Undergraduate Anthropology as White Academic Space: Perceptions and Experiences of Minority Anthropology Students at West Virginia University

Tanisha Adams

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, West Virginia University

Background

Despite early contributions to scientific racism and Western imperialism, American Anthropologists—initially guided by Franz Boas—have worked against racism and toward a more relativistic perspective on human diversity (Boas 1916). Boas worked with scholars of color, popularized cultural relativism within and outside of the field, and actively challenged racism both inside and outside of the field. While Boasian anthropology worked to discredit racist rhetoric and encouraged a perception of anthropology as an anti-racist or post-racist discipline, they simultaneously maintained the racial status quo within the field of anthropology (Anderson 2019). During the 1990s, with the Civil Rights movement as a backdrop, anthropologists began to analyze the inclusion of minority anthropologists within the field. This discourse then led to the creation of the Committee on Minorities in Anthropology (CMA) — a group consisting of established anthropologists of color — in 1969 (TPRA). The CMA conducted a survey of minority anthropologists. The TPRAs analyzed survey results and concluded that minorities were leaving the field early, being encouraged not to study anthropology, and that anthropologists of color did not “feel that they could actively encourage minority students to take up a career in anthropology (Broklin, et al., 2011, 595).” Decades later, in 2009, the Committee on Race and Racism in Anthropology (CERRA) was created (TPRA). This group conducted another survey of anthropology faculty and graduate students of color to re-address issues shown in earlier studies.

The results of the CERRA survey demonstrated that little had changed since the 1970s. Survey results suggested that there remained significant racial and ethnic disparities within anthropology (TPRA). The focus of the survey was on previous PhD anthropologists and graduate students. The survey explored barriers to success as well as obstacles to academic and financial support. Survey results demonstrated growth within the number of anthropologists of color through the 70s-90s but also indicated that there was still significant underrepresentation across minorities. Many of the survey participants indicated that they were the only one or one of two students of color in their department. Additionally, survey responses pointed to anthropologists of color being tasked with “diversity duty” that ultimately proved a major barrier to obtaining tenure or degree completion (TPRA).

In the decade following the CERRA report, some graduate anthropology students have shared individual experiences that exemplify CERRA survey findings. Students share feelings of marginalization in academic spaces (namely academic conferences) due to a lack of representation in these spaces (few anthropologists of color) and racialized discourse from white Martin (2017) claims that alongside lack of support in graduate school, white anthropologists continue to “other” minority graduate students by acting like they are not anthropologists but, rather, investigators. Parkh (2018) argues that established anthropologists continue privilege white anthropological thinking and discourse by not incorporating racial and ethnic minorities in academic space. Anthropologists have focused research and discussion on racial and ethnic marginalization within the field on PhDs and graduate students. For this reason, little is known about the undergraduate minority experience in anthropology. This study seeks to analyze and compare the current status and the academic experiences of racial and ethnic minority undergraduates majoring in Anthropology.

Methods

This study seeks to explore a population not surveyed by the AAA — undergraduate anthropology students. This study examines the perceptions and experiences of racial and ethnic minority students at West Virginia University. To create the interview script, I used CERRA survey instruments. Questions that could apply to the undergraduate experience were used. Questions specific to the graduate student experience were removed or were revised to reflect an undergraduate academic experience. For example, CERRA survey question 18: “Some minority anthropologists say that in contrast to non-minority anthropologists they have been allowed in the following ways: field worker and interviewee, liaison to a minority, ethnic or cultural group, cultural broker interpreter for majority member anthropologists. Imagine you, for a moment, are a student and professional anthropologist. How do you handle these situations? If yes, please provide an example. If no, please provide a reason why.” Revised question: “In your experience, have you ever felt compelled to answer certain racial/ethnic questions in class because of how you identify? Or, to represent a minority perspective while in the classroom?”

CERRA survey question 18: “It has been said that the intellectual contributions of minority anthropologists are not given the same consideration as those of non-minority anthropologists. For example, the writing of minority anthropologists is often not reviewed in professional journals, not quoted or cited, and seldom used as required readings. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? If you agree, can you, say, name examples of how you disagree, please comment.” Revised question: “Do you feel that you have been equally exposed to anthropologists of color as well as non-ethnic anthropologists within your classes through textbooks and classroom materials?”

Interviews were conducted with 7 students majoring in Anthropology at West Virginia University who also identify as a racial or ethnic minority. Each interview ranged from 20 to 30 minutes. Interviews were conducted in a private space and all participant data has been deidentified. To protect the identity of participants, the author of this study has sole access to interview data and fieldnotes, and only aggregeted interview data has been shared.

Results

- Participants expressed similar concerns as graduate and faculty highlighted in the CERRA Report
- "I think a lot of people who are in anthropology, get pushed— they’re going to teach ethnic classes or they’re going to be experts in what their background is. It’s like why can’t we be an expert in whatever.
- "All participants expressed limited exposure to anthropologists of color.
- "It’s not a part of my academic curriculum. It’s something that I have taken upon myself to expose myself to anthropologists of color. I shouldn’t have to do it.
- "I can’t name another anthropologist of color, male or female, off the top of my head.
- "All participants indicated that representation is important, only five said it was necessary.
- "First Gen students all felt representation was necessary.
- "Those who did not feel it was necessary, had a parent of color who has a graduate degree.
- "Having a father who has his MD, it doesn’t make me feel like a minority.
- "Two students felt that their education had suffered because of lack of representation.
- Participants shared mixed feelings about being asked to represent racial or ethnic background in the classroom.
- Some felt marginalized in these instances.
- "I felt almost obligated to answer certain questions because of my race to the land—a being the only person in the room that was able to identify closely with them.
- Two felt marginalized but also felt it was important to represent their background.
- "If you were to ask me about my ethnicity (sigh)... but if we’re talking about anthropology, there’s something I can relate to.
- Four felt empowered/important to represent their racial and ethnic background.
- "I honestly felt more empowered.
- "I’d rather educate people.
- All who felt marginalized identify as Afr. Amer/Black or Mixed.
- When asked how many students of color are within the anthropology major, the majority of participants overestimated.
- All first generation (3) knew about anthropology before coming to college while others did not.

Conclusions

This small study suggests there is diversity in the experiences and perspectives of minority undergraduate students: some, but not all, students shared experiences of being “othered” and some, but not all, students shared perceptions anthropology as a “white space.” However, most expressed a desire for greater minority representation among faculty and in the field. While some students did feel marginalized within classrooms, students felt more marginalized within the field of anthropology. Students noticed a lack of racial and ethnic minority representation in textbooks and readers and expressed feeling obligated to study what they are familiar with (i.e. their own culture).

Although representation is important to all minority students, first-generation students were greater impacted by the lack of minority representation in the classroom, among faculty, and in the texts assigned in class. All students who are both first-generation and minority not only felt it was necessary to have representation but also felt that their education had been hindered by lack thereof. This suggests that additional factors such as first-generation status and socio-economic status may play a role in how minority students view anthropology and their experiences within the discipline.

Next Steps

Due to the small number of participants, broader research is needed to better understand the perceptions and experiences of minority undergraduate students within anthropology. I hope to adapt the interview script into an online survey in order to survey students at universities and colleges throughout the United States. These results would provide more generalizable data on the experiences and perceptions of undergraduate anthropology majors who identify as a racial or ethnic minority and contribute to efforts to increase participation and retention of this population within the field of anthropology.

References


Acknowledgements

A special thank you to:
- The Office of Undergraduate Research, West Virginia University
- The Research Apprenticeship Program (RAP), West Virginia University
- Department of Sociology and Anthropology, West Virginia University
- Dr. Susanna Donelson, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, WVU

A very special thank you to all of my peers who agreed to participate in this project and who generously shared their experiences with me.