Debunking the Myth That All Is Well in the Home of "Brown v. Topeka Board of Education": A Study of Perceived Discrimination

Author(s): Michael L. Birzer and Richard B. Ellis

Reviewed work(s):


Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40034347

Accessed: 09/03/2013 20:09

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Sage Publications, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Journal of Black Studies.
DEBUNKING THE MYTH THAT ALL IS WELL IN THE HOME OF BROWN V. TOPEKA BOARD OF EDUCATION
A Study of Perceived Discrimination

MICHAEL L. BIRZER
Wichita State University
RICHARD B. ELLIS
Washburn University

This article examines perceived discrimination in Topeka, Kansas, which is home to the landmark Supreme Court Decision Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education. Using data from a 21-item survey questionnaire and nine focus groups, this article describes perceptions of discrimination among citizens. The findings suggest that a significant portion of participants have experienced some form of discrimination. Quantitative and qualitative data reveal that significant levels of perceived discrimination have been experienced across all population groups. The authors draw from the normative theory of discrimination in the interpretation of the data. This article concludes by suggesting policy recommendations that may be a start for effective remedies that aim to minimize perceived discrimination in this community.

**Keywords:** perceived discrimination; Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education; normative theory of discrimination

**Historically, race relations in the United States** has been dominated by segregation, a system of racial separation that, while in name providing for separate but equal treatment of White and Black Americans, the reality is that it perpetuated inferior accommodations, services, and treatment for Black Americans. On May 17, 1954, in the case of Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas the U.S. Supreme Court ended federally sanctioned racial segregation in the public schools by ruling unanimously that “sepa-
rate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” A groundbreaking case, Brown not only overturned the precedent of Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), which had declared “separate but equal facilities” constitutional but also provided the legal foundation of the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

The Brown decision is merely one of a host of events that not only brought to light discriminatory practices in the United States but also allegedly ended these practices. We use the word allegedly in the sense that much evidence suggests discrimination continues to haunt a great many minority groups in contemporary American society (Bennett, Merritt, Edwards, & Sollers, 2004; Deitch et al., 2003).

Discrimination has had a long history in the United States and, in part, is closely related to historical patterns of immigration and migration, particularly in the flow of newcomers to northern states (Chian, 1991; Heer, 1993; Kull, 1992; Massey & Denton, 1993; McClain, 1994; Middleton, 1992; Roediger, 1991; Steinfield, 1970; Swift, 1991). Early federal government support of slavery also vividly attests to a record of racist ideology that perhaps has perpetuated discrimination currently experienced by many persons of underrepresented groups (Feagin, 1991; Feagin, Vera, & Batur, 2001; Fishbein, 2002; Patterson, 1998). Nineteenth- and 20th-century restrictive immigration laws based on race and the imprisoning of Japanese Americans during World War II are merely two examples that illustrate racist ideology that have nurtured long and systematic patterns of discrimination (Yates, 1995a).

Discrimination results from deep prejudices held by individuals and sometimes can be found more significantly in the form of institutional and economic discrimination. For example, Ayres (1991) found clear patterns of discrimination between Whites and African Americans in purchasing vehicles inasmuch as that African American men paid an average of U.S.$421 more for a car when compared to White men, and African American women paid about $875 more. Similarly, Yinger (1995) found that home mortgage lenders are 60% more likely to turn down a mortgage request from a minority applicant than from an equally qualified White applicant.
THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Social scientists have offered what has become a plethora of theories and explanations of prejudice and discrimination; however, we primarily drew our interpretation of the data gleaned in the current study from the normative theoretical approach. Some scholars argued that a relationship exists between prejudice and discrimination and a person’s tendency to conform to societal expectations (Kitano, 1966; Pettigrew, 1959). The normative theoretical approach takes the view that prejudice and discrimination are largely normative based.

The normative theory as advocated in the classical work of Pettigrew (1958, 1959) contends that prejudice and discrimination are influenced by societal norms and are found in situations that serve to encourage or discourage tolerance or intolerance of minority groups. Social norms provide the generally shared rules of what is acceptable and nonacceptable behavior. Thus, by learning and accepting the prevailing prejudices or discriminatory practices, the individual is conforming to those norms. In essence, the normative theory contends that there is a direct relationship between the degree of conformity and degree of prejudice and discrimination. There is research that supports this view. For example, Pettigrew (1959) found that southerners in the 1950s became less prejudiced against Blacks when they interacted with them in the army, where the social norms were less prejudicial. Similarly, Watson (1950), in her classic study, found that people moving into an anti-Semitic neighborhood in New York City became more anti-Semitic. Explicit normative theories of prejudice and discrimination are not advocated frequently today; however, based on past research and the current study, we found that normative explanations are, in part, conducive to, if not directly related to, discrimination.

CONTEXT OF DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination is evident in activities that disqualify members of one group from opportunities open to others. For example, dis-
discrimination occurs when African Americans are refused jobs made available to White persons, or a landlord who refuses to rent to an individual because of his or her sexual orientation. Generally, discrimination has been defined in the social science literature as “practices and actions of dominant racial and ethnic groups that have a differential and negative impact on subordinate racial and ethnic groups” (Feagin & Eckberg, 1980, p. 11).

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

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

In general, the body of research on discrimination reveals that it is widespread and varying in nature. For example, discrimination has been played out in such variables as race, ethnicity, weight, gender, sexual preference, class status, employment, housing, and physical appearance to name a few. Some forms of discrimination may result from a lack of understanding, socialization, or dogmatism whereas other forms of discrimination may be nurtured and exacerbated by current events. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a spike of workplace and other forms of discrimination have been reported against Muslims and Arab Americans (Adelman, 2002). Incidents such as these may be, in part, explained by what Boulding (1989) referred to as disintegrative power that is achieved through hatred, fear, and threat of a common enemy.
There is a growing body of literature that indicates an increasing pattern of discrimination against gay men, lesbians, and transgendered persons in a plethora of venues. Lombardie, Wilchins, Priesing, and Malouf (2001) found that there is a pervasive pattern of discrimination and prejudice against transgendered people within society. Badgett (1995) found patterns of wage discrimination against gay men and lesbians. Similarly, Berg and Lien (2002) found significant disparities in wages of gay men and lesbian workers in the United States inasmuch as gay men earn 16% to 28% less than heterosexual men with similar demographic characteristics. Discrimination has also been found to exist against same-sex couples when making hotel reservations (Jones, 1996).

RACE

Discrimination based on race has been quite prevalent in America when compared to other variables (Feagin, 1991). Likewise, a disproportionate amount of the literature centering on discrimination pertains to race. Some scholars argued that contemporary discrimination based on race is particularly pervasive in the American criminal justice system (Bushway & Piehl, 2001; Coker, 2003; Luna, 2003; Miethe & Moore, 1986; Parker, 2002). Perhaps one of the more perplexing issues facing the criminal justice system today is the allegation that some contemporary police practices are motivated by discrimination and racism. Some observers have accused the police of systematically stopping minority motorists simply because of the color their skin, while the police themselves emphatically deny these allegations. The general scholarship on the U.S. criminal justice system offers clear and convincing evidence of a long history of not only racial but also cultural and class group biases in its administration (Yates, 1995b). Similarly, research has pointed out that police routinely discriminate by labeling African American teenagers as delinquent and in doing so refer them to juvenile court disproportionately more than White teenagers when engaging in the same or similar behavior (Huizinga & Elliot,
Moreover, the literature has made clear that people of color in the United States are imprisoned at significantly higher rates than Whites (Bishop & Frazier, 1988; Petersilia, 1983; Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, 2000).

Discrimination based on race has also been found to act as a barrier in the legal profession insomuch as it sometimes keeps minority attorneys from advancing in the profession (Foley & Kidder, 2002). Research has also suggested wide patterns of disparities in income of minority employees when compared with White employees in some professional occupations (Hirsch & Schumacher, 1992).

Native Americans have long held that they have been subjected to systematic discrimination in names, images, and mascots that symbolize Native Americans, particularly in sports and advertising (Hatfield, 2000; King & Springwood, 1999). Others have asserted that American society has long created an image of Native Americans that is a racial stereotype, an image that is a reflection of the dominant society that leads to discrimination (Farris, 1997). The literature has made clear that many Native Americans are outraged about the symbolization of Native American names in sports and other advertising schemes (Hatfield, 2000). This brings to light a salient paradox. On one hand, Native Americans feel that they are discriminated against by sports and advertising’s use of Native American names; on the other hand, society would not tolerate equivalent symbols of other minority groups. This paradox gives clear evidence of the prevalence of discrimination against Native Americans.

GENDER

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

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

The discussion framed above is by no means offered as an exhaustive presentation of the nature or type of discrimination prevalent in the United States. We offer the discussion to merely exemplify the complex nature of discrimination. In the current research, our objective was to describe perceptions of discrimination in general, and not against one specific group.

**METHOD**

**BACKGROUND AND SAMPLE**

The setting for this research was Topeka, Kansas, which according to the latest U.S. Census information has a population of 123,993. This community was selected for three primary reasons: (a) it is one of the larger metropolitan areas in the immediate geographical area to draw from a diverse population; (b) Topeka, Kansas, is home of the landmark 1954 Supreme Court Decision, *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* which made “separate but equal” practices illegal; and (c) the researchers had access to participants and the necessary support to administer surveys and to hold focus groups throughout the community.
To examine perceived discrimination, we drew from quantitative descriptive survey data and qualitative focus group data. The current study utilized a descriptive design. As Merriam (1988) pointed out, descriptive research is undertaken when description and explanation (rather than prediction based on cause and effect) are sought, when it is not possible or feasible to manipulate the potential causes of behavior, and when variables are not easily identified or are too embedded in the phenomenon to be extracted for study.

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

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

A 21-item survey instrument was designed to measure discrimination as perceived by the participants. Items 1 through 16 queried the participants to respond either yes or no pertaining to various venues of discrimination (i.e., any form of discrimination, race, religion, sexual orientation, social class, gender, age). Items 17 through 21 asked the participants to rate the five statements such as “The Topeka community treats all citizens equally” (a) strongly agree, (b) agree, (c) neutral, (d) disagree, and (e) strongly disagree. There was also space reserved at the end of the survey for participants to add their own personal commentary pertaining to discrimination if they wished to do so. These written comments were analyzed for similar or recurring themes.

FOCUS GROUPS

In addition to survey data, nine focus groups were held during the course of 9 weeks (one from each city council district). The pur-
pose of the focus groups was to query information about personal experiences with discrimination. A semistructured format was used to conduct the focus groups. The questions concentrated on two main areas: the participant’s perceptions in general of discrimination in the community, and their personal experiences with discrimination.

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

**QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS**

Recall that 18,000 surveys were mailed to every third registered voter with 1,633 valid surveys returned. Of these, 578 returned surveys were from males, 1,038 from females, and 8 reported being other. Of the returned surveys, 1,529 reported that they were heterosexual, 59 reported being gay men and lesbians, 35 reported being bisexual, and 6 responded in the other category. The racial demographic breakdown of the sample was similar to the census configuration of the City of Topeka, suggesting that the persons responding to the survey were demographically similar to the larger population of the city itself. Table 1 depicts the demographic makeup of the participants compared to the City of Topeka.

The researchers found that discrimination was experienced by 50% of the 1,633 respondents. The respondents reported discrimination based on gender 37% (n = 610), age 30% (n = 489), race 25% (n = 408), religion 13% (n = 213), disability 3% (n = 210), sexual orientation 9% (n = 144), and gender identity 7% (n = 121).

When the data were analyzed by racial and ethnic groups, it was revealed that 88% (n = 34) of Hispanics, 83% (n = 96) of African
TABLE 1
Demographic Makeup of Research Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>City of Topeka (%)</th>
<th>Research Sample (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Hispanic origin represents 6.5% of the population that is included in each of the above racial distributions (based on Census 2000 figures; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Americans, 82% (n = 44) of those self-identified as biracial, 78% (n = 28) of those self-identified as multiracial, 70% (n = 19) of Native Americans, and 44% (n = 585) of Whites reported experiencing discrimination.

When analyzing the data by sexual orientation, 83% (n = 49) of persons self-defined as gay men and lesbians, and 60% (n = 21) of persons self-defined as bisexual reported experiencing discrimination.

Eight percent or 138 reported experiencing physical violence, 30% or 485 reported experiencing employment discrimination, 9% or 143 reported experiencing discrimination in housing, 9% or 156 reported that they had been denied employment benefits because of discrimination, and 6% or 102 participants reported having been denied social services because of discrimination. Because many respondents indicated having experienced more than one form of discrimination, the total number of reported experiences of discrimination does not equal the number of respondents in the groups.

Minority groups were also asked to identify characteristics of the discrimination they experienced. Table 2 depicts reports discrimination based on the various groups.

Chi-square tests were calculated to see if there were statistically significant differences based on race and/or sexual orientation and the categories of discrimination that were queried on the survey: (a) discrimination in general, (b) verbal violence, (c) physical violence, (d) housing discrimination, and (e) employment discrimina-
### Table 2

**Experienced Discrimination Based on Group**  
(percentages in parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>African American (n = 117)</th>
<th>Gay Men or Lesbian (n = 59)</th>
<th>Biracial (n = 54)</th>
<th>Hispanic (n = 41)</th>
<th>Multiracial American (n = 36)</th>
<th>Native American (n = 27)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General discrimination*</td>
<td>96 (82)</td>
<td>49 (83)</td>
<td>44 (81)</td>
<td>34 (83)</td>
<td>28 (78)</td>
<td>19 (70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal violence*</td>
<td>65 (56)</td>
<td>21 (36)</td>
<td>33 (80)</td>
<td>24 (59)</td>
<td>28 (78)</td>
<td>12 (44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical violence</td>
<td>22 (19)</td>
<td>16 (27)</td>
<td>9 (17)</td>
<td>4 (10)</td>
<td>7 (19)</td>
<td>3 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing discrimination</td>
<td>21 (18)</td>
<td>7 (12)</td>
<td>4 (7)</td>
<td>4 (10)</td>
<td>10 (28)</td>
<td>4 (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment discrimination</td>
<td>34 (29)</td>
<td>23 (39)</td>
<td>23 (43)</td>
<td>10 (43)</td>
<td>17 (47)</td>
<td>9 (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>117 (7)</td>
<td>59 (3.6)</td>
<td>54 (3.3)</td>
<td>41 (2.5)</td>
<td>36 (2.2)</td>
<td>27 (1.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.

Chi square analysis revealed statistically significant differences in two categories: general discrimination \( \chi^2 = 19.16, df = 5, p < .05 \), and verbal violence \( \chi^2 = 26.73, df = 5, p < .05 \). The data suggest that there was a relationship between race and/or sexual orientation and general discrimination, and between race and/or sexual orientation and verbal violence. In other words, the data suggest that those participants who identified themselves as members of minority groups experienced generalized discrimination and/or verbal abuse (based on their race and/or sexual preference) with a frequency that was significantly greater than random chance.

### Qualitative Analysis

As part of the current research, nine semistructured focus groups were held throughout the community. The purpose of these focus groups was to glean a better understanding of individual experiences with discrimination. In their qualitative narratives, participants provided additional data about the nature of discrimination in Topeka. From the analysis of the qualitative data, three major
themes emerged. These themes were congruent with the findings from the survey data and, furthermore, corroborated the survey findings.

THEME NUMBER 1: RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

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

I did not experience racial discrimination until I moved to this city.
I feel on the average that Topeka is a very racist community and that Whites blame Blacks for everything that goes wrong.
Prejudice based on race is subtle but nevertheless exists.
Although it is supposed to be a great place to live, I find that it is full of prejudice.
This community as far as I am concerned is a very racist place. It’s no environment to raise children.
There are a lot of Black people here who are mentally challenged as a result of the cold harsh conditions in this community.
I was born here. My father had to leave in 1939 due to racism. I have experienced discrimination and racism in Topeka all of the years I have lived here, and it is worse and even more covert now.

THEME NUMBER 2: SEGREGATED NEIGHBORHOODS

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

I have lived on both coasts and I have found Topeka to an unusually racially segregated city. I would not live here if I was a minority.
Blacks are confined to live in only certain parts of the community. Housing patterns in this community are not equally based. Minorities are not given house loans to buy in certain parts of the community. The Blacks live on the east side of town and the Whites on the west side.

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

THEME NUMBER 3: SEXUAL ORIENTATION

There were a significant number of comments and similar themes regarding discrimination because of sexual orientation. Most of these seemed to revolve around issues of harassment and a generalized feeling of being unwanted. Comments such as the ones that follow reveal this sense of being unwelcome.

Homosexuals know where we are welcome and where we are not welcome.

Topeka is not a friendly environment for gay people.

I am a heterosexual, but when a homosexual in my church came out, there was a witch hunt to find gays in the congregation.

My partner and I are leaving this city because of the intolerance and discrimination we have had to endure in this city.

Our community has a real problem of tolerating homosexuals.

I am relatively new to Topeka and find it a shock of the lack of tolerance toward homosexuals.
DISCUSSION

The findings from this research are informative regarding the nature of discrimination in this community. Quantitative data were augmented by a significant amount of qualitative data obtained from focus groups. The focus groups provided data from approximately 60 individuals; the survey provided comments from an additional 450 individuals. These qualitative data provide a vivid sense of the pain and distress that respondents have experienced with discrimination.

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

There were a number of strong statements about experiences with “reverse discrimination.” Reverse discrimination has been defined as government actions that cause better qualified White males to be bypassed in favor of women and minority men. The paradox here is that this is an extremely emotional issue because it conjures up the notion that somehow women and minorities will subject White males to the same treatment received by minorities during the past 3 centuries. This has led some to call for color-blind policies; however, the problem herein is that color-blind policies imply a very limited role on the part of the state in addressing social inequality between racial and ethnic groups (Mack, 1996; Winant, 1994).
On the other hand, many of the minorities who participated in the focus group sessions, and many that responded on the comment section on the survey form, voiced a similar theme of being segregated into certain areas of the community because of what they called “discrimination in mortgage lending and leasing.” Recall that some of the participants expressed that segregation in housing patterns in Topeka are worse than other areas they have lived in the United States. There is some literature that suggests that pervasive segregation in housing creates and perpetuates underclass communities (Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987, 1996). Massey and Denton (1993) argued that segregation is the lynchpin of the underclass and that discrimination leads to segregation; in addition, segregation, by restricting economic opportunities for persons of color, produces economic disparities that incite further discrimination and more segregation. Flippen (2001) found that African Americans and Hispanics face housing inequalities because of racial segregation that undermines home ownership and upward mobility, and they maintain that the more segregated a city, the less minority home ownership. This may be one explanation of the frustration and pervasive feelings of discrimination perceived by many of the minority participants in the current study.

The data from the focus groups convey a pervasive feeling of being victimized, suggesting that feeling discriminated against is a widespread experience in this community. One respondent said “The main type of discrimination I have experienced is because of my long hair. Being watched more closely in stores, things of that nature.” Another referred to feeling discrimination because she is overweight. Others spoke of feeling discriminated against because they are single. There were references to feeling discriminated against for being a smoker, being prolife, being less well trained and less experienced on their jobs, being poor, and even being well to do. Blame for these distressing experiences is ubiquitous and appeared to be diffusely projected against the monied class, city government, the human relations commission, the police department for racial profiling, the fire department for hiring so few minorities, local restaurants, stores, and banks. In short, there were few social and commercial institutions that were not blamed for the
experiences of discrimination reported by the respondents to the survey.

This research brings to light several salient issues. The quantitative data combined with the qualitative data suggest that discrimination is not an isolated experience connected just with work and housing. It is a part of daily living for a great many people in this community. The data indicated a statistically significant incidence of verbal violence combined with examples of physical violence suggest that persons who are targets of discrimination are frequently confronted with it in a wide variety of situations as well. This seems to lend itself to a normative theory of prejudice and discrimination. Recall that the normative theory as advocated in the classical work of Pettigrew (1958, 1959) takes the view that prejudice and discrimination are influenced by societal norms and situations that serve to encourage or discourage tolerance of minority groups. A major thematic issue found in the current study was that many participants felt that discrimination was a part of daily living in this community. It is possible that a culture of intolerance has been shaped in a latent normative fashion in this community.

One of the factors that went into selecting this community for the current study was that it is the centerpiece of the landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision, Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education. This decision stated that “separate but equal” facilities, including education, was unconstitutional. The current research was conducted just prior to the 50th Anniversary of Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education decision. Thus, one would hypothesize that because of the historically legal significance of desegregation in this community that the perception of discrimination would be much less than what the data bore out. In fact, it may have been presumed that the Brown decision would have led quickly to massive change. Moreover, and perhaps more important, these data suggest that even some 50 years after Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education that this decision and other corollary judicial decisions have been slow to change or influence discrimination. Perhaps Rosenberg (2004) stated it best when he alleged that the Brown decision is celebrated not for what it achieved, but for what it is officially stated that it should have accomplished.
The current study also revealed significant amounts of perceived discrimination against those who defined themselves as gay men and lesbians. The survey and focus group data seemed to indicate that gay men and lesbians feel isolated and, in many situations, avoided in an obvious manner when their sexual orientation was known. This parallels other research that found that people still openly avoid gay men and lesbians and that persons feel at relative ease in expressing their homophobic feelings (Nava & Dawidoff, 1994).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 covered discrimination based on race, color, creed, national origin, and sex. However, with the growing problem of discrimination against the gay men and lesbian community, there remains little legal protection, and a fierce debate continues on the status of gay men and lesbians and discrimination laws. Many communities across the United States have adopted ordinances that specifically address discrimination against gay men and lesbians. The community where the current study was conducted does not have an ordinance that specifically addresses discrimination against gay men and lesbians.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The current research has several implications for policy. First, recall that qualitative data revealed a theme that many minorities found it difficult to secure start-up business loans in this community. We suggest that city authorities review the process of allocating minority business loans. Focus group participants expressed that those authorities responsible for disseminating minority business start-up loans require as part of the application package a business plan. Focus group participants related that many minority business loan applicants do not have experience completing a business plan. Perhaps classes can be facilitated that demonstrate to minority applicants how to complete a good business plan that may subsequently assist minorities in securing business start up loans.

We also suggest that community leaders begin to hold town hall meetings for the purpose of discussing race and differences. It was
apparent that many participants felt that the city, as a whole, does not appreciate or respect differences. It may also be beneficial for organizations within this community to increase diversity. Enhanced affirmative action policies may need to be established and enforced. This parallels Conyers (2002) when he suggested that affirmative action strategies (taking race into account) are one of several remedies that are needed to minimize discrimination.

Finally, authorities in city government should investigate the possibility of establishing an ordinance that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. Many participants who identified themselves as gay and lesbian expressed that they had experienced discrimination on more than one occasion. This community does not have an ordinance that specifically addresses discrimination based on sexual orientation.

**CONCLUSION**

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

Even though the current study was limited to 1,633 respondents in one urban area, and is a one-shot descriptive study of sorts, it points to promising areas of research. The current study not only shed light on perceptions of discrimination but also revealed that even in a community that is celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education*, this city has not made significant progress in respecting diversity and differences other than mere symbolism. The sense that we gleaned, especially from the focus group data, was that discrimination, although not in a blatant form, is more or less a salient and latent undercurrent in this community. Because the current small study was limited to one municipal community of 123,993 citizens,
we suggest that future studies be conducted in other communities that celebrate significant civil rights events in their history to determine whether the findings of the current study can be replicated in other community settings.

NOTE

1. Many respondents reported discrimination in more than one area so the total categories of reported discrimination does not equal the sample of \( N = 1,633 \). The total number of reported discrimination in each category is more than \( N = 1,633 \).

REFERENCES


*Michael L. Birzer is an assistant professor of criminal justice in the School of Community Affairs at Wichita State University. His research interests center on the dynamics of police minority relations, police education and training, and discrimination and racism. His most recent work focused on phenomenological reflections of what makes a good police officer from the perspective of the African American community.*

*Richard Ellis, Ph.D., is a professor and department chair of the Human Services Department at Washburn University. His research, professional writing, and teaching addresses a variety of issues, including drug and alcohol prevention, treatment and relationship to victimization, hate crimes, culturally competent practices, community development and social advocacy. He has served on the Advisory Council for the Joint Center on Violence and Victims Studies, the Board of Directors of Topeka AIDS Project, and currently oversees two grant projects at Washburn University involving students in community service and social change projects. He had two chapters published in *Victim Assistance: Exploring Practice, Organizational Policy and Societal Responses* (2003).*