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Title: The Myth of the Black Townie

About the Author: I am a Senior in Psychology and African American Studeis here at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. I am currently applying for graduate school and my intention is to pursue a Ph.D in Sociology. Eventually, I would like to be an African American Studies professor. My research interests include; inequality as it relates to the social experiences of African Americans, class conflicts within the community, and the impact of social and cultural capital on the life courses of Black Americans.

Keywords:

Abstract: This inquiry, based on qualitative data obtained from both participant interviews and my own personal observations, seeks to understand the relationship between African American students of Parkland College, the University of Illinois, and similarly aged, non-enrolled members of the Champaign Urbana community. The findings of this investigation suggest that there is often a hostile relationship between African Americans of these diverse populations. The research was based on the popular usage of the derogatory term "townie" to define an uneducaed, lower class African American who was born and raised in the area. Although there might be several viable explanations, my data seems to confirm that cleavages along lines of economics and education were the main source of conflict.

Initial Exercises: Growing up near the University of Illinois allowed me to informally become a part of the culture of the school. My mother would frequently bring me to various cultural events, museums, plays, and dinners. I remember always being in awe of students and faculty and the overall intellectual atmosphere I felt when I came. My great uncle and my mother attended the U of I, and I was strongly encouraged to apply and attend the University.

Although I loved the Champaign-Urbana community, and the school was fairly close to home, I always felt that admission was unattainable for me. My hesitation wasn't really based on academics, because all through out high school I had excelled in every subject. I think the major deterrent was the fact that the U of

I is a research institution. I don't think I fully understood what the term meant I just knew that it set the University of Illinois apart from other institutions. Anytime I mentioned to teachers or members of my community that I was considering Illinois State, Northern, and the University of Illinois, it was always the U of I that generated looks of respect, awe, and pride. Nobody who knew me doubted my ability to succeed at the institution and in a way, that fact influenced my decision to apply and finally, accept the offer for admission.

Overall, I would say that my first year at the University was fairly successful. I think this has a lot to do with preparation I received in high school that extended beyond learning study techniques and getting good grades. I feel that I was well equipped to negotiate through the various offices, forms, registrations, etc because I had been given the tools to do so during high school.

For people who have not been given these skills, it is easy to see how navigating a large university like this one could become discouraging. I don't think the University is particularly helpful in that respect. Students are expected to know which office to go to for a multitude of issues, which counselor to speak to, and deadlines for every process on campus. If a student does not, it is not because there is so much information to remember, it is because that student is irresponsible or somehow unprepared for college. Besides the 1-3 days of orientation, students aren't really given the chance to make a smooth transition from high school to the University. You're thrown out there and expected to sink or swim.

Now that I have almost completed my education at the U of I, I have a

different understanding of the university. Although grades and academics are important, I think the most significant consequence of college is the education you receive outside of the classroom. I can't speak about the nature of other universities, but the University of Illinois is excellent in terms of encouraging students to take what they learn and apply it to real life. The experiences I've had have allowed me to consider life after college and how my education can be used to produce the type of career and lifestyle I would like to have.

My interest and excitement in viewing the archive material stemmed mainly from the fact that my family has a personal history with the University of Illinois. As I mentioned in my first assignment, both my great uncle and my mother attended this university. My ultimate goal was to locate information that would tell me about their personal experiences here at the University. I wanted to see my mother and my great uncle as student facing the same type of dilemmas I face, doing homework and participating in extracurricular activities. For me, this trip was about finding my place in the University.

University Archives

My great uncle was involved in so many organizations. Not only was he president of Flagg House which I am, he was in the University Chorus, German Club, and the Junior Bar Association. During her time here, my mother was involved with what would have been considered back then, very "radical" organizations. She participated in protests and demonstrations with topics ranging from the University's business dealings with countries that exploited their people,

to the lack of minority faculty on campus. (It amazes me every time we discuss the similarities between her U of I and mine, and I am always disgusted that I am still fighting the same battles she begun.)

I was extremely proud to see my family represented in the history of the University. But, in a way, it revitalized the feelings of inadequacy I felt prior to coming here. As I near the end of my educational career at the University of Illinois, I've begun to wonder what type of legacy I am going to leave behind. Although I've been involved in a significant number of organizations, I don't feel like I have particularly left my mark on the campus. In particular, I think about my future generations and worry about having significant accomplishments to share with them that will inspire them as my mother's have inspired me. A question that immediately popped into my mind when I felt the surge of pride at seeing my great uncle as one of the few African Americans in his organizations was: What types of publications would I like my children and my children's children to see if they were to visit the University archives some 30 years from now?

I also gathered information relevant to my research project. I read an oral history about Albert Spurlock who attended the University from 1928-1938. In it, I found information that led me to believe that the relationship of campus and community members back then was very similar to the relationship today. Spurlock describes a social event in which "town people tried to get in" and started shooting. If I had not known that these statements were part of a historical interview, I would have believed that it was a recent account. His description

sounded so familiar, it could have easily been any of my peers describing a

weekend out at I thought this statement was extremely profound on several levels.

First, it clearly suggests hostile relationship between "town people" and University

students. But also, it suggests the boundaries that existed and perhaps may still

exist between these two very distinct sub groups.

Reading this article made me think about my project in a different way and

encouraged me to add a historical piece to my research. In addition to

interviewing current students and residents of the community, I intend to interview

individuals who have had a connection with the University of Illinois in the past.

This method will allow me to not only compare between the various sub groups,

but also across generations.

Question: What is the nature of the relationship between African American students at the University of Illinois and Parkland college, as well as non-enrolled members of the Champaign Urbana community?

Plan: Do these various subgroups dress differently at social events, and how might that affect their experiences?

Do pricing and identification requirements affect the social experiences of these populations differently?

Do Parkland students and community members differ from U of I students in their choice of social events, and if so, what may be the reasons?

Data:

Discuss: The Myth of the Black Townie

Alana Mbanza

EPS 500: Ethnography of the University

University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign

"To me…a townie is a person that is born and raised in Champaign…but…they

are kind of like deadbeats…" (Female, Community Member).

"From what I understand, a townie is somebody who actually lives in the town and usually doesn't attend one of the schools, but likes to hang out in the same places as individuals who do" (Male, UI Student).

"I consider a townie to be a person who lives in Champaign, who is not in school, just working, being a bum, or pursuing a rap career" (Male, UI student).

"I would call myself a townie because I'm from Champaign, but whenever other people hear me use that term in reference to myself, they tell me I'm not a townie because I go to school here" (Female, Parkland student).

On my quest to find the allusive Black townie, I encountered;

- Many who reported townie sightings

- Others who identified themselves as townies. However, after further investigation, evidence revealed that they were not, in fact, townies, and

- Those who adamantly proclaimed that they would never ever date a townie, but couldn't quite explain to me what a townie was.

So who are these individuals who cause so much consternation among University of Illinois and Parkland students but have eluded my every attempt to examine them? What characteristics constitute a townie? And, why is there such a negative connotation associated with the term?

This project originally began as a comparative analysis of the social experiences of Parkland and University of Illinois students, as well as similarly aged community members. My underlying assumption was that these group's experiences differed significantly, and that these differences could be explained in terms of various indicators of socioeconomic status such as; style of dress, venue choice, and college enrollment or non-enrollment.

I wanted to understand if there was something about the culture of the institution that created feelings of elitism and superiority. Furthermore, I was interested in learning if these attitudes resulted in the utilization of discriminatory policies and practices to aggressively keep non-enrolled individuals out. Some of the research questions I wanted to address are as follows:

Do these various subgroups dress differently at social events, and how

might that affect their experiences?

Do pricing and identification requirements affect the social experiences of these populations differently?

Do Parkland students and community members differ from U of I students in their choice of social events, and if so, what may be the reasons? However, after the first few interviews, a compelling theme began to emerge. When responding to the final question concerning choice of venue, Parkland, UI, and community members alike stated that when deciding where to go out on weekends, they were primarily concerned with the atmosphere and crowd at a particular location. Many specifically used the term townie while others only spoke only in general terms about "rude" and "violent" individuals who "messed up" the parties with excessive fighting. Either way, the underlying message was that there was something inherently negative about "them" that "we" did not want to have anything to do with.

As a result of this new information, my project has changed slightly since it was first conceptualized. I am now attempting to understand the nature of the relationship between these various subgroups of African Americans rather than the social experiences of each group. This research is primarily based on the sociological theory of in groups versus out groups.

According to Shchaefer, "an in-group can be defined as any group or category to which people belong (120)." Essentially, these groups create a sense of a collective "we" or "us." In-groups are of no distinctive size; they can be as large and as broad as college students, or as strictly defined to only include students in a particular Sociology course. Conversely, out-groups are any groups to which an individual does not feel a particular sense of belonging. Out-groups are generally labeled as "they" or "them" (120). Often times, there are conflicts between these two groups due to a feeling of superiority within the in-group.

In an oral history by Albert Spurlock who attended the University from 1928-1938, I found information that led me to believe that the relationship of campus and community members back then was very similar to the relationship today. Spurlock describes a social event in which "town people tried to get in" and started shooting. If I had not known that these statements were part of a historical interview, I would have believed that it was a recent account. His description sounded so familiar, it could have easily been any of my peers describing a weekend out. I thought this statement was extremely profound on several levels. First, it clearly suggests hostile relationship between "town people" and University students. But also, it suggests the boundaries that existed and perhaps may still

exist between these two very distinct sub groups.

Even more historical evidence can be found in *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois, 1965-75*; a book that chronicles the struggle for Black studies programs on the University of Illinois campus in the 1960's and 70's. Within the course of the historical analysis, Williamson details the relationship between the Champaign Urbana community and University students. Because Black students were originally denied access to University residence halls, they were forced to reside in the community with members who were willing to take them in.

This fact and the racial consciousness characteristic of the Black power movement created an early sense of responsibility and connection to the community. Many students were involved with outreach and volunteer services within the Champaign Urbana community. A former UI student, who had attended the school in the early 1970's confirmed this information. She was involved with an organization named Sisters in the Struggle that provided an after school program for youth in the community.

Nevertheless, when students were allowed to enter the residence halls, the relationship between campus and community changed. An animosity developed due to male competition for female dates, as well as prohibition of community members from Greek parties. Black students would only enter the Champaign Urbana community to utilize its services such as barber shops and restaurants and quickly return to campus. The same can be said of the relationship between campus and community today.

My interest in this topic stems from the fact that I have been able to identify with both sides of this issue at various points in my life. I was born in Champaign-Urbana, raised in a small town nearby, and spent most of my summers here. I have sometimes been labeled a townie because I associated with others who were classified as such; and because I am more knowledgeable about the culture of the Champaign-Urbana community than the average UI or Parkland student.

After I entered the University of Illinois, I found that it had become more difficult to communicate with some of my closest friends; partly because we had developed different interests, were concerned with different issues, and because of an unmentioned tension between us. This study seeks to understand that tension. Although this is primarily a scientific inquiry, it is based on my own quest to understand my changing identity within the context of the University.

Methods

To collect data I conducted eight interviews and observed the behavior of individuals in several social locations around town. The social venues I chose to observe were; Soma, FuBar, Ellusions, Jackson's, and Joes. These locations were chosen because they were specifically mentioned by participants as desired places to patronize.

Participants

Most interviews were conducted in central locations such as the Illini Union, the undergraduate library, and Marketplace Mall. Participants were both male (five) and female (three). All were African American. Of these eight participants,

four were University students (including one former student), one was a Parkland student, and three were born and raised in Champaign-Urbana. I used the snowball technique whereby I started with individuals that I knew and obtained recommendations for others who might be interested in assisting me with my research objectives (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004).   Because I utilized this method, it is extremely likely that participants had similar answers regarding dress, venue choice, and other topics of interest.

When I first started interviewing people for the project, I had only a few very basic questions that I wanted to ask. My plan was to have a minimal amount of structure to give participants the opportunity to dialogue about the topic freely. Examples of my questions are; what is your relationship to the University of Illinois (current student, former student, etc.)? What types of social events do you attend? What do you generally wear when you go out? Are you familiar with the term "townie" and what would you consider to be the characteristics of a "townie?" After my first interview, I gained some valuable information about additional questions as well as different ways of phrasing my questions to elicit more detailed answers.

It was very difficult to keep from asking leading questions. For example, the question "Would you consider the term, townie, to have negative connotations?" implicitly states what my own personal beliefs may be and cues participants to the answer that would best confirm my hypothesis. Instead of questioning this way, I chose to have respondents identify the major characteristics of a townie first, and then to evaluate whether they would consider this term to be a negative one. This method eliminated some of the potential biases in the data.

Findings

Conflicting Data

An interesting theme that emerged during the course of my research was conflict within the data. There were significant differences between my observation and the responses I was given by participants.   I originally assumed that "townies" or people from the Champaign area would dress differently from UI and Parkland students. "Townies" would be more casually dressed in jeans, tennis shoes, and jerseys, while UI and Parkland students would dress more professionally. This assumption was based a series of observations conducted at the various social venues mentioned previously. In venues specifically designated as "townie clubs", I noticed that the dress code was extremely relaxed and centered on sports apparel.

However, as I gathered research from participants, I noticed that my observations often conflicted with the perceptions of my interviewees. Many community members, Parkland students, and UI students described similar styles of dress for a night on the town. The typical response was that girls would wear "something sexy but classy" that "emphasized certain body parts." A typical outfit would include; a nice blouse or dress, with either jeans or slacks, and heels. Men's responses varied from a nice button down shirt and jeans to a tuxedo. Interestingly, many of the male participants made sure to emphasize that they would absolutely never wear gym shoes.

Another assumption was that "townies" would pay more and be required

to show additional identification for admission into clubs, bars, and other social events. However, again, when probed about how much they were willing to pay, how much they would typically pay, and if they felt that pricing at certain events differed for various groups, all participants responded in similar manners. Many said that they would be willing to pay no more than $10 on a regular weekend and up to $20 for special events such as Homecoming or Cotton Club. Admittedly, this leading question could have potentially influenced participant responses. But, because not one individual answered in the affirmative, or felt that prices were different for different populations, I can confidently assume that the answers given were accurate reflections of the interviewee's beliefs.

The discrepancy in these findings could be due to several factors. First, people may not have been aware of the differences. I noticed that the likelihood that campus venues will charge more and require additional identification for non-enrolled people increases during the summer months when students are gone. For that reason, such instances may not have been readily available to most respondents. Others may have been hesitant to admit that they had noticed any differences between themselves and others at social events. If people had noticed that they dressed differently, were being required to show additional identification, or pay different prices, it could have been easier to ignore the issue or simply not pay then to analyze the reasoning behind it.

"I promised my family I would never go to Townie Clubs": Choice of Venue

I chose to analyze participant's choice of venue for a variety reasons. First, I was primarily interested in the popular belief that there are "townie clubs" or places where people born in Champaign usually frequent. Clubs that were specifically mentioned by University and Parkland students were Jackson's, Canopy, and Ellusions. Furthermore, I was also intrigued by the idea that these spaces are distinctly different in atmosphere than those typically patronized by University of Illinois and Parkland students. Responses and observations typically confirmed that there were in fact segregated areas depending on which group you chose to identify with. Many people from the community generally enjoyed going to Jackson's, the Legion, and Ellusions, while students were concentrated in places like Soma, FuBar, and High Dive.

Concern for personal safety was often cited as the main reason students were unwilling to go to clubs designated as "townie clubs". One participant who was born here, began her academic career at Parkland College, and was now about to graduate from the University of Illinois, told me that she had promised her family that she would never go to a "townie club." Her reasoning was based on her family's concern for her safety. There was a general assumption among both college students, as well as many community members, that "townies" were often the source of fighting and violence at social events. When questioned if she believed that it was only townies that created problems, one female UI student quickly disagreed. "Students create problems too; there are just different consequences for us."

Another reason for the difference in venue choice was the type of atmosphere these clubs presented. As one male Parkland student notes, these clubs

typically "don't have the girls I'm looking for" implying that there was a lower class population frequenting these areas. Other descriptions of the differences in "townie spots" and campus locations included the perception that venues in the community were too "bar-y" as opposed to "party-y." When asked to clarify, this female UI student responded that at campus clubs social networking was the main focus. On the other hand, individuals who attended clubs in the community were intent on "hooking up" or ultimately just looking for dates.

"They are kind of like deadbeats": Negative Connotations

After I confirmed that there was indeed an animus relationship between students and townies, I was interested in finding out how these various individuals would actually define the term. I essentially wanted to learn the basic characteristics of a townie. According to many, these individuals were known for their disruptive and violent behaviors. They were often labeled as "trouble makers" and prone to starting fights. Guns and shootings were also a common topic mentioned in the context of a townie characteristic. Overall, every person interviewed agreed that the term had negative connotations.

"High Dive has townies, but they're clean cut townies": Socioeconomics Matter

In addition to the violence associated with these individuals, there was also the sense that townies were not involved in anything productive around the community. Interestingly enough many of the community members clearly stated that they would not consider themselves townies. Overwhelmingly, people responded that being from Champaign Urbana did not automatically classify one as a townie. Instead, a townie was more narrowly defined to include only those of low socioeconomic status. Frequent terms used to describe these individuals were "low class," "hood," "ghetto," and "economically deprived."

In addition, according to most individuals interviewed, there are different levels of townies, with differing levels of acceptance among both college communities. An international student at Parkland College summarizes this theme by differentiating between "regular townies" and "clean cut" townies. Two factors seemed to influence the degree of acceptance most; education and employment. Employment was important in mitigating the negative stigma associated with a townie classification. For a person born and raised in Champaign to avoid this designation it was essential that they be actively engaged in some sort of productive and gainful occupation.

In their definitions of the term, most stated that the fact that a townie "doesn't attend one of the schools" was an indicator that he or she was a townie. There also seemed to be a clear understanding that although townies were not in school, they still benefitted from the school in some ways. One community member suggested that townies "could care less about the school academically, they are more interested in the night life and the entertainment associated with it [the school]. This fact seemed to be a major source of irritation among University of Illinois student in particular. I often heard frustrated remarks related to "townies coming in and messing up *our* parties." This statement conveys both a sense of ownership and the desire to keep these unwanted strangers out.

"Ew, she's dating a townie!": The Gendered Townie

An interesting phenomenon I encountered during the course of my investigation

was the notion of a gendered townie. When defining the term townie, many respondents offered characteristics that were noticeably male. For example, when asked whether her or her peers ever discussed the topic of townies, or community members, a former University of Illinois responded that it was often in the context of dating. Many females would be berated or looked down upon if they were in a relationship with a male from the community. More specifically, she said "Ew, *she's* dating a townie!" However, this interviewer quickly responded that if the townie had a decent job, the stigma was greatly reduced. A female community member vehemently stated that she would never "dream of dating a townie."

This belief that those who cause typically cause problems are unemployed, uneducated Black men can also be observed in the type of dress code enforced in both campus and off campus locations. Dress code policies include the restriction of basketball jerseys, ball caps, and baggy pants. All of these pieces of clothing are perceived to be worn by lower class African American males.

During the course of this investigation I observed a blog on the Myspace website that spoke to a similar issue involving discriminatory dress code policies in Iowa. According the blog, members of the Black Student Union were preparing to boycott several bars in the Iowa City area. As the spokesperson of the organization clearly points out, these codes and policies target Black men and assume that these particular items are clothing only "black males would wear — baggy jeans, jerseys, flashy ice."

Admittedly, the proprietors of bars in Iowa most likely were not African American, nor would they have specifically had the term townie in mind when conceptualizing these discriminatory policies, however, similar components can be observed in both scenarios. First, there is a distinct population that is targeted as the source of the negative attitudes. Second, there are specific negative characteristics attributed to the selected population. Finally, these characteristics are generally cultural. It is culture, not race that has become the new determinant of social acceptance. Culture cuts across lines of race so that even members of one's own race can be subject to individual prejudices.

Discussion

This inquiry, based on qualitative data obtained from both participant interviews and my own personal observations, seeks to understand the relationship between African American students of Parkland College, the University of Illinois, as well as similarly aged, non-enrolled members of the Champaign Urbana community. The findings of this investigation suggest that there is often a hostile relationship between African Americans of these diverse populations. Although there might be several viable explanations, my data seems to confirm that cleavages along lines of economics and education were the main source of conflict. More than just simply a derogatory term used to define the characteristics of particular group; the term townie seems to embody this conflict. It is a symbolic way of saying that "we" are different from "them." Inherent in this classification system is the belief that "we" are better than "them" for the many reasons mentioned previously.

That these various subgroups belong to the same racial and ethnic category does not necessarily mean that they should be expected to get along. However,

these intriguing tensions may speak to larger changes in society and beg further investigation. If education and employment are the main reasons cited as causing division within these groups, then it is in these contexts that the relationships between them must be studied. The notion of prejudice within already subordinate groups is not so much of a new phenomenon, as it is little studied.

In analyzing the relationship between non-enrolled and enrolled African Americans, I am essentially looking at differences along dimensions of socioeconomic status and class. Researchers in both Sociology and African American studies have recently begun to examine the interactions between upper, middle, and lower class African Americans; highlighting the diversity within this racial group. *Black Picket Fences* by Mary Patillo and *Blue Chip Blacks,* written by Karyn R. Lacy both use the context of neighborhoods to delineate the relationship among these various subgroups. However, higher education is something that has yet to be explored as a potential source of conflict and tension within the African American community.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this research project revealed an interesting trend in relationships between diverse populations of young African Americans in the Champaign-Urbana area, it was not without its limitations. First, due to time constraints, the study was not as comprehensive as it could have been. This fact limits the ability of the research findings to be generalized to large populations within the community. I suggest that future researchers attempt to replicate these findings on a much larger scale by interviewing more participants and observing social locations in the Champaign-Urbana area over an extended period of time.

A questionnaire might also be more effective in gathering information from participants. The anonymity of this research method would allow individuals freedom to express their true beliefs without fear of social stigma. Additionally, this study had larger sample of UI students than any other demographic due to ease and accessibility to the researcher. As a result, Parkland students and community members were not given as strong a voice in this project. It is essential that this population be heard to fully understand the nature of the relationship between these three subgroups.

EUI Links: Class and the consumption of status symbols on the U of I campus

http://hdl.handle.net/2142/1882

 Parkland Community College Transfer Students and Current Students

http://hdl.handle.net/2142/2308

Class Differentiation in the University of Illinois and Parkland College

http://hdl.handle.net/2142/1808