A critique of Harper & Yeung’s *Perceptions of institutional commitment to diversity as a predictor of college students’ openness to diverse perspectives.*
Choose one of the articles named below (both available in pdf versions on the D2L community page). Write an essay on the strengths and weaknesses of its research and the conclusions drawn from it, and identify the article’s relation to other work in its area(s) of inquiry.

Overview

This essay will analyze the research article, *Perceptions of institutional commitment to diversity as a predictor of college students’ openness to diverse perspectives* by Casandra E. Harper and Fanny Yeung (2013). The analysis will evaluate strengths and weaknesses of the quantitative research study and the conclusions drawn from it. The organization of this essay will include the (a) introduction, (b) literature review, research questions, and theoretical framework (c) design of the study (including the methodology and analysis) (d) results and discussion (e) relation to the field of inquiry and recommendations for future research and analysis and (f) summary.

Introduction

According to Creswell (2009), an effective general template for a good article introduction contains five parts. First, the author(s) should “identify the research problem” using a “narrative hook” or words that engage the reader into reading more about the purpose of this study (p.102). Second, the author(s) should present “studies addressing the problem” by summarizing “large groups of studies instead of individual ones” to justify the importance of the study and explain why the current study will be different than past studies (p. 104-105). Third, the author(s) should address the “deficiencies in past literature” by citing the lack of research on a particular topic or variable, by identifying the theoretical or methodological flaws of previous studies, by addressing areas overlooked in past studies, and by discussing how “a proposed study will remedy these deficiencies and provide a unique contribution to the scholarly literature” (p. 107). Fourth, the author(s) should address the “significance of the study” by creating a clear rational related to three or four research, practice, or policy improvements that will result and tie these results or outcomes and link this work to the “different groups that may profit from reading
and using the study” (p. 107). Fifth, the author(s) should end the introduction with a “statement of the purpose or intent of the study” (p. 108).

In their introduction, Harper and Yeung (2013) partially complete the first three steps in Creswell’s (2009) model but fail to address the last two steps of significance and purpose. In the first paragraph of their article, Harper and Yeung (2013) set the stage for their research by raising important points that could be described as their narrative hook. These points include the need to move beyond structural diversity and the need to look to the quality of cross-racial interactions, because detrimental effects for students of color have been noted if we do not attend to the dynamics of cross-racial interactions. In the last sentence of the introduction, the authors allude to the research problem by discussing the need for further research “to uncover how students go about engaging in cross-racial interactions and how these relationships influence students’ openness to diverse perspectives” (Harper and Yeung, 2013, p. 26), however, it is not a very strong statement of why this particular study is needed.

Throughout the entire introduction, the authors describe numerous studies that address step two and step three of Creswell’s (2009) model. They provide a succinct statement of findings and implications of these studies on diversity, including the study of close personal relationships and diverse environments, in addition to the numerous short and long term benefits of structural diversity. While the discussion of the literature in the introduction raises very important points, it describes the work of specific authors rather than broad themes of study. Even though it addresses past research, the introduction only explains fails to describe any theoretical or methodological deficiencies of past studies does not explain why the present study will be different than past studies.
As stated, the introduction does not address the fourth and fifth parts of Creswell’s (2009) model as it fails to mention any details about the current study, why it is significant, who will benefit from this work, or the purpose of the study. To address the significance of this study, the authors could have used legal and political climate such as the recent Supreme Court case on *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2013) and *Schuette v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action* (2013) or the guidelines issued by the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (Guidance, 2011, 2013 cite) on how to legally pursue diversity in higher education admissions policies to outline how this study could be used by lawyers, scholars, and policy makers. Instead, the authors simply mention the “backdrop of contentious debates” (pg. 25). This reference has the opposite effect of explaining the significance of the current work by downplaying the political, legal, and empirical research significance of diversity in higher education. From the introduction, it is difficult to tell what the purpose or goal of the current work will be, what specific problem will be addressed, and how the authors intend this work to be used.

In a quantitative article, it is important to have a well written purpose statement so that the readers can be introduced to the variables, relationships and research site. A quantitative purpose statement “begins with identifying the proposed major variables in a study (independent, intervening, dependent), accompanied by a visual model to clearly identify this sequence, as well as locating and specifying how the variables will be measured or observed” (Creswell, 2009, p. 117). Harper and Yeung (2013) do not provide the reader with any information about the variables, the relationship between variables, what relationships they intend to study, what statistical tests or models they plan to use, or the research site in written form in the introduction. The lack of a well written purpose statement forces the reader to make assumptions about what
variables they are using and what relationships between variables the authors intend. A clear statement of purpose orients the reader to what will be discussed in the article and provides a beacon throughout the article to guide the discussion of literature, providing insight into the authors’ assumptions through the choice of theoretical framework, selection of analytic methods, research results, and conclusions.

One other note on the introduction that could lead to confusion is that Harper and Yeung (2013) use the term *structural diversity* without providing a definition or the context until several sections later to understand what it means. While readers familiar to the subject area may know that *structural diversity* is the “numerical representation of various racial/ethnic groups” on campus (Hurtado, Miled, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998, p. 282), others not familiar with this definition may think it is the difference in types of higher education institutions or other possible definitions.

**Literature Review, Research Questions and Theoretical Framework**

In quantitative research, literature can be presented at the beginning of a study “to provide direction for the research questions or hypothesis” (Creswell, 2009, p. 27). Harper and Yeung (2013) provide the literature at the beginning of the study but provide limited direction for the research questions or hypothesis as they do not explain the reason behind the organization of the literature, the specific methodologies or variables used by the studies in the literature review, or the specific limitations of any of the studies presented in the literature review. Talking in general terms about several studies, the authors state that “national survey data quantifies the interracial interactions with relatively cursory individual-level variables, such as the frequency with which students dined, studied or partied together” (p. 27). However, the authors do not
indicate that this study employs a survey or that these variables will or will not be used in the present study.

The literature review does not address important elements of structural diversity. Research shows that campuses with a high degree of structural diversity can report conflict between the majority and minority racial/ethnic groups without the presence of student-centered support programs that maximize cross-racial interaction and discussion (Chang, 1996; Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). Another weakness of the literature review and of the research proposed by this article is the failure to address other factors that impact campus climate in addition to structural diversity such as the ones proposed by Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson and Allen (1998) including: (a) the institutional context and their historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion; (b) the psychological dimension of campus climate including individuals’ and group perceptions of discrimination and racial conflict and the institutional response to discrimination; and (c) the behavior dimension of campus climate. Harper and Yeung (2013) later mention the work of Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Terenzini, and Nora (2001) “as past research examining the environmental influence of institutions and its association with students’ openness to diversity” in the theoretical framework section of the article but, the elements or components of the institutional environment responsible for the attitudes and behaviors are not clarified or discussed.

The literature review in this article most closely resembles a systematic literature review. A systematic literature review “typically focuses on a specific empirical question often posed in cause-and-effect form” (Kennedy, 2007, P. 139). At the end of the literature review, three research questions are presented that loosely reflect the elements of the literature provided. The first question, “How racially diverse are students friendship groups?” does not imply a cause-
and-effect relationship without the reader making an assumption that the sample of students questioned will be taken from racially diverse campuses, and no mention is made of the characteristics that will be evaluated in a specific sample (Harper & Yeung, 2013, p. 28). The second research question, “How do students’ precollege and college interactions, views, university perceptions and experiences, influence their openness to diverse perspectives?” poses nested questions about a very broad set of related factors that are not described in detail (Harper & Yeung, 2013, p. 28). Third, the final research question asks “Is “openness to diverse perspectives” significantly predicted by the same factors when the sample is further disaggregated by race?” (Harper & Yeung, 2013, p. 28). This question implies that the reader knows what an “openness to diverse perspectives” includes and excludes, and that there is a way to determine what factors are related to race and what factors are not related to race.

Harper & Yeung (2013) identify Allport’s (1954) contact theory as the “guiding framework” of this study (p. 28). The framework is described briefly offering a short synopsis of the four environmental and situational conditions that must be included in intergroup relations for positive results to occur, but they do not describe how the current study or the variables being studied relate to this theoretical framework specifically. The authors justify the use of contact theory because it has been used to study cross-racial interactions in student outcomes before, but they only list one other study (Chang, Denson, Saenz, Misa, 2006) that has used this framework and they do not explain why it is the appropriate framework to use for this study.

The authors note several improvements that they will incorporate into Allport’s (1954) framework. The first improvement is one made by Pettigrew (1998) to include the difference in importance of friendships. The second improvement was a result of Emerson, Kimbro & Yancey’s (2002) critique of contact theory that encouraged them to include behavioral measures
as well as attitudinal measures in this study. Next comes a laundry list of important findings that should be taken into account, including prior contact with diverse peers (Emerson, Kimbro & Yancy, 2002), the wide variation in friendship group racial composition (Mack, 19995), and the role of institutional environment in student’s openness to diversity (Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Nora, 2001); but the reader is left to figure out how these results and studies will be incorporated into the current research.

The authors conclude this section by stating “Our study adds to this research by including items that address institutional commitment to diversity in unique ways” but they do not define or describe institutional commitment or what is unique about the way that they will measure or address institutional commitment. In the literature review, they could have provided a definition and strand of literature on institutional commitment and a list of variables that have been traditionally used to study this commitment. The authors could have even identified the site of this research as the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and described what programs, classes and policies they promote to demonstrate a commitment to diversity. They could also have provided an example or a list of the unique ways they propose to measure UCLA’s commitment to diversity and more important than the list, why these unique measurements are needed, how they were validated as measurements, and why they are theoretically aligned with Allport’s (1954) framework.

**Design of Study**

In the methods section of this article, Harper and Yeung (2013) describe the (a) data and sample, (b) dependent measure, and (c) independent variables. They provide information on the longitudinal survey data obtained through the Campus Life in America Student Survey (CLASS) on the UCLA campus. The first survey was given in 2004 to freshmen at UCLA and the follow-
up survey was conducted two years later in 2006. “The sample for this study included only participants who participated in both waves of data collection (N=517) (Harper & Yeung, 2013, p. 29). The authors do not explicitly state that they are using the data set collected from another study, and they do not provide a reference to the UCLA CLASS data set and how they accessed this information. They do not discuss the creation of the survey instrument, the modification of the survey data, why they did not use the survey data from all six universities in the CLASS project, what they did with missing variables, or how they created new variables for analysis. Additionally, the CLASS data accessed on the UCLA Student Affairs Information and Research Office website indicates that the CLASS survey was given at UCLA in 2004 and again in 2007 but there is no mention of a 2006 survey (UCLA Student Affairs, 2007). This study does not reference the initial results or analysis of the original CLASS data and it does not orient the reader to the assumptions, limitations, reliability, and validity of the initial research instruments. Not disclosing this information may raise ethical questions regarding proper attribution, the duplicate or redundant publication of results, and the ability to replicate the results of this research (Creswell, 2009, Remler & Van Ryzin, 2010).

The discussion of the dependent measure was brief and provided a very basic description of the five-item factor that measured students’ openness to diverse perspectives. The authors do not discuss why the dependent measure was grouped or reduced which raises additional questions: Were the variables grouped into less correlated factors to help with the multicollinearity problems? Why were the factors not analyzed individually? Are there latent variables, or variables that are underlying these factors but not directly observable measures? Alternatively, is the dependent measure making use of a theory and being used as a confirmatory factor analysis? Without this description, it is unclear why the factors of the dependent measure
are being combined and what assumptions or limitations are being presented (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2010).

The independent variables are presented in thematic grouping and several explanations were provided for specific terms and variables. However, this section also did not explain all of the included variables, how or why they were included in the regression model and if any variables from the original study were excluded or reduced into multifactor variables. Harper and Yeung (2013) did discuss the benefits of a longitudinal data set and noted that they could control for the students’ precollege experiences including racial/ethnic diversity of their high school, the amount of racial/ethnic interaction in high school, and students’ precollege openness to diverse peers and perspectives (p. 32). The authors do not tell the reader how they controlled for these factors.

Harper and Yeung (2013) explain that they first analyzed descriptive statistics and that then used ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis. They justify the use of OLS because it has been recently used by Mayhew, Grunwald, and Dey (2006) but do not explain why it is the proper statistical analysis, what other options were considered and what the benefits and drawbacks were for conducting this analysis. They further describe using a blocked hierarchical approach to add variables to the model and tie this to Astin’s (1991/2002) Input-Environment-Outcomes (I-E-O) model. Both of these techniques are very specific and the Astin and Dey (2006) resource that is referenced for this method was unable to be located for review but it has been referenced as an unpublished manuscript in other publications (Tanaka, 2007). Astin and Dey (1997) have provided instruction on Causal Analytical Modeling via Blocked Regression Analysis (CAMBRA) procedures to evaluate I-E-O results at UCLA during a summer workshop but that reference guide is not referenced here (House, 1998). Harper and Yeung (2013) could
have more strongly supported their method of analysis by explaining that this approach is used to control (minimize) the initial effects of input characteristics to obtain less biased estimates of environmental variables on a specific college outcomes.

The authors address three limitations but they do not raise additional other limitations presented by the design of this study, the use of self-reported survey data, the self-reporting of racial categories, and the creation of composite variables for analysis and the methods used in data analysis. For example, the CLASS survey questionnaire reports that students were allowed to indicate if their closest friends were bi-racial or multi-racial but the authors do not clarify how bi-racial and multi-racial students were included in the regression analysis (CLASS Instrument Wave 1, 2004; Class Instrument Wave 2, 2007). Given the design of this study and the complexity of the statistical analysis, they should have provided a longer description of the limitations of this study.

**Results and Discussion**

Harper and Yeung (2003) present a well written account of the results of this study and address the research questions posed earlier in the article providing an explanation of the significance of the findings for variables analyzed (Creswell, 2009). This discussion is logical and follows the process of analysis undertaken to generate the results. The descriptive statistics are represented in the text and not provided in an easy to read table. Table 1 presents the variables included in the regression analysis (Harper Yeung, 2003. p.30). Many of these variables are not discussed or explained in earlier parts of the paper. For example, a variable listed in table 1 called “psychological adjustment” is labeled as a 4-item composite variable, however, this variable, what it adjusts and what it consists of is not described outside of the information contained in these tables.
The authors provide lists of the composite variables in Table 2 including a values for factor loading and significance (p.310). Wave 2 is noted but none of the other waves of analysis are noted in this table. Table 3 is a simple and easy to read presentation of the results to the first research question (p. 35). Table 4 attempts to provide a pre-college and college predictors of students’ openness to diversity as juniors (p. 36). Table 4 would have been slightly more useful if they would explain why the N value under the first column of reported values labeled all respondents is 397, or roughly 76% of the total number of actual respondents (n=517). It would also be helpful if table 4 could include an $R^2$ value for each stage of regression. Additional $R^2$ values would allow us to confirm that the model was improving as the variables were being added. The authors should also present a table and a graphical representation at the correlation between variables and a complete set of regression results for all variables. These tables would allow the reader to visualize the information and make reporting the results more transparent.

The discussion section of the article contains only three references that connect the results to the literature review. The major unexpected finding and the variable with the strongest association was the belief that the university spends “too much” time on diversity-related issues was negatively associated with the outcome (p. 37). In other words, if students perceive the university to be overly committed to diversity they were less likely to become more open to diverse perspectives. While the discussion thoughtfully suggests future qualitative research to explore this relationship, the validity of this finding is never challenged and the alternative is not ever put forth. Instead of a tipping point for openness that is worthy of exploration, perhaps it is a window of opportunity in young adult development for students to have not had a positive transformative experience with diversity. It is really feasible for universities to spend less time on diversity related issues as the student population continues to become more diverse?
Relation to the Field of Inquiry and Recommendations for Future Research and Analysis

Most of the research on racial-ethnic attitudes has been influenced by Allport’s (1954) contact theory (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) used in this study as the theoretical framework. This study provides additional evidence that pre-college attitudes predict one’s openness to diversity, that structurally diverse college environments increase diversity, and that close friendships increase one’s openness to diversity. The study should be a starting point for further multi-campus studies or it could possibly try and obtain data from the other five schools involved in the CLASS survey. If the results of this survey that overrepresent Asian and female respondents can be expanded it would be more useful and generalizable (American educational Research Association, 2009). The authors could also explore using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) for other theoretical frames that incorporate psychological, behavioral, and historical factors as well as structural diversity into their campus climate framework (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998; Pike & Kuh, 2006), in relation to how students socialize on campus (Weidman, 1989) or to study the differences in student views about diversity (Umbach & Milem, 2004).

Summary

Harper and Yeung (2013) present a study on an incredibly important topic that has political, legal, and academic implications. The introduction, literature review, theoretical framework and methods section lack components and thorough explanation of the research process and its limitations. However, this study includes evidence of a very thoughtful statistical analysis and presents important results while using Astin’s (1991/2002) well known I-E-O model.

References


*Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, 113 S.Ct. 2411,(2013)


