

The prompt:

Two key agents of socialization are the community and educational system. In class we have read and discussed pieces that examine the relationships between place, institutions and race/racism. For this assignment you will be asked to once again draw upon your own experiences to think through these issues. With this in mind I want you to focus on the community you grew up in and the schools that you attended to think about the how the issues we have discussed and read are connected to wherever it is that you call "home." What this essay will require you to do is as Clifford Geertz wrote, "make the familiar exotic." You will need to look at your community and educational institutions with fresh or new eyes and write about how the issues of race and ethnicity exist in both spaces.

Some questions to consider: What community are you writing about? Where is it located? Is it urban, rural, large or small? Who lives there? Is your community diverse or homogeneous? How and when have issues of minority / majority groups come up? How is the community structured, particularly in terms of ethnic enclaves or neighborhoods? How are boundaries established and/ or enforced? What is the historical development of this community? How are issues of race and ethnicity connected to the history of your community?

Describe the educational system in your community .What were the racial/ethnic dynamics with your school(s)? Depending on the size of your community, how did this impact the educational system (i.e. number of schools, districting/ zoning issues)? How did the educational institutions serve as a reflection of the larger community, particularly in terms of race/ ethnicity?

How has your social location, in terms of your own race/ ethnicity as well as class and gender, impacted your relationship to and understanding of your community and your experience(s) within the educational system?

Papers will need to draw upon at least two sources from course readings.

Sit Where You Please

Gabor Por

SOC128 – Interethnic Relations

7/10/2005

Based on my limited personal educational experience I can only write about the race/ethnicity issue on the college level in the US. However I can also compare it some extent to Hungary's, where I also attended schools. There the relative (white homogeneity of the country and the different historical background (i.e. no slavery, no colored people) people of color were treated as curiosum. In contrast in my junior college in Santa Cruz, California I could perceive real differences between Whites and Hispanics. What I experienced there supported Twomey's thesis that non-whites accept the concept of racial hierarchy at least subconsciously and through their inadvertent actions propagate it. I was also participant in an experiment that worked toward the post-racist society Johnson et al set out.

I was brought up in Budapest, Hungary where there were no people of color in the sense and numbers as they are in the United States. The only sizable group we can speak of these approximately 3-5% gypsy population. There are other ethnic groups in Hungary, such as Croatians, Rumanians, Germans and Slovaks, but each of these represent less than one percent of the population. I was trying to find specific numbers but the closest I got was the official census' numbers¹ based on language spoke at home. Independently from the numbers I cannot recall anybody from my elementary school whom I could identify as different ethnically or racially from myself. If there were gypsies, Croatians, ... in my environment I was not aware of them.

In high school I had one gypsy class mate but she dropped out in our freshman year. I do not have many or clear memories of her and do not know her socio-economic background. However looking back now I realize that I always assumed that she was from a poor family. I went to a high school class specialized in Mathematics. We studied 10 hours of Math a week as opposed to the usual 2. We were taught that we are an elite class. Only two persons dropped out in our four years of study, so we assumed that they could not keep up with the high pressure our school put on us. One of them was the aforementioned gypsy girl. I remember that she was mocked by some of my school mates for being different. At the time I did not associate it with

¹ Hungary's population by mother tongue, nationality and sex, 1930, 1960–2001
http://www.nepszamlalas.hu/eng/volumes/06/00/tabeng/1/load01_9_0.html

her ethnicity. At this point I do not know whether this was the main reason she felt "different" or she really was not as smart and fast as the other kids.

There was one biracial girl in my high school. One of her parent was from Africa and the other from Hungary, so her skin color was "café au lait". She was an attractive girl by most boys' standards, including mine. I never actually talked to her, just noticed her as an exotic young woman. Again, I do not know anything about her background, only how she looked (good.) I am aware that research on racial stereotypes in the US showed that African Americans are often associated with (and portrayed in the media) with physical characteristics and animalistic, instinct driven nature as opposed to whites who are thought in terms of their intellectual capacities. I would not attribute my relative interest in this young woman to this factor. I was just a typical teenager interested in girls of all kinds. I did not necessarily see in her, just an attractive body more than in girls of the same skin color as me.

I also attended a college in Hungary (and got a BA in Economics/Hotel Management.) There was one black/African student in the school. He was from the upper class, from a wealthy aristocrat family. His appearance and mannerism was princely, indeed his nickname was "Prince." There were (quite a few) women who were attracted to him. He, similarly to the girl from high school, was viewed and treated as an 'exotic' specimen. I believe that being one of a kind, non-native, visually pleasing made these two people physically desirable in the eyes of Hungarians. However as far as I can tell not too many people (including myself) moved beyond that or had built close personal friendships with them as they did with white, ethnic Hungarians.

I have never been to a US grade or high school. All I know about them is through movies and friends' stories. Therefore I do not feel qualified to express any opinion in this regard. However I did attend junior college in Santa Cruz (Cabrillo College). The table below contains the student's body's ethnic makeup in percentage, based on the school's official statistics². I also

² Cabrillo College Enrollment by Ethnicity
http://www.cabrillo.edu/services/pro/factbook/enrl_by_ethnic2004.PDF

listed the area's populations proportions, based on the Census numbers³. Finally for comparison reasons the respective numbers for the other college in university, UC Santa Cruz⁴, are also here.

	Santa Cruz population	Cabrillo College	UCSC
White	72	69.5	51.7
Asian Americans + Pacific Islander	4.8	4.9	18
Hispanics	17.4	20.3	14.3
African Americans	1.6	1.4	2.5
Native American	n/a	1.3	0.9

Compared to the general ethnic makeup of Santa Cruz county whites, African Americans and Asian Americans were underrepresented at Cabrillo College, while Hispanics over. These numbers should be taken with a hint of salt, because Cabrillo College is on the Southern part of the city, close to the mostly agricultural Watsonville, that has a much higher Hispanic population. I suspect that students from there attended in higher numbers and that may skewed the numbers.

It was interesting to note that UC Santa Cruz's statistics listed Whites as Euro-Americans and Native Americans as American Indians. This is the first I heard the term "Euro-Americans" and it made perfect sense. In this usage the label for whites became similar to the other labels, by being made up of two words. It helps to debase them as the group everybody compares itself to by default, by showing that they are also just newcomers, but instead of coming from Africa or Asia they happened to come from Europe. The numbers are less representative of the local population because attendance in a university typically pooled from a much larger area. Students come from all over the US and the world, unlike at a community college.

Furthermore to attend a community college is much cheaper than going to a university. I believe this cost difference can account for the fact that Hispanics attended higher number the college than the university. A significant proportion of the local Hispanic community is from the

³ Santa Cruz Ethnic makeup <http://www.ersys.com/usa/06/0669112/ethnic.htm>

⁴ Ethnic Composition of UCSC's Student Body <http://www.ucsc.edu/about/statistics.asp>

agricultural town of Watsonville (famous for its strawberry fields), where the average family income is below of the proportionately white Santa Cruz.

One major way racial separation showed up in my school experience there was in the seating in the classrooms. The majority of the back rows were filled with Hispanic students and the majority of the front rows with Whites. There were some exceptions for each tendency, but these trends were nevertheless very visible. It was not enforced by anybody, but students "naturally" allocated themselves in this pattern. As a pattern it cannot be explained by individual's preference only. It cannot be true, that so many Hispanic "just preferred" to sit at the back. This reflects the "racial hierarchy"⁵ according to which non-whites compare themselves to whites' norms and therefore "fit themselves in the hierarchy."

I was an outsider in this college (being an immigrant, older-reentry student and somewhat recluse) and therefore didn't fully understand the dynamics behind this. I assumed that the seating happened because of the self-positioning of the students, because I never saw any over signs of racism or conflict between whites and Hispanics. I didn't think that there was pressure on Hispanics to sit in the back. However my perception must have been limited because I was not engaged deeply enough in the community. I learned contrary evidence from the graffiti in the men's bathrooms. There were numerous writings complaining about white racism and the disadvantages of being Hispanic. It is not direct evidence of what was going on but definitely a measurement of how Hispanic men felt on campus. I was always surprised at the vehemence (and language) of these remarks. It reflected how they felt: unwelcomed to use an understatement. That is way they felt safer in the back rows. At the same time majority of white student may not even realized what was going on.

I would have preferred to discuss the racial makeup of the academic workforce of these schools as well, but did not find sufficient data. That in itself may reflect an even deeper disparity. I took 26 courses in two years and had only white professors. Not a single one of them

⁵ Twomey, Jane L. 2000. "Newspaper coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising: Race, Place, and the Story of the 'Riot'; Racial Ideology in African American and Korean American Newspapers." *Race, Gender & Class*, 8:140-150

was of a different race. This is anecdotal "evidence", therefore cannot be scientifically considered, but it is still an indication of white privilege.

There was one exception to the unwritten seating rule. A Sociology professor (with whom I took two courses) required each student to sit at every occasion in a different seat. We had to chart where we sat throughout the semester and the final included a few questions, observations about the effect of this strategy. This professor practiced and encouraged us to break the "patterns of racial segregation"⁶. It was one of the most exciting courses for this reason alone. Hopefully this was a small step in the process of reaching a post-racist society that Johnson's article mentioned.

Just considering a single aspect of the educational system I could conclude that differences still exist. We are definitely not a color-blind society. When a future student will walk in a classroom and will sit based on her/his preference of the subject, the professor and mood of the day and not on unscripted rules, and when men's bathroom walls will not be covered with racial epithets we will be closer to the post-racist society. Until then we, whites have to "step out of our comfort zone", have to re-educate ourselves and create social structures that are truly representative of our society's makeup. I agree with every suggestion of Johnson's call for action.

⁶ Johnson, Jacqueline, Sharon Rush & Joe Faegin. 2000. "Doing Anti-Racism: Toward an Egalitarian American Society." *Contemporary Sociology* 29:100