Still Here: African American Male Perceptions of Social and Academic Engagement at a 4-Year, Predominantly White Institution of Higher Learning in Southern New Jersey

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Abstract

This study explores perceptions of the academic, social, and institutional forces that shape success for African American male students attending a 4-year, predominately White public college in southern New Jersey. This study utilized an interview-based qualitative research method to examine African American male students' social and academic experiences at a small, predominantly White, liberal arts college in southern New Jersey. Attention to the experiences of African American male students attending White colleges is particularly important because issues surrounding social receptivity (i.e., the general acceptance of an individual or group’s presence) are factors that play a significant part of the students' learning experience. This study found that in 21st-century America, the African American male students' perceptions of and experiences with social receptivity at a predominantly White institution (PWI) can have a significant impact on the students' learning experience. The major themes of this study that emerged were “Level of Preparation for College Life at a PWI,” “Lack of Belonging in a New Social Environment,” “Feelings of Social and Personal Isolation,” and “Feelings of Negativity Toward the Faculty.”

Keywords

African American males, preparation at a PWI, lack of belonging, social and personal isolation

Introduction

This study explores perceptions of the academic, social, and institutional forces that shape success for African American male students attending a 4-year, predominately White public college in southern New Jersey. Attention to the experiences of African American male students attending White colleges is particularly important because issues surrounding social receptivity (i.e., the general acceptance of an individual or group’s presence) are factors that play a significant part of the student’s learning experience (Bailey, 2006). A better understanding of the issues that shape the African American male students’ educational success is needed at all levels of higher education. Of particular interest is the necessity to gain greater insight of this experience at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), where the majority of Black male students are now attending college (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Whitmore, 2006).

In the context of this study, “Black” is used in the broadest sense to describe people from the African Diaspora. Black male students include men who self-identified racially or ethnically as Black/non-Hispanic, or African American. The rationale for focusing exclusively on Black males was based on their low college enrollment and academic success rates. In 2004, Black men earned 33% of all-Black bachelor’s degrees (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2006). The literature on college enrollment shows that Black men have the lowest enrollment rates of all college-aged students. Currently, 37% of African American men of college age are enrolled at U.S. postsecondary institutions compared with 44.1% of White men (American Council on Education, 2006). Of the 6,312 students enrolled at the 4-year, predominately White public college in southern New Jersey who participated in this study, 8% are African American males.

According to the Minorities in Higher Education Annual Report (2006), the 10-year rise in Black enrollment from 22% in 1993 to 28% in 2003 is mainly attributed to women, who made up two thirds of the increase. Such findings underscore the need to investigate, further, the Black male college
experience and identify possible impediments to their success.

The literature on college aspirations has examined such factors as race and gender (Hubbard, 1999), socioeconomic status (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernai, 2001), first-generation students (Choy, 2001; Horn & Chen, 1998), peers (Gandara, 1995; Tinklin, 2003), and family (Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999) to provide a better understanding of how they impact students’ success in college. While many of these studies concluded that the above-identified sociodemographic factors did, indeed, have an impact on student success, they also suggest that there are other sources of influence which impact the college aspirations of Black students. These factors include the presence of other Black students and staff; their expectation of faculty, both Black and White; and the African American males’ perceptibility of inclusion in the new social environment of a PWI.

The primary purpose of this study was to extend the current research on African American males attending a PWI and analyze how their perceptions of receptivity of the Black male presence on the college campus affect their educational experience. This study hopes to add to the existing foundation of theoretical constructs that describes the unique social college transition that African American male students often face at PWIs of higher education.

A Question of Race

As members of the Black community, African American students, both male and female, are no strangers to issues of race and racism and the impact they can have on their opportunities for success. The construct of race, socially defined as the ability to separate and categorize individuals based on the color of their skin, has been used as a barrier to participation for the African American community since the earliest inception of the nation (Karenga, 2010). Racism, defined as the inherent belief in the superiority/inferiority of one group over another (Roger & Kitano, 1970) has impacted every social and economic stratum in the Black community and has wreaked havoc on the social, economic, and emotional well-being of African Americans (Asante, 2003; Better, 2007; Franklin & Moss, 2000; Karenga, 2002; Reid-Merritt, 2010). Over a period of more than 300 years, numerous efforts have been made to foster feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, low self-esteem, and social isolation in members of the Black community. Marable (2003) notes that the cultural history of Blacks in the United States is, in part, the struggle to maintain their own group’s sense of identity, social cohesion, and integrity in the face of policies which have been designed to deny their common humanity and particularity. Surviving and thriving in a racially charged social environment has been an ongoing challenge for the African American community.

Forced Integration

The historic 1954 Supreme Court decision of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka ruled that all segregation in public schools was “inherently unequal.” The doctrine was extended to state-supported colleges and universities in 1956. In 1961, two Black students registered at the University of Georgia but were suspended due to student disorders; they were later returned under a federal judge’s order. In 1962, violence erupted in Mississippi when James H. Meredith, a Black student supported by federal court orders, registered at the University of Mississippi. A mob gathered and attacked the force of several hundred federal marshals assigned to protect Meredith; two persons were killed.

Such incidents of violence and social rejection occurred on many campuses in the South as well as in many other areas in the United States. However, it was the abundance of civil rights legislation, financial aid, and recruiting from racially underrepresented groups that followed in the mid-1960s and early 1970s that encouraged larger numbers of Blacks to attend White institutions. Between 1960 and 1970, African American student enrollment in southern PWIs had increased from 3,000 to 98,000 students. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964), and the continued utilization of the GI Bill (1944) by those returning home from the service, the enrollment of African American students increased significantly (Mingle, 1981). According to Hine, Hine, and Harrod (2004), between 1960 and 1977, the college attendance of African American students increased from 227,000 to 1.1 million. Unfortunately, guaranteeing greater access of Black students to institutions of higher education continued to plague the nation, and once African American students entered PWIs, most of the students felt alone and alienated (Willie & McCord, 1972). Their experiences on campus were marked with feelings of rejection and social isolation (Patton, 2005).

In the more than 50 years since the onset of the modern-day Civil Rights Movement, the Black presence on White campuses remains a critical concern. A 2000 national survey by the Washington, D.C., based National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ) indicated that racial discrimination against African Americans remains so intense; Blacks feel that no other racial or ethnic group is discriminated against more than them. More importantly, the report reveals that most of the nation agrees with that sentiment. In the 21st century, African American males at PWIs continue to face a unique set of social circumstances, leading to the same feelings of social isolation that were prevalent during earlier times.

It is of major significance that scholars focus on the unique set of social experiences of the African American male. This is especially true in the area of higher education. According to Akbar (1991), “The objective of education for African American males is to chart a course formed out of the natural expression of African people” (p. x). Unfortunately, it is the knowledge of one’s history, heritage as well as experiences with racial and other forms of social oppression that accompanies the Black
male on his arrival at the White college campus. For Asante (1987), one must search and locate their “center” if they are to maintain a sense of African consciousness. This is certainly true for Black males who find themselves surrounded in a European-dominated cultural environment. Asante further asserts that to fully comprehend African American males, it is necessary to understand their journey, their treatment by others, and their adjustments to a socially oppressive environment. During a time period increasingly described as 21st-century postracial America, how do African American males view the impact of their presence at majority institutions? This case study offers additional research and insights on the African American males’ search for a meaningful social environment that helps to affirm the legitimacy of their presence on a predominately White campus.

**Method**

This study utilized an interview-based qualitative research method to examine African American male students’ social and academic experiences at a small, predominantly White, liberal arts college in southern New Jersey. Interview-based qualitative research allows the researcher to reveal many facets of the human experience that cannot often be uncovered with quantitative methods, including subjective views, perceptions, feelings, and reactions to experiences in context (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Kazdin, 1998). A qualitative methodology is most valuable and appropriate for this study because it enabled the researcher to capture a richer, more detailed perspective of the subject matter. Interviews were conducted using a carefully planned focus group designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment.

A focus group, as Lederman notes (see Thomas, MacMillan, McColl, Hale, & Bond, 1995), is a technique involving the use of in-depth group interviews in which participants are selected because they are a purposive sampling of a specific population. Participants in this type of research are selected on the criteria of being within a similar age range, having similar sociocharacteristics, and being comfortable talking to the interviewer and each other (Richardson & Rabiee, 2001). Several advantages of using a focus group are high face validity and relatively low cost. In addition, unlike structured interviews, increasing the sample size requires minimal time and resource investment (Krueger, 1994).

Students were interviewed using an open-ended questionnaire that probed areas related to the following: expectations of the college experience, previous experience with a diverse faculty and student population, level of participation with other students in the college environment, and their overall perception of the education experience.

**Participants**

The sample consisted of 13 African American males ranging in age from 18 to 25. Eight of the students were from urban cities (i.e., Newark, Camden, and Atlantic City); these three areas are diverse with respect to race; 3 were from suburban areas (Galloway, Cherry Hill, and Egg Harbor Township), median income US$32,000; and 2 were from rural areas (Salem County, Medford, and Sweet Water), typical population for these areas is 5,000 residents. Ten of the students were first-generation college students. Two of the students were freshmen; 4 were sophomores; 4 were juniors; and 3 were seniors. Eight of the students came from single-parent homes; the remaining 5 students were from two-parent family homes. Of the 13 students in the sample, 5 stated their high schools were not racially diverse, with the majority of students being White. The other 8 students stated that their high schools had an African American majority.

**Procedure**

The interview data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), which allowed for the identification of salient themes in the students’ perceptions. Using an interview protocol, the researcher facilitated discussions among participants centering on their experiences at a PWI. The group interview was conducted with an independent observer (an American-born Black male) and lasted an hour and a half. The candid discussions were taped and transcribed by the researcher.

**Data Analysis**

Framework analysis was used to analyze the interview from the focus group. The five key stages in this analysis included familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, and interpretation (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The process of data analysis began during data collection and continued throughout the process. Following the review of recorded interviews, as well as detailed notes taken during the focus group sessions, familiarization and major themes began to emerge. A thematic framework was identified and subcategories developed. At this stage, descriptive statements were formed and an analysis was carried out on the data under the questioning route. Indexing resulted in highlighting and sorting out quotes and making comparisons. These quotes where then lifted from the original context and rearranged under the newly appropriate thematic content. Finally, charting and interpretation was done; all responses were interpreted and identified quotes were linked to the data as a whole.

**Findings**

The comments made during the interview provided a gateway to understanding the experiences of African American male students at a predominately White college. The major themes of this study that emerged were as follows: “Level of Preparation for College Life at a PWI,”
“Lack of Belonging in a New Social Environment,” “Feelings of Social and Personal Isolation,” and “Feelings of Negativity Toward the Faculty.” The key themes are presented below and profiles are provided to offer an insight about the lives of the students interviewed (pseudonyms have been used).

**Level of Preparation for College Life at a PWI**

The first theme that emerged was the lack of preparation for African American males attending a PWI. Many participants described their sense of “culture shock” when they first arrived on the campus. The participants’ degree of comfort was dictated by their experiences with what they perceived as campus racism. Specifically, participants spoke of feeling like they were singled out in class by their classmates and professors as the “go to” person for all things Black. Questions about Black culture and its meaning were frequently directed toward them. They described a definite feeling of “being different” or set apart from their White classmates. For some, this feeling pertained to the classroom and beyond. For example, Mike, a 19-year-old sophomore majoring in economics who attended an all-Black high school, stated,

> I feel a lot of racial tension on campus. In the dorm where I live, there were only White kids and they would ask me, “how come all Black people do this” as though I represented the Black population. I admit that I was not prepared for this.

Another student, Rashan, a 19-year-old sophomore majoring in economics who attended an all-Black high school, stated,

> Another student, Rashan, a 19-year-old sophomore majoring in criminal justice, also expressed discomfort as being viewed by White people on the campus as the “Black expert.” He did not want to be a spokesperson for the entire race. Rashan stated, “I feel like there is an expectation from my professors and classmates that I will have all the answers to questions that arise regarding the Black culture.”

**Lack of Belonging in a New Social Environment**

An area of social adjustment that tends to define African American college students’ experiences at a PWI college involves their sense of membership in the college community. Ten of the 13 participants reported feeling “underrepresented,” “a lack of belonging,” or being consciously aware of their numerically racially underrepresented group status. An illustration of this theme is exemplified in Atif’s statement. Atif, a 21-year-old junior majoring in business who attended an all-Black high school, stated,

> I always felt like I did not belong on campus. When you enter a room, you look for another Black person in the classroom and you always knew their name. I was not prepared for the lack of diversity at this school; I know all the names of every Black person that is on this campus.

Atif’s comments reflect his feelings about the lack of belonging as well as building on the theme of a lack of preparation for attending a PWI. Another example of a lack of belonging is demonstrated in Jamal’s comment. Jamal, a 23-year-old senior, majoring in business stated, “I have to say how uncomfortable it was to walk into a classroom because you would be the only African American male in class. I started to wonder if I really belonged here.” Bill, an 18-year-old freshman undecided major, who attended an all-Black high school, shares this sentiment. He stated, “The first time I felt like a minority was at this school. It is crazy. Where are all the Black people? I too can name every Black person in this school.”

**Feelings of Social and Personal Isolation**

Another theme that characterized the experiences of the students interviewed in this study was the sense of isolation once they arrived on the predominately White campus. This sense of isolation reflected their overall campus experience, including academic life, extra curricular activities, and residential activities. For several students, there were intense periods of feeling isolated, to the point they considered leaving the college. For others, this feeling was described as being “invisible” on the large, predominately White campus or only being seen as “EOF” (Educational Opportunity Fund) students.

For example, Nick, a 25-year-old senior majoring in psychology stated,

> A lot of times when I first got here, I really felt lonely. I came from a predominately Black neighborhood and high school, so I felt isolated at first. I really thought about going back home. It was not until some other Black students came and introduced themselves to me did I think I would stay here.

Another example of this theme is illustrated by Ahmed’s statement. According to Ahmed,

> It was a shock when I got here and saw the lack of diversity; you start looking for other Black people right away. We are so happy to see another one of us, that you are welcomed with open arms.

Finally, Mohamed, a 19-year-old student majoring in political science who attended a predominately White high school and was concerned that he would, again, be trapped in a socially isolated environment stated, “I was so happy when I found out my roommate was Black.”
Feelings Regarding the Faculty

The students reported that the quality of time faculty spent with them is more important than the quantity of time. And while Black male students wanted to connect with professors, respondents talked more directly about their concerns that being African American might negatively affect their relationships with faculty. This too, was based on their perceptions that they were being treated differently by White faculty. An illustration of this theme is represented in Ahmed’s statement “If I need help, I need help. Some professors feel I need help because I’m Black.” Bill, the 18-year-old freshman, is also reluctant to approach faculty members. He stated,

I do not feel comfortable asking White professors questions anymore ever since I got shut down the first day of class. I waited just like everyone else who needed to speak to the professor. He spoke to everyone and when it was my turn he said he had to go. That turned me off and made me wonder if he did not have time for me because I was Black.

Abdul, a 23-year-old senior majoring in business added, “I had a bad experience with a White professor last semester and I have proof about it being a racial thing. I would get points less than my classmates and I was the one tutoring them!” Finally, Jamal stated,

I tend to participate more if the professor is Black, because I know they would not look at me as if I’m stupid. When you have a White professor, the focal point is on you, so I tend to be more vocal and sharper in my answers because I know I have to represent myself and other Black males.

Discussion

African American undergraduate students’ experiences on predominantly White campuses have been the focus of many research studies, most highlighting these students’ academic difficulties (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Nettles, 1990). Major findings reveal that African American undergraduate students experience higher attrition rates, lower cumulative grade point averages, and less persistence to graduate than do majority students (Allen, 1992). However, participants in this study described their most pressing concerns as adjusting to a lack of preparation for college life at a PWI, general feelings of isolation, a lack of belonging, and negative feelings regarding White faculty members.

A central theme that emerged in this study was the participants’ lack of preparation for attending a PWI. Many students described feelings of “culture shock.” Chavrous (2000) contends that African American college students experience culture shock as a function of conflicting cultural beliefs and values due to an incongruence between the cultural and social values of the students and the underlying values and philosophies associated with a predominantly White environment. A support network, specifically other students, staff, and faculty from a similar group, has proven to be of great value in facilitating a positive quality of experience for the African American college student.

In a study conducted by Douglas (1998), 10 African American 1st-year students were asked to give their level of readiness for attending a predominantly White university. A consistent impression given was the participants’ consciousness of being Black on campus. In a small group interview one student commented, “When I go out on campus, it seems like that I wear my skin color with a magnifying glass. It’s like, all of a sudden, Black is just in my head” (p. 421). These findings are similar with the results of this case study. As evidenced in the statements of the participants, race was perceived as a primary factor in determining the types of experiences they would have on the campus.

Another major area of social adjustment involved a lack of belongingness in a new environment. These feelings were captured by students who described “always looking for another Black person when you walk into a room.” Most said that they had felt more supported in their home and high school community; feeling underrepresented was a new, unexpected experience. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) suggest that students from racially underrepresented groups who attend predominantly White campuses often band together for support due to the perceived negative connotations they sense from nonminority students and faculty. The same was true for the students in this study. Many of the students stated that they sought out other Black students, knew the names of most of the Black students on campus, and were happy to see another Black face in class. This was their support system.

Another theme that exemplified the experiences of the students in this study was the sense of social and personal isolation due to attending a PWI. African American males need a strong supportive environment to establish their presence and sense of cultural identity (Akbar, 1991; Mincy, 1994). This is especially true for African American males who are one of the most underrepresented groups at PWIs. Many of the students interviewed gave accounts of feeling alone and isolated due to the lack of diversity on campus. Again, from the respondents’ point of view, the lack of receptivity to the Black male presence on the campus was apparent.

Finally, feelings regarding faculty members was a topic of discussion in this focus group. The students talked directly about their concerns that being African American might negatively affect their relationships with faculty. Students wanted the opportunity to have quality time with faculty members, but they did not want to surrender their sense of academic confidence, racial identity, or cultural comfort to get it. This is a significant point. Nettles, Theony, and Gossman (1986) report a positive correlation between students’ perceptions of the quality of faculty treatment and academic performance. Initiating faculty interactions seemed to be associated with a risk that faculty would view them as needing help as a direct result of being
African American. Black students’ concerns about negative expectations can also impact the success of their academic transition (Pino & Smith, 2004). It is apparent, as indicated by the results of this study, that when African American male students have certain White professors, they believe that it has a potential impact on their academic performance.

**Limitations**

This study was limited in three ways. Qualitative results are generally accepted to be generalizable to others outside the study when sampling is appropriately done and when the results are credibly drawn from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The results produced in this study were based on the experiences of a small group of African American male students at one institution. Although open-ended questions were used in this study, the interview structure had the potential to influence the shape and scope of participant responses. In addition, a possible limitation was less experimental control and the fact that some of the participants may have been influenced by what was being said in the group.

**Conclusions and Implications**

This study found that in 21st-century America, the African American males’ perceptions of and experiences with social receptivity at a PWI can have a significant impact on the students’ learning experience. The findings of this study are important because when students are enrolled at institutions with supportive environments (Kuh, Schuh, Witt, & Associates, 1991; MacKay & Kuh, 1994; Zhang & Smith, 2011), they experience greater satisfaction with college and are more likely to graduate. Similarly, when African American students participate in programs that address existing social environment concerns, enhanced adjustment and higher retention rates are found (MacKay & Kuh, 1994). Moreover, Banks (1984) reports that African Americans have a desire to make their campuses more desirable places for their racial group to attend.

Negative interpersonal experiences in predominantly White university settings can mediate, or limit, the ability of some African American students to engage in learning, student life programs, and other opportunities that are a part of campus life. African American students often perceive faculty and other support services to be uninviting and inaccessible (Stage & Hamrick, 1994). Fleming (1984) describes academic environments that, although not outwardly hostile, provide little or no social support to Black students. Many of these students devise coping skills such as resourcefulness, flexibility, and sublimation; skills that allow them to function in the college academic environment.

Because social and personal isolation and lack of belonging appear to be central factors in many African Americans’ satisfaction and success on predominantly White campuses, school personnel must understand how these issues operate and develop effective interventions for these individuals. In order for Black males to succeed at PWIs, schools need to promote and nurture supportive environments. One of the ways to achieve this goal is by employing more Black male and female professors in a variety of disciplines and by educating existing faculty and staff about the specific issues of concerns that have been raised by young Black male students. Having the availability of more Black professors to serve as mentors can enhance the students’ access to a supportive relationship in their educational experience.

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Bio

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