

## PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION IN TOPEKA, KANSAS

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### ABSTRACT

*Objective.* This study describes perceived discrimination in Topeka, Kansas. *Methods.* A 21 item survey questionnaire shows perceived levels of discrimination and the nature and type of discrimination experienced by citizens. Nine focus groups were conducted by the researchers to better understand the nature of discrimination in this community. *Conclusions.* A significant portion of participants experience some form of discrimination. Data from both survey responses and focus groups reveal that discrimination is experienced across all population groups. The findings convey a sense of victimization and a strong sentiment that it is an active undercurrent within this community. These findings suggest that community leaders need to be cognizant of community perceptions of discrimination as they prepare for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education.

Discrimination has a long and deplorable history in the United States, and is closely related to historical patterns of immigration and migration, particularly in the flow of newcomers to northern states (Chan 1991; Heer 1993; Kull 1992; Massey & Denton 1993; McClain 1994; Middleton 1992; Roediger 1991; Steinfield 1970; Swift 1991). Early federal government support of slavery attests to a record of racist ideology which has perpetuated discrimination experienced by many persons of underrepresented groups (Fishbein 2002; Feagin, Vera, & Batur 2001; Feagin 1991; Patterson 1998). Nineteenth and twentieth-century restrictive immigration laws based on race and the imprisoning of Japanese-Americans during World War II are merely two examples that illustrate racist ideology which has nurtured a long and systematic pattern of discrimination (Yates 1995a).

Discrimination results from deep prejudices held by individuals and can be found more significantly in the form of institutional and economic discrimination. For example, Ayres (1991) found clear patterns of discrimination between whites and African Americans in purchasing vehicles with African American men paying an average of \$421 more for a car compared to white men and African American women paying about \$875 more. Similarly, Yinger (1995) found that home mortgage lenders are 60 percent more likely to turn down a mortgage request from a minority applicant than from an equally qualified white.

### THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS

The literature that centers on prejudice and discrimination is framed primarily on four main theoretical constructs; 1) scapegoating;

2) authoritarian personality; 3) exploitation, and 4) normative. The first, scapegoating theory based on the work of Bettelheim and Janowitz (1964), contends that prejudiced people believe they are society's victims. The scapegoating theory suggests that individuals, rather than accepting guilt for some failure, transfer the responsibility for failure to some susceptible group. This is often seen when unsuccessful applicants assume that a minority candidate or woman got the job that they were denied.

Authoritarian personality theory based on work of Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Stanford (1950) views prejudice as an isolated incident that anyone may possess. The authoritarian personality centers on an adherence to conventional values, uncritical acceptance of authority, and a concern for power. This personality is in turn aggressive toward persons who do not conform to conventional norms or authority structures. In essence, a person who is raised in an authoritarian environment will then later treat others as he or she had been raised. Discrimination would then be acted out against persons or groups who celebrate customs or cultures which are different from the conventional.

Exploitation theory draws from the Marxist social thought which emphasizes exploitation of the lower class as an integral part of capitalism. In many cases racial discrimination is used to justify the subordination of groups. Cox (1942) asserted that exploitation theory views prejudice and discrimination against minority groups as an extension of the inequality faced by the entire lower class. In essence, racism and discrimination stigmatizes a group as inferior so that

the exploitation of that group can be justified.

The normative theoretical approach takes the view that prejudice and discrimination is largely normative based. The normative theory as advocated in the classical work of Pettigrew (1958, 1959) contends that prejudice and discrimination are influenced by societal norms and is found in situations that serve to encourage or discourage tolerance or intolerance of minority groups.

### **THE NATURE OF DISCRIMINATION**

Discrimination is evident in activities that disqualify members of one group from opportunities open to others. For example, discrimination occurs when African Americans are refused jobs made available to whites, or a landlord refuses to rent to an individual because of his or her sexual orientation. Generally, discrimination has been defined in the social science literature as

practices and actions of dominant racial and ethnic groups that have a differential and negative impact on subordinate racial and ethnic groups. (Feagin & Eckberg 1980 11)

Although prejudice is often the precursor to discrimination, the two may actually exist separately from one another. It is possible for persons to have prejudiced attitudes but never act upon them. Moreover, discrimination may not necessarily derive directly from prejudice. For example, a business owner might steer away from opening a business in a predominately African American neighborhood not because of attitudes of hostility, but because of concerns about selling and marketing a particular product in the area, attracting customers, or perhaps because of declining property values making it difficult to sell the business in the future.

Discrimination can also be played out when an individual(s) is willing to sacrifice money, wages, or profits in order to cater to their prejudice (Becker 1957, 1993). In this case, the prejudice is already part of the utility function and may reflect some dislike, anger, or similar emotions toward a certain group of people (Becker 1993).

In general, the body of research on discrimination reveals that it is widespread and varying in nature. For example, discrimination has been played out in such variables as race, ethnicity, weight, gender, sexual preference, class status, in employment, in hous-

ing, and in physical appearance to name a few. Some forms of discrimination may result from a lack of understanding, socialization or dogmatism while other forms of discrimination may be nurtured and exacerbated by current events. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 a spike of workplace and other forms of discrimination have been reported against Muslims and Arab-Americans (Adelman 2002). This may be explained by what Boulding (1989) referred to as disintegrative power which is achieved through hatred, fear, and threat of a common enemy.

### **Sexual Orientation**

In recent years, there is a growing body of literature that indicates an increasing pattern of discrimination against gay and transgendered persons in a plethora of venues. Lombardie, Wilchins, Priesing and Malouf (2001) found that there is a pervasive pattern of discrimination and prejudice against transgendered people within society. Badget (1995) found patterns of wage discrimination against homosexuals. Similarly, Berg and Lien (2002) found significant disparities in wages of homosexual workers in the United States with homosexual men earning 16% to 28% less than heterosexual men with similar demographic characteristics. Discrimination has also been found to exist against same sex couples when making hotel reservations (Jones 1996).

### **Race**

Discrimination based on race has been quite prevalent in America when compared to other variables. Likewise, a disproportionate amount of the literature centering on discrimination pertains to race. Some scholars have argued that contemporary discrimination based on race is particularly pervasive in the American criminal justice system (Bushway & Piehl 2001; Miethe & Moore 1986; Parker 2002). Perhaps one of the more perplexing issues facing the criminal justice system today is the allegation that some contemporary police practices are motivated by discrimination and racism. Some observers have accused the police of systematically stopping minority motorists simply because of the color of their skin, while the police themselves emphatically deny these allegations.

The general scholarship on the U.S. criminal justice system offers clear and convincing evidence of a long history of not only ra-

cial, but also cultural, and class group biases in its administration (Yates 1995b). Similarly, research has pointed out that police routinely discriminate by labeling African American teenagers as delinquent and in doing so refer them to juvenile court disproportionately more than white teenagers who engage in the same or similar behavior (Hui-zinga & Elliot 1987). Moreover, the literature has made clear that people of color in the United States are imprisoned at significantly higher rate than whites (Bishop & Frazier 1988; Petersilia 1983; Walker, Spohn & DeLone 2000). Discrimination based on race has also been found to act as a barrier in the legal profession in as much that it sometimes keeps minority attorneys from advancing in the profession (Foley & Kidder 2002). Research has also suggested wide patterns of disparities in income of minority employees when compared with white employees in some professional occupations (Hirsch & Schumacher 1992).

Native Americans have long held that they have been subjected to systematic discrimination in names, images, and mascots that symbolize Native Americans, particularly in sports and advertising (Hatfield 2000; King & Springwood 1999). Others have asserted that American society has long created an image of Native Americans that is a racial stereotype, an image that is a reflection of the dominant society which leads to discrimination (Farris 1997). It is clear that Native Americans are outraged about the symbolization of Native American names in sports and other advertising schemes (Hatfield 2000).

### Gender

Not only has race been a significant factor in discrimination in American society but gender discrimination has been quite prevalent. Wilcox (1997) found that African American women face discrimination on the bases of both race and gender and scholars have argued that their double status disadvantage should predispose them to high levels of group consciousness. Similarly, Weinberg (1998) found that Mexican American women face discrimination not only because of race but also because of gender. Levin, Sinclair, Veniegas, and Taylor (2002) described this as the double-jeopardy hypothesis inasmuch that women of color will expect to experience more general discrimina-

tion than men of color, white women, and white men because of perceived stereotyping that they are members of a low status group.

Research has also pointed out that gender is a better predictor of salary when compared with job position, experience, or education. York, Henley and Gamble (1987) found in administrative careers that males earned an average of \$5,645.00 more per year than females. While still other scholars have found gender bias to be prevalent in textbooks and other materials and that most teachers in practice do not treat male and female students equally (Recchia 1987).

## METHODOLOGY

### Background and Sample

This study utilized a descriptive design. As Merriam (1988) pointed out, descriptive research is undertaken when description and explanation rather than prediction based on cause and effect are sought. Thus, we were interested in describing discrimination as perceived by the participants. The setting for this research was Topeka, Kansas which according to the latest United States Census information has a population of about 123,993. This community was selected for three primary reasons:

- 1) It is one of the larger metropolitan areas in the immediate geographical area in order to draw from a diverse population.
- 2) Topeka, Kansas is the center of the landmark 1954 Supreme Court Decision, *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* which made "separate but equal" practices illegal.
- 3) The researchers had access to participants and the necessary support to administer surveys and to hold focus groups throughout the community.

In the current study, a mailing list of all registered voters in Topeka was obtained from the county election commissioner. The survey instrument and set of guiding questions, which would appropriately glean citizens' perception of discrimination, was mailed to every third registered voter. If there was more than one registered voter in a household, then a survey was mailed to only one individual in that household. A total of 18,000 surveys were mailed.

The 21 item survey instrument was de-

**Table 1: Demographic Makeup of Research Sample**

	City of Topeka	Research Sample
White	89%	81%
African American	9%	7%
Hispanic	6.5%	2.5%
Native American	1%	2%
Other	1%	1.4%

Note: Hispanic origin represents 6.5% of the population which is included in each of the above racial distributions. (Based on Census 2000 figures.)

signed to measure discrimination as perceived by the participants. Items 1-16 queried the participants to respond either "Yes" or "No" pertaining to various forms of discrimination (i.e. any form of discrimination, race, religion, sexual orientation, social class, gender, age). Items 17-21 asked the participants to rate the five statements such as "The Topeka community treats all citizens equally" 1) strongly agree; 2) agree; 3) neutral; 4) disagree, and 5) strongly disagree. There was also space reserved at the end of the survey for participants to add their own personal commentary pertaining to discrimination. These written comments were analyzed for similar or recurring themes.

In addition to survey data, nine focus groups were held over the course of nine weeks (one from each city council district). The purpose of the focus groups was to query information about personal experiences with discrimination. A semi-structured format was used to conduct the focus groups. The questions concentrated on two main areas: the participant's perceptions in general of discrimination in the community, and their personal experiences with discrimination.

Focus groups provide descriptive data; therefore, when analyzing qualitative data, the researcher searches for patterns that emerge (Silverman 1993). Using the two main areas of questioning, we looked for patterns within each and noted common themes. Then, we looked for other accounts that offered alternative perspectives to the common themes. Furthermore, qualitative data from focus groups enabled the researchers to make better sense of the survey data thus developing a broader understanding of experienced discrimination.

## Results

Recall that 18,000 surveys were mailed to every 3<sup>rd</sup> registered voter with 1,633 valid

surveys returned. Of these, 578 returned surveys were from males, 1038 from females, and 8 reported being "other". Of the returned surveys, 1,529 reported that they were heterosexual, 59 reported being homosexual, 35 reported being bi-sexual, and six responded in the "other" category. The racial demographic breakdown of the sample was similar to the census configuration of the city of Topeka, suggesting that the persons responding to the survey were demographically similar to the larger population of the city. Table 1 depicts the demographic makeup of the participants compared to the city of Topeka.

The researchers found that discrimination was experienced by 50 percent of the 1633 respondents. The respondents reported discrimination on the basis of gender 37% (n=610); age discrimination 30% (n=489); racial discrimination 25% (n=408); religious discrimination 13% (n=213); discrimination because of disability 3% (n=210); discrimination because of sexual orientation 9% (n=144), and discrimination because of gender identity 7% (n=121)<sup>1</sup>.

When the data was analyzed by racial and ethnic groups, it was revealed that 88% (n=36) of Hispanics; 82% (n=96) of African Americans; 82% (n=44) of those self-identified as bi-racial; 78% (n=28) of those self-identified as multi-racial; 70% (n=19) of Native Americans and 44% (n=585) of whites reported experiencing discrimination.

When analyzing the data by sexual orientation, 83 percent (n=49) of persons self-defined as homosexual, and 60 percent (n=21) of persons self-defined as bi-sexual reported experiencing discrimination.

Minority groups were also asked to identify characteristics of the discrimination they experienced. Of the total sample, 8 percent or 138 minorities reported experiencing physical violence; 30 percent or 485 minorities

**Table 2: Experiences of Discrimination Based on Group**

Experience	African American		Homosexual		Bi-Racial		Hispanic		Multi-Racial		Native American	
	N=117		N=59		N=54		N=41		N=36		N=27	
*General Discrimination	96	82%	49	83%	44	81%	36	88%	28	78%	19	70%
*Verbal Violence	65	56%	21	36%	33	80%	24	59%	28	78%	12	44%

\*p &lt; .05

reported experiencing employment discrimination; 9 percent or 143 minorities reported experiencing discrimination in housing; 9 percent or 156 minorities reported they had been denied employment benefits due to discrimination, and 6 percent or 102 minority participants reported being denied social services due to discrimination. It should be noted that since many respondents indicated having experienced more than one form of discrimination, the total number of reported experiences of discrimination does not equal the number of subjects in the groups. Table 2 depicts reported discrimination by minority group.

Chi-square tests were calculated to see if there were statistically significant differences based on race and/or sexual orientation and the categories of discrimination which were queried on the survey: 1) discrimination in general; 2) verbal violence; 3) physical violence; 4) housing discrimination, and 5) employment discrimination. Chi square analysis revealed statistically significant differences in two categories: general discrimination  $\chi^2 = 19.16$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $p < .05$ , and verbal violence  $\chi^2 = 26.73$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $p < .05$ . The data suggests that there is a relationship between race and/or sexual orientation and general discrimination, and between race and/or sexual orientation and verbal violence. In other words, this analysis of the data suggest that those participants who identified themselves as members of minority groups experienced generalized discrimination and/or verbal abuse (based on their race and/or sexual preference) with a frequency that was significantly greater than random chance.

### THEMATIC SUMMARY

As part of this research nine focus groups were held throughout the community. The purpose of these focus groups was to glean

a better understanding of individual experiences with discrimination. From the analysis of the qualitative data, two major themes emerged. These themes were congruent with the findings from the survey data and furthermore corroborated the survey findings.

### Theme # 1: Racial Discrimination

There was an overwhelming amount of qualitative data that directly related to racial discrimination in Topeka. Some of the common forms of this discrimination were lack of opportunities, housing, and employment issues. There were frequent comments on the difficulty that people of color have in starting businesses and buying houses. Many spoke of an overall attitude of unequal treatment, prejudice, and disharmony. This attitude showed up consistently in the comments. For example,

I did not experience racial discrimination until I moved to this city.

I feel on the average that Topeka is a very racist community and that whites blame blacks for everything that goes wrong.

Prejudice based on race is subtle but nevertheless exists.

Although it is supposed to be a great place to live, I find that it is full of prejudice.

This community as far as I am concerned is a very racist place. It's no environment to raise children.

There are a lot of black people here who are mentally challenged as a result of the cold harsh conditions in this community.

I was born here. My father had to leave in

1939 due to racism. I have experienced discrimination and racism in Topeka all of the years I have lived here and it is worse and even more covert now.

One other theme that was consistent was the prevalence of segregated neighborhoods. For example:

I have lived on both coasts and I have found Topeka to be an unusually racially segregated city. I would not live here if I was a minority.

Blacks are confined to live in only certain parts of the community; housing patterns in this community are not equally based.

Minorities are not given house loans to buy in certain parts of the community.

On the reverse side of racial discrimination against people of color, interestingly, many Caucasian individuals indicated that, based on race, they also felt discriminated against. They felt that they were being passed up (particularly in employment situations) for people of color to meet a "quota". Based upon these comments, it appears that there is a lack of understanding and education regarding power, privilege and who holds it in our society and how this contributes to the broader issue of discrimination so widely experienced in this community.

### **Theme #2 - Sexual Orientation**

There were a significant number of comments and similar themes regarding discrimination due to sexual orientation. Most of these seemed to revolve around issues of harassment and a generalized feeling of being unwanted. Comments such as "homosexuals know where we are welcome and where we are not welcome" and "Topeka is not a friendly environment for gay people" reveal this sense of being unwelcome.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The findings from this research are quite informative regarding the perceptions and nature of discrimination in this community. As noted previously, statistical data were augmented by a significant amount of qualitative data obtained from focus groups. The focus groups provided data from approximately 60 individuals; the survey provided comments

from an additional 450 individuals. These qualitative data provide a vivid sense of the pain and distress that respondents have experienced with discrimination.

This study was organized around the concept of "discrimination" but the word itself was not defined. Respondents were not constrained by any pre-determined definition of just what did or did not constitute discrimination. As a result, the study identified discrimination in and by minority groups, as might be expected, but it also revealed a significant sense of discrimination among the majority (white) group as well. This finding seems to parallel other research which has found consistent patterns of perceived discrimination across all racial and ethnic groups including white non-Hispanics (Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams 1999). For example, Kessler et al (1999) report that perceptions of discrimination are common across racial/ethnic groups: whites report a rate of 30.9 percent compared with 48.9 percent for African Americans and 50.2 percent for other racial and ethnic minorities.

There were a number of strong statements about experiences with "reverse discrimination." Reverse discrimination has been defined as government actions that cause better-qualified white males to be bypassed in favor of women and minority men. The paradox here is that this is an extremely emotional issue because it conjures up the notion that somehow women and minorities will subject white males to the same treatment received by minorities during the last three centuries. This has led some to call for color blind policies, however, the problem herein is that color blind policies imply a very limited role on the part of the state in addressing social inequality between racial and ethnic groups (Mack 1996; Winant 1994).

On the other hand many of the minorities who participated in the focus group sessions and many that responded on the comment section on the survey form, voiced a similar theme of being segregated into certain areas of the community because of what they called "discrimination in mortgage lending and leasing." Recall that some of the participants expressed that segregation in housing patterns in Topeka are worse than other areas they have lived in the United States. There is some literature that suggests that pervasive segregation in housing creates

and perpetuates underclass communities (Massey & Denton 1993; Wilson 1987, 1996). Massey and Denton (1993) have argued that segregation is the lynchpin of the underclass and that not only does discrimination lead to segregation, but segregation, by restricting economic opportunities for blacks, produces economic disparities that incite further discrimination and more segregation. This may be one explanation of the frustration and pervasive feelings of discrimination perceived by many of the minority participants in this study.

The data from the focus groups convey a pervasive feeling of being victimized, suggesting that feeling discriminated against is a widespread experience in this community. One respondent said

The main type of discrimination I have experienced is because of my long hair. Being watched more closely in stores, things of that nature.

Another referred to feeling discrimination because she is overweight. Others spoke of feeling discriminated against because they are single. There were references to feeling discriminated against for being a smoker, being pro-life, being less well trained and less experienced on their jobs, being poor, and even being well-to-do. Blame for these distressing experiences is ubiquitous and appeared to be diffusely projected against the monied class, city government, the human relations commission, the police department for racial profiling, the fire department for hiring so few minorities, local restaurants, stores and banks. In short, there were few social and commercial institutions that were not blamed for the experiences of discrimination reported by the respondents to the survey.

The statistical findings combined with the qualitative data suggest that "discrimination" is not an isolated experience connected just with work and housing. It is a part of daily living for a great many people in this community. The data indicated a statistically significant incidence of verbal violence combined with examples of physical violence suggesting that persons who are targets of discrimination are very frequently confronted with it in a wide variety of situations. This seems to lend itself to a normative theory of prejudice and discrimination. The normative

theory as advocated in the classical work of Pettigrew (1958, 1959) takes the view that prejudice and discrimination are influenced by societal norms and situations that serve to encourage or discourage tolerance of minority groups. A major thematic issue found in this study was that many participants felt that discrimination was a part of daily living in this community. It is possible that a culture of intolerance has been shaped in a latent normative fashion in this community.

One of the factors that went into selecting this community for the study was that it is the centerpiece of the landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education*. This decision stated that "separate but equal" facilities, including educational, was unconstitutional. This research was conducted nearly 49 years after the *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* decision. Thus, one would hypothesize that due to the historically legal significance of desegregation in this community that the perception of discrimination would be much less than what the data bore out. In fact, it may have been presumed that the *Brown* decision in 1954 would have led quickly to massive change. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, these data lend themselves to the conclusion that even some 49 years after *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education*, this decision and other corollary judicial decisions, have been slow to change or influence discrimination.

This study also revealed significant amounts of perceived discrimination against those defining themselves as gay. The survey and focus group data seemed to indicate that homosexual's feel isolated and in many situations avoided in an obvious manner when their sexual orientation is known. This parallels other research which has found that people still openly avoid homosexuals and that persons feel at relative ease in expressing their homophobic feelings (Nava & Dawidoff 1994).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 covered discrimination based on race, color, creed, national origin, and sex. However, with the growing problem of discrimination against the gay community there remains little legal protection and a fierce debate continues on the status of gay men and women and discrimination laws. Many communities across the United States have adopted ordinances which specifically address discrimination

against gays. The community where this study was conducted does not have an ordinance which specifically addresses discrimination against gays. Interestingly, a few months after this study was completed, an ordinance initiative was brought before the city council to include gays in the city's anti-discrimination ordinance. The initiative failed to receive the votes necessary to be enacted into law and the ordinance initiative failed.

This research suggests that a significant portion of the participants have experienced some form of discrimination in this community. From both the survey responses and the comments of the focus group participants, it is evident that discrimination has been experienced across all population groups. This is confirmed by the fact that most of the respondents (n=932) disagreed with the survey statement that "the Topeka Community treats citizens equally."

Even though this study was limited to 1,633 respondents in one urban area, and is a one shot descriptive study of sorts with limited generalization, it points to promising areas of new research. This study sheds light on perceptions of discrimination, and reveals that a community preparing for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* has not made significant progress respecting diversity and differences. The sense that we gleaned, especially from the focus group data, was that discrimination, although not in a blatant form, is a salient undercurrent in this community. Because this small study was limited to one municipal community of 123,993 citizens, we suggest that future studies be conducted in other communities that celebrate significant Civil Rights events in their history to determine whether the findings of this study can be replicated in other community settings.

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#### END NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Note: Many respondents reported discrimination in more than one area so the total categories of reported discrimination does not equal the sample of N=1633. The total number of reported discrimination in each category is more than N=1633.