University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Sociology Department, Faculty Publications | Sociology, Department of

3-1-1962

# Negro College Students' Participation in Sit-Ins

Ruth Searles
*University of North Carolina*

J. Allen Williams Jr.
*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*, jwilliams2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub

Part of the Sociology Commons

Searles, Ruth and Williams, J. Allen Jr., "Negro College Students' Participation in Sit-Ins" (1962). *Sociology Department, Faculty Publications.* Paper 122.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub/122

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Department, Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Published in SOCIAL FORCES 40:3 (March 1962), pp. 215-220.



# NEGRO COLLEGE STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN SIT-INS*

RUTH SEARLES AND J. ALLEN WILLIAMS, JR.

*University of North Carolina*

ABSTRACT

Socioeconomic and legal changes in the position of southern Negroes have been accompanied by a changing pattern of race relations and a new attitude on the part of Negro leaders. Data from a closed-answer questionnaire administered to students in three Negro colleges in North Carolina support the hypothesis that sit-in protests are less indicative of social alienation among Negroes than of their identification with or positive reference to the white middle class.

IN THE PAST six years dramatic changes have occurred in the pattern of Negro-white relations in the South. Outside the sphere of government, perhaps the three most significant demonstrations of the change have been the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955–56, the Tallahassee bus boycott of 1958, and the student sit-ins which began in February 1960, when four freshmen from A. & T. College walked in F. W. Woolworth's Greensboro department store and sat down at the lunch counter.

Although many white southerners have attempted to ascribe these anti-segregation protests to the work of outside agitators and local malcontents, most thoughtful analysts have emphasized (1) a shift in the prevailing attitude in the Negro community from one of complacency and accommodation to one of deep involvement in efforts to alter their second-class citizenship, and (2) a shift in Negro leadership from those oriented toward accommodation to those oriented toward reform and substantial gains for the Negro community. Writing about Negro protest leaders in Tallahassee, Killian and Smith observe:

> ... the "new" leaders are becoming permanent leaders not because of the attractiveness of their personalities or their skill at organizing, but rather because they adhere rigorously to the *form* of militant leadership which is becoming the trend for Negroes throughout the United States.[1]

Similar observations have been made by others.[2]

Some of the literature on mass movements concerns political activity in the lower middle and lower class and suggests that the protest demonstrations and the militancy may be expressions of profound alienation and disaffection—that the adherents are people hostile both toward the out-group (whites) and toward themselves. The psychological function of the movement would be

* A paper read at the twenty-fourth annual meeting of the Southern Sociological Society, Miami Beach, Florida, April 1961.

[1] Lewis M. Killian and Charles U. Smith, "Negro Protest Leaders in a Southern Community," *Social Forces*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (March 1960), p. 257.

[2] Louis E. Lomax, "The Negro Revolt Against 'The Negro Leaders,'" *Harper's*, June, 1960, p. 41, ff; James Baldwin, "A Negro Assays the Negro Mood," *The New York Times* Magazine, March 12, 1961, p. 25 ff.

to provide a "legitimate" outlet for aggression and promote the loss of self and acquisition of a new self through total devotion to a cause.[3]

Whether or not that interpretation is appropriate, the question arises, "Why now?" Martin Luther King, Jr., in his account of the Montgomery bus boycott, begins his explanation with, "There comes a time when people get *tired* . . ." [italics ours], but continues, "Negroes in other communities confronted conditions equally as bad, and often worse. So we cannot explain the Montgomery story merely in terms of the abuses that Negroes suffered there."[4]

Writing of revolutionary movements, Brinton observes:

> . . . the revolutionary movements seem to originate in the discontents of not unprosperous people who feel restraint, cramp, annoyance, rather than downright crushing oppression . . . [They] are not worms turning, not children of despair. These revolutions are born of hope, and their philosophies are formally optimistic.[5]

Hoffer makes a similar point when he notes:

> Discontent by itself does not invariably create a desire for change . . . Those who are awed by their surroundings do not think of change, no matter how miserable their condition.[6]

While both Brinton and Hoffer are concerned more with revolutionary than with reform movements, they point to the phenomenon we observe in the shift of attitude and leadership in the Negro community: pressure for change occurs among people who are rising.

It is our thesis that the sit-ins and other forms of Negro protest led by middle and upper class Negroes are best interpreted by reference group theory and the concept of relative deprivation. The shift from accommodation to militancy among Negroes is seen as a consequence of a shift from evaluating their social position primarily in terms of their membership group to evaluating it in terms of a nonmembership group. For Negro college students and for Negro business and professional people, the nonmembership reference group is considered to be persons of similar position and training in the white community.

Merton and Rossi hypothesize that some similarity in status attributes between the individual and the reference group must be present before the latter can serve as a comparison.[7]

### GROWTH OF THE NEGRO MIDDLE CLASS

In spite of the fact that there remain substantial differences in level of attainment between Negroes and whites on most socioeconomic scales, the last two decades have brought important advances. The *percentage* increase in income since 1939 has been about the same for whites and nonwhites.[8] In the period 1950 to 1958, the proportion of nonwhite workers in the following skilled and white collar jobs increased as follows:

- Craftsmen (20 percent increase)
- Sales workers (24 percent increase)
- Clerical and kindred workers (69 percent increase)
- Professional and technical workers (49 percent increase)[9]

Concerning advances in educational attainment:

> Among the young nonwhite population, the average level of educational attainment has risen faster than among the young white population. For example, between 1950 and 1957 the median years of school completed by the nonwhite population aged 25 to 29 increased by 1.2 years, while among the general population of the same ages it increased by 0.2 years.[10]

Improvements in the socioeconomic position of Negroes are concomitant with the proliferation of specialties in the occupational-industrial sphere. As there is increasing demand for persons with specialized skill and advanced training to fill

[3] Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1951); Harold D. Lasswell, "The Psychology of Hitlerism as a Response of the Lower Middle Classes to Continuing Insecurity," *The Political Quarterly*, IV, 1933, 373–384; Robert K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Rev. ed. (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1957); Edward A. Shils, "Authoritarianism: 'Right' and 'Left,'" in Richard Christie and Marie Jahoda, eds., *Studies in the Scope and Method of the Authoritarian Personality* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1954).

[4] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1958), p. 53.

[5] Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1952), p. 278.

[6] Eric Hoffer, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

[7] Robert K. Merton (with Alice S. Rossi), "Reference Group Theory," *Social Theory and Structure*, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

[8] Donald J. Bogue, *The Population of the United States* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959), p. 657.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 504.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 343.

occupational niches, the importance of ascribed status diminishes and that of achieved status increases.

The rising standard of living; the growing number of skilled, white collar, and professional workers; and the increasing number securing high school and college educations are indicative of growth in the Negro middle class.

Middle class persons are socialized to desire middle class goals: occupational achievement, economic security, respectability, prestige—success. The middle class (especially the college-educated) Negro is a prime example of a person with poorly crystallized status[11]—status having mutually inconsistent attributes. As a middle class, college-educated person, he has the competence and motivation to seek not only material rewards of success but also the assurance of a respected position in the community. As a Negro, he finds racial barriers placed so that much of the achievement he desires (and has come to demand of himself) is barely out of reach. If he were white, this middle class person who strives but fails to reach his goals might easily blame himself. The Negro middle class person who sees disparity between his goals and his attainments can reasonably attribute it to institutional arrangements rather than personal inadequacies.

The significance of the "education" component of middle class status should be emphasized, for education not only provides training and develops skill; it also inculcates values, commitments, and modes of behavior. As a group, those with high school education or above are likely to be more concerned with public affairs, better informed, more active in community organizations, more concerned with interpersonal relations, more reasoning and problem-solving in the resolution of conflict, more tolerant of nonconformity, more protective of civil rights, more optimistic, more aspiring than the less well-educated.[12] In brief, education tends to be a vehicle for democratic values.

In considering the factors which might lead to Negro middle class persons taking the white middle class as a reference group, we should look at the similarity of status attributes but also for factors making such a comparison "legitimate." We have mentioned the values advanced by education. Another is the value "equality of opportunity" as implemented recently by the 1954 Supreme Court decision and by civil rights legislation. Merton points out:

> If the structure of a rigid system of stratification . . . is generally defined as legitimate . . . the individuals within each stratum will be less likely to take the situation of the other strata as a context for appraisal of their own lot . . . If, however, the system of stratification is under wide dispute, then members of some strata are more likely to contrast their own situations with that of others, and shape their self-appraisals accordingly.[13]

### THE NEGRO COLLEGE STUDENT

The Negro college student, similar to the white college student, is likely to have come from a middle class family. If he has, the factors discussed above have already influenced him toward considering whites of like status as a reference group. To the extent that parents project their own goals and striving onto their children (especially children going to college), one might expect added momentum in the drive to overcome status disparities.

Given the similarity of socioeconomic background and of values and goals between Negro and white students; given the legitimacy of implementing equal opportunity; given the current emphasis on higher education and on utilizing talent, there is ample reason for Negro college students to feel deprived.

A sense of relative deprivation may provide a strong predisposition for protests against segregation and discrimination. The unique position of the college student adds a final triggering component: relative freedom from constraints. Most college students are free from restraints imposed by parents. They do not yet have families of their own. If they have jobs, they usually are not the ones they intend to keep after college. The student

[11] "Crystallization" as the term is used in Gerhard Lenski, "Status Crystallization: A Non-vertical Dimension of Social Status," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 19 (August 1954), pp. 405–413.

[12] Morris Axelrod, "Urban Structure and Social Participation," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 20 (October 1955); Gerald Gurin, Sheila Feld, Joseph Veroff, *Americans View Their Mental Health* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1960), p. 210; Samuel A. Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1955); Daniel R. Miller and Guy E. Swanson, *Inner Conflict and Defense* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1960).

[13] Merton, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

body at a college is easily assembled. There are many organizations already established which can serve as the nuclei or agents of new organizations. Communication channels are many and diffuse. There is, finally, the college temper: active, optimistic, energetic, gregarious. That these are frequent facilitators for revolutionary and reform movements is suggested by the centrality of students in major change movements throughout the world.

### THE DATA

The data to be reported here were gathered in May 1960, from 827 students at three Negro colleges in Greensboro and Raleigh.[14] Closed-answer questionnaires were administered in classes meeting at 9 a.m. and were collected by their instructors. Our concern is with the following questions: (1) Are these students from middle class backgrounds? (2) What is their general image of their peers and of Negro middle class adults? (3) What is their image of whites? (4) What do they consider the primary motivation for the protest? What methods do they think appropriate for it? (5) How ready are they to move from the southern Negro community? (6) How optimistic are they? (7) In what ways are the active participants in the protest movement different from other students?

As might be expected, data on socioeconomic background show this to be an upper middle class group. The Raleigh and Greensboro-High Point metropolitan areas in which the three colleges are located have a high proportion of Negroes in middle class occupations, relative to the South, generally. In 1950, 27 percent of the adult Negro male population in these two centers were classified by the U. S. Census as craftsmen, managers, proprietors, or professional workers. Forty-two percent of the students have fathers in these occupational groups. One-fourth have fathers who are business or professional men. Median family income in Greensboro-High Point was $1,360 and in Raleigh, $1,164. The median family income for the students is in the $3500 to $5000 bracket. Both parents of the average student have had some years of high school education.

Students were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement with the position on segregation and discrimination taken by designated Negro and white leaders and groups. The greatest perceived consensus is with their peers—students in their own college—and with adults in the Negro community who are most likely to be college-educated: ministers and college professors. Sixty percent indicate strong agreement with the perceived views of the majority of students in their college. Strong agreement with most Negro ministers is indicated by 52 percent; with most Negro college professors, 42 percent; with most Negro public school teachers, 31 percent; and with most Negro businessmen, 26 percent.

Asked to indicate the extent of their agreement with the position on segregation and discrimination taken by white college students, 74 percent showed agreement or strong agreement with the perceived views of northern white students, 28 percent with the perceived views of southern white students. As if to avoid criticizing white students in the South, 37 percent checked, "I am neutral, or I don't know what their views are."

Students were asked to select what they felt was the primary reason for white opposition to the protest movement. Over half checked, "They are afraid of any change in the present situation," while almost one-fifth checked, "They really believe segregation is morally right." Less than one in ten selected, "They hate Negroes." Six and a half percent said, "They are protecting economic interests." These answers may be excessively rosy and fail to reflect a genuine undercurrent of hostility, yet they seem to indicate at least a surface willingness to give whites the benefit of the doubt. Particularly with regard to college students in the North, there is a generally accepting and optimistic view of whites.

Sources of motivation for participation in the protests were ranked. Over one-half ranked "resentment against everyday injustices" first. One in five ranked "democratic ideals" first. Only 7 percent gave first rank to "desire for Negro unity." Concerning actions to be included in the protests, the overwhelming majority endorsed sit-ins, picketing, and negotiation. Fewer than one percent of the answers indicated an acceptance of the use of violence.

Assessing the support given by Negroes to the protest, 67 percent indicated that they thought more than one-half of the Negroes in the city gave at least moral support to the movement.

What about the future? Although 91 percent

[14] Additional discussion of these data will be found in Paul C. Wehr, "The Sitdown Strikes: A Study of the Passive Resistance Movement in North Carolina" (Unpublished Master's thesis, Graduate School, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1960).

of the respondents have spent most of their lives in the South, only 36 percent said that they planned to live in the South after graduation. About 6 out of 10 said that they were optimistic to a great or very great extent about the possibilities of achieving higher social status, yet more than one-half the respondents indicated some pessimism about the possibilities of using their education and training to advantage. Asked to choose between two hypothetical jobs which might be offered them on graduating from college, 44 percent selected "a job with very good pay in a Negro business," 56 percent selected "a job with a growing industry outside the Negro community with not much pay but excellent opportunity for advancement according to your performance."

Having summarized the data relevant to our thesis that protests were precipitated by Negro students' reference to the white middle class as a standard of comparison, we now ask, "What proportion of these students participated in the protest?" The data leave little question about their enthusiasm: over 90 percent of the respondents indicated that they had participated in some way.

### THE MOST ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS

When the data were divided into three groups according to the *degree* of respondents' participation, we found fewer than chance number of statistically significant differences among the three. It appears, concerning the demographic and attitudinal variables we measured, that the high participators are representative of the group as a whole. If we are willing to speculate about nonsignificant differences which form patterns, however, there are several worth our attention.

In the "high participators" category (24 percent of the total) were placed those who said that they had participated in the sit-down demonstrations and had also walked in a picket line, distributed leaflets, acted on a committee of the movement, or helped in other ways such as making posters or telephoning. The "low participators" were those who did not participate at all (only five percent—the definition of "participate" is apparently liberal) or who only attended mass meetings and/or co-operated with the boycott: a total of 44 percent. The intermediate group comprised 31 percent of the total.

Comparing the "highs" with the "lows," we find that those who participated most actively in the protests are from generally higher social status backgrounds than the low participants.

Active participants were more optimistic about the support given the protests by Negroes. They were also more optimistic about the support given by whites. They were more likely to indicate agreement with "white students in the North" concerning what Negroes should do about segregation and discrimination.

They were less likely to attribute opposition to hatred of Negroes by the whites. They were also less likely than low participators to hold "white people in general" primarily responsible for the protests' failure to gain equal service for Negroes.

One of the few statistically significant differences between active participators and those less active suggests the importance of previously established organizations for facilitating the organization and spread of such a movement. Those who were most active in the protest were more likely than those less active to participate in three or more extracurricular activities.

Summarizing, we could say that the most active participants were like the other Negro college students—only more so.

### CONCLUSIONS

It is probable that other forms of Negro protest can appropriately be seen as expressions of alienation and disaffection. It may be that the students in our study are not representative of those from other schools who have innervated other protests. But the affirmative, optimistic, tolerant aspect shown by the students generally, and by the active participants especially, demands explanation.

Socialized to value respectability and achievement, educated to affirm their right of equal opportunity, legitimized in their expectations by civil rights legislation and an important body of opinion, living in a college environment where freedom from constraints and ease of communication facilitate the development and spread of protest activity, these students have selected nonviolent protest as an acceptable means of demonstrating their anger at barriers to first-class citizenship. Far from being alienated, the students appear to be committed to the society and its middle class leaders. If our "reference group" hypothesis is generally correct, we need to find out where the groups' boundaries are drawn—who is included in and who excluded from both the membership and the nonmembership

groups. We need to discover how these boundary lines shift as the protests have varying degrees of success or failure. We should like to locate the point at which faith in negotiation and nonviolent protest dissolves into cynicism and either indifference or attack.

Studies of the current Negro protests in the South offer an unusual opportunity to students of social change. Seldom are the actors and the issues in social change more identifiable or the sources and consequences of change more indicative of the society's values.