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# **"THE CONTACT HYPOTHESIS: WHITE STUDENTS AND BLACK PROFESSORS"**

**Donnetrice C. Barbee**

Doctoral Scholars Fellow

Howard University

**"This analysis examines Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis as it relates to white students' perceptions of black professors teaching at predominantly white colleges and universities."**

This analysis examines Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis as it relates to white students' perceptions of black professors teaching at predominantly white colleges and universities. The primary research question asks: Does exposure to black professors improve white students' attitudes towards blacks in society at large? To answer this question, the author will examine previous research on the contact hypothesis. Additionally, the author will examine research on student perceptions of black professors teaching at predominantly white colleges and university, then correlate findings. The presumption is that students with high prejudice ratings are less likely to change their attitudes towards blacks due to exposure to a black professor than students with low prejudice ratings.

According to Allport (1954), "[prejudice] is actively resistant to all evidence that would unseat it." Nonetheless, Allport (1954) contends that interracial contact may lessen prejudice: (1) when those in contact are of equal status; (2) when those in contact perceive themselves to be in pursuit of common goals; (3) when the contact is sanctioned by institutional support, i.e., by the larger community or by law; and (4) when the contact is positive in nature. Not all of these conditions apply, however, to white student-black professor contact.

In the classroom setting, black professors are not of equal status to students, but of higher status, which may threaten a prejudiced student's presumption of superiority. Further, the black professor and the white student may not be in pursuit of common goals, wherein a student's goal is to learn; a professor's goal is often to be perceived as credible. Yet, according to Hendrix (1997), students at predominantly white institutions apply more stringent standards when assessing the credibility of black professors than they do when assessing the credibility of white professors. Regarding the latter conditions, the mere fact that the black professor has been hired by the white institution suggests institutional support of interracial contact. Lastly, contact will likely be positive in nature if students feel that they gained something from the course.

Many additional dynamics will need to be examined to fully discuss the contact hypothesis and black professor-white student interaction. For instance, this paper will conduct a brief historical analysis of race relations in the United States and the origin of black-white interracial conflict. This paper will also examine the psychology of prejudice beyond the notion of black-white intergroup conflict to look at general intergroup conflict on a nonracial basis (i.e., class based, gender based, geographically based). This approach

will allow the author to move beyond black-white race relations to examine other students' perceptions of black professors and the possible origin of those perceptions. Hence, questions will arise regarding the functionality of prejudice. Why do some hold on to prejudice even in the face of opposing facts? Further, has the integration of blacks into popular culture influenced students' perceptions of black professors?

The fact is that over the past decade, interracial contact, particularly between black and white youth, has steadily increased. Today, these youth interact far more than did their parents and grandparents. They attend school together; they live in the same neighborhoods; they listen to the same types of music; and they share many of the same societal influences. Nonetheless, the number of black professors teaching at predominantly white institutions remains less than five percent nationally. Hence, though blacks have gained popularity and credibility in sports and entertainment, they are still questioned regarding their academic capabilities. Society perpetuates the notion that blacks are biologically inferior to whites' intellectual level by publishing reports such as the bell curve and consistently offering information on black students' poor performance on standardized tests. All of this, then, would suggest that contact does little to alter long-held attitudes and stereotypes against the black community. In short, students' exposure to black professors teaching at predominantly white institutions is unlikely to diminish their stereotypical views of blacks in general.

**Presenter:**

**Donnetrice C. Barbee** received her undergraduate degree from the University of New Haven in West Haven, Connecticut. There she majored in English, with a writing concentration and a minor in communication. Ms. Barbee then went on to complete the Master's Degree at Howard University in the Department of Human Communications Studies. Ms. Barbee specialized in Mass Communication and wrote a thesis entitled, *Themes of Love Portrayed in R&B Ballads: 1970s, 1980s, 1990s*. Upon completing the program in May 1995, Ms. Barbee taught at James Madison University in the Speech Communication Department. The courses taught include; Basic Human Communication (hybrid), Interpersonal Communication, Intercultural Communication, and Public Speaking. It was in this setting—a predominantly white university enrolling between 14,000 and 15,000 students each year, only five percent of whom were African American—that Ms. Barbee developed an interest in white student perceptions of black professors and the effect of contact. Therefore, in August 1999, Ms. Barbee accepted the Doctoral Scholars Fellowship Award and began coursework toward a Ph.D. in Intercultural Communication.