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# Racial Discrimination in a Rural Midwest Town

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## **Introduction**

Prejudice and discriminatory behaviors contribute to poor outcomes for individuals in marginalized groups. This study examines how a rural community, in the Midwest, views race and discrimination, and how these views affect community members' experiences. A 10-question survey was administered to teachers, elderly individuals, law enforcement officers, and former students about their experiences with diversity within the community. The survey questions focused on the topics of race, discrimination, and racism. The results of the survey provide a means of determining the lack of cultural competence and discrimination within a rural Midwest populace.

Examining racial discrimination and prejudice in rural communities is a relatively new area of research. For the purpose of this study, the Midwest is the American Great Lakes region composed of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin. This study, examines racial discrimination in a rural town with less than 500 citizens. The rural farm town forms a tight knit community where everyone knows each other and many children graduate with the same 70 students they have known since Kindergarten. There is a lack of diversity within the community, so individuals tend to fear differences which can lead to the use of discriminatory language and sometimes violence against people of color. The purpose of this research is to examine and analyze individual discrimination and racism in a Midwest rural community.

Determining people's awareness of racial discrimination within rural communities may increase the cultural competence of the rural populace. This is significant for the well-being of minorities in rural communities, because being viewed as an outsider in one's own community can be harmful to an individual's mental health. This study is also personally significant because I grew up in a similar community and want to help others understand what it is like to live in a

rural area. Furthermore, sharing this kind of research with the community can potentially change the lives of students in rural communities, so they can become more culturally aware of their prejudices at a younger age.

This study is framed by survey questions surrounding the topics of racism, discrimination, and rural studies. These areas of study allow a better assessment of whether rural communities harbor negative racial attitudes towards minority groups. The research questions for this study concerning this Midwest rural community are: how is race perceived, how is discrimination viewed, and how did individuals within the community become aware of their race?

## **Literature Review**

Discriminatory acts and speech can be detrimental to an individual's personal health. There are a variety of different ways that researchers examine discrimination and racism in rural settings, and these will provide the conceptual framework for this research. The scholarly conversations I engage in are focused on racism, discrimination, and rural studies.

The literature on racism examines different forms of racism which are especially relevant to rural studies. Psychologists Dovidio and Gaertner collaborated for 35 years on the topic of aversive racism. They argue that aversive racism is subtler, and often occurs when someone believes in equality, but unconsciously harbors negative feelings towards minority groups (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005, 618). These unconscious feelings are harder to detect compared to overt racism which is more direct. Dovidio and Gaertner suggest utilizing the common in-group model against aversive racism. This model reduces indifference and increases the perception of having a common connection between people.

Zuriff, a clinical psychologist at M.I.T., researches different forms of racism. He noted a decrease in racist attitudes on standard tests, and began focusing on newer forms of racism: modern, aversive, and implicit stereotypes. In addition to aversive racism, modern racism is also relevant to rural studies. Modern racism involves rationalizing any discriminatory attitudes because of traditional values or practices (Zuriff, 2002, 117). Modern racism is different from aversive racism because it includes the presence of traditional values, and is pertinent to isolated towns where individuals often uphold the same values.

The research questions for my study encompass these different forms of racism. Both aversive and modern racism are especially relevant to my project because they are two concepts that could be found in the results of the survey. In addition, Dovidio, Gaertner, and Zuriff did extensive research to back up their claims, so they are reliable. They also discuss how aversive and modern racism apply to small groups of people, but neither applies them specifically to a rural town. Therefore, my study, engages these concepts and extends the conversation on racism in rural America.

Discrimination is a complex concept. Existing literature describes the different types of discrimination and other concepts connected to it, such as, in-group favoritism and ethnocentrism, which are particularly relevant to my study. Ross Hammond, from the Department of Political Science at the University of Michigan, and Robert Axelrod, from the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, focus their research on decreasing discrimination by creating opportunities to bridge social capital between groups. Hammond and Axelrod define ethnocentrism as: discrimination in regards to attitudes and behaviors, which are based on group boundaries determined by characteristics, such as race, and on complex social and cultural inputs (2006, 926). This definition applies to rural communities because the whiteness of the town is

the unifying characteristic which sets the boundaries for what attitudes and behaviors are deemed discriminatory. Hammond and Axelrod define in-group favoritism as: a behavioral tendency which requires little cognitive effort (Hammond & Axelrod, 2006, 927). Favoring individuals of a similar race relates to discriminatory behaviors and aversive racism.

Sociologist Fred Pincus's teachings focus on racial diversity. His research focuses on analyzing the three main types of discrimination: individual, institutional, and structural. For this study, institutional and structural discrimination are focused on the big picture, which is why I am only using his examination of individual discrimination. He defines individual discrimination as, “the behavior of individual members of one race/ethnic/gender group that is intended to have a differential and/or harmful effect on the members of another race/ethnic/gender group” (Pincus, 1996, 186). Pincus provides a conceptual framework for discrimination, and compares how each form affects minority groups.

Pincus’s definition and framework of individual discrimination aids in the research methods and coding used in this study. In addition, if other forms of discrimination in the community are perceived, they can be understood by examining someone’s lived experiences within the community. Individual discrimination relates to how ethnocentrism, in-group biases, and aversive racism are usually formed subconsciously on a personal level. These definitions help conceptualize the concepts used in the surveys and coding of the data.

The third scholarly conversation this study engages with is Rural Studies. The diverse research and methodologies that frame these studies informed the methods section of my project and make it a rural-centered study. The local school system is important to any community so understanding the importance of educators and students in regards to their cultural competence is vital. Therefore, I draw on Thomas Scott’s and Jane White’s work with high school students.

Thomas Scott focuses his research on how high school students perceive “the other” and the developing world. He examined students before and after engaging in a curriculum designed to minimize the use of stereotypes, and concluded that teachers promote cultural competence by allowing students to decide how and why they feel differently about other cultures. Jane White discusses allowing students to have emotional responses to new material. When investigating other cultures, she believes educators should discourage “us” and “them” narratives and allow students to independently investigate unfamiliar cultures. Her survey was distributed to both teachers and students. So, both Scott’s and White’s studies provide insight into how educators are currently involved in teaching cultural diversity.

The research focusing on the bonds found within rural communities provides a framework for what it is like to live in a small town. One study that I draw on for my project reviews the different ways in which social inclusion has been conceptualized through four systems: market, bureaucratic, associative, and communal relations (Shucksmith, Shucksmith & Watt, 2006, 680). The authors argue that individuals’ behavior and how much they belong in their community depends upon their relations within the systems. They also discuss three schools of thought associated with exclusion/inclusion: placing individual’s morals and behaviors at the center, emphasizing discrimination issues and the lack of enforced rights, and highlighting systems and institutions. Inclusion and exclusion are also discussed in Michael Leyshon’s research on rural youth identity formation. The closeness of the rural community allows the youth to connect their identity to the rural space which creates a unique in-group. These connections make it difficult for rural youth to accept someone from outside the community, which can lead to discriminatory behaviors.

In the literature on rural communities, three studies helped guide this research. Sociologist Snipp's research provides a history of rural sociological research, and the major constructs, theorists, and historical overviews of communities that were examined over the years. In addition, he argues that examining minority groups in rural communities is important, because it translates into a larger understanding of how race and ethnicity operate in society. While my survey will focus on a contemporary rural community, understanding how rural sociologists have previously studied race and ethnicity through surveys allows me to bring my study into conversation, particularly my survey results with this earlier research.

Another study conducted by David Sizemore examines the process of inclusion and exclusion of Hispanic individuals in the rural community of Appleton, Illinois. He argues that inclusion often has two conflicting sides, a sensitive side to ensure no one is offended, and a portion allowing white privileged individuals to feel that Hispanics (other minorities) need to conform (Sizemore, 2004, 535). This argument relates to aversive racism and in-group favoritism because the white community members are consciously trying to be inclusive, but subconsciously they desire conformity. His primary data collection method is an in-depth community study which involves observations. Sizemore's research frames the methods of my study within a rural studies framework.

A third foundational study for my project was Helga Leitner's work on white individual's racial attitudes towards immigrants in a rural Midwest town. She argues that small town life is often depicted as a white space and that minorities seem to disrupt white social and moral values. (Leitner, 2012, 830). Upholding traditional social and moral values based on race affirms modern racism, which is apparent in her results. Leitner created focus groups of long-term white residents in Minnesota to discuss topics in relation to racial discrimination. Many of the

participants felt that the immigrants in their community needed to assimilate, which supports the notion that rural communities in the Midwest have significant discriminatory attitudes.

While these foundational studies helped construct the framework for this research, there are ways the current study adds to the existing literature. Previous researchers targeted specific minority groups to analyze the attitudes present towards them, but this survey does not have a focused target. Unlike previous research, this study involves a broader approach by simply analyzing if there are discriminatory attitudes present within the community, regardless of who they are aimed at. In addition, the earlier studies did not analyze such a broad sample of community members. The survey in this study was distributed to a diverse group of community members to obtain a general sense of what discriminatory attitudes are present, if any.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

A 10-question survey was administered to members of the community. The questions centered upon topics of race, discrimination, and personal experiences within the community. The survey questions were: how long have you been a part of the community, what is your connection to the community, what is your highest level of education, what is your racial identity, when was the first time you were aware of your race, what is the level of racial diversity in your community, do you think race plays a significant role in your experiences in the community, have you interacted with a person of color in the community or outside of it, have you encountered “racial discrimination” either towards yourself or others in the community, and do you think racism still exists in America? The sample selection included teachers, guidance counselors, police officers, retired individuals, and former students. Such a diverse sample, provides the opportunity to obtain a broad understanding of discrimination, race, and small town life from many different perspectives.

The sample was recruited through email correspondence asking participants to respond if they were interested. Participants were assured that the survey would not take longer than 20 minutes, their opinions and name of the community would remain anonymous, and their responses would only be used for a research project and would not be published. The researchers email was included at the bottom of the survey, for individuals with questions. The survey was sent out to 17 community members. All the survey documents, decoding document, and notes were stored in a secure location to ensure confidentiality. The data was analyzed using open coding to look for the emergence of similar themes and experiences between participant's survey responses. Specifically, examining the data for similarities in how individuals view race, whether they saw discrimination as a pressing issue, and their general experiences of living and/or working in a small town.

## **Results**

The survey was emailed to 17 people, and 9 individuals responded: one police officer, one guidance counselor, one secretary, one principle, three teachers, and two former students who graduated from the local high school. The majority of respondents have been a part of the community for their whole life, and most achieved a bachelor's degree. When asked about how they identify racially, three participants' said "White" and the other six said "Caucasian". The responses for the participants' connection to the community varied from residents, teachers, and local church parishioners. For example, one respondent is, "involved in the local church and involved with daughter's school and athletic activities." Most of the participants said that they had first been aware of their race around age 6, through cultural events or fellow community members.

The last five questions were aimed at understanding diversity in the community as a whole. One question concerned the level of diversity present in the community, and all nine participants answered the level of diversity was extremely low compared to neighboring areas. One participant's response was, "We do not have a very diverse community. It is predominantly Caucasian, with a very small handful of African American and Mexican American residents." Question 7 asked participants if they thought that race played a significant role in their experiences in the community, and 8 of them said no because of the lack of diversity. One of the participants, who is a teacher in the community, disagreed and said, "I do think people of different races are treated differently here." The next survey question asked participants about their interactions with people of color, and all 9 responded that they had interacted mostly outside of the community or in professional/sports settings. One participant said, "Yes, where I work, at sporting events and in general day to day living when I am out and about running errands in a larger community." Another individual spoke about his/her son's recent marriage to an Asian-American woman and their other friends who have married interracially.

When participants were asked if they had encountered "racial discrimination" either towards themselves or others in the community, four individuals responded "no". The police officer answered yes, and described a time arresting a Black individual who yelled the officer was meeting her "black quota", but she actually had a warrant for her arrest. Two of the teachers responded that they had not witnessed racial discrimination in the community, but that it had been an issue in their classrooms with children of color being bullied at times. One teacher remarked, "In teaching, I have heard offensive remarks from a student directed towards a biracial student." A former student said, "At home I would say there is more discrimination than at school." In addition, one participant said he/she sees it occur in the community.

The last question of the survey was, do you think racism still exists in America? All nine participants said yes, but provided different explanations. One individual said, “I believe there is less of it now though than there was in past but it still exists.” Another participant highlighted how racist attitudes can be taught by older family members, and then “hatred is passed down among generations.” In addition, one of the teachers spoke specifically about the size of the community and social media playing a part in racism. They said, “We have made great strides, but in small communities like mine, I think we are very backward to the idea and tolerance of other cultures.” The participant mentioned how social media has opened people’s eyes to more cultures, but allows intolerance to spread faster. In relation to the community specifically they said, “Our world feels very large and small at the same time.” Other individuals discussed the wide impact that racism can have on people of every race, and how discrimination extends beyond people of color to those with disabilities.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the results of the survey, in this community different races are perceived in a positive light, but not overly present, and many of the participants’ experiences with race were favorable. When addressing the question of how discrimination is viewed, the participants either witnessed it in classrooms or outside of the community. All nine participants agreed that racism still exists in America, so they are aware that racial discrimination is a concern. Many of the participants became aware of their race when they were about 6 years old, which could be due to their ability to remember that specific experience. In addition, the influence of television and fellow community members of color could have impacted them significantly around that age. The participants discussed how social media, and television are opening up the rural Midwest community to more cultures; however, people are not actually experiencing them beyond the

screen. Overall, the racism in this rural community is better than in the past, but there is still more intolerance here than in multicultural areas, such as, universities and larger cities.

One limitation of this study is, the small sample size. Surveying more community members to participate would allow a wider variety of experiences to analyze. In addition, having more former students who grew up in the community included in the sample would allow a comparison between those that have recently gone to university and those who have been working/living in the community for a longer amount of time to see if those who have recently attended college are more culturally competent. In addition, the low diversity in the town in question could have affected how much racial discrimination the participants have witnessed. If the town had a more multicultural population, then race may have been perceived differently. Further research should expand upon the survey and include a case study of the town and interview members of the community about their experiences with race, discrimination, and living in a small town.

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