has continuously been affected by, and in turn reflected and reinforced, the very prejudices and discrimination that it purports to understand and challenge (Garvey, 2001; Howitt, 1990).