

Informal Segregation in University Dining Halls

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to observe the racial dynamics of campus dining halls. We test Bonilla-Silva's tri-racial stratification system within the bounds of campus dining halls. We observed multiple mealtimes at four dining halls over a period of three months. We discovered that dining halls are informally racially segregated, with whites being the most segregated. Dinner seemed to be the least segregated meal of the day at the university in which the research was conducted.

Introduction

The Supreme Court case *Brown vs. Board of Education* (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954) marked a turning point for racism and bias in the United States. "Separate but equal" was determined to be inherently unequal. In the years since the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, institutions of higher education started to strive for more racial diversity on campus. The purpose of this study is to determine if the money which goes into diversifying college campuses is actually succeeding at diversifying students' friend groups. In short, do college students interact outside of their race?

To answer this question, we took to the dining halls at a university to discover the workings of race on a college campus. This form of data collection is applicable to study racial integration because eating is an intimate act. Humans eat with friends, family, and people they are trying to get closer to. We observed racial interactions at meals in four campus dining halls over a three-month period.

The findings of this research showed that there is still a lack of cross-racial interaction at the university in question. Only 31 percent of the 628 tables observed were interracial. This is a very small percentage for a University that prides itself on being racially diverse. The racial group that has greater segregation rates in the dining halls is the white group. Out of all of the times observed, dinner seemed to be the least segregated meal of the day at the university.

Literature Review

Similar research on this topic has been done previously. Tatum (2003) asked why do black kids sit together in school cafeterias? Her research focused on kids in middle school. She noticed that children were tending to group together. As children age and enter adolescence, they start to ask the question "who am I?" and, as Tatum points out, black children start to ask "who am I ethnically and/or racially?" It is at this point that children start to pay attention to the color of their friends. White students start isolating themselves from their black friends because they feel that in order to be successful in high school, they have to stay away from black classmates. Tatum observes that if the education system can better help with this important transition in children's life, then we might not see such a devastating amount of "natural" segregation.

Schrieff et al (2005) did an observation in two dining halls at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. This study was intended to test the contact hypothesis.

They had four observers, each of whom covered a wing in the dining hall. They decided to only observe during dinner hours because that was the time that all students had access to the dining halls. Their research included 50 observations of two dining halls for 100 total observations. The results showed that the dining halls were segregated, with half containing more white people by a high percentage and the other half containing more blacks.

According to Chang (2007), the issue of self-segregation and racial balkanization has wrongly focused on students of color. He showed how students of color generally show higher levels of cross-racial interaction at institutions with greater levels of racial diversity than white students. Chang (2007:33) believes this is partially due to “artificial process, institutional naiveté, racial stratification, and policy barriers.” He argues that a university history favoring white males is a haunting reality that students of color continue to notice. When universities do not recognize minority cultural norms such as those that are common among African-American students, it intensifies the racialization of student groups.

Bishop et al. (2012) conducted a study on racial segregation in dining halls of the University of Alabama. They classified people by sex and race (white, black, or other) at each table. They concluded that levels of racial integration were still low, with only 16.0 percent of African-Americans sitting at integrated tables, and 9.3 percent of Caucasians sitting at integrated tables. Overall, only 11 percent of the total population sat at tables that were integrated across racial lines. So one can see that the University of Alabama’s effort “to promote diversity on campus” has not substantially increased cross racial interactions on campus. Even though universities may have a diverse student body, which is the case for the University of Alabama, they are not seeing students of different races intermingling with each other.

These articles focused on interactions made in educational dining halls, and showed how African-Americans are largely left out of the cross-racial crowd. However, there were differences in the studies. For example, Tatum (2003) focused her research primarily on the social implications of being around African-American children and white children in public middle schools, while the other researchers focused on how race plays a part in college dining halls. Regardless of their differences, they all had limitations, such as restricted times of data collection, an emphasis on public schools, and analysis of race as mainly black and white.

Theory

Our research moves beyond the bi-racial system to consider Bonilla-Silva’s (2004) ideas about how racial segregation still exists in a new way. Bonilla-Silva says people may treat others differently based off their ethnicity as well as their race. He proposes that the United States’ traditional bi-racial system is undergoing a dramatic change. People are no longer being categorized as black or white but as what degree of whiteness they possess. The whiter people will tend to avoid the blacker people under Bonilla-Silva’s theory. He states that the United States will ultimately have a loosely bound tri-racial system like Caribbean and Latin American countries. He calls the three racial categories white, honorary white, and collective black. Bonilla-Silva based his tri-racial theory on the socio-economic status between whites, an honorary whites category (light-skinned Latinos, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, Asian Indians, Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, most Middle Eastern Americans, and most multiracials), and a collective black category (blacks, dark-skinned Latinos, Vietnamese Americans, Hmong Americans, Reservation-bound Native Americans, New West Indian and African immigrants, Cambodians and Laotian Americans). He shows that contact between whites and honorary whites is higher than between whites and members of the collective black category.

If Bonilla-Silva’s theory is correct, more black people will be observed eating together with other black people but rarely will they be seen eating with white people. This same divide can be applied in the other direction, as more white people will be seen eating together with other white people, but without the presence of black people at their table. The bridge between these two categories will be the honorary whites. For the most part honorary whites will be observed eating with people in their same category or with whites. On occasion the honorary white members may interact with the black category, as it is more socially acceptable for them to interact with blacks than for whites to do so under Bonilla-Silva’s theory.

Methodology

At the university, all students who live on campus are required to purchase a meal plan. There are four dining halls on campus. We went to all four dining halls on a regular basis over a three-month period of time. Our times of observation include breakfast, lunch, dinner, and a snack period.

Since primarily first-year and second-year students live on campus (living on campus is required during the first year), the demographics which matter most to this research are the incoming classes of Fall 2014 and Fall 2015. Of these students at the university, the African-American population was 6.55 percent, American Indian/Alaskan Native was 0.35 percent, Asian was 7.55 percent, Hispanic was 15.15 percent, Pacific Islander was 0.1 percent, White was 65.15 percent, Multiracial was 4.8 percent and Unknown/Unspecified was 0.35 percent.

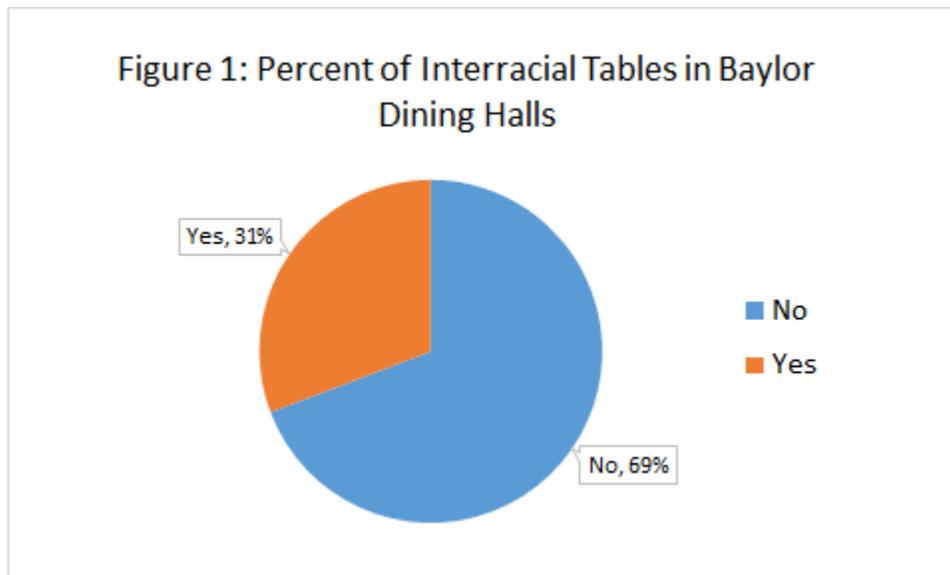
In contrast to previous research, we collected data at multiple meals over a longer period of time. This will provide more detailed data regarding the different ways people of certain races choose to sit in university dining halls. From January to April 2016, we observed the four dining halls on campus. In order to be discrete, we sat at different tables around the dining hall and recorded a headcount of people and races at each table with more than one person. We placed each person into a racial category (Asian, Black, or White) based on skin colors, facial features, and vocal triggers when we could hear them speak.

Findings

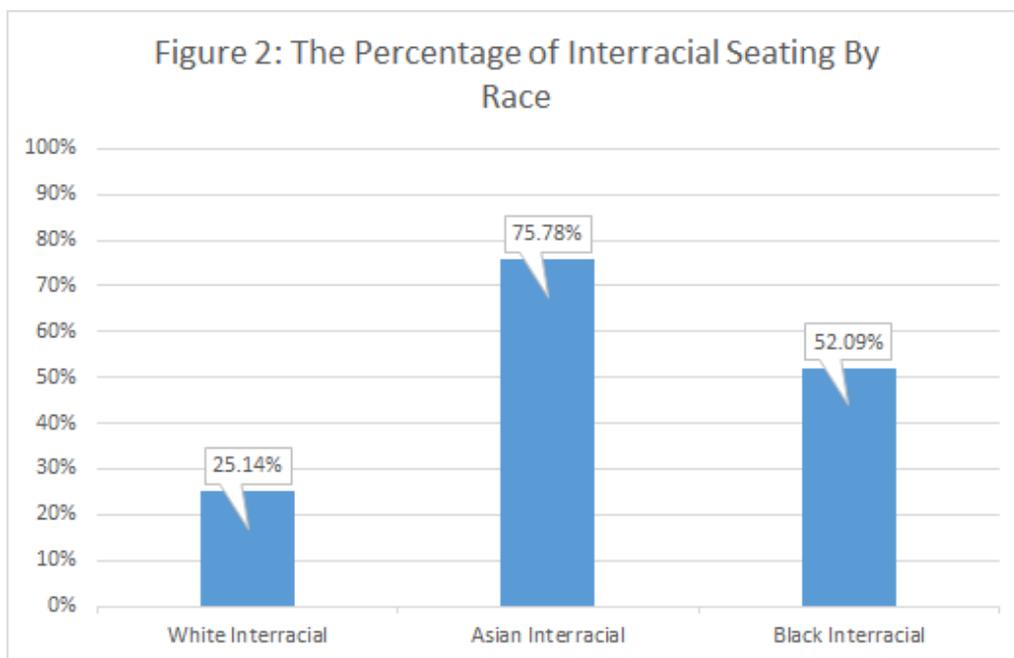
If race relations at universities across the country are becoming better, less segregation would be visible within college dining halls. Our data suggest that this is not the case, as there tends to be extreme informal segregation occurring within dining halls through seating choices. Data collected contain 628 total observations, as shown in Table 1. Each observation is a grouping of people at a table.

Table 1: Observations by Dining Hall

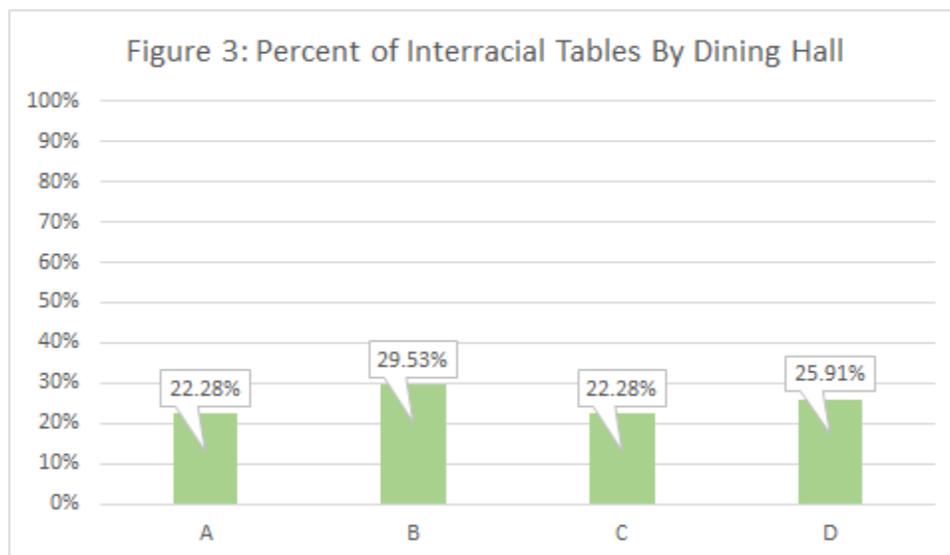
Dining Hall A	164 Observations
Dining Hall B	192 Observations
Dining Hall C	134 Observations
Dining Hall D	137 Observations



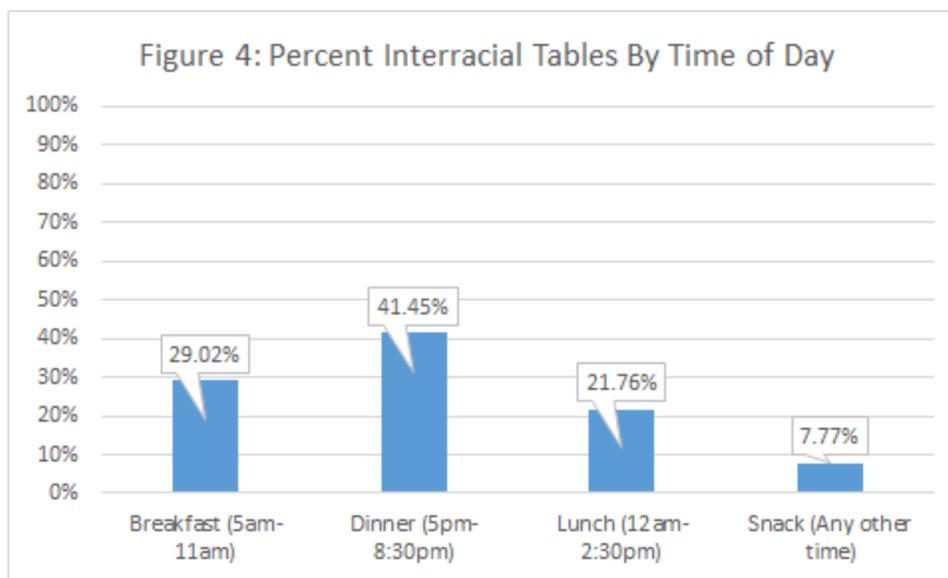
Overall, there were far fewer interracial tables than there were uniraical tables, which we predicted. Figure 1 shows the dramatic recorded difference between the number of interracial tables and non-diverse seating arrangements. An interracial table in this study is defined as any table which had more than one ethnic group seated at it. Over the duration of data collection, 69 percent of tables recorded were not interracial while 31 percent of tables were. A total of 1775 people were recorded. The people observed were comprised of 1269 whites, 223 Asians, and 263 African-Americans. We also observed 17 people from a race other than Asian, Black, or White, but we dropped these people from our analysis.



The interracial tables were composed of more whites than any other race because the university has more whites in general, however, only 25 percent of all white people recorded were seated at an interracial table. Asians were more likely to be at an interracial table than any other race. This could be due to the small number of Asians present at the university, which makes it unlikely that a large percentage of Asians would solely eat together. The same thing could be said about the African-Americans for there are a greater number of whites present at the university than any other race, therefore making it more likely that the minority races would be present at the interracial tables more frequently. Furthermore, by having a large percent of Asians at interracial tables, the data is supporting the tri-racial system since Asians are considered “honorary whites” who essentially become a middle group between the white and collective black categories according to Silva’s theory.



As shown in Figure 3, Dining Hall B had slightly more diversity at its tables than did the other dining halls. The other dining halls had relatively the same amount of interracial tables. Dining Hall B is surrounded by the Honors Hall Dorm, which may explain the increased diversity because the honors program has a large diversity of majors to offer, which will in turn create a more diverse program. If this proves to be true, then potentially the certain majors could be more racially diverse compared to other majors. For example, Dining Hall A is positioned between the pre-med dorm and the engineering dorm and it had less racially diverse tables than Dining Hall B did.



Interestingly enough, out of all the eating times in a day, dinnertime had the most racially diverse tables. This could be attributed to people meeting up for dinner, while for breakfast, lunch, and snack-times they tend to go alone and find people to eat with when they arrive at the dining hall. This suggests that multi-racial interaction happens most when it is planned beforehand rather than occurring spontaneously. People of different races may be friends, and may interact on and off campus. However, in order for people of different races to meet and become close enough to share a meal, the initial conditions and environment in which they meet is very important, and a university dining hall may not be that particular environment.

Conclusion

Throughout the time of data collection, it was clear that self-segregation was happening. Whether the students had any recollection of this actually occurring, it was definitely happening in large amounts. Observing self-segregation falls right in line with the proposed hypothesis. Whites and Blacks both tended to sit with others of their race, while Asians as honorary whites were more apt to eat with other races. As Bonilla-Silva stated people tend to self-segregate due to feeling more comfortable with the same skin color. The way people are brought up has a lot to do with this skin color mindset. Even if the parents are not intentionally portraying race favoritism, it is something that gets passed down to their children subconsciously.

The tri-racial system that Bonilla-Silva proposed has been supported by this study. There was a significant difference between Asians (our honorary white category) and other races in terms of who sat at interracial tables. Bonilla-Silva (2004:933) stated that “race conflict will be buffered by the intermediate group,” which this study affirms. Asians played the “middleman” for whites and blacks.

Like most studies, our research had some limitations. We treated the Hispanics at the university as racially white. Thus we did not count how many Hispanics sat with whites, blacks, or Asians. Future research should distinguish Hispanics as a separate category. Also, our study only observes one university over a limited time span. A future study could observe multiple universities across the country during a longer time span. By doing this, researchers will be capable of making stronger conclusions about cross racial interactions on campuses of higher education. Our research also lacked data from other places a student at the university could eat (i.e. snack shops and restaurants on campus). Being able to observe these missed dining locations would help ensure a greater accuracy of cross racial relations at a university, and may even find out that racial diversity is higher in atmospheres where the food is branded.

It is evident that self-segregation is occurring naturally, since the university does not have any rules stating that you have to eat with the same racial group. Just as Bonilla-Silva stated, people will tend to seek and surround themselves with people of the same race. Although the university has racial diversity (more than 30 percent of students are racial or ethnic minorities), interracial contact in informal settings remains low. The thing that explains this absence of cross racial interactions in dining halls is segregation of friend groups. Even with the university's goal of being racially diverse, it is difficult to encourage students to interact with different races on campuses. If the university and universities across the United States want to improve how racially diverse their school looks on paper, they are doing a good job; but if they want to actually integrate their student body, more work needs to be done.

Acknowledgements: A special thanks to Dr. Dougherty for helping us through every step of the research process. We could not have done it without you.

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