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# **"A LOOK AT HOW MINORITY GRADUATE STUDENTS MIGHT BE PERCEIVED IN GRADUATE SCHOOL BY THEIR FELLOW CAUCASIAN COLLEAGUES"**

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Ph.D. Student in Psychology

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**"Although scholars have published numerous articles on affirmative action, research on prospective graduate students' beliefs and attitudes towards affirmative action remains limited."**

As part of a larger study, case reports from two self-identified, Caucasian female undergraduate psychology students applying to graduate programs (Master's and Doctoral) in psychology and psychology-related fields will be used as the basis for discussion. The current investigation focused primarily on their perceptions about the policy and practice of affirmative action in graduate school admissions, and their attitudes toward minority graduate students. Although scholars have published numerous articles on affirmative action, research on prospective graduate students' beliefs and attitudes towards affirmative action remains limited. Furthermore, most scholarly work on affirmative action issues has focused primarily on older adults, the employment sector, and economic advancement issues. Perhaps most importantly, many studies on college students' attitudes toward affirmative action have been descriptive and ungrounded in theory. In an attempt to address these issues, the current investigation utilized social psychological theories (illusory correlation, realistic group conflict, and group serving bias) to examine students' perceptions about affirmative action in graduate school admissions and their attitudes toward minority graduate students. The following research questions were examined:

- 1) How do prospective Caucasian graduate students perceive affirmative action policies in higher education?
- 2) How might prospective Caucasian graduate students perceive minority students in graduate school?

Data analyses revealed disturbing trends in the perceptions of prospective Caucasian graduate students towards affirmative action policies and minority students. Based on illusory correlation theory, individuals develop a false impression that two variables correlate with one another. Consistent with this theory, results showed that respondents attributed a variety of false meanings to affirmative action policies in graduate school admissions. False attributions about affirmative action included negative connotations such as "preferences" and "percentages" for minority students. Realistic group conflict theory, the notion that prejudice arises when two groups compete against one another for limited resources also emerged. Data analysis revealed that respondents believed that affirmative action policies adversely impacted their graduate admissions into some departments. Specifically, these participants noted that although they were female, being Caucasian probably had a negative impact on their overall graduate admissions chances. Finally, group-serving bias theory posits that individuals are more likely to attribute

outgroup members' negative behaviors to their dispositions in explaining their behaviors. Consistent with this suggestion, doubts about minority graduate students' intellectual abilities and admissions qualifications emerged. When respondents were asked to report what thoughts might come to mind if they were to observe minority students experiencing academic difficulties in graduate school, respondents were inclined to attribute minority students' academic difficulties to inferior intellectual qualifications and affirmative action policies.

Several programmatic implications in higher education were drawn from the current case studies. First, the issue surrounding prospective graduate students' false associations about affirmative action policies in graduate admissions sheds light on the importance of developing programs designed to properly educate students, college faculty and administrators, and student personnel about affirmative action. Second, this data makes it evident that minority students might be vulnerable to negative perceptions about their admissions qualifications and intellectual abilities. Thus it is imperative that faculty members actively promote and maintain positive race relations among the graduate students in their respective academic departments. Third, multicultural and diversity training programs for undergraduates and graduate students can potentially promote positive race relations between majority and minority students. However, one cannot solely rely on this type of strategy to facilitate this process. It is faulty to assume that such programs can remedy "hardwired" prejudicial perceptions and stereotypes about minority groups. Thus as a supplement to multicultural and diversity training programs, minority graduate students must develop social and academic support groups in their academic departments.

Finally, faculty and college officials can address affirmative action issues in higher education in a variety of different ways: (1) design graduate program curriculums that include courses that inform and educate students about minority populations and race-related issues in higher education, (2) invite minority speakers or expert scholars to speak to students, college administrators, and faculty members about affirmative action issues in higher education, and (3) organize symposia on multicultural and race-related issues in higher education. Additionally, university-based programs aimed at providing social and academic support for minority graduate students should be incorporated in academic departments.

### **Presenter:**

**Byron L. Zamboanga** is a Ph.D. student in developmental psychology (minor in psychometrics) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). He received his bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of California-Berkeley, and a master's degree in clinical psychology from UNL. His scholarly interests include acculturation, risky-behaviors, and drinking expectancies and alcohol use among Latino youths. He also has strong research interests with ethnic minority issues in higher education. He is currently a member of an interdisciplinary scholarship/outreach (Latino Research Initiative-LRI) initiative that seeks to address the critical needs and issues of Latinos in Lincoln. As a member of the LRI, Mr. Zamboanga has been actively involved in the development and

implementation of the Latino Achievement Mentoring Program (LAMP), a community-university based program designed to help reduce school dropout rates among Latino youths in Lincoln.