Political and Racial Polarization and the Intersection with Social Work

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Immediately following the 2016 presidential election, fifty-one people were given an online survey based on several political topics: race, party identification, voting choice, and opinions on the state of political and racial polarization in the United States. Given the role of the media to shape public opinion, an option was given for the survey respondents to give their opinion on controversial articles that were selected. Before conducting the survey, I believed that the respondents would agree that the United States is polarized, but agree with the message that the controversial articles were giving off. The clear majority of respondents agreed that the United States is becoming more politically and racially divided. I then used their responses for a discussion-based presentation and connected the issue of polarization to social work; social workers must validate the concerns of their clients following the election, but must also teach resiliency.

Keywords: politics, race, polarization, discrimination

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The emergence of social media has made the public more aware of social issues. As with other forms of media, social media has the power to form public opinion and increase the salience of world issues. Furedi (2014) discusses multiple protests, such as Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and the Hong Kong and Ukraine government resistances. The author elaborates on social media's role in the formation and stability of these protests. While not mentioned in Furedi's article, my presentation mentions the salience of hashtags such as #blacklivesmatter and #notmypresident in shaping public opinion on racial and political issues.

With race being a significant issue in today's political environment, it is often difficult to see where a mixed-race person falls. Mixed-race students are

underrepresented at the University of Illinois, as 2 percent of students self-identify as mixed-race ("UIUC…", 2016). Consequently, respondents' perceptions of mixed-race individuals were viewed through several conceptual lenses. The first concept was color blindness, the belief that race does not factor into how one makes sense of the world (Lux, 2016). The second concept was color consciousness, referring to the heightened awareness of racial issues and process of confronting the reality of race and racism in the United States (Lux, 2016). Until students are exposed to race education, they may operate from a color-blind view of society (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012). If it can be implied that most who took the survey were concurrently enrolled in a particular diversity course, it can be inferred that most students or survey respondents might have adopted a more color conscious view of society. It was initially hypothesized that most respondents' estimations of the percentage of UIUC students who identify as mixed-race would be considerably higher than the actual percentage. This was shown to be the case in the results.

The following questions were only asked of the presentation audience in order to connect race perception with mixed-race individuals: Why was there such a large difference in people's perceptions of the number of mixed-race individuals on the UIUC campus? Are we more color blind than color conscious if we fail to see these differences in race? Do mixed race individuals feel that they need to choose to identify as one race over the other? These questions were connected to concepts of assimilation and acculturation. According to Carter-Black and Pineros (2016), assimilation is defined as relinquishing one's original culture in favor of the norms and behaviors of the dominant culture while acculturation is defined as the blending of elements of two or more cultures

including aspects of the dominant culture. It can be argued that the failure of the respondents to acknowledge these differences amongst mixed-race individuals is in direct contrast to being a color conscious individual.

Next, in the wake of the election results, tensions were high across the country. Many people responded negatively to the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. This presentation aimed to encourage participant dialogue about the election outcome, which was a challenging task. One side argued that negative feelings were a result of increased sensitivity to world issues. Another side argued that the negative feelings were valid given the unique circumstances of President Trump's election. Given the position of the National Association of Social Worker's Code of Ethics, there is no right or wrong position to this argument for social workers.

> Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental or physical disability. – NASW Code of Ethics, 6.04 ("Code of Ethics…" 2008).
> In the final analysis, most respondents believe that the United States is politically

and racially divided. The polarization represented by the opposite ends of this political spectrum could potentially lead to more deeply entrenched racism and discrimination. As future social workers or those with an interest in social work, we need to be cognizant of and identify ways to address the polarization issue and make sure clients of all backgrounds have a safe space to express their concerns. Many people are dissatisfied and greatly concerned about the election results. Their concerns are valid, but we must also promote resiliency and emphasize the strengths perspective. Alienating individuals for their beliefs does nothing for the overall welfare of society. These are difficult issues to talk about, but they are issues that should be talked about.

Methods

Participants

A total of 51 anonymous respondents completed an online survey (except for one duplicate entry that was later removed from the spreadsheet). Participation in the survey was voluntary, and the survey was sent out through multiple means such as text message, Facebook, and GroupMe. As this was not a true random sample, the demographics of the respondents were skewed toward the demographics of the University; mostly white and seemingly with a liberal slant.

Materials

The survey was administered via Google Forms, an online survey service provided by Google. It consisted of eight mandatory quantitative questions on race, voting choice, party alignment, opinion on political polarization (with an option to elaborate on the answer), opinion on racial polarization (with an option to elaborate on the answer), how society should view race, a question on mixed-race individuals, and a question on how they feel about Donald Trump being elected as president of the United States.

The remaining two qualitative questions were optional and asked for the respondent's opinion on two controversial articles. The first selected article was from *The Washington Post*, titled "It's time to stop talking about racism with white people." Linly, the author, discusses their frustrations with how white people react to racial issues (Linly, 2016). The next selected article was from *Mic,* titled "I want a divided America." Subsequently, Cheney Rice discusses their frustrations with supporters of Donald Trump and offers insight into their actions (Cheney Rice, 2016). Both articles have controversial titles and presents controversial opinions, which is why it was deemed essential to

include these publications in the survey. There was a less than desired number of

responses to the qualitative questions (9-14 out of 51 total responses), but the responses

proved to be important to include in the presentation.

Presentation

The information gathered from the survey was used in an informal discussion-

based presentation designed to fulfill a James Scholar Program honor course requirement.

At times, perceptions do not match behavior. The primary goal of the presentation was to

see if the audience's perceptions of race differed from the survey data, to contrast their

perceptions to the current political climate, and encourage a positive non-biased

discussion on race and politics. Additionally, the audience was given questions that

survey respondents were not given to distinguish the presentation from the survey, as

discussed in the introduction section. Without questions proposed to the presentation

audience, the presentation would have just been a recapitulation of the survey data.

Results

Taking into account the mixed-race individuals and individuals that selected

"other" as a race, the sample size was 64.7 percent white, 21.6 percent Hispanic/Latino,

3.9 percent African American, and 19.6 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. The data showed

39/51 voted for Hillary Clinton, 7 voted for Donald Trump, while 5 did not vote.

Additionally, 36 identified as a Democrat, 5 identified as independents, 4 were unsure of

their political alignment, 3 identified as moderates, and 3 identified as Republicans.

Further, 46 thought that this country is experiencing political polarization, 3 said the

country might be experiencing political polarization, and 2 said that the country is not

experiencing political polarization. While 37 thought that the country is experiencing

racial polarization, 13 said that the country might be experiencing racial polarization, and 1 said that the country is not experiencing racial polarization.

The next question asked if society should be color blind or color conscious with no elaboration on what either of these two terms mean. Forty-two (42) said society should be color conscious, and 9 said that society should be color blind. In order to link to the previous question, the next question asked the respondent to give an estimate of the percentage of mixed-race students currently enrolled at UIUC. Most respondents (18) believed that the percentage was between 20-35 percent. In fact, only 2 percent of UIUC students identify as mixed race ("UIUC…", 2016). Next, 62.7 percent of respondents were dismayed about the presidential election of Donald Trump. These results only account for the responses to the quantitative questions. Responses to the qualitative questions can be found in the supplemental documents (Garcia, 2016).

Discussion

Based on survey results, it appears that respondents believe there is a high degree of political and racial polarization in this country. Respondents were more certain about the political division, but less sure about the racial division by a margin of approximately 20 percent. Perhaps if the sample had included a higher percentage of minority students, the data would have indicated more certainty of a racial division in the United States. Nonetheless, the written responses suggest a positive outlook toward the future of race and politics, as represented by the following quote stating:

> ". . . I would love to never hear [that] white people are racist again, I believe racism and injustice still needs a spotlight shone upon it in this country. I believe that white people should be talking to other white people . . . we should all be listening to the people of color around us . . .being told that white people are racist feels like a personal attack, and thus makes me want to discontinue the conversation . . . [but] it is important for . . . black and other voices of color to be

heard, and if the people of color in our society need to take a break from making their voices heard, then it should be our turn to speak on their behalf as they are willing to let us" (Garcia, 2016).

Other responses were similar to the one above. While respondents understood that there may have been political and racial divisions, it would not serve any useful purpose to exclude the voices of racially privileged groups from conversations on race. Doing so would only foster further alienation, something that social workers should not be promoting. If we can imply that most individuals who voluntarily chose to complete the survey were university students and possibly social work students, the results demonstrate a positive outlook toward acceptance of differences in ideology. While most believe that the country is politically divided, social workers can continue to promote and encourage the creation of a positive and accepting environment, and work to end pointless and ultimately detrimental divisiveness.

To view the PowerPoint presentation with supplemental data, click on the following link.

https://uofi.box.com/v/politicalracialpolarizationppt

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