

“A Hole in Austin’s Soul”: Black Faculty Perceptions of the Austin Community

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Project Synopsis

Despite Austin’s high placement on many quality of life reports, there exists a perception (reinforced through recent events) that the quality of life in the city differs significantly for African Americans. The recent arrest of Dr. Henry Louis Gates, in his home city that demographically and reputationally resembles Austin, indicates that African-American academics may experience challenges to their quality of life and sense of well being when they leave their campus offices. This research proposal seeks to proactively collect the experiences and perceptions of Black academics at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) as it relates to their engagement and involvement in the Austin community. Using a phenomenological qualitative interview approach and focus group interviews, 30 African-American faculty will be interviewed individually and in a focus group to learn of their lived experiences navigating the Austin community beyond their campus offices. Understanding these experiences will help faculty, administrators, and institutional leaders (locally and in communities with similar demographics) to better support and enhance the effectiveness of African-American professors as they balance their academic responsibilities in addition to their connections in and contributions to life in the City of Austin.

How Warfield Center Colleagues can assist in this project:

- Let me know if you would be interested in participating in this study. One-on-one interviews will be conducted by research team members in the Spring, for a duration of 60-90 minutes and possibly a follow-up. Additionally, we plan to conduct focus group interviews on emergent topics from the individual interviews.
- I am working with Dr. Ted Gordon to purposely assemble a diverse sample of tenure-track Black faculty at UT-Austin. Of particular interest are:
 - Scholars with children (age unimportant)
 - Scholars who are single or unpartnered
 - Scholars who came to Austin with a partner outside of academia
 - Scholars who identify as members of the LGBTQ community
 - Scholars who relocated to Austin from communities with vibrant Black communities (Atlanta, Washington, DC, etc.)
 - Scholars who relocated to Austin from predominantly White and/or ethnically nondiverse communities
 - Scholars from outside the U.S.
- Please share any resources or contacts that you believe might be helpful with this project.

I will keep the Warfield Center family apprised of progress on this research!

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[T]he African American community informed City leaders that they were experiencing a different standard of living than other Austinites. After listening to concerns, the City Demographer conducted a study that confirmed African Americans trailed other ethnic groups in many socioeconomic areas.

- *African American Quality of Life Report: Addressing Community Needs Together*, April 2008

Indeed, [City Demographer Ryan] Robinson concluded that while Southern cities – notably Atlanta and Dallas – hold a strong lead in attracting black families that have "out-migrated" from the largest Northern and Western cities, Austin has not been able to attract those young black professionals. In that respect, he said, Austin simply isn't "on the map." The problem, he concludes, is that Austin does not have (nor, apparently, has it nurtured) the "critical mass of cultural infrastructure" necessary to attract the migrating black population. Robinson told the council that in conducting a small, informal survey of black Austinites, 65% said young black professionals bypassed Austin because it has "no social scene." Additionally, 27% said Austin lacked a "critical mass" of blacks, while 8% said the city's reputation kept young professionals away from the city. In short, Robinson said, Austin lacks a "vibrant, sort of happening, scene."

- *Austin Chronicle*, “Quality of Life for Blacks in Austin: Going Beyond Midtown,” April 2005

Introduction and Statement of Problem

According to the US Census Bureau, the city of Austin, Texas ranks 133rd out of 238 cities with populations of 100,000 or greater regarding the percentage of its African American or Black population (10.0%), placing near cities such as Los Angeles (11.2%), Denver (11.1%), and Las Vegas (10.4%) (US Census Bureau, 2000). Austin has a number of impressive accolades regarding the quality of life in the city, including top 10 placements on several “Best Places” lists of cities to live and work (Austin Convention Center Department, 2009). However, the opinion that such accolades are not inclusive of the African American community exists.

Several noteworthy incidents have occurred in the Austin area that may contribute to this perception. Like many cities in the American South, Austin has a long history of discriminatory and racist actions directed towards Blacks and other communities of color (Duren & Iscoe, 1979). However, racial profiling continues to be a concern – for example, a recent study found that African American motorists are 1.8 times more likely to be stopped and 2.3 times more likely to be searched than white motorists – although white Austinites were twice as likely to be found with contraband following a consent search (Steward, 2008). While it might be argued that these incidents affect a certain segment of the Austin Black community, such incidents serve as a “canary in the coalmine” for other segments of the community as well – specifically, Black upwardly mobile professionals, who may think that similar events could befall them.

Indeed the truth of this statement was borne out on a national stage in Cambridge, Massachusetts in July of this year. African American professor and director of the Harvard W.E.B. Du Bois Institute Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was arrested outside of his own home by a police officer investigating an erroneous report of a break-in (it was in fact, Dr. Gates and his driver attempting to open his jammed front door) (Jan, 2009). The shocking nature of this arrest prompted prominent Black scholar Dr. Michael Eric Dyson to remark that “Gates’ crime appears to be a new one in the litany of crimes that black folk commit by virtue of their very existence -- in this case, HWB, or housing while black” (Dyson, 2009).

The Gates arrest is particularly chilling for Black academics, who concurrently wrestle with a number of challenges in the academic realm (Allen, Epps, Guillory, Suh, & Bonous-Hammarth, 2000; Reddick, 2007; Turner & Myers, 2000). Gates’ experience reified concerns that race casts a long shadow in other aspects of their lives. As Yale’s Dr. Stephen Carter opined, “If it can happen to [Gates]... then it can indeed happen to any of us” (Stripling, 2009).

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This research seeks to *proactively* collect the experiences and perceptions of Black academics at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) as it relates to their engagement and involvement in the Austin community. While the University has taken commendable strides in addressing longstanding concerns of Black academic professionals, such as the development of the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement (Vincent, 2007) and the strengthening of the John L. Warfield Center for African and African-American Studies (John L. Warfield Center for African and African American Studies, 2009), an emergent question asks how these academics make meaning of living, researching, teaching, and serving in a community that appears to offer drastically different quality of life measures contingent upon race.

Simply put, an investigation of how Black faculty make meaning of their interaction and involvement in the Austin community will provide valuable insight not only to members of the UT Austin community, but the multiple commissions investigating the differential perspectives of the quality of life in the city for African Americans compared to other racial groups. It is important, however, to note that the value of this research is not limited to those invested and interested in African American quality of life issues in Austin. The Gates arrest just months ago speaks to the challenges that many communities face in confronting longstanding racial tensions.

Research Questions

1. How do African-American faculty at The University of Texas at Austin make meaning of their engagement in the Austin community (socially, in teaching, research, and service)?
2. What strengths do African-American faculty at The University of Texas at Austin perceive as they socialize, teach, research, and serve in the Austin community?
3. What challenges do African-American faculty at The University of Texas at Austin perceive as they socialize, teach, research, and serve in the Austin community?

Theoretical Framework

Pierce’s (1995) theory of racial microaggressions is particularly suited for an examination of African American faculty issues related to their impressions of a community with potentially disparate experiences between racial groups. In the modern era, overt acts of racial prejudice are rare – especially in progressive communities like Austin. However, individuals and communities are still subject to encounter less obvious and covert acts of prejudice and discrimination, termed microaggressions (Pierce, 1995; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue et al., 2007; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003). These incidents are everyday interactions with colleagues, public servants, members of the community, and even public policy “characterized by routine encounters with another’s prejudice (negative affect and beliefs based upon racial group membership) and discriminatory behavior (differential treatment based upon racial group membership) that pervade people’s daily social interactions” (Swim et al., 2003, p. 40). I choose to apply the term “microstresses” in lieu of Pierce’s original term, as it speaks to a definition by legal scholar Catherine Wells, who states that microstresses “produce fear, stress, and emotional harm. When made in public, a microaggression may also embarrass the victim, undermine her credibility, or expose her vulnerability” (Wells, 2007, p. 10).

Microstresses are mitigated by a positive racial climate – for instance, inclusion of perceptions and concerns of communities of color in policy; reflection of historical and contemporary experiences of people of color; policy efforts to attract and engage people of color; and a civic mission reinforcing an institutional commitment to diversity (Hurtado, Milem,

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Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). However, if any such aspects of the community climate are unsatisfactory, microstresses can have a compounding effect on the individual’s quality of life.

Methodology

This study proposes to pursue a phenomenological qualitative approach and focus groups to learn how African American faculty at UT Austin make meaning of their engagement in the Austin community. Professors will be interviewed one-on-one by research assistants, with the potential for a follow-up interview if time and interest permits. The purpose of the interview will be to learn how professors came to UT Austin, what factors they considered before taking a position in and moving to Austin, and how they make meaning of their connection to the Austin community via their teaching, research, service obligations, and social interactions. After each interview, the interviewer will compose reflective field notes to capture immediate impressions of the interview experience, as well as discussing key themes and concepts from the interview (Maxwell, 1996). Memos will be written throughout data collection and analysis as a recursive tool to clarify thoughts, themes, and approaches to organizing the voluminous data.

In addition to the one-on-one interviews, faculty will be invited to participate in one of three focus group interviews conducted by members of the research team to discuss social and political perspectives on the African-American experience of living and working in Austin. The interactive nature of a focus group will generative robust discussion and shared concerns among the participant group. The researchers will also utilize document analysis when participants make mention of events and/or organizations salient in their lives in Austin.

Analytic Strategy

The primary investigator has recruited four graduate students in the College of Education, Beth Bukoski, Jessica Jimenez, Stella Smith, and Patrick Valdez, all of whom have some experience conducting qualitative research. With additional training and experience, I believe the research team will be able to collect, analyze, and write up the data for publication in one year.

The research team will collect demographic and background information on the participants via questionnaire. This data will be aggregated and analyzed to create a profile of the sample. Participant narratives will comprise the majority of data utilized in this paper, as well as themes from the focus group interview. The interview protocol for the study will be created through a review of the literature on African-American faculty and their community involvement. Interview data will be organized in a systematic coding process. Initially, an etic coding procedure will be employed, with themes identified from the research literature on the topic of microstresses (with an understanding that this theoretical lens is merely an interpretive lens). With this list of etic (derived from theory) codes, the researcher will approach the data integrating emic (derived from data) codes, and thusly revised the code list. The codes will then be used to organize the data utilizing the Atlas.ti software package. Codes will be used to construct the findings section based on frequency, and similarities and differences among axes of difference (age, rank, gender, family status, etc.).

Validity concerns will be addressed through audiotaped recording and professional transcription services, utilizing member checks with participants, and sharing coding and memos with an interpretive community (Kvale, 1996; Maxwell, 1992, 1996; Seidman, 1998). The resulting analysis will be submitted as a report to the Vice President for Diversity and Community Engagement and edited for consideration in a scholarly journal, such as the *Harvard Educational Review*.

References omitted for brevity.