Interracial Friendship in New York City

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ABSTRACT

Objective The goal of the research was to discover the differences in interracial relationships between adolescents in different neighborhoods in New York City. Methods We distributed questionnaires and conducted interviews in five different neighborhoods containing adolescents of different races in New York City. Results The differences between districts were not big, but we had interesting findings regarding the neighborhood Mott Haven. Conclusions This research had revealed the similarity in interracial friendship between different neighborhoods in New York City, and presented a promising atmosphere for the city’s present and future. As Muhammad from Harlem puts it, “New York has different things and more opportunities.”

BACKGROUND

The world tomorrow is powered by today’s adolescents. With the development of the Internet, intercontinental transportation, and multilingual education, the world has never been so closely connected. To understand how this world may evolve in the future, it is pivotal to understand the relationships between adolescents in the present.

Globalization has driven a lot of people to migrate to U.S. since the early 20th century. As people migrate, they bring their own cultures and traditions into their destinations. The arrival of the population itself leads to greater racial diversity in the destination. However, diversity usually leads to the issue of racial segregation. Racial segregation is a frequently argued topic all the time. The promotion of racial equality rises from the protection of basic human rights. While most cities in the world are dominated by a single racial group, New York City is a city without dominant races among its population.

There has been a number of studies done on the topic of interracial friendships between adolescents in the past in New York City. Social relationship between blacks and whites improved in the United States after the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, leading to the increase in the frequency of interracial interaction (Hallinan and Williams 1989). Racially mixed neighborhoods are more likely to foster interracial friendships and stimulate interracial interactions through daily activities. Numerous studies have been previously conducted to study interracial relationships. Besides location of residence, personal background
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information such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status also shapes a person’s interaction and relationships with people of other races (Bledsoe, Combs, Sigelman, and Welch 1996). Adolescents’ choices for friends in terms of races closely relates to their social environments at school. Additionally, the more opportunities teenagers have to interact with others, the more likely interracial friendships form. However, under normal circumstances where adolescents have absolute freedom of choice, they are still more likely to develop friendship among their own races (Entwisle and Mouw 2006). Schools and the society are trying to create more opportunities for people to foster interracial relationships (Hallinan and Williams 1989). But despite the efforts in propaganda for racial equality and elimination of racial segregation, some of the New York City population are not open to interracial friendships and they tend to limit their friendships among their own races. Most of the previous researches focused on living and learning environments such as school and community’s effects on interracial friendship. Although our research topic is not newly brought up, the particular location of New York City can provide us with a brand new insight into interracial friendships.

We plan to utilize New York City’s unique population composition and its neighbourhoods with racial features to find out more about interracial friendships among adolescents in different NYC neighborhoods. We believe that this topic has great significance because by discovering the specificity of interracial friendships, we can gain insights into the level of integration which New York adolescents are experiencing currently. The world is developing dramatically and cannot operate smoothly without the cooperation between people of different races. Interracial friendships during adolescence will be most likely to broaden the adolescents’ scope and make them more accepting and understanding towards other races, which will aid them in their future life and make them more active global citizens.

We believe that any adolescent, sociologist, or New Yorker would be interested in our research because reading our report would provide them with an up-to-date insight of interracial friendships from the perspectives of adolescents themselves.
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DESIGN
To go further with studying interracial friendships, we plan to use a combination of interviews and questionnaires. Questionnaires can provide us with highly quantifiable data, while interviews can provide us with a more comprehensive personal insight of the interviewees and perhaps stimulate further thoughts on the topic.

Since our research is about adolescents of different races, we will travel around New York City to look for our sample. We assume that public venues are one of the places where the adolescents are most likely to be present.

We will go to five neighborhoods in New York City: Harlem, Upper East Side, Flushing, Mott Haven, and East Williamsburg. According to New York City Department of City Planning in 2011, Harlem contains large numbers of black people, in Upper East Side white people, in Flushing East Asians such as Chinese and Korean, in Mott Haven Hispanic, and lastly, in East Williamsburg a mixture of people of different races (see the charts below). For each neighborhood, we will distribute 20 questionnaires to 10 boys and 10 girls, which makes up 100 questionnaires given in total. In each neighborhood, we will interview a boy and a girl who are willing to participate. In total, we will make 10 interviews. We will make sure the sample for our research all live in a neighborhood that we are studying (East Upper Side, Flushing, East Williamsburg, Mott Haven, Harlem).

(Graph 1: Demographics of Harlem)     (Graph 2: Demographics of Upper East Side)
For the questionnaires, we will ask about the respondent’s personal information first, including his/her age, gender, race, and the school he/she goes to. The respondent will also be asked about where he/she grew up, which will enable us to understand whether people from a specific region are more likely to have interracial friends. Following questions about basic personal information, the respondent will be asked questions regarding his/her own friendships so that we can find out whether the respondent has any specific preferences regarding choice of friends. We will also ask questions about the respondent’s parents’ influences on the respondent's choice of friends. Finally, we focus on the topic of interracial friendships and ask in the questionnaire how comfortable and how desirable interracial friends are for the respondents. Thus, by analyzing the results of the questionnaires, we can understand how resident neighborhood, school environment, race, gender, age, parental influence, and grow-up locations affect interracial friendship between adolescents in New York City. For studying the effects of school environment on interracial friendship, we will ask for the respondents to write down the names of their schools, and then use authorized data from the website “InsideSchools” about the racial composition of the schools’ student
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bodies. The questionnaires will be distributed based on convenience sampling. If we see people that look like adolescents, we will approach him/her, confirm their age as in between 10 and 18, and then ask him/her “Are you living in New York City?” to ensure that we are not distributing questionnaires to non-residents since our population of interest is limited to adolescents residing in the premises of New York City. We want to get as genuine responses as possible from the respondents, thus we will claim that the questionnaires are surveys for “adolescent friendship” through the introductory sentence and in the title of the questionnaire papers. We also include a few camouflage questions in the questionnaire to avoid social desirability bias.

In addition to questionnaires, we will conduct interviews with adolescents who are not occupied. We will choose adolescents of the dominant race in the neighborhood to interview. For example, we would choose to interview black adolescents instead of white adolescents in Harlem. The interview will be semi-structured in format, focusing on interracial friendships in depth. We hope to gain a more personal and subjective understanding of interracial friendships through interviews. If the interviewee does not respond actively, we will ask open-ended follow-up questions closely based on the information they provided. We will record the interviews using phone recorders and will gain informed consent from the interviewee prior to the interview. We will type up the interviews into scripts for later analysis.

DISCUSSION

Execution

Our group spent 5 days collecting data in 5 neighbourhoods: Harlem, Upper East Side, Mont Heaven, Flushing, and East Williamsburg. The whole process wasn’t that smooth since we met a lot of unexpected trouble. However, we finally achieved the planned goal and successfully finished the data collection.
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Results

(Table 1: Informations of the Sample)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>NH</th>
<th>Harlem</th>
<th>Mott Haven</th>
<th>Upper East Side</th>
<th>Flushing</th>
<th>East Williamsburg</th>
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<tbody>
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For each neighborhood that we collected data from, the numbers of respondents of each racial category were reflective of the existence of racial dominance. In Harlem, official census report suggests the dominance of black people. Correspondingly, our sample in Harlem consists mostly of black people. The parallel also occurs in Mott Haven with Hispanics and Upper East Side with Whites. However, more Hispanics and fewer Asians were interviewed in the sample for Flushing than the case of racial dominance described in the census data. In East Williamsburg, fewer Asians were interviewed than expectation.

The numbers of respondents of different age ranges in Harlem, Mott Haven, and Upper East Side were highly unequal because we used the method of convenient sample. Sample in Flushing and East Williamsburg were fairly distributed in terms of age by chance. For all five neighborhoods, the majority of the respondents grew up in New York City. Because of convenient sampling, the ratio between respondents who did and did not grow up in NYC is uncontrollable.

Our research discovers that adolescents from different neighborhoods differ marginally in their opinions and experiences with interracial friendship. The unanimous diversity of schools may be an influential reason why adolescents in New York tend to be thinking the same way on interracial friendships, the neighborhood with the least diverse schools still has a very high rate of diversity. None of the neighborhood we went to had complete racial dominance.
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Mott Haven is the most special neighborhood among the five we had researched, where the largest number of respondents believe that their parents do have effects on their choice of friendship and where 2 out of 20 respondents felt “uncomfortable” or “extremely uncomfortable” with interracial friendship. We consider that one of the reason causing this is gentrification in Mott Haven.

When we ask the question “Do you treat your interracial friends differently?” in the qualitative interview, we received similar answers from most interviewees- “No, I am very open and I just don’t really care if they’re another race. As long as they’re nice, happy and willing to do things with me, I will be happy hanging out with them.” The interviewees’ response, however, might have been influenced by social desirability bias. The American society values racial equality, thus when responding to the interview question regarding racial discrimination, the interviewees might not have been completely honest with their genuine opinions.

Analysis

School importance for making friends.

In our research, 94% of the respondents think that school is an important place for making friends while only 6% do not think so. The graph indicates that in American adolescents’ daily life, school is a significant place to find friends.
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The racial composition of schools of respondents in different neighborhoods (Green = Blank Answer) (Dominant means the largest race is 15% more than the second largest race in the school).

Through the graph below, we can find out that 95% of Harlem adolescents, 90% of Upper East Side adolescents, 85% of the Flushing adolescents, 75% of the Mont Heaven adolescents and 90% of East Williamsburg adolescents prefer school with more diverse gender and race. In the last graph above, we have proved that school is really an important place to make friends. So it is easy to understand that adolescents’ preference in school types would certainly affects their possibility to attach to students in different races and to make interracial friends. And through the results showed below, we can bring out a conclusion that adolescents living in Harlem are most willing to make interracial friends.

Do you think your parents have an influence on your choice of friends?

As is known to all, parents influence adolescents to a great extent. If parents concisely lead their children to make friends with certain races, children would probably have tendency to
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make interracial friends or friends with their own race. Among all the adolescents who did the surveys, 70% said their parents don't suggest them to make friends with people of certain races or just tell them to stay away from those who do drugs, while 29% of the adolescents said their parents do give suggestions in making friends.
Tip: One adolescent skipped this question.

*The percentage of adolescents agreeing and disagreeing on whether their parents have influenced their choice of friendship (Green = Blank Answer).*

From the graph below, we can see that 85% Upper East Side parents would influence adolescents’ decision in making friends, so do 75% Flushing parents, 70% Harlem parents, 65% East Williamsburg parents and 55% Mott Haven parents. It seems that Hispanic parents in Mott Haven are more open and more willing to accept their children’s interracial friends. White parents in Upper East Side seem to be more prudently towards children’s friendship, especially interracial friendship.
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Graph for the question “Does the difference in culture and language make it harder for you to communicate with your friends?” by districts (Green = Blank Answer).

Differences in culture and customs as well as blocks in language would certainly impede people’s interracial communication. But as adolescents, differences in culture and customs may not be a big problem. From the graph, we can find that 80% Upper East Side adolescents don’t take cultural differences as a obstacle of interracial friendship, and so do 75% teenagers in Harlem, East Williamsburg as well as Flushing, and 65% adolescents in Mott Haven. Some of the Hispanic family are not good at English, and Hispanic parents may even do not understand, so it may be a little bit harder for them to communicate with other people whose first language is English.

Graph of respondent’s comfortness with interracial friendship by neighborhood (Deep Blue = Extremely Uncomfortable, Red = Extremely Comfortable, Orange = Blank Answer).
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People’s emotion really affects a lot, and that’s why we care about adolescents’ intuitive feelings when they get along with their interracial friends. From the graph, the rate of “Extremely Comfortable” is high up to 85% in Upper East Side and 65% in East Williamsburg. “Extremely Uncomfortable” only appear in Mott Haven. This result suggests that interracial friendship is valuable while it may also cause unpleasant experience because of cultural differences. Also, racial discrimination seems still exists nowadays.

Conclusion
There are two parts to our research - design and execution. This passage is dedicated to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of our design and the successes and challenges of our execution.

For our design, we managed to rephrase several questions in our questionnaires and make the questions more apprehensible. Numerous respondents showed confusion towards the questions before being adjusted. We were also careful not to change the questions too much so that the answers received from the previous versions of questionnaires could remain valid.

In addition to our multi-version questionnaire, we utilized New York City’s unique diversity from the very start of our research since our topic was about interracial friendships. Numerous other research topics involving inequality or adolescence in a general way could be conducted in many parts of the world, but New York is one of the most ideal cities to study topics related to racial diversity.

Before the research started, we decided to distribute an equal number of questionnaires to girls and boys and we controlled the number of respondents in each neighborhood to 20 so that no neighborhood would be able to skew the data unfairly.

However, due to the time constraints and the lack of access to satisfactory samples, we were only able to adopt convenience sampling as our method of selecting both the respondents and interviewees. Most of the times we only chose parks that are close to the metro station, which made the research region much smaller than the neighborhood. If we had the time and the
resources to adopt other sampling methods, our data would be more accurate and representative of the population in each neighborhood.

Additionally, due to the constraints in time and resources, we were not able to go to more neighborhoods. If we had done so, we would perhaps discover the subtle differences in interracial friendships between adolescents of different countries but of the same race.

Furthermore, a more detailed understanding of interracial friendships can be achieved if we used the Likert scale in some of our questions instead of a simple “Yes No” type. A Likert scale would show the extent of their feelings and their conditions. We realized this problem the second night after starting our research, which was all too late for us to make major changes because it would force us to recollect the data using the new questions again, which we neither had the time nor the energy to do so.

Finally, we did not regulate the number of questionnaires received by different age groups. This had caused certain age group to share a larger portion of the questionnaires, making the overall data slightly skewed towards that specific age group.

From this paragraph onwards we will discuss the successes and challenges of the execution phase. The first success is, we managed to separate ourselves into two groups of two after we arrived in the neighborhood. By doing so, what used to be 20 questionnaires and 2 interviews for four can now be divided to 10 questionnaires and 1 interview for two. Although the numbers remain the same, it requires less effort when a bigger task is divided into smaller ones.

Secondly, during the research, we all took out temporary Columbia University ID cards with us. This action turned out to be helpful because we were accepted more frequently when we introduced ourselves as “students of Columbia University” instead of random Asian adolescents doing social researches. The ID card helped us earn trust from strangers faster, which increased the likelihood of them answering our questionnaires and interviews.
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However, no matter what identification we show to respondents, we are still strangers to them. The distant relationship led to brief answers and short interviews, which was simply not very fruitful for us to analyze. Most of the times the interviewer spoke more – much more – than the interviewee.

A further problem with interviews is the difficulty in drafting thought-provoking question amidst interviews. We had to be careful about our usage and phrasing, for example, if we start the question with “do you…” then we are almost asking for a simple yes or no answer. We could certainly start the question with “how” or “what”, but there were still problems of unfamiliarity. Sometimes the longer the question we ask, the shorter the answer they give.

Lastly, the interviewees did not plan ahead for this unpredictable interview. They might be off from a ball game temporarily, or may be playing with their friends; but whichever their actions may be, our action of interviewing them had certainly disrupted their schedules. Sometimes the brief answers are not because of unfamiliarity with the interviewer, but because of the immediacies of the situation.
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