Interethnic Encounters between African American and Vietnamese American Students in the HBCU Context

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Abstract

This study tests Kim’s (2005) contextual theory of interethnic encounters by investigating the relationship between associative/dissociative behavior and personal integration network between African American and Vietnamese American college students within the HBCU context. One hundred and fourteen African American students and 110 Vietnamese American students participated in the quantitative part of the study, while 12 African American and 12 Vietnamese American students selected from the larger sample participated in interviews. Univariate and t-test analyses and Pearson correlations provided partial support for the theorem. African American students reported significant levels of associative behavior toward Vietnamese Americans in relation to their personal integration networks in daily contacts, with acquaintances, and casual friends. In contrast, Vietnamese American students reported a significant associative behavior toward their African American counterparts in relation to their personal integration network in daily contacts only. Theme analysis supported the degree of association reported by both ethnic groups. It also revealed the role of stereotypes and distant communicative proximity in promoting dissociative tendencies.
Recent studies have examined interethnic encounters in the broader context of pluralism and globalization as they play out in the United States and more particularly in American universities (Dalib, 2011; Halualani, 2010; Y. Y. Kim, 1986; 2005, 2010). Indeed, the university setting provides a rich context in which to test the “reality” of interethnic encounters because of its multicultural student population, including co-cultural groups and international students. Kim and McKay-Semmler (2010) contend that an understanding of interethnic encounters in a university context should take into consideration various ethnic realities as they play out in different university environments, the quality of the interethnic relations on campus, and the surrounding communities. While mainstream institutions remain the main location for research, they also represent a type of interethnic reality typical of “middle America,” ignoring in the process other realities more specific to marginalized cultural groups.

Unlike mainstream universities, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have tended to attract majority African American students. More recently, several HBCUs have shown relatively significant percentages of non-African American student populations consisting of Asian, Hispanic, International, and White American students (Apart No More, 2010). Thus, HBCUs offer a unique context in which to examine interethnic communication among U.S. co-cultures. Underrepresented in the social science literature, interethnic encounters between African Americans and Vietnamese Americans warrant investigation since they make up large percentages of minority population who tend to live in close proximity with one another in large urban areas (Census, 2011; The Vietnamese Population in the United States, 2011).

Hence, the purpose of this study is to move beyond the Black and White binary approach to interethnic communication studies and explore the nature of interethnic encounters between African Americans and Vietnamese Americans, within a situated context. This approach places marginalized groups at the center of the research paradigm when investigating intercultural and interethnic communication (Houston, 2000; M. S. Kim, 2002).

**African American and Vietnamese American Socio-cultural Contexts**

According to the 2010 Census Data Report, African Americans account for 12.6 percent of the total U.S. population with an increase of 12.3 percent between 2000 and 2010 (2010 Census Data). In contrast, Asian Americans account for only 4.8 percent of the population with a significantly greater population increase than African Americans during the same period (43.3). Vietnamese Americans only represent 0.5 percent of the total U.S. population. With a population of more than a million and a half, the Vietnamese comprise the largest population of Southeast Asian refugees to have settled in the United States (Southeast Asian Americans at a Glance, 2010). Currently the fifth largest Asian American group in the United States, Vietnamese Americans are projected to become the second largest by 2030 (Kaplan, et al., 2003).

The earliest contact between African Americans and Vietnamese Americans took place on foreign land during the Vietnam War (1960-1963). This first contact was embedded in the complex interplay between racial tensions in the U.S. and racial discrimination within the U.S. Army against African American GIs fighting in Vietnam (Jefferson, 2000). With the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, the Vietnam War helped raise further African Americans’ socio-cultural and political consciousness. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., among other critics, described the Vietnam War as racist calling it “a white man’s war, a black man’s fight” (Tucker, 1998). For African Americans, fighting in Vietnam was fighting someone else’s war against Vietnamese, an enemy they did not understand.

The next more enduring contact has been on home territory when Vietnamese refugees came to the United States after the fall of Saigon in 1975. The history of Vietnamese refugees settling in the United States is one of adversity, because of resettlement in a foreign land, the
breakdown of family systems, and the rebuilding of ethnic communities (Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Further, Vietnamese refugees in the United States have experienced varying levels of adjustment depending on their economic status, educational background and level of English proficiency (Chung, Bemak & Okazaki, 1997; Huer, Saenz & Doan, 2001; Nguyen, 1982). While minority status within a racialized society places people of color at a disadvantage, Zhou and Bankston (1998) argue that Vietnamese Americans have relied on strong ethnic social networks to achieve relative social success.

The history of African Americans and Asian Americans in the United States has been one of racial inequality and economic disparities. According to Okazawa-Rey & Wong (1997), any informed discussion of Black-Asian relations at once encompasses the complex issues of community control, economic development, and assimilation of new immigrants. The disparities between the two communities likely reinforce pre-existing perceptions of who the insiders and outsiders are and the potential for interethnic conflicts. With each new wave of immigrants coming to the United States, Black communities are experiencing racial anxiety as economic opportunities for jobs, housing, and other social services are shrinking (Shah & Thornton, 2004).

Along with the fear of having to compete for economic and social opportunities with new immigrants particularly, poor African Americans are at a disadvantage when trying to access government sources of information necessary to their survival (Elliot & Pais, 2006). For example, a study investigating the evacuation of African Americans and Vietnamese Americans prior to Hurricane Katrina’s landfall revealed the advantages of Vietnamese Americans in learning about Katrina's impending landfall from government sources, evacuating before Katrina's landfall, and being more satisfied with assistance provided by the government (Li, et al., 2008). Further, the cultural and racial misconceptions and negative stereotypes on the part of these two ethnic communities toward one another (Okazawa-Rey & Wong, 1997) often promoted by news coverage of interethnic conflicts (Shah & Thornton, 2004) are not conducive to the development of and maintenance of harmonious interethnic relationships. Thus, any improvement in interethnic relations must begin with an understanding of the nature of interethnic encounters within a particular socio-psychological context.

**Contextual Theory of Interethnic Communication**

In the spirit of pluralism expounded by American society and its consequent effects on the reaffirmation of ethnic identity and concurring interethnic tensions (Kim, 1986), Kim (2005) proposed a contextual theory of interethnic encounters to investigate this “grass-root reality.” Her theory is useful in exploring interactions among various ethnic groups because it moves away from the individual-level unit of analysis to the interplay between behavior and context.

Taking into consideration interethnic verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors and the intrapersonal cognitive and affective processes taking place within the individual, interethnic encounters are defined in terms of two contrasting behaviors. **Associative behavior** takes place when communicators in interethnic encounters are motivated to engage in meaningful interactions. Meaningful interactions involve being attentive to one another, perceiving and responding to others as unique individuals, and displaying affirming communication. Conversely, **dissociative behavior** occur when communication is based on a lack of interest, stereotyping and impersonal communication. These behaviors are enacted according to several characteristics associated with the communicator, the situation, and the environment, leading to eight contextual factors. Each contextual factor is linked to associative or dissociative behavior resulting in the development of eight theorems.

According to Kim (2005), three situational factors are likely to affect the associative/dissociative behaviors between African American and Vietnamese American students. The
first situational factor is *ethnic proximity-distance*. It involves the sharing of internalized beliefs, value orientations, and norms closely associated with a particular ethnic group. *Shared-separate goal structure* is the second situational factor. It refers to the extent to which the communicator’s identity is shared by, or separate from, the identity of the other party(ies) involved in interethnic communication. Better known as *personal network integration*, the third situational factor is associated with the degree of a communicator’s ethnic relational integration of his/her network.

Thus far, a single study has examined interethnic communication among college students using Kim’s (2005) contextual theory of intercultural encounters. Kim and McKay-Semmler (2010) applied the theory in a mainstream college setting reflecting a moderate level of ethnic diversity, paralleling that of the overall student population around the United States. They tested two theorems that link *associative* and *dissociative* behavior with an individual’s personal *integration network* with ethnically dissimilar others (theorem 5) and *relative in-group strength* assessing group size, economic resources, and institutional and organizational power (theorem 7). Results showed that individuals, regardless of ethnic backgrounds, report a high level of motivation and readiness toward ethnically dissimilar others including the more personal nature of dating and marriage relationships. In addition, there was a strong association between individuals’ ethnically integrated personal networks and their relational openness to interethnic encounters. Finally, relative in-group strength was negatively associated with the level of one’s engagement in interethnic encounters, particularly at the level of close friendship. That is European American respondents reported significantly less diverse encounters with non European Americans. Conversely, the less dominant ethnic group was more likely to associate with other less dominant ethnic groups.

The current study expands Kim and McKay-Semmller’s (2010) research by investigating the “grass-root reality” of two co-cultural groups who tend to live, and in some cases, study in close proximity to one another in “Southern America.” For the purpose of this study, we want to test Theorem 5 which states: The more (less) ethnically integrated the communicator’s personal network structure, the more associative (dissociative) the communicator’s interethnic behavior. In addition, we want to explore how ethnic groups think about their interactions with one another. According to Halualani (2010), understanding how students make sense of their intercultural experiences adds an important subjective dimension to the more scientific understanding of interethnic encounters. Thus, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the relationship between *associative/dissociative* behavior and *personal integration network* among African American and Vietnamese American college students?

RQ2: What are the qualitative thoughts African American and Vietnamese American college students hold about their encounters with one another?

**Method**

This study relies on an integrative research methodology that combines qualitative and quantitative data collection. According to Kim and McKay-Semmler (2010), this methodological approach best serves to gain a detailed and in-depth understanding of the various aspects of college students interethnic encounters while engaging in a systematic testing of the relationships among theoretical concepts. Thus, we adopted a “systematic interview questionnaire” that combines the more ethnographic nature of open-ended questions with the high research efficiency of Likert-type scale questions. According to Weller & Romney (cited in Kim & McKay-Semmler, 2010), this integrative methodology balances the spontaneity and depth of information of interview responses with the more structured nature of scale responses.
Interview Settings, Interviews, and Respondents

Data was collected at a Southern HBCU with a total enrollment of 3,399 students. Close to 74% of the students are African Americans while a little more than 10% are Vietnamese Americans. More than one-half of the university students are from a single southern state (57.1%), and primarily from a single metropolitan area in which the university is located (XXXX University Profile, Office of Planning, Institutional Research, and Assessment, 2010-2011).

Respondents. A total of 224 students participated in the quantitative part of the study. Of the two hundred and twenty-four participants, 114 were African American, with an average age of 19 (M = 19; SD = 3.38). Seventy-six percent were female, and 34 percent were from New Orleans. One hundred and ten participants labeled themselves as Vietnamese Americans whose average age was 20 (M = 20.19; SD = 3.68). Fifty-five percent were male, and 87 percent were from the city in which the university is located. The participants were recruited in Communication classes and Pre-Pharmacy classes over a four week period. All participants completed an informed consent form prior to completing the survey. No extra credit was offered.

Research Variables and Measurements

A three part survey was developed from Kim and McKay-Semmler’s (2010) associative/dissociative theoretical construct scale (Relational Openness) and the Personal Network Integration scale to assess African American and Vietnamese American college students’ level of motivation to engage in interethnic interaction, their readiness to develop personal, intimate relationships with each other, and the quantity/quality of their relationships with each another. A demographic section asked about age, gender, majors, hometown, and classification.

Associative/dissociative behavior. The theoretical construct of associative/dissociative behavior was assessed using a slightly modified version of the Relational Openness Scale, an empirical indicator of the construct (Kim & McKay-Semmler, 2010). The scale measures the degree of comfort individuals feel when interacting with ethnically dissimilar others in various social contexts. Comprised of 10 items assessing different relational contexts, two of the items were adapted to the college context, and two versions of the scale were developed to assess African Americans’ degree of comfort in interacting with Vietnamese Americans and vice versa. The two modified items are “Studying with African American/Vietnamese American classmates,” and “Socializing with African American/Vietnamese American students.” Each item was measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale. Prior reliability estimate for the scale was .860 (Kim & Semmler, 2010). For this study, reliability estimate was .892 for the two ethnic groups combined (α = .895 for Vietnamese American students and α = .894 for African American students). As indicated in Table 1, a factor analysis of the Relational Openness scale using Varimax rotation with Kaiser Normalization yielded a two-factor solution, supporting the previous factors mentioned in Kim and McKay-Semmler’s (2010) study. The reliability estimate for the first six items assessing social relationships (Factor 1) was .86 while the last four items assessing personal/intimate relationships (Factor 2) was .91.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Studying with African/Vietnamese American classmates</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Working for an African/Vietnamese American student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Socializing with African American/Vietnamese American</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Playing sports with African American/Vietnamese American</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Working in a lab with African American/Vietnamese American</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Using the same study area with African American/Vietnamese American</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Having a class mate</td>
<td></td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Studying with African American/Vietnamese American</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Visiting African American/Vietnamese American in their residence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Participating in a social club with African American/Vietnamese American</td>
<td></td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1

Factor Analysis: Relational Openness to Ethnically Diverse Other
American boss

3. Working as a boss for African/Vietnamese Americans .71

4. Socializing with African/Vietnamese American students .89

5. Inviting an African/Vietnamese American to a party .74

6. Developing close friendships with African/Vietnamese Americans .76

7. Supporting a family member dating an African/Vietnamese American .86

8. Dating an African/Vietnamese American .84

9. Supporting a family member marrying an African/Vietnamese American .86

10. Marrying an African/Vietnamese American .89

N = 224

**Personal Network Integration.** The personal network integration reflects one of the situational factors affecting interethnic encounters. This scale developed by Kim and McKay-Semmler (2010) measures the extent to which both ethnic groups incorporate the other into their own networks of personal relationships. It was slightly modified to include four single item-measurements: the first item deals with the percentage of daily contacts; the second item measures the percentage of acquaintances included in one's personal relationship network; the third and fourth items ask for the percentage of casual friends and close friends. Respondents relied on a nine-point scale ranging from 0% to less than 1% and 80% -100%.

**Qualitative Interviews**

Two student research assistants were individually trained to conduct 12 interviews with African American students and 12 interviews with Vietnamese Americans over a three-month period. Both were female students. Respondents identified as African American or Vietnamese American, were interviewed by the research assistants sharing the same ethnicity. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at various locations on the HBCU campus such as the university library, classrooms, and a coffee shop where students from each cultural group typically congregated. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The 24 interviewees were selected randomly from the larger sample used for the quantitative part of the data collection.

The interview comprised 10 questions assessing students’ level of ethnic identification with the campus, perceptions of their importance as an ethnic group, cultural representations, and an assessment of interactions with the other ethnic group. Interview questions included “As an ethnic group, how do you feel you are perceived on campus?” and “How would you characterize your encounters with African American/Vietnamese American students?”

**Results**
The associative/dissociative variable (*relational Openness*) and the situational variable (*Personal Integration network*) were analyzed using univariate, t-test analyses and theory testing.

**Univariate and T-Test Analyses**

**Relational Openness.** A univariate ANOVA was performed on the relational openness scale. The analysis indicated a significant effect for ethnicity one one’s level of motivation and readiness for interethnic associations, (F(1, 223) = 5.131, p. < .05). Given the distinction between the level of motivation to engage in interethnic social encounters and the level of motivation to develop interethnic personal/intimate relationship, t-tests revealed that while both African American and Vietnamese American college students share the same level of motivation and readiness to engage in social interethnic relations with one another (M = 5.63; SD = 1.011 and M = 5.61; SD = 1.17 respectively), African American students reported a higher level of relational openness for personal/intimate relationships (M = 5.39; SD = 1.44) than Vietnamese American students (M = 4.56; SD = 1.70), t [223] = 3.937, p. < .000. There were no significant differences in relational openness by gender and hometown.

**Personal Integration Network.** With regards to the four dimensions of *personal network integration*, Vietnamese Americans reported a significantly higher percentage of daily contacts with their African American counterparts than vice versa (t [222] = -14.98, p < .000). They also reported having significantly more African American acquaintances (t [222] = -13.98, p. < .000), more casual friends (t [222] = -12.15, p. < .000), and more close friends (t [222] = -6.59, p. < .000) than their African American college mates. These results are not surprising since as a minority within a larger African American minority population, Vietnamese American students have more opportunities to develop relationships with their counterparts than vice versa.

**Theorem Testing**

Theorem 5 states that the more (less) ethnically integrated the communicator’s personal network structure, the more associative (dissociative) the communicator’s interethnic behavior. Thus, the relationship between the two variables *relational openness* and the four levels of *personal network integration* was tested using Pearson correlations.

For the African American student sample, the theorem was supported at three of the four levels of personal network integration. As shown in Table 2, there was a moderate, but statistically significant correlation between relational openness measuring associative/dissociative behavior and daily contacts (r = .188, p. < .05), acquaintances (r = .282, p. < .01), and casual friends (r = .209, p. < .05). The correlation between relational openness and close friends was not significant (r = .166, p. > .05) for the African American sample. Results further show that the levels of daily contacts, acquaintances, casual friends, and close friends making up African American respondents’ *personal network integration* are strongly correlated with one another with correlations ranging from r = 3.16 (p < 0.01) to r = .878 (p < .01).

For the Vietnamese American sample, the theorem was only supported at the first level of *personal network integration*. There was a moderate and significant correlation between relational openness and daily contacts (r = .276, p. < .01). The other correlations were not significant (see Table 3). Results also showed that only three of the four levels of *personal network integration* ranged significantly from r = .315 (p < .01, for daily contacts) to r = .800 (p < .01, for casual friends). These results suggest that both African American and Vietnamese American students who have daily contacts with one another also form well-integrated personal networks of acquaintances, casual friends, and close friends.
TABLE 2

Pearson Correlations Coefficients between Relational Openness and Personal Integration Network for the African American Sample (n = 114)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Relational Openness</th>
<th>Daily Contacts</th>
<th>Acquaintances</th>
<th>Casual Friends</th>
<th>Close Friends</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relational Openness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Contacts</td>
<td>.188*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquaintances</td>
<td>.282**</td>
<td>.674**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual friends</td>
<td>.209*</td>
<td>.693**</td>
<td>.878**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close friends</td>
<td>.166</td>
<td>.316**</td>
<td>.472**</td>
<td>.563**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant at the 0.05 level; ** Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

TABLE 3

Pearson Correlations Coefficients between Associative/Dissociative Behavior and Personal Integration Network for the Vietnamese American Sample (n = 110)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Relational Openness</th>
<th>Daily Contacts</th>
<th>Acquaintances</th>
<th>Casual Friends</th>
<th>Close Friends</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relational Openness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Contacts</td>
<td>.276**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquaintances</td>
<td>.159</td>
<td>.669**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual friends</td>
<td>.183</td>
<td>.502**</td>
<td>.800**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close friends</td>
<td>.152</td>
<td>.315**</td>
<td>.562**</td>
<td>.781**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Interview Analysis

The qualitative interviews of African American and Vietnamese American college students in this study focused on perceptions of interethnic communicative engagement in a collegiate environment as well as preferences regarding social and situational interactions between the two groups. An analysis of these preferences and perceptions yielded several themes that seem to pervade the cognitive understanding each group holds about the other’s behaviors and biases.

A thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Owen, 1984) was utilized in order to uncover themes that speak to the nature of interethnic interactions between the co-cultural groups. This qualitative research method was chosen in order to uncover the most robust findings while informing the quantitative data concerning the nature of interethnic communication. A thematic analysis of the verbatim transcripts was engaged in order to code the data for common content and general themes. Using Owen’s (1984) criteria for thematic analysis, the
data was coded for *recurrence* within threads of meaning and *repetition* of words, phrases, sentences, etc. Utilizing thematic analysis as an analytical tool was useful because it allowed for flexibility, yet systematic interpretation of patterns of experiences (Aronson 1994; Braun & Clarke 2006) conveyed through participants descriptions and impressions.

The 24 interviews yielded six themes; four reflecting associative behaviors and two reflecting an underlying tendency toward dissociative or contrasting behaviors. As previously stated, *associative behavior* occurs when interethnic encounters reflect meaningful interactions. These behaviors were coded as *association*, *institutional culture*, *close communicative proximity*, and *communicative reciprocity* in interethnic encounters. *Association* can be defined as interethnic encounters where students found themselves working together or interacting in social situations. These interactions were positively valenced due to the importance of the context.

African American respondents typically felt a positive association with their Vietnamese American counterparts when the context was characterized by a social situation, or shared interests. For example, an African American respondent suggested:

*My Vietnamese classmate enjoys UFC fighting and I didn’t expect him to like it.*
*I thought the only form of martial arts Vietnamese people enjoyed was karate, but he was a UFC fan as well.*

While social situations in which there were shared interests characterized positively valenced associations, some respondents also felt that the “right” synergy between cultural groups produced positive interaction. One Vietnamese American respondent claimed:

*I don’t see race as a barrier. If I like you, then I like you. I just see people; I don’t see your color of your skin as a major factor. If the chemistry is right and our personalities click then I think it’ll work.*

Overall, respondents felt that positive association was normally experienced by respondents when they were put in a situation, whether social or otherwise, together. As well, respondents felt such associations were positive because they treated the “other” the way they wanted to be treated. They did not see culture as a barrier at all. Such was the case with the following African American respondent: *“Since we are the majority, I don’t really get to interact with other cultures. When I was in biology, I had classes with Vietnamese or Asians. …they were enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and nice.”* A Vietnamese American respondent added:

*I interact with other cultures in the same way I interact with my own ethnic group. It’s nothing different, I treat others the same way I treat my Vietnamese friends. The only difference is a language barrier. When I try to talk to other cultures, I try to relate more to them and try to understand what they are talking about.*

The institutional culture of the university in which the research was conducted further impacted the perceptions of positive interethnic interactions for the respondents. Most respondents felt that the university reflected respect for ethnic groups through its concentration on high achievement and academics. For example, an African American respondent said:

*In the community, [XXXX University] is known for its academic background and being an HBCU. Being a XXXX holds a lot of positive weight...The Vietnamese at our school definitely see that Blacks are trying to get an education just like them. We are striving just as hard as them. It’s not like we are all bad.*

Some respondents also felt that the university was proactive in creating a positive institutional culture by offering activities where cultures could socialize, further creating positive associations. One Vietnamese American respondent stated “I would like to say that I think the school is very ethnical and they have a lot of activities to get us involved and less
racist. They allow us to think about and take care of other cultures.” For some respondents, the institutional culture of the university created a sense of similarity, i.e., because students went to the same university, they felt they were the same. In this regard, a Vietnamese American respondent stated “They see us as, well, I think most of them feel like we are the same. Like we are not in the minority compared to them because there are a lot of Vietnamese here.” Overall, the culture of the institution produced positive associations due to the ways in which students perceived their interethnic encounters. As well, the sense of collectivism felt on an HBCU campus seems to add to these positive associations because each ethnic group, while a distinct cultural entity, was able to see itself as a part of the whole due to the integrative culture of the campus community.

Finally, communicative reciprocity and close communicative proximity tended to be characterized together as noted by respondents. When respondents felt positive interethnic communication was reciprocal, they tended to positively valence their interethnic interactions. Some respondents engaged in communication due to the history they shared with their differing cultural peer or the fact that both cultural groups resided in the same geographical location. An African American respondent summed up these perceptions as follows:

The Vietnamese Americans that I have met on campus seem very comfortable around Blacks. I think it’s because it’s (city’s name) and there is a large population of African Americans here...While our cultures and lifestyles may be different, we are still able to commune with one another.

As well, when respondents found themselves in close proximity to the others, be it in a classroom situation or social situation such as working in student groups, etc., they tended to perceive their interethnic communication positively. For example, one African American respondent claimed: “I met most my Vietnamese associates in the math lab. In fact, the first person to tell me I was a good tutor was a Vietnamese student.”

In terms of communicative reciprocity, most respondents from both cultural groups felt that proximity determined communication. Specifically, if a person from the other cultural group was in close proximity socially, interethnic communication was possible, even probable if the person seemed to convey a positive or amenable personal disposition. However, a sense of “knowing” the person was often noted as necessary for any communicative exchange to take place. For example, a Vietnamese American respondent suggests:

If they [African Americans] come around me with good intention then I’ll talk to you. It’s all about the person and how you approach me. So it can range from acquaintances to close friends, depending on the person and the vibe they give me.

An African American respondent adds, “Just like with the African American cultures, if I don’t know you, I don’t speak. If I know you, I will speak” while another Vietnamese American said, …I do have a Black friend back at home, but you would not try to make friends with anyone randomly. You would just have to know them...maybe from middle school or high school. [If] I do know them somehow, then, I would hang out with them.

Taken together, when respondents felt their communicative advances acknowledged within the particular context of an exchange, there seemed to be positive feelings associated with the other cultural group. However, these same comments suggest that there was some resistance to taking the “first step” in creating a communicative interchange when there was not a sense of familiarity between each person. This seemed to be overcome by geography and/or history with the differing cultural group. Therefore, communicative reciprocity and
close communicative proximity seemed to work hand in hand in order to create a positively valenced association between the two cultural groups.

Along with positive perceptions of association with the other, other perceptions may underlie some dissociative tendencies between the two ethnic groups. Two other themes tend to illustrate some of the factors linked to Kim’s (2005) notion of dissociative behavior, namely, stereotypes and distant communicative proximity. Each ethnic group either held stereotypes about the other or perceived that the other held stereotypes about their particular ethnic group. Most of the stereotypes focused on perceptions of intelligence in the Vietnamese American culture, i.e., the “model minority” moniker often attributed to Asians in America. African American respondents often felt that their Vietnamese counterparts were highly intelligent and/or were perceived to be, giving them an earned or unearned “leg up” academically. An African American respondent stated “The thing I noticed about them is that they always have the answers to everything from previous tests so it’s good working with them.” While another added “[They are] smart- Every time I get a previous semester test from a Vietnamese American, it is a high grade.” “They are so smart and they don’t even try. Well they try, but it doesn’t look like they try.”

Vietnamese American respondents tended to feel that this evaluation of their intelligence as well as the perception of their elevated socioeconomic status was not warranted. For example, a Vietnamese American respondent reported the following:

_They automatically think I’m smart and rich. This is how I got into [the university] because I don’t have to worry about tuition. We’re always studying and we’re boring. [They] may not realize that we are just as poor as other minority groups._

Another added “Because I am Asian, I am stereotyped as an overachiever. People always ask me to study with them or help them on their homework.” However, some African American respondents felt many of their Vietnamese American counterparts perceived them as inferior, whether intellectually or racially. One African American respondent stated “I think they see me as beneath them, in particular, educationally inferior to them.”

While stereotypes abounded, some respondents felt that both cultural groups stereotyped each other unfairly. Of note, it seems that this notion allowed for a perception of equanimity. In this way, interethnic encounters may produce an understanding of oppression and marginalization when both cultural groups see their similarities when expressing cognitive elements of dissociation. In this regard, a Vietnamese respondent stated:

_As much as the African American stereotype Asian people, they make is seem like it is unfair how they are stereotyped. They are doing the same thing that they are doing to the Asians. They are being a hypocrite. They may say one thing about Asians, but if an Asian would try to say something about them they get hurt and offended…I do not think people understand we have the same racial problems, but always feel like they are the victim and that Asians cannot be the victim._

Many of the ethnic stereotypes conveyed in the interviews were influenced by preconceived notions brought on by distant communicative proximity. Simply, the respondents had minimal contact with each other whether in academic or social situations. As a result, each group seemed to hold the perception that the other ethnic group held negative opinions about the other. Differing from the findings above, most African American respondents had strong opinions about what they perceived to be the strong sense of collectivism of their Vietnamese counterparts. One African American respondent conveyed these feelings as follows:

_They keep to themselves. At the nail places, they keep to themselves. They are reserved in what they tell you or what they want to tell you. You don’t really get_
to know their culture. We only see what they present us. We don’t see how they interact with each other or how they are at home.

Along with perceptions concerning collectivism, some African American respondents interrogated what they perceived to be dissociative tendencies. They felt Vietnamese Americans may be responding in a dissociative manner due to their perceptions of their African American counterparts’ behaviors. Nevertheless, the assessment of their communicative behavior, whether positive or negative, emanated from the perception that Vietnamese Americans do not reach out to their African American counterparts. One African American respondent states:

Vietnamese tend to shy away from Black interaction... At [the university] they separate themselves from Blacks altogether. I don’t think the separation is solely their fault. We (Blacks) separate ourselves too. Vietnamese really look after each other so maybe they feel they have to separate. They stay on top of each other so everybody can pass their classes. Whereas with Blacks, it’s more of a competition; it’s crabs in a bucket. Everybody wants to be the smartest or get the best grade instead of saying we as a people need to advance. I think the Vietnamese definitely see the lack of community with Blacks so why would they want to deal with us when we struggle to interact with our own kind?

This analysis reflects the two ethnic groups’ conceptualizations of themselves and each other within their encounters. They emphasize the positive associations they feel toward one another in a situated context, while apprehending the role of stereotypes and distant communicative proximity in dissociating themselves from the other.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to test Kim’s (2005) contextual theory of interethnic encounters by examining two co-cultural groups African American and Vietnamese American college students in the context of a HBCU. In particular, we tested theorem 5 positing that the more (less) ethnically integrated the communicator’s personal network structure, the more associative (dissociative) the communicator’s interethnic behavior. The results of the univariate and t-test analyses and correlations provide partial support for the theorem. According to these results, we propose the following findings.

First, the relationship between associative/dissociative behavior and personal network integration varies with the ethnic groups under study and the context of interethnic encounters. In this study, the quantitative data suggested that both African American and Vietnamese American college students report being very open to social encounters with each other. However, when investigating the more personal/intimate level of relationships, African American college students reported being more willing to date or marry their Vietnamese American counterparts than vice versa. That is Vietnamese American college students reported being less motivated and ready to develop personal/intimate relationships with their African American counterparts, even though they reported more daily contacts, acquaintances, casual, and close friends with them. These findings suggest that the quantity and quality of relationships between African American and Vietnamese American college students do not necessarily promote a mutual willingness and readiness to develop personal/intimate relationships with one another.

The themes identified through the qualitative analysis provide valuable insight into the degree of association between relational openness and personal integration network reported by both African American and Vietnamese American college students. First, the positive associations described by both ethnic groups are the results of the institutional culture of integration and close communicative proximity and reciprocity created by the college experience, as well as the social and historical conditions of their proximity to one another.
These positive associations are further explained with more personal comments about each other. For example, African Americans emphasize the value of establishing common grounds to relate to their Vietnamese American counterparts. Vietnamese Americans highlight their perspective of sameness and equality when interacting with other ethnic groups, a perspective that avoids playing off cultural stereotypes. These positive perceptions support Halualani’s (2010) findings that different ethnic groups, such as African American and Asian students, conceptualize their intercultural encounters differently in a multicultural university.

The same thematic analysis also revealed conceptualizations about the other that suggest underlying tendencies toward dissociation between the two ethnic groups. In particular, cultural stereotypes and distant communicative proximity have the potential to establish and maintain a communicative distance between African American and Vietnamese American students. Although both ethnic groups acknowledge the unfair racial stereotyping imposed on them as marginalized groups in American society, they also report cultural stereotypes that can act as psychological barriers to the development of interethnic encounters. For example, the Asian stereotype of the “overachiever” is deemed advantageous in promoting interethnic encounters between the two groups. However, it also tends to create a negative perception that African American students are less capable in a learning environment, according to African American respondents. Conversely, the perception that Vietnamese Americans display a strong sense of collectivism whether in a college environment or in the work place could act as a deterrent to African Americans’ willingness and readiness to interact with them.

Overall, this study responds to Kim and McKay-Semmler’s (2010) call to replicate their findings in other university contexts that are significantly different in their ethnic student population and surrounding communities. The quantitative and qualitative data adds understanding to Kim’s (2005) theory concerning the associative behaviors, the integration of ethnically different others in one’s personal network, and the cognitive factors mediating interethnic encounters between African American and Vietnamese American in the context of an HBCU. The situational factors along with the social and psychological elements that influence interethnic encounters clearly illustrate the complex nature of these encounters. They combine a motivation to associate when communicative proximity is available and interactions take place based on common grounds and treatment of sameness with the psychological influence of stereotypes on the interactants’ desire to interact cross ethnically. Further, these associations tend to promote social, rather than personal/intimate relationships between the two ethnic groups.

While the results of this study are meaningful in expanding Kim’s (2005) theory of interethnic encounters to other ethnic groups and different university contexts, they need to be replicated at other HBCUs. Considering that majority HBCUs have historically been established in poor, inner city neighborhoods, they also tend to attract different ethnic communities to their midst and provide rich cultural contexts in which to explore other “grass-root realities” of marginalized groups, and document their experiences (Houston, 2000; Hendrix, 2010). Within similar contexts, other situational factors should be investigated to better understand the complex nature of association among ethnically dissimilar groups. Contextual factors, such as relative in-group size and strength, should predict the direction of these associations in a university context. They should reveal the relative majority/minority status of one’s ethnic group in a given university environment. Kim and McKay-Semmler (2010) reported a negative relationship between in-group size and associative behaviors in European Americans’ college students’ interactions with other ethnic groups, due to their dominant position. The present study reports positive relational openness on the part of majority African American students to interact with their minority peers. This could be an indication that there are no social status differences between the two ethnic
groups in spite of their differences in in-group size. Varying in-group size and strength in different HBCU environments may influence the direction of these associations depending on the majority student population and their socio-historical status.
References


