Alienation amongst black students at a predominantly white university

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In South Africa today there are twenty-one universities. Like so many other aspects of existence in South Africa, universities are broadly segregated along racial lines. Certain universities are regarded as "open" universities – in effect these are mainly white English – speaking universities which accept some black students, but these remain very much in the minority. At UCT black students make up 20% of the university student body (van der Merwe, 1987). This situation raises questions about how black students adjust to attending a white majority campus.

There is considerable interest in what has been termed the "alienation" of university students (Holian, 1972). Many authors working in this field define alienation in accordance with Seeman (1959) who delineated four major components: meaningless, powerlessness, normlessness and social isolation. Keniston (1960) and others believe alienation to be a dominant theme in the lives of university students. Moreover, it has been postulated that students experience alienation with reference to society as a whole as well as within the university and other

specific contexts (Keniston, 1960). Some theorists have recognized the influence that social structures bring to bear upon creating the individual's feelings of alienation (Burbach and Thompson, 1973).

Loo and Rolison (1986) have sought in particular to examine the alienation of minority students at predominantly white universities in the USA. Their definition of alienation, based on Tinto's conceptual constructs of academic and social integration (1975, in Loo and Rolison, 1986), takes specific account of the position of ethnic minority students on university campuses. For this reason, the definition they provide is the most appropriate in terms of examining black students at white English-speaking universities in South Africa. We therefore define alienation in accordance with Loo and Rolison as "the outcome of one's holding values highly divergent from those of the social collectivity, and ... insufficient personal interaction with the other members of the collectivity" (1986:59-60), noting that alienation may occur in both the academic and social subsystems of the university.

There is substantial international evidence to suggest that all college students experience some degree of alienation. Various studies have sought to examine cross-cultural differences (eg. Tomeh, 1974) and the position of minority group students on campuses in different countries; for example Hong Kong (Ma, 1985). In the USA, one of the most recent and thorough studies is that of Loo and Rolison (1986). They conducted in-depth interviews with 109 minority group students and 54 white students. Their

findings revealed that "the sociocultural alienation of minority students was significantly greater than that of white students" (1986:64) and that minority group students felt that they faced more academic difficulties than white students.

Mphahlele (1982) has noted that black students at predominantly white campuses in South Africa experience similar feelings of alienation to those of minority students at American universities. Mphahlele views these feelings as resulting from pressure to surrender to the cultural values of the dominant white group. He notes further that the psychological experience of a minority group will involve a regrouping or voluntary segregation in order to protect their distinct cultural experience and self-image as black.

Few studies in South Africa have sought to systematically examine the position of black minority students on white majority campuses. However, a major study by Honikman (1982) investigated the experiences of first-year students at UCT in an attempt to identify factors that influence students' well-being and academic performance. Aiming for a holistic perspective, the author looked at social, emotional, political and academic functioning. The study devotes much time to the specific problems of black students, though these are not seen in isolation from the problems of students in general. Honikman found that social and emotional factors are highly influential in affecting the general well-being of students. In this regard, black students showed particularly severe and "a-typical"

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problems. Difficulties encountered in the transition from school to university, compounded by inadequate educational background, were found to undermine the confidence of black students and to affect their academic performance. Black students were also found to experience greater initial confusion and feelings of alienation. More significantly, black students experienced accommodation, transport and finance problems which the author felt probably had wide ranging effects. She suggests further investigation of these material factors for the social, emotional and political difficulties they might generate. This she feels is important in understanding the attitudes and perceptions of black students.

It is Honikman's (1982) contention that these problems must be viewed in context; that is the university should be seen as a micro-society which is experiencing problems generated by the macro-society of apartheid South Africa. In this regard she gives details of apartheid legislation like Population Registration and Group Areas acts, education and security legislation, labour regulation, the homeland system, etc. which are seen to directly or indirectly affect all students at university. In other words the structure of the apartheid society has differential effects on black and white students and the position of these students on campus reflect those differences.

The connection between students on campus and the broader society has implications. Since universities are not seen to operate in a vacuum, Alexander (1985) puts forward the view that the student has a role to play in society. He notes that one cannot be a

student out of the context of total existence. Hence the black student remains oppressed in society and at the university. Struggle for liberation occurs both in society and on the university campus. It is therefore part of the students' role to challenge structures which are oppressive, including educational structures that reproduce the values, ideals and rules of the dominant class.

A recent study conducted by academics at Wits explored views of "people of three different 'constituencies' to identify their perceptions of Wits at present and elicit suggestions as to how our university may play a more constructive and creative role in the future" (Perceptions of Wits, 1986:2). Findings revealed widespread agreement amongst all three groups that the university could do more to support the disadvantaged community by increasing access to university education and to decision-making structures, and by making the university curricula, teaching and research more relevant to the South African situation. Black students in particular felt that more affirmative and radical action was needed; for instance, opening dialogue with the ANC, establishing resource centres for use by community organizations and trade unions, and locating part-time courses within the community.

The political function of education then may be seen as important to a large number of persons in South Africa, as was demonstrated by Danziger. He analysed the future autobiographies of three groups of black African pupils who

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wrote about their expectations, plans and aspirations for the future. These revealed that pupils engaged in limited personal planning and were increasingly occupied with socio-political problems. Danziger suggested that the "tendency to see the future in social rather than individual terms represents a reaction to conditions of political oppression and social discrimination which govern the lives of these subjects" (1975:119). By contrast, trends in the white sample revealed that pupils were pre-occupied with realistic personal plans, similar to Euro-American patterns.

In a replication of this study, Du Preez and collegues (Du Preez, Bhana, Broekman, Louw and Nel, 1981) found that Black pupils tended to have a more revolutionary orientation to change than whites; that is, to view violent overthrow of the state as the only means for social change. Whites tended to move away from the conservative image found in Danziger's study, towards more liberal or catastrophic views of the future. These studies suggest that black pupils may evidence a greater concern for political rather than personal issues, and may adopt a more revolutionary standpoint with respect to these. This is not unexpected given the differing positions of black and white pupils in the broader society.

More recently, an analysis of how deeply social reality penetrates the personal sphere has been offered by Foster and Finchilescu (1986). They put forward the notion that South Africa is a society in which there is little interpersonal contact between 'races'. The authors criticise the contact hypothesis

which states that increased contact per se will improve intergroup relations. Using social identity theory, they argue that only contact of a certain type will bring about change. It is further argued that where there is a common goal to change the apartheid structure, there is also an effort to change racially defined group identities, for example in liberation movements and activist groups. In other words, interpersonal contact between people of different 'race-groups' such as on an open university campus is not enough to improve group relations since the social reality and group identity of those individuals will still be intact.

Given the scant opportunity for meaningful intergroup contact (Foster and Finchilescu, 1986), and the reality of voluntary segregation on both American (Loo and Rolison, 1986) and South African campuses, the perception of other 'racegroups' by a particular 'racegroup' is of considerable interest. Cooper (1981) proposed that this lack of intergroup contact results in different racegroups evidencing mistrust towards one another and his research findings suggest that this may indeed be the case. On the basis of these findings Cooper surveyed the attitudes of black students on UCT campus to being at a predominantly white university. He found that 90% reported feeling alienated in this regard. This finding supports the work of Honikman (1982) and Loo and Rolison (1986).

In summary, the scant South African literature on black students at predominantly white universities reveals that the problems

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experienced by black students at white majority campuses are material, socio-political, psychological and academic. Moreover, socio-political factors are determinants of black student perceptions and attitudes. Finally, it is important to recognise that the racial divisions evidenced in South African society at large are reflected in the microcosm of the university.

It appears then that in South Africa the concept of alienation is not used, but that the problems of university students are seen in terms of the material, socio-political, psychological and academic. Alienation is implied, but explicit links are not made. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to employ the framework of alienation and within that, to explore the various factors which underlie this experience.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A two-group design was employed for comparative purposes. A group of 10 black and 10 white students was selected. The term "black" refers to those students classified as "African" in terms of South African legislation. The rationale for the exclusive use of "African" students was that those students are usually the most disadvantaged and underprepared in terms of socio-economic status and educational background. Attempts to match the participants in the two groups proved difficult, but the variables of age and level of university training were controlled for.

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Sampling

The initial sampling pool was defined as all UCT first-year students between the ages of 18 and 23 years, registered for Psychology I. Random selection using psychology department student records yielded too few black students who met the criteria of age and level of university study and difficulty was encountered in contacting the sample in this way. The first author therefore approached the Psychology I class for volunteers. This yielded 6 white students and one black student who met the criteria. Since this sample was inadequate, further participants were sought by asking interviewees for other contacts. This seemed particularly important in the case of black students who initially seemed wary of the motives of such research.

The final sample therefore comprised of 10 black and 10 white students, mainly from the Arts and Social Science faculties. There was altogether 9 males and 11 females with a mean age of 19.5 years. Most white students had matriculated in 1986. Most black students had matriculated earlier and had either worked or studied before coming to UCT. Most white students came from families where both parents had matric and some tertiary education. The minority of black students came from homes where parents had matric and tertiary education.

Procedure

Participants were contacted telephonically and asked to participate in a study exploring their adjustment to UCT. Of

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those whom the first author managed to contact, only one student
refused to participate. Interviews were conducted on campus,
lasted approximately one hour, and were taped in all cases except
one. A semi-structured interview schedule was used which included
both closed and open ended questions. The schedule covered the
following broad areas: material problems, academic satisfaction,
social and political experiences. All tapes were transcribed and
quantitative and qualitative analyses performed.

FINDINGS

The findings revealed that black students experience far greater
alienation than white students and that this stemmed from three
broad areas, that is the material, the social and the academic.

Material

With respect to accommodation, transport and finance black
students had more problems than white students. The majority of
the former (90%) did not get into residence in the first semester
and were forced to move from place to place. Lack of transport
posed an added financial strain upon these particular students
and encroached upon their study time, exemplified in the
following quotation:

> "My friends helped me with some money for the
> taxi to Mowbray. Then I take the bus or walk
> to campus - using the library after hours was
> a problem in this way."

These kinds of problems made students feel unsettled and
insecure, and appeared to have repercussions for their academic
performance.

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White students did not have these problems because they were still living with their parents (which reduced their expenses), and the majority had adequate financial support and transport arrangements.

Academic

Both black and white students felt underprepared for coming to university. Although black students felt confident initially, due to poor academic performance this confidence was undermined. Most of the latter students were achieving low marks for course work, failing exams and had to attend academic support programs. By contrast, white students were performing better than they had expected and had gained confidence from this.

All of the black students interviewed felt dissatisfied with their academic performance. In the main these students had difficulty in pinpointing their problems, feeling it was a combination of factors as the following quotation illustrate:

> "I don't know exactly why, it's linked to many things"

Nevertheless, various problems were identified; these included language difficulties, study skills, perceived prejudice and difficulty with acclimatising to UCT. In addition, the material problems mentioned earlier negatively affected black students in particular, in that lack of adequate accommodation, financial strain and transport difficulties detracted from time available for academic pursuits.

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Social

The importance of the social sphere in the alienation of minority students has been noted (Loo and Rolison, 1986). Honikman (1982), for example, draws attention to the importance of social and emotional factors in the alienation or "well-being" of black students in particular at UCT. However, most authors in this field have neglected the role of the political sphere in influencing the alienation of university students. It is our contention that for the South African university student the political sphere is intrinsically bound up with the social sphere, and that this needs to be acknowledged when discussing the alienation of these students.

Students were asked about the social and political aspects of their life at UCT. White students found it easy to separate these two areas whereas black students did not. All white students could identify with the values, goals and ideals of the university and expressed feeling integrated into the university, as one student put it:

> "It's a brilliant environment- I'm becoming
> increasingly more integrated."

Another student said:

> "It's what I expected - a jol"

These students felt that their political views were also congruent with those espoused by UCT. It therefore appears that white students do not feel alienated from the university since in terms of Loo and Rolison's definition they do not hold "values highly divergent from those of the social collectivity" (1986:60).

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By contrast 60% of black students described not feeling
integrated into the university as the following two quotations
illustrate:

>"UCT is just that place on the mountain.
>I am not part of this community."

>"I don't feel at home here - there are
>too many things to remind me it's a
>white university."

The university was seen not to cater for their social and
political needs and as representing only the interest of whites.
Consequently these students felt that the political views of the
university and their own were not congruent. They spoke at
length of this:

>"UCT has a non-racial policy in public,
>but this is not really so."

>"I found UCT hard, arrogant and out of
>touch with black suffering."

A number of authors have described black students as experiencing
alienation from the univerity in this way. These findings
support those of Vilakazi and Tema (1985) and Lea (1987).
Vilakazi and Tema noted that black students may have difficulty
in adjusting to what they term the "whiteness of the
university". Furthermore, Lea (1987) using Vilakazi and Tema's
concept, found that 73% of black students in her sample also
reported difficulty in adjusting to the "whiteness" of UCT.

Essentially white and black students were not interacting
socially with one another, a situation of voluntary segregation
which supports the work of Loo and Rolison (1986) and Lea (1987).
In fact, black students felt that UCT was racially polarized.

Thus one student commented:

> "I thought black and white conflict
> would be less at varsity level,but
> you still find people with racist
> ideas."

It thus appears, in accordance with Loo and Rolison's definition
of alienation , that black students at a predominantly white
university do experience feelings of alienation in that they hold
"values highly divergent from the social collectivity" and have
"insufficient personal interaction with other members of the
collectivity" (1986:60) The collectivity in this case
characterized by "white" values, goals and ideals.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this small and exploratory study suggests that
black students at a predominantly white university experience
greater feelings of alienation within that context than white
students.

The findings of this study illuminate the socio-political
components of black students' alienation. On a psychological
level, many of the black students interviewed felt distanced from
UCT, mainly because they felt they could not identify with the
values of the institution. The majority of black students in the
sample expressed political sentiments in this regard. For these
students, the political level is important for them as oppressed
people. The realization that the university environment mirrored
the divisions and dilemmas of the broader society came as a

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serious disappointment. This would also imply that the struggle for liberation continues on campus and as such, black students cannot separate their political ideals and academic aspirations. As pointed out by Danziger (1975), socio-political goals for liberation took precedence over the personal, individualistic aspirations of black pupils, whereas white pupils had predominantly personalised goals. It is suggested here that this may also be the case for black and white students on UCT campus. In other words, the different life experiences of these students has resulted in them developing different goals and in experiencing the university differentially.

It could be said that the belief in the non-racial nature of UCT pervades sectors of the UCT community. While UCT may be following a non-racial policy, this study showed that students do not necessarily experience it as that. A blind belief in UCT as non-racial can lead to the denial of racially defined problems such as those problems explored in this study. Keeping in mind that such "racial" problems result from the system of apartheid, it could be argued that a denial of these problems can lead to complacency. While it is important for us to commit ourselves to a policy of non-racialism, it is alo important to raise our consciousness of the dynamics at play in this situation.

It is recognised that this study has various limitations, conceptually and methodically. The concept of alienation as used by Loo and Rolison (1986) remains somewhat vague and therefore requires further refinement. For example, Loo and Rolison do not explain what is meant by "insufficient personal interaction". A

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qualitative methodology was considered to be the most appropriate means of investigating the experiences of black students on predominantly white university campusus. Although this method has gained increasing recognition in recent years (Kirk and Miller,1986), the small sample size and difficulty in matching the two groups of students place constraints upon the generalisability of the findings. Nevertheless, it is our contention that this study has highlighted some important concerns which should, in the future, be subject to more systematic research.

Finally, this study has implications for the university as a whole. The UCT community (i.e administration, staff and students) needs to become sensitive to the issues and concerns of black students. Thus the university should seek ways to minimise feelings of alienation of black students. This will necessarily involve critical self-examination on the part of the university in terms of whether it really is an agent of change, or a supporter of the status quo. Moreover, further research into the issues and concerns of black students is warranted if these are to be clearly understood by all concerned and if meaningful change is to be affected within predominantly white universities in South Africa.

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