

Hostility among friends can come from surprising places

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Sherelle Ferguson and Annette Lareau, Edmund J. and Louise W. Kahn Professor in the Social Sciences. Credit: OMNIA

Same-race friendships on college campuses can be sources of support and help build a sense of belonging. However, sociologists Sherelle Ferguson, and Annette Lareau, Edmund J. and Louise W. Kahn

Professor in the Social Sciences, have found that class differences can create tensions within these relationships.

In a piece published in *Socius*, titled "Hostile Ignorance, Class, and Same-Race Friendships: Perspectives of Working-Class College Students," Ferguson and Lareau describe findings from in-depth interviews with working-class, first-generation students at two private universities. These students describe micro-aggressions in interactions with their more affluent peers around everyday concerns like hair, academics, and money.

"Being from a lower-class background is still a stigmatized identity on many college campuses," says Ferguson. "Prior literature has discussed the alienation that upwardly mobile students feel while attending elite college campuses, so we weren't too surprised to hear that. However, we were surprised to hear about antagonisms that arose within their close friendships with students of the same race but different class."

The experiences of first-generation, working-class students have long interested Lareau, who previously co-authored a study on adults who are upwardly mobile and has observed many first-generation students struggle on campus for various reasons. "I became interested in understanding more deeply how class and race come together for the lived experiences of first-generation students," she explains.

After serving as Ferguson's Ph.D. adviser, Lareau was eager to partner with her on this project. They chose in-depth interviews as a valuable research method for participants to share their experiences and perspectives.

"We wanted a deeper dive than a survey. We wanted to hear from the students themselves—to hear their voices—about their experiences in the university setting," says Lareau.

The 44 interviews demonstrated that Black, white, and Asian American students are experiencing classist interactions with same-race friends characterized by what the authors term as "hostile ignorance." Ferguson defines hostile ignorance as "interactions when more affluent students ask a question or make a comment to working-class students in a critical or hostile manner (rather than a neutral or positive one) on a matter connected to the students' class position."

Ferguson and Lareau's work spotlights that among the many struggles that first-generation college students might face, hostile ignorance from their wealthier, same-race friends can be a particularly painful one. Lareau says, "One of the things that is challenging for first-generation students is that the slights and insults can come from not just strangers or acquaintances, but also people in their inner circle—roommates and even close friends. This makes the [college](#) experience difficult and exhausting. It is hard, at times, for first-generation students to find respite."

The authors hope their study will broaden the conversation on the experiences of first-generation, working-class students and increase the attention on classism in peer culture, particularly among peers of the same race.

More information: Sherelle Ferguson et al, Hostile Ignorance, Class, and Same-Race Friendships: Perspectives of Working-Class College Students, *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/23780231211048305](https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231211048305)

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