

October 2001

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Scott Freng M.A.

*Doctoral Student, Social Psychology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

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Freng, Scott M.A., "Experiences of Prejudice and Isolation at a Predominantly White, Great Plains University" (2001). *Sixth Annual National Conference, POCPWI*. 42.

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# Experiences of Prejudice and Isolation at a Predominantly White, Great Plains University

## Abstract

*This session discusses results from a qualitative study examining the experiences and isolation of Students of Color and GLBT students at a Great Plains University. Over 61 percent of respondents had experienced prejudice. In addition, students saw "minority" status as both an isolating factor and a source of solidarity.*

## **Scott Freng, M.A.**

Doctoral Student, Social Psychology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Research examining prejudice and discrimination on university campuses often investigates how these experiences influence attrition and persistence (e.g. Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rice, 1989; Suen, 1983). Attrition is influenced by various stressors including "adjustment stress, academic demands, relational problems and financial worries," but only minority students face the additional stress of prejudice (McCormack, 1998, p.379). Experiencing prejudice and discrimination creates disincentives for minorities to interact with non-minority faculty, staff and students (Cabrera et al., 1999). Investigations of the experience of prejudice and discrimination on college campuses has traditionally focused on African Americans' experience at predominately white institutions (e.g. Buttny, 1999; Feagin, 1992; Fisher & Hartmann, 1995). Within this research, Jones (1991) offers numerous examples of prejudice and discrimination against African Americans on university campuses and found that four types of racist acts exist on campuses. These types include: slurs and verbal taunts, written or pictorial insults (cartoons, posters, flyers), organized protests and demonstrations and violent activity (Jones, 1991). In addition, research examining the experiences of prejudice on university campuses is often quantitative in nature. The purpose of this research was to examine the unique experiences of prejudice and isolation from the viewpoint of several "minority" groups, while utilizing qualitative data gathered from respondents answers to several structured open-ended questions.

Transcripts from 47 participants were analyzed qualitatively using phenomenology. Phenomenology is concerned with the wholeness or complexity of experience, while trying to capture an experiences' essence (Moustakas, 1994). Analysis of transcripts revealed several themes. These general themes included that students saw faculty and other students as the primary sources of prejudice on campus, that prejudice usually took the form of slurs/verbal taunts and written/pictorial insults and that "minority" status was both a source of isolation and solidarity.

Students saw the main sources of prejudice and racism as faculty and other students. In addition, prejudice was perpetuated by not only white or "straight" students, but also by other minority students. Of the incidents of prejudice reported by participants, only two aspects of Jones' (1991) typology were evident. These were slurs/verbal taunts and written/pictorial insults. Approximately 61 percent of the participants reported being the

target of prejudice while at this university. Many participants did not label certain incidents as prejudicial, but rather as due to ignorance and the reliance on stereotypes. In addition to experiencing prejudice, ignorance and stereotypes, many minority students also faced feelings of isolation on a predominantly white university campus. Isolation stemmed from being surrounded by students different from themselves and the lack of diversity on campus. A sense of isolation was most often reported in classrooms. However, outside the classroom, some students felt they gained solidarity from campus organizations and groups. Other students saw isolation versus solidarity as a personal choice.

### **Conclusion**

Results indicated that students saw faculty and other students as the primary sources of prejudice and discrimination at this predominantly white, Great Plains University. These experiences were prominently written insults and verbal taunts/ slurs. In addition, students saw minority status as both an isolating factor and a source of solidarity. These results pointed out the possible difficulty Students of Color and GLBT students face at a predominantly white university. Experiencing prejudice, stereotypes, or ignorance was a common occurrence and served as an added stress to university life. In addition, many students felt isolated and without proper support due to a lack of diversity.

### **Presenter**

**Scott Freng** is currently a doctoral student in social psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He received his M.A. in clinical psychology from the University of South Dakota in 1998. His current research interests include examining the processes of prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination and specifically how these issues impact Native American populations.