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Race, Research, and Tenure: Institutional Credibility and the Incorporation of African, Latino, and American Indian Faculty

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# **RACE, RESEARCH, AND TENURE**

## **Institutional Credibility and the Incorporation of African, Latino, and American Indian Faculty**

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Conventional wisdom suggests that colleges and universities act in objective ways that are guided, in large measure, by an unrelenting quest for the truth. This article, however, draws on the literature on the power of race to demonstrate how some universities use tenure and promotion committees, as well as other resources, to show that private universities are more susceptible to the interests of alumni and, as a result, are sometimes less interested in safeguarding the interests of faculty of color, who are involved in controversial research on racial issues. This suggests that institutions vary in their willingness or ability to facilitate incorporation among faculty of color in academia.

*Keywords: faculty diversity; institutional racism; symbolic interaction; tenure discrimination; Indian mascots*

### **RACIALIZED RESEARCH BY THE UNTENURED PROFESSOR**

In many ways, stereotypical representations and racialized mascotry of American Indians truly are a crucial part of racial discrimination and minority issues. Yet, with some minor exceptions, issues revolving around American Indians remain untreated and unacceptable to most of mainstream academia, who are locked into differential treatment of so-called minority groups and are resistant

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to further changes or charges of racism. This means that American Indian tenure-track professors who conduct research on racial discrimination vis-à-vis American Indians are highly suspect in an academic world that has convinced itself of ubiquitous progress away from a recent past of institutional racism (Deloria, 1987; Morris, 1993; Nagel, 1995).

### **DOMINANT IDEOLOGIES AND DENIAL OF INSTITUTIONAL RACISM**

Ideologies that rationalize and justify systems of social stratification are particularly important; indeed, they are inextricably linked with the nature of dominance by elites or political groups. In American social institutions—especially the sphere of higher education—the mainstream ideologies are those of meritocracy and foundational freedoms. As constitutionally stated, most academics follow the general public and historical scholarship in either denying or downplaying systems of racial exploitation and oppression, such as race-based slavery or indigenous genocide (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Similarly, the social sciences are typically less interested in describing and analyzing racism that is institutionally based and are more focused on individual acts or expressions, which allow elites and their political representatives to dismiss claims of systemic racism, even to the extent that individual or small group racism can be used to demonstrate a “declining significance of race” (Willie 1979, 1983; Wilson, 1978).

These denying ideologies allow dominant groups to avoid meaningful discussions of racism, contemporaneously, and even allow a gentler interpretation to undeniable historical systems. Academic institutions and scholars become prime players in the reproduction and dissemination, (some say the actual production) of these modern ideological positions (Zwiegenhaft & Domhoff, 1999). Therefore, discussion about race and racism in the social sciences becomes a primary battleground over the meaning, and practice, of American society.

## **IMAGE AND IDEOLOGY OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS**

Within the previously stated battleground over the ideological representation sits the professoriate, those with some protections defined under tenure and institutional rules of public institutions, and those without tenure protections whose vulnerability is greater at many private institutions, without union or state-sponsored rules of fair play. We must enter into this volatile and diverse mixture of issues affecting tenure relationships, the perceived and real image of the university.

Within private institutions, the alumni and various groups associated with general endowment often exercise a vastly disproportionate influence over tenure lines and racialized research, especially if connected to the public image of the institution. Therefore, within this one sector, professors conducting research on race and racism with possibilities of affecting public images of universities, the issue of tenure becomes an especially salient point of divergence. One of the questions that can be asked (either by senior administration sensitive to alumni giving and institutional politics or, too often, alumni and donor organizations themselves) is “Does the university approve of or want research that may illustrate racism in the institution, its sponsoring companies, or the general society?” Questions such as this take on great importance in tenure decisions for some faculty (Chait & Trower, 2001; Jasper, 2001).

## **REPRESENTATIONAL ISSUES OF RACISM AND SPORTS MASCOTRY**

The structural issues of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 1997) are linked to symbolic representations (Sears, 1988) that extend from individual imagery to societally sanctioned iconography, (Harjo, 1998; Lujan, 1998) constituting historically based and currently practiced racist systems. Although academics periodically analyze—and sometimes contribute to the suppression of these racialized inequalities and injustices—the actual systems change primarily because of social movements, individual heroic acts, and sustained

pressures—economic, political, social—that arise from grassroots situations (Carnoy, 1994; Gamson, 1990; Morris, 1984, 1993; Scott, 1990).

Some of the most pervasive racial icons that are a leftover legacy of colonialized racial systems (from which American society based its early race relations) are those of a savage “wild” Indian, and indeed, these are very much the root icons for the repression of most other racial minorities in the United States (Mann & Zatz, 1998). These icons are especially powerful in relationship to changing ideologies and constructions of race and Whiteness in America (Jacobson, 1998), especially those of the original Irish immigrants as savage and ape-like (Curtis, 1997).

Similarly, racialized mascots, logos, and team names for collegiate sports (and the general society) take on these historically based ideological struggles for group meanings of race and superiority. Two other issues complicate these matters: First, sports teams, to a large extent, become emblematic of institutions; and second, only Native Americans and their so-called tribes are employed in this manner. Therefore, universities are especially sensitive and very defensive about these issues that are also unresolved in the general society, and there is little to no crossover effect of racism as experienced by other racial minority groups who are almost bound to have much greater presence on the campus, and within its sociopolitical spheres of influence, (Johns, 2000).

Seeing as even mainstream faculty have problems with these issues, and conflicts over them, American Indian faculty face situations that are already loaded with the deck stacked against them on nearly every level—students, colleagues, administrators, and alumni (Batur-Vanderlippe, 1999; Feagin, 2000).

### **DEVALUING RESEARCH AND DISTORTING TENURE FOR POLITICAL REASONS**

In these scholarly environments, some forms of research are valued more than others, whether it is published. Research and professional activity that underscores or reifies the dominant ideologies,

especially that which further justifies or rationalizes the existing social stratification (such as racial inequalities and residential segregation being more of an economic set of factors, rather than continuing discrimination on the part of dominant groups) is lauded and appreciated (Bonilla-Silva, 2001).

These findings, although appearing to study and analyze existing inequalities arising from elitist, historically oppressive systems of racism (and sexism), avoid the central structural explanations and allow researchers and their institutions to take the now widely accepted formal positions that racial discrimination is no longer a key causative variable for measured inequality, but only has left-over effects that should disappear in time. They also perpetuate meritocratic ideologies stressing “lift oneself up by one’s bootstraps” individualist thinking, sometimes resonating with immigrant myths that were, of course, shaped during deeply racist policy-driven past practices. Finally, they call into question the many poor racial minority groups, such as inner-city Blacks and reservation-based Indians, and their common contention that they are racially oppressed.

Thus, research, appearing to be neutral and scholarly, has important political manifestations, including the justification for racial inequalities that are replicated within the student and alumni bodies of institutions that may formally state that they value diversity even as all of their internal mechanisms reproduce exclusionary dominance for some racial groups. What is more interesting is that new ideologies and myths arise as to why there is a lack of diversity within student bodies and especially the professoriate and administration. In this venue, the few racial minorities that are of value to society with very good grades or excellent credentials are competitively stolen by other institutions. This myth further underscores a relative dearth of qualified minorities, which resonates with business practices, company politics, and national or state governments, including such controversial areas as affirmative action (Fenelon, 2001; Hochschild, 1995; Wellman, 1997;).

Tenure, when conferred or denied in politicized systems like those described previously, is rather like affirmation systems, with an increasingly higher bar for performance by those who may dis-

agree with the dominant meritocratic ideologies, and an increasingly lower set of standards for those scholars in alignment with the official and informal explanations for the general lack of diversity.

These observations are even more powerful for racial minorities, operating in both directions, than for members of dominant groups; although to a much lesser extent, it does apply to everyone. Moreover, they are more apparent and present in private institutions operating off endowments, and more applied in the social sciences, and sometimes the humanities, than the natural sciences, or many of the professional schools (Steinberg, 2001).

### **ACADEMIC FREEDOM, TENURE LINE POSITIONS, INSTITUTIONAL IMAGE**

Issues of academic freedom (often taken for granted by those outside academia) are thereby very strong within four sectors of institutional life—research, teaching, internal political presentation, and public representations. Each of these areas is affected by the ideologies of race and racism, and the aforementioned position of minority faculty in their respective disciplines.

Research, even within more quantitatively oriented social sciences, may be differentially valued within the promotion and tenure systems because of its political repercussions. From this view, tenure can mean that administrators and alumni groups may be forced to live and coexist with faculty whose research they find repugnant or in opposition to their own beliefs or observations. When the linkage with private corporate interests (who may contribute to the university alumni) is perceived as either critical or harmful, the pecuniary interests of administration can interfere, creating conflict over the nature, the credibility or valuation, and the venue for faculty research. Institutional image—a key political interest of many private universities—is situationally critical (Dei, 2000; Eakin, 2001).

Whereas, as noted earlier, alumni donor groups and administration may not desire research that demonstrates racialized inequalities or actual racism in the general society or the institution, imag-

ery of opposing such research against African American and in many cases Latino/Hispanic groups or individual faculty with representation of those groups, may be even less desirable. Even such relatively invisible groups (as in Asian Americans) may prove to be embarrassing, such as with the Wen-Lo Hee case linking racial fears about links of Chinese Americans with spying from China, based on simple conjecture and causing some protest from political groups and the press. However, this article contends that an overwhelming majority of states and institutions dealing with Native Americans can simply ignore these sets of issues, either because of the extremely low demographics or because Indian issues do not register on their radar as being of any importance. In addition, as described in the beginning of this article, societal denial of genocidal domination and stereotypical treatment in the media and with sports mascots remains pervasive and powerfully absent in most discussions of race and racism. Because of this, research dealing with contemporary sociopolitical issues of American Indians is truly symbolic, and representative, of contested racial ideologies in higher education (Deloria, 1998; McKee, 1993).

### **LESSONS FROM CASE STUDIES AT U.S. PRIVATE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS**

Reviewing a hypothetical or distanced case study taken from real-life faculty experiences, and placing our situational construct at a privately endowed institution with religious affiliation, each of the previous observations can be identified *in situ* (Ragin & Becker, 1992) for practice, equity, and policy on diversity (Welsch, 1999).

For instance, this Christian-oriented school hires a Native American faculty member specializing in analysis of social inequalities (especially revolving around race and ethnicity) and Indians. Located in the same city is a sports team called a generic Native American name, with mascots, logos, and decorated fans visibly marking historical and contemporary stereotypes and imagery. Let us say that major investors and owners of the team and/or its subsidiaries are affiliated with the university, as well as the city govern-

ment. Add into this mix a sudden winning streak by the city sports team, following a long and critically disclaimed history of a city in decline for years, and you have a volatile situation in terms of any racial representations of indigenous people (Fenelon, 1999).

As discussed earlier, students reflect the symbolic domination that they interact with in society, especially when it is widespread, and the particular minority group is underrepresented.

When the faculty member chooses—or perhaps even feels forced to begin research on the high levels of deeply racialized behavior previously described—the university’s unofficial evaluation (including the alumni, major donors, and administrators) are in potential conflict with scholarly academic freedom. Moreover, when the dominant ideologies are displayed with a near patriotic fervor throughout the institution, many other faculty back away from appearing to support such research, at least in public venue (Dei, 2000).

With this one particular case in mind, we can observe the intersection of nearly all the unofficial forces attempting to influence reappointment, tenure, and promotion cycles of the faculty. First, there are external business forces with various paths to access to the administration (as in endowments). Second, the alumni compose a primary influence, especially at a private institution relying on contribution and “legacy” student enrollment. Third, members of the boards of trustees, and various advisory boards, can indirectly address issues. Fourth, city officials and various city councils can suggest agendas and biases to the institution. Each of these unofficial groups attempted to influence the promotion and tenure process of the mentioned Native American faculty member studying Indian mascotry, team names, and related issues of racism, with some results (Brownstein, 2001).

Keeping all four of these external effects in mind, we can more easily observe how the nature, credibility, and even venues for research in such controversial areas are called into question—sometimes even outright attacked—by senior administrators who become conduits for these forms of institutional discrimination. The provost in one case directly intervened in research programs, through denying grants and acceptance of reports, calling the findings unsubstantiated and the behavior of the faculty member in

defending the partly quantitative results as unprofessional. Operating under a bare majority of committee members (controlled by a graduate studies dean), research findings that were accepted and presented at a national disciplinary association on the highest levels were rejected by faculty and administrators bereft of expertise in the social sciences.

Furthering the rejection of the faculty member and the research results were criticisms by deans and associate deans that the faculty member's protest and response to the rejections were unwarranted and unacceptable, even when discussing the use of research methodologies long accepted in most disciplines. The written critiques were subsequently used to formally evaluate the faculty member after the evaluation timelines for that academic year had ended by contract, and to remove the faculty member from the tenure line, based almost entirely on the professional research and the published findings on the city and corporate use of racialized mascots.

### **THE NATURE OF STEREOTYPES AND PRIVILEGED DOMINANT DISCOURSE IN ACADEMIA**

Earlier observations on the changing discourse of race and racism are important to reclaim here. Essentialist Black-White paradigms tend to repress only the racialized language about African Americans, causing dominant/mainstream groups to feel frustrated about political correctness curbing their speech and writing. In related cases, we found that research on affirmative action was often rejected and/or inappropriately devalued, when it was found to have racist overtones.

Dominant group discourse holds sway in all but the most egregious and demonstrated cases, especially when the frame is outside the Black-White or racist-not racist paradigms. Similarly, stereotypes that rely on historical, comparative, or institutional analysis are rejected, allowing their redefinition and denial (Johnson, Nagel, & Champagne, 1997).

Issues that resonate in the broader society (such as racism without the Ku Klux Klan, Skinheads, or Nazi Brownshirts) become part of a privileged discourse under the aegis of the dominant

groups through simply saying “I know such and such is not a racist” or the particular participants “did not mean anything racial in the remark” or decision under protest by the minority groups. Academic culture actually fosters these approaches by downplaying face-to-face encounters, exaggerating backroom committee work, and allowing external forces multiple entry points. Moreover, pertinently, structurally permanent slots, such as tenure, become key convergence areas.

These observations are particularly appropriate in wake of the World Trade Center and Pentagon bombings by the al-Qaeda terrorist organizations. Similar to American Indians in the political denial of the dominant group’s participation, to the extreme underrepresentation as a minority, and most pertinently to the mainstream stereotyping (in this case of Muslims, Middle Eastern Arabs, and even amazingly to many unassociated groups such as Sikhs [because of their turbans]), Americans are now racial profiling Arab American citizens and people from the Middle East. Scholars undertaking this research (and those who have done so for years) of Middle Easterners are not only suspect for their potential bias and alleged lack of subjectivity but also may be profiled by their home institutions and external agencies for their perceived loyalties without consideration of their actual ethnicity or national origin. In addition, as with cases of tenure, private institutions will almost certainly link such considerations with many institutional benefits—including promotion and tenure. At least some linkages emanate from the historical construction of the “other” and “enemy” icons (Middle East—Said, 1993) (Indians—Ross, 1998) (culture—Hartocollis, 2001).

### **CONCLUSIONS ON TENURE AND RESEARCH AGENDAS IN CONTROVERSIAL FIELDS**

Based on the aforementioned research and observations, the conclusion of this article is summarized in the following 10 statements:

1. Diversity throughout the professoriate, and research associated with minority faculty members, has made little progress in the past 2 decades, even as available topics, student demographics, and general public knowledge has increased in these same realms.
2. This general progress is especially constrained with most under-represented minority groups, with groups such as Native Americans also misrepresented in analysis.
3. Private corporations, alumni groups, trustees, and various councils are likely to pressure college administration over faculty conducting controversial work, especially if they are group members.
4. Administrators, college committees, and management pass on these concerns when minorities become targets for their research and political beliefs, especially if applicable to the college itself.
5. Social institutions are replicated within private colleges/universities, conducting gatekeeping functions that easily transfer into tenure and promotion decisions.
6. Hegemonic domination continues to be a critical problem in academia, in contemporary and with historical analysis, as represented in struggles over sports mascots and team names.
7. Dominant group structural issues, as found in affirmative action and in racial profiling policies, continue to influence institutional treatment of tenure and research agendas.
8. These sociopolitical positions may be observed from the national level, as in the United States pullout of the U.N. conference on racism in South Africa, to local issues such as racial profiling, (Cincinnati, New York City, and this case study), and usually involve institutional resources.
9. Individual minority faculty continue to pay a price and feel they must negotiate their research agendas over such critical issues, even in the face of increased diversity on campus.
10. Institutions subordinate their stated commitment to increasing racial/ethnic diversity of the faculty and related research issues, to the structural demands and interests of external forces.

Therefore, it is necessary for scholars to study disjunctures between perceptions and reality of research and diversity, especially as evidenced in the professorial issues of tenure and promotion. Such published information, which is subsequently disseminated in academic and public communities, are necessary resources as

minority faculty continue in their quest for tenure, promotion, and incorporation in higher education.

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