

# Race-Related Stress and Sociocultural Orientation Among Latino Students During Their Transition Into a Predominately White, Highly Selective Institution

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**Abstract:** This longitudinal study examines minority status stress and sociocultural orientation among Latino freshmen as they enter a predominately White, elite, private institution. The study finds Latino freshmen report experiencing racism. Students respond to racism by developing an alienated sociocultural orientation and beginning to see their Latino peers as a source of support.

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**Resumen:** Este estudio longitudinal examina estrés debido al estatus minoritario y la orientación sociocultural entre estudiantes Latinos de primer año al entrar a una institución privada, privilegiada, predominantemente Blanca. El estudio encuentra que estudiantes Latinos de primer año experimentan racismo. Los estudiantes responden al racismo desarrollando una orientación sociocultural alienada y empezando a ver a sus compañeros Latinos como fuente de apoyo.

**Keywords:** Latino; college; students; racism; stress

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**Latinos remain underrepresented** in highly selective universities (Altbach & Lomotey, 1991; National Center For Educational Statistics, 1997; National Council of La Raza, 1999; Quintana, Vogel, & Ybarra, 1991). Highly selective and private institutions have distinct racial climates that are shaped by the school's historical legacy (Hurtado, 1992). In these institutions, norms have been shaped by a homogeneous White, male, middle-class population (Choi-Pearson & Gloria, 1995; Fiske, 1988; Menges & Exum, 1983). This historical legacy also influences administrator, faculty, and student views of minority students' participation at these institutions (Hurtado, 1994).

Latino students attending highly selective colleges report racial and ethnic tension on campus (Hurtado, Faye-Carter, & Spuler, 1996). Race and ethnicity are risk factors because of difficulties with academic and social in-

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tegration (Gloria & Robinson-Kurpius, 1996; Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990; Murgia, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991). Experiences with racism, alienation, and isolation contribute to difficulties with social integration, thus affecting decisions to leave the academy (Benette & Okinaka, 1989; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Mayo, Murgia, & Padilla, 1995).

The transition to college is a critical period for all students and is marked by complex challenges in emotional, social, and academic adjustment (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The most profound effect of the college environment occurs during the first few months of the transition from home to school (Garg, 1992; Tinto, 1975, 1988, 1993). During this time, students may doubt their academic abilities (Rendon, 1994). Most students, regardless of ethnicity, exhibit evidence of raised psychological symptoms and absentmindedness during the transition months (Brooks & DuBois, 1995; Fisher & Hood, 1987; Loeb & Magee, 1992).

Latino freshmen experience an additional source of stress during the transition to college because of their status as minority students in predominately White institutions (Attinasi, 1989; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). The more selective the institution, the more likely Latino students will experience a hostile campus racial climate during their transition (Hurtado & Faye-Carter, 1997). Latino students report higher degrees of feeling uncomfortable compared to their White counterparts (Gloria & Pope-Davis, 1997; Gloria & Robinson-Kurpius, 1996). Latino students may also experience an incongruity between the family ecology and the school environment because of cultural difference, which may hinder a smooth transition from high school to college (Harrison et al., 1990; Hurtado, 1994; Kenny & Perez, 1996).

The purpose of this study is to understand the race-related psychosocial stress that Latino students experience and the ways in which they cope with stress during the freshman year at a predominately White, highly selective, private university. The questions this study sought to answer include the sources of minority status stress, the ways in which students cope with minority status stress, and the possible changes in stress and coping that students experience during the freshman year.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were identified via the university registrar's office. All Latino freshmen from the entering class of 2000 were identified from the student body list using their self-identified ethnicity.

### **Data Collection and Response Rate**

The study was a 1-year longitudinal study, and administration of the first wave of the survey occurred during the first 2 weeks of the fall quarter.

The second wave of survey administration was conducted during the first 2 weeks of the spring quarter. The survey items administered at Time 1 were also administered at Time 2.

The Latino students in this study came from diverse high school contexts: 57% came from schools where the majority of students were White, 18% came from racially mixed schools, and 25% came from same-race schools. Social class differences were also evident as 5% were poor, 26% were working class, 28% were middle class, 13% were upper middle class and, 26% were upper class.

Time 1 total response rate was 42% ( $n = 73$ ). Females comprised 56% of the sample ( $n = 41$ ). Time 2 total response rate was 55% ( $n = 95$ ). Females comprised 60% of the sample ( $n = 57$ ). In all, 54 students participated in both Time 1 and Time 2 survey administrations. These participants were matched for the change analyses.

### Site

The research site was a highly selective, private university on the West Coast. The undergraduate student body consists of approximately 6,000 students. The racial makeup of the student body is 61% White, 26% Asian or Asian American, 9% Latino, 8% African American, 2% Native American, and 5% other.

### Measures

*Minority Status Stress.* This measure is a 37-item Likert-type scale survey designed to assess stress particular to minority students (Prillerman, 1988). A factor analysis indicated that a four-factor solution accounted for 69.8% of the variance and produced the most interpretable factors with high alpha reliabilities (see Table 1). The four factors are intergroup stress, racism stress, intragroup stress, and achievement stress.

*Sociocultural Orientation Scale.* This measure is a 39-item scale that assesses four modes of adjustment to a predominately White institution: assimilated, affirmed, alienated, and individualism or race avoidance (Prillerman, 1988). Factor analysis indicated that a four-factor solution accounted for 68.9% of the variance with high alpha reliabilities (see Table 2).

### Results

#### Time 1

The means of the sample at Time 1 are presented in Table 3. Each variable within a construct is presented in descending order according to the mean. Minority status achievement stress was most frequently reported, followed by intragroup stress, intergroup stress, and racism stress. During the

**Table 1**  
Minority Student Stressors Scales and Items

<i>Scales and Items</i>	<i>Factor Loading</i>
Scale 1: Intergroup stress (10 items; $\alpha = .93$ )	
There are not enough professors of my race	.785
Living in a predominately White campus	.780
Having to live around mostly White people	.764
Few students of my race in my classes	.760
Seeing members of my race in low status jobs	.719
Racist policies	.690
Lack of concern for students of my race	.686
Having to always be aware of what White people might do	.635
Relationships between different ethnic groups on campus	.619
Few courses involving issues relevant to my ethnic group	.604
Scale 2: Achievement stress (6 items; $\alpha = .85$ )	
Doubting my ability to succeed in college	.856
Feeling less intelligent or less capable than others	.818
My academic background being in adequate	.807
My family having very high expectations for my college success	.610
Being the first in my family to attend college	.607
Feeling as though others do not respect my intelligence	.564
Scale 3: Racism stress (4 items; $\alpha = .91$ )	
Being discriminated against	.826
Being treated rudely because of my race	.787
Others having expectations of poor performance	.751
White people expecting me to be a certain way because of my race (i.e., stereotyping)	.568
Scale 4: Intragroup stress (3 items; $\alpha = .73$ )	
Pressures from people of my same race (i.e., how to act, what to believe)	.748
People close to me thinking I'm acting White	.701
Pressures to show loyalty to my race	.629

NOTE: Factors solution accounts for 69.8% of the variance.

first quarter, affirmatively oriented was most frequently reported, followed by individual or avoidance orientation, assimilated orientation, and alienated orientation.

## Time 2

The means of the variables at Time 2 are presented in Table 4. Each variable within a construct is presented in descending order according to the mean. Toward the end of the freshman year, students most frequently reported minority status achievement stress, followed by racism stress, intergroup stress, and intragroup stress. Toward the end of the year, affirmative orientation was most frequently reported, followed by individual or avoidance orientation, alienated orientation, and assimilated orientation.

**Table 2**  
Environmental Orientation Scale and Items

<i>Scales and Items</i>	<i>Factor Loading</i>
Scale 1: Assimilation (3 items; $\alpha = .99$ )	
I am embarrassed of others of my same ethnicity	.996
I am attracted more to Whites	.996
I participate in predominately White activities	.994
Scale 2: Alienation (4 items; $\alpha = .78$ )	
I don't trust White people	.837
I feel angry with White people about their treatment of Latinos	.827
I feel that [the university] represents values that differ from my own	.792
It bothers me to see an interracial couple	.635
Scale 3: Affirmation (3 items; $\alpha = .74$ )	
I enjoy being around other Latinos	.830
I am proud to be Latino	.825
It is important for Latinos to know the history of their people to really know themselves	.772
Scale 4: Individualism or race avoidance (3 items; $\alpha = .11$ )	
I would rather avoid conflict than confront it	.733
I don't feel comfortable discussing race	.649
It is important for me to fit in	.539

NOTE: Factors solution accounts for 68.9% of the variance.

**Table 3**  
Time 1—Means and Standard Deviations

<i>Minority Status Stress</i>	<i>Stress</i>		<i>Coping</i>		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Sociocultural Orientation</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Achievement	3.32	1.11	Affirmative	4.02	0.675
Intragroup	2.68	1.05	Avoidance	3.42	0.528
Intergroup	2.45	1.11	Assimilated	2.55	0.685
Racism	2.23	1.11	Alienated	1.94	0.724

NOTE:  $n = 73$ .

## Change Analyses

To ascertain how the entire sample of students changed in the stress and coping domains during the first year, repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted on each construct. The analyses were conducted using only the students with both Time 1 and Time 2 data. The sample size for these analyses varied from 44 to 47 by conceptual set of variables as many students during Time 2 did not complete the entire survey.

**Table 4**  
Time 2—Means and Standard Deviations

	<i>Stress</i>		<i>Coping</i>			
	<i>Minority Status Stress</i>	M	SD	<i>Sociocultural Orientation</i>	M	SD
Achievement		2.98	1.16	Affirmative	3.26	1.18
Racism		2.76	1.59	Avoidance	2.78	0.796
Intergroup		2.42	1.23	Alienated	2.42	0.655
Intragroup		2.34	1.04	Assimilated	2.29	0.600

NOTE:  $n = 95$ .

**Table 5**  
Minority Status Stress—Repeated Measures ANOVA

	<i>Intragroup</i>		<i>Achievement</i>		<i>Intergroup</i>		<i>Racism</i>	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Time 1	2.68	1.05	3.32	1.11	2.45	1.11	2.23	1.11
Time 2	2.34	1.04	2.98	3.32	2.42	1.23	2.76	1.59
	$p = .047$		$p = .114$		$p = .891$		$p = .05$	
Within-subjects effects								
$F(7, 301) = 6.32; p = .000$								
Multivariate								
$F(7, 37) = 8.969; p = .000$								

NOTE:  $n = 44$ .

### Minority Status Stress

Repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted for the entire sample so as to ascertain change over time in minority status stress. The results for minority status stress were significant ( $n = 44$ ), multivariate  $F(7, 37) = 8.969$ ,  $p = .000$  (see Table 5). The within-subjects effects were also significant,  $F(7, 301) = 6.32$ ,  $p = .000$ , which indicates a significant reduction in intragroup stress ( $p = .047$ ), whereas racism stress increased ( $p = .05$ ).

### Sociocultural Orientation

Repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted for the entire sample. The results for sociocultural orientation were significant ( $n = 47$ ), multivariate  $F(7, 40) = 54.118$ ,  $p = .000$  (see Table 6). The within-subjects effects were also significant, univariate  $F(7, 322) = 42.12$ ,  $p = .000$ , indicating that students changed significantly between Time 1 at the beginning of the academic year and Time 2 at the end of the academic year. Students rated themselves significantly lower on three of the four sociocultural orientation scales at the beginning of the year than at the end of the year: assimilative ( $p = .000$ ), affirmative ( $p = .050$ ), and avoidance ( $p = .000$ ). Students re-

**Table 6**  
Sociocultural Orientation—Repeated Measures ANOVA

	<i>Affirmative</i>		<i>Avoidance</i>		<i>Assimilative</i>		<i>Alienated</i>	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Time 1	4.02	0.675	3.42	0.528	2.55	0.685	1.94	0.724
Time 2	3.26	1.18	2.78	0.796	2.29	0.600	2.42	0.655
	$p = .05$		$p = .000$		$p = .000$		$p = .000$	
Within-subjects effects								
$F(7, 322) = 42.121; p = .000$								
Multivariate								
$F(7, 40) = 54.118; p = .000$								

NOTE:  $n = 47$ .

ported significantly higher levels of alienated orientation ( $p = .000$ ) at the end of the year.

## Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the minority status stress that Latino students experience during their freshman year at a predominately White, highly selective university and the ways in which they coped with the stress. As students entered the institution, the least reported form of stress was stress due to racism. Latino students were most affected by achievement stress because of the challenging curriculum and stress induced by members of their own Latino community. Intragroup stress was operationalized with statements such as “pressures from my race on how to act or what to believe,” “people close to me thinking I am acting White,” and “pressures to show loyalty to my race.” Many Latino students in this particular school context attended high schools where they were among a predominately White student body. In fact, 57% of the sample had such a background. The lack of exposure to other Latino students prior to matriculation into this highly selective institution may explain why the intragroup stress was high at the beginning of the year.

Students reported experiencing a greater degree of racism over time. The racism construct was operationalized with the statements such as “being discriminated against,” “being treated rudely due to race,” and “others having expectations of poor performance.” At the beginning of the year, students rated this stress as the least-reported minority status stress. This finding indicates that race may be a less salient issue upon college entrance. However, by the end of the year, having had more exposure to a hostile campus racial climate, students reported experiencing more of racism than they did at the beginning of the year.

The operationalization of the racism construct includes “others’ expectations of poor performance.” In highly selective university contexts, minor-

ity students are frequently perceived as having been admitted because of affirmative action policies. Thus, professors and students may perceive them to be less qualified because of their racial group membership. This perception discredits the abilities and accomplishments of minority students. These high-achieving Latino students have been admitted to a highly selective institution, which indicates a history of academic excellence. However, in this new context, they are perceived as being admitted because of their race and face discrimination.

The decrease in intragroup stress accompanied by an increase in racism stress suggests that in a hostile campus racial climate, Latino students begin to see their Latino peers as less of a source of stress and more of a support network. To foster their own social integration, students may begin to socialize within their own racial group. In the face of a hostile campus racial climate, students meet their social needs by interacting with students who share their experiences of discrimination. This finding may illuminate the process by which racial balkanization occurs on college campuses (Duster, 1991).

Students exhibit a change in their sociocultural orientation during the school year. The entire sample reported an increase in alienated sociocultural orientation. The increase in alienation also supports Hurtado and Faye-Carters' (1997) finding that perceptions of a hostile racial climate (e.g., racial tensions, discrimination, and marginalization) are directly and negatively associated with students' sense of belonging. Therefore, experiencing racism appears to decrease Latino students' social and academic integration.

Students reported that they have become less individual or avoidant over time. This construct is operationalized with statements such as "I don't feel comfortable discussing race" and "I would rather avoid conflict than confront it." The salience of race has become apparent, perhaps because of the rise in racism stress. Students have subsequently become less avoidant of racial issues and are more willing to confront and discuss them.

A decrease in affirmative orientation has also occurred during the first year. This finding indicates that as students become immersed in a predominantly White environment, they become less ethnocentric. Over time, Latino students respond to the hostile campus racial climate by also becoming less assimilated. They are more willing to discuss racial issues, yet feel as though they do not fit in. These findings suggest that for the campus, racial climate does not foster social and academic integration for Latino students.

In conclusion, the transition into a predominately White, highly selective university can be stressful for Latino students regardless of sociocultural orientation upon entry. The common experience Latino students share is the hostile campus racial climate that fosters alienation.

Despite the hostile campus racial climate, the 5-year retention rate for the entire student body is 90.1%. Evidently, the stress that Latino students

experience during the transition into a predominately White, highly selective institution is not insurmountable. Moreover, the students themselves are highly identified with doing well academically. They labored diligently to gain entrance into this highly selective institution and are familiar with setting goals and seeing them to fruition. These high-achieving students navigate their way in this hostile context to get their social and academic needs met, which contributes to the high retention rate and eventual degree completion.

These findings are of importance to student life and development personnel. Further efforts must be made to fully integrate Latino students into predominately White, highly selective university contexts. These efforts must have the goal of increasing multicultural awareness, tolerance, and acceptance. Coursework, seminars, and workshops designed to address the issues of race and tolerance could be requisites of enrollment. Moreover, reported incidences of racism must be dealt with swiftly and fairly.

### **Limitations**

There are several comments that need to be made regarding the generalizability of the results of this study. The sample included only students who volunteered to respond to the surveys. It is possible that the students who participated differed in some systematic ways from students who chose not to respond. The original questionnaire package was quite long, thus students who chose to participate may have had some personal motivation for completing and returning the survey that may have differed from students who did not participate.

The study only included students from one highly selective, private institution. The results of this study may only be generalized to other highly selective universities. It is likely that Latino students at other highly selective, predominately White institutions share similar experiences. However, without a national sample that is representative of various geographical regions and types of universities, generalizations beyond this context should be made with caution as there may be differences by university based on geographic location, size, and ethnic diversity of the campus. Generalizing the results to all Latino students must also be made with caution as most of them who matriculate to postsecondary education are concentrated in 2-year, less funded institutions (Olivas, 1983; Quintana et al., 1991).

This research is among the first studies to examine Latino student transition at a highly selective institution. Until more studies are conducted, these results should be interpreted cautiously.

Because the study relied on self-report, the possibility exists that students may have responded in a socially desirable manner. In addition, problems arising from the small sample size are the most critical limitations of this study. The small sample size reduced the power of the analysis and in-

creased the likelihood of finding Type II errors. It is possible that the analyses failed to find significant differences where differences may have existed. A larger sample size may have yielded more robust significance. This study needs to be replicated with a larger sample to confirm the results.

Although one of the strengths of the study was its longitudinal design, it is limited in its ability to understand long-term outcomes for Latino students who attend predominately White universities. The stresses that students experience after the freshman year, how students utilize resources and develop their sociocultural orientation, and what factors are important in their long-term adjustment during the remaining college years and postcollege cannot be ascertained from this study. Although this study was longitudinal and focused on the freshman year, more long-term studies that incorporate the full 4 to 5 years that encompass undergraduate education are needed.

### Future Directions

Future research questions that emanate from the findings of this study include, "How do minority students change during the course of their college years in relation to minority status stress and race-related coping strategies?" To answer this question, a nationwide sample with a longitudinal data base would need to be accessed. A study driven by this question would chart the stresses throughout each year and would chart how students changed in their sociocultural orientation over time. Such a study would have implications for how students conclude their college experience and what stresses and orientations they might encounter in the workplace.

Furthermore, future research into how people perceive, encounter, and respond to race-related stress in contexts such as public spaces and the workplace would also further illuminate this phenomenon under a variety of contexts. Results from such a study could inform policy that guides how race is dealt with in these circumstances and could be utilized in employee training programs that address multiculturalism.

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