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Impacts of PWI campuses on Black Students Mental Health and Academic Performances

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BLACK STUDENTS: EXPERIENCES ON PWIS

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Purpose

Throughout my journey as a Black male in a society where having dark skin is viewed and treated as if it was disadvantage, I developed a keen interest in understanding how a campus environment may impact the behavior, mental and academic performances of Black students.

My interest in this topic grew out of my upbringing and daily challenges I faced. I grew up in a marginalized neighborhood on the southside of Chicago, where poverty was high, and crime and death were all around. Growing up I was always told by the leaders within my community that many of the families in the area were known as “at risk” individuals. "At-risk" can be described as those who may not have finished secondary education, who struggle to reach adulthood, and most likely to be a part of the mortality rate as stated by Jones (2021). According to Jones, between 2009 and 2018 the mortality rate for Blacks was 65% higher than whites, and this may be due to lifestyle of Blacks, their health issues, housing, and issues around racism and discrimination.

Being a part of this environment has dramatically influenced my mental thinking. From my experience growing up in a society based on stereotypes can be very detrimental. It can be learned that labels themselves are disabling. I aimed to transgress these stereotypes, which led to my journey to attend a PWI. Being a Black male and viewed as a threat to others, I not only felt intimidated but disadvantage, as well. Those preconceived feelings led me to develop insecurities, fear and feeling ostracized in an environment designed
specifically for white to excel. However, I chose to use those feelings of intimidation as my motivation to become successful and defy the stereotypes that were already placed against me.

**Introduction**

Over the years, racial discrimination against African Americans has been a major concern in nearly all aspects of the American society. Compared to White Americans, African Americans have been marginalized economically, financially, and socially. As they strive to quench their thirst for education, many African Americans decided to attend PWI. Predominantly white institutions or PWI refer to higher learning institutions in which 50% or more of the student enrollment are Whites (Mahony, 2020).

For some Black students being on a PWI campus their performance and cognitive behavior may be impacted. For example, many Black male students feel disadvantaged or discriminated against based on the color of their skin and the perception of them being viewed as a threat to others based of the racial threat theory (Blalock, 1967) As a student at a PWI, these issues made me feel intimidated. They are the things that triggered feelings of insecurities, fear, and a feeling of being ostracized in an environment that may not be welcoming. This paper expounds on factors that motivate Black students to strive to be a success at PWIs, their performance during their stay at the PWI, their mental health history while in the PWI campus, their encounters with racism, and how it may affect their academic performance.

**Literature Review**

2.1 Critical Race Theory
The critical race theory is a legal analysis framework that is built on the notion that race is neither biologically nor naturally grounded feature (Britannica, 2021). Billingsley & Hurd (2019) noted that contrary to other theories, critical race theory draws on theory, critical consciousness, and experiential knowledge to illuminate and eradicate the root cause of structural racism. Over the past two decades, the critical race theory has facilitated the discussion of progress towards attaining race equity. The critical race theory is often used to analyze social institutions and defining the source and how racism impacts minoritized groups.

Critical race theorists argue that the laws and legal institutions are inherently racist considering that they continue to develop and maintain economic, social, and political inequalities between African Americans and Whites (Eakins & Eakins, 2017). This was evident in the American education system, when African Americans were not allowed to attend schools, and even when they could attend, most schools were reserved for the white students and Black schools were controlled by whites (Woodson, 1999). On the other hand, schools that were attended by African Americans were underserved and under budgeted, which in some cases underprepared students for institutions of higher education.

Critical race theory challenges the belief that colorblindness aligns with the absence of racism and race consciousness aligns with racism. Colorblindness, which is both a school of thought and an attitude, argues that nonracial factors such as income primarily elaborate ostensibly racial phenomena (Mahony, 2020). Colorblindness requires a detailed assessment of the potential benefits of a race to injustices (Mazzocco, 2017). Although race-conscious research, including early eugenics studies, has been the bases for the negative misinformation about Blacks, in some cases it has added to the conversation on
colorblindness, and race consciousness which has led to some of the inequities Black and other have faced. Race consciousness is, therefore, vital for elaborating racialized mechanisms and constructs (Mazzocco, 2017).

Another aspect of critical race theory is the discussion on structural racism, refers to systems within structures that have disadvantaged Blacks in the areas of housing, education, employment, and economics (abc7news.com). The critical race theory posits that racism is integral to society and everyday life (Jones & Reddick, 2017). Minorities are exposed to various forms of everyday racism, such as being followed while shopping. In respond to racism and discrimination, minorities should learn hold to react racism they encounter, knows how to detect it, and recognizes the unjust treatment they are experiencing.

2.2 Racial Identity Theory

Negga et al. (2007) and Steward & Cunningham (2015) addressed the issue of racial and social identity for people of color, especially African Americans. Most studies have addressed how African Americans define themselves and feel about themselves. The oppressed and marginalized social status of Black people have led to various discussions by leaders on how African American name themselves, have a collective racial identity, self-esteem, and self-concept (Jennings, 2011). History indicates that Africans have been called or referred to as Black, Colored, Negro, African American, or Afro-American (Wallace & Bell, 1999). Every name or label used has been to refer to the inferiority of African Americans. African Americans quest to name and identify themselves reflects their socio-political consciousness racial identity.
Identity is a significant factor that influences one's well-being and how one relates with others (Thoits, 2012). Eakins & Eakins (2017) defines identity as a particular image that forms the belief of a person is. People with a strong sense of identity tend to be motivate and can find their place in any environment or setting. A clear understanding of who we are makes it easier to relate with other people and groups. Besides, identity helps one to know how to behave and make sound decisions (Eakins & Eakins, 2017).

For years, racial identity theories have been used in psychological literature (Brittain, 2011). Thompson and Carter (Carter, 1997) expound on identity and race integration as a systematic component within the human body. The authors indicate that a combination of racial identity theory and psychological models can result in understanding an individual's well-being and functioning.

Black students experience challenges identifying with the education system and other students. Identity is a significant factor that influences one's well-being and how one relates to others. Identity is a particular image of ourselves that forms the belief of the kind of a person one is. Notably, people with a strong sense of identity certainly have more advantages. A clear understanding of who we are makes it easier to relate with other similar people and groups. Besides, identity helps one to know how to behave and make sound decisions. Constantly, humans are faced with complex circumstances and decisions. Without any prior beliefs on how one should behave or act, weighing the available alternatives and making decisions may be challenging.

2.3 Education

Over the past fifty years, the number of Black people pursuing four-year college education has considerably increased (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). Despite the progress, the
number of people of color attending university is still lower than white students.

Understanding the diverse factors that influence and motivate young Black people to pursue a higher education may help assess how the environment at PWIs may affect their mental health and academic performance.

African Americans have encountered many hindrances in accessing education. During slavery, Blacks were prohibited from receiving an education (Jones & Reddick, 2017). After slavery, Blacks established their own schools where they were taught by Black teachers and administrators and encouraged to be a success in everything they did. Within their own schools, students were able to learn about their history, experiences, and contributions.

With the verdict of Brown Vs Board of Education and the order that schools begin to integrate, we saw many Black students being forced to commute considerable distances to white schools which were located away from their homes. After desegregation, state and local government and other stakeholders started closing schools, reforming schools, and setting up ways to prevent Black children from obtaining their education (Library of Congress, 2021). However, integrated schools mainly reflected middle-class European American ideals (Parker & Jones, 1999) which left many Black students feeling uncomfortable. For some Black parents, they preferred for their children to attend schools with a high Black population. At the same time, when it came to going to college many parents encouraged their children to attend PWIs.

2.4 Motivation

Motivation is an individual's incentive and desire to engage in a specific activity or the students' efforts to boost their performance (Ames, 1990). Some motivation theories argue that motivation can increase the student's performance and learning. To understand what
motivates an individual and how that may influence their academic performance and overall well-being, various motivation theories have been developed. Initial studies have indicated that unmotivated students often encounter difficulties in understanding or excelling in education (Hidi, 2000).

Consequently, an essential responsibility of educators is to enhance student’s motivation to learn (Johnson, 2013). Students’ motivation is considered a vital element in the learning and teaching process at all educational levels. Students who are motivated, have fun learning in and out of the classroom (Johnson, 2013). These students tend to have faith in their ability to learn and be responsible for their learning (Johnson, 2013). As a result, educators need to find ways to help students connect with diverse concepts, topics, and theories. In numerous studies, motivation has been defined differently.

One study that discussed human motivation and personality is self-determination theory whichelf-determination theory suggests that motivated behaviors vary in the degree to which they are autonomous vs. controlled. (Black, 2000). This theory emphasizes the creation of an environment that encourages individual intrinsic motivation development. This goes to show how some Black students believe that their instructors and professors do little to motivate or encourage them. Other Black students, tend to utilize the self-determination theory to achieve academic success.

2.5 Experience

Schools learning environment have a critical role in influencing how students perceive school and how it affects their academic performance (Strange & Banning, 2015). In other words, the environment can influence how we think and see things. If the
environment of the school, is not welcoming or is uncomfortable, the student may not do as well in their classes or interact well with peers, administrators, and faculty.

PWIs mainly incorporate white's culture and beliefs. Black students attending a PWI feel unwelcome, find it hard to have a sense of belonging, and are hesitant to get involved on campus. Black students found it challenging to adapt to the campus and connect with white students (Rozek, 2020; Harper & Antonio, 2008). Lack of connection with the environment triggers restlessness that may affect students’ academic performance and mental health.

2.6 Academic performance

The academic performance of Black students at PWIs can be used to assess how they are doing and the chances of them persisting the following semester. Despite the changes and opportunities available within higher education, the education equity gap between African Americans and Whites is widening. Scholars have associated this gap in achievement with theories relating to structural and environmental racism, genetic inferiority, opposition, and resistance (Milem & Umbach, 2008). According to Ogbu (2003) this statement demonstrates how a class analysis shows the achievement gap between white students and middle-class Black students who, based on their family, socialization, and upbringing should be doing well academically. Ogbu (2003) continue to explore this idea in a study looking at the achievement gap between whites and African Americans in Cleveland's suburban community education institution for over eight months. In this study, Ogbu and his team interviewed school personnel, students, and community members to understand what might affect the academic performance of Black students and overall intellectual engagement. Based on this study, the cultural-ecological approach explored two broad factors that influence students' academic performance and school adjustment. These factors
include the way minorities interpret and respond to how they were treated in the class and how society and its institutions/ system have treated them. Ogbu refers to the first group of factors as community forces.

Although community forces have been initially used as a lens in several his research, in this study, Ogbu (2003) expands the framework by looking closer at Black students' relationship with the institutions and educational system, their expressive behaviors and beliefs, including the way they interpret and respond to language and cultural differences due to their collective identity. Ogbu (2003) concluded that low teacher expectation is another factor that causes Black students' underperformance. Teachers in most PWIs often have stereotypical beliefs about Black students' attitudes even before meeting students or witnessing their academic patterns (Ogbu, 2003). This may inhibit the teachers from motivating Black students to perform better.

2.7 Discrimination

Throughout global history, people often use race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation to discriminate or segregate others in society. Discrimination is deeply rooted in the history of this and other countries (Parker & Jones, 1999), where the colonizer created the images of others as being lazy or inferior. Racial variability emerged as the foundation for structures and institutions to propagate human rights violations and discrimination (Wallace & Bell, 1999). Wallace & Bell (1999) defines discrimination as a structured way to abuse other people on the grounds of racial differences, thereby preventing or blocking them from participating in politics, accessing wealth, and engaging in diverse human life spheres. Jones & Reddick (2017) indicate that human discrimination is deep-rooted in nearly all social institutions in the United State. Although the United States is a democratic society
where the constitution legally protects every individual against discrimination, many minorities, especially African Americans, have continually faced discrimination.

Racial discrimination entails devaluation and disempowerment of a minority group based on race differences (Jones & Reddick, 2017). In other words, the dominant group is allocated desirable resources and societal opportunities compared to ethnic groups or races which are viewed as inferior (Jones & Reddick, 2017). This ideology offers the criteria for ranking social groups in the community. Consequently, negative attitudes and beliefs, stereotypes, prejudice, and certain behaviors aimed at these groups lead to discrimination and racism.

From admission to graduation, Black students face some form of racism, discrimination, and segregation, among other race-related issues (Robinson et al., 2018; Harper, 2008). Some black students are treated differently from white students due to perceptions that staff and the institution may have towards Blacks.

Riddle (2019) argues that regional levels of bias are among the negative experiences black students may encounter while attending PWIs. Regional levels of bias could be interlinked with the racial student disciplinary disparities for several reasons (Riddle, 2019). Their study highlights various examples that are likely to be triggered by the majority group's socio-political power and intergroup contact or racial bias. Sparks (2016) stated that racial bias can happen when a person encounters someone with opposing beliefs and feelings about a given group and whose actions could result in disciplinary disparities. This may occur when an administrators, staff, and teachers are biased and make decisions against Black students that are not in their best interest. Similarly, biased community members can project that may be viewed as negative transgressions against a black student.
In higher learning institutions, Black students may experience bias when interacting with the administrators, staff, faculty, and other students (Milem & Umbach, 2008). In a study conducted by Ruiz et al (2012) they reported that Black students faced a high rate of discrimination. Their study indicated that Black Students experience prejudice, bigotry, race-related institutional and peer support, and challenges integrating in informal interactions. These findings may have substantial implications on Black students' psychological sense of belonging, affecting their mental and physical well-being.

In the 19th century, institutional discrimination against African Americans or Black people was prevalent (Billingsley & Hurd, 2019). African American were denied fundamental rights enjoyed by other citizens, such as economic, education and voting rights. To provide African Americans their rights, Congress has passed laws or regulations in various forms to stop the practice of discrimination in all forms in education, housing, business, health, economics. For example, discrimination can still be found in education in the form of funding for local schools or how Black students may be awarded scholarships or recognized for their academic achievement or how students are treated on campus.

Jones, Cross, & DeFour (2007) examined how campus environment cause students from diverse background to confront forms of microaggressions and discrimination. Microaggressions are daily behavioral, verbal, or environmental indignities that involve people's mixed heritage status and are experienced by multiracial individuals of any phenotype or racial makeup (Johnson & Nadal, 2010). These microaggressions are manifestations of monarchism. Mono racism is a psychological inequality social system where people who do not fit the monoracial categories may be oppressed on interpersonal and systemic levels due to underlying beliefs and assumptions in the singular, discrete racial
categories (Harris, 2017). Examples of multiracial microaggressions include isolation, exclusion, objectification and exoticization, denial of multiracial experiences and reality, and identity or experiences pathologizing. In the higher education microaggressions can be experienced through interactions with faculty and peers, marginalizing curriculum and pedagogy, and frustration with maintaining singular monoracial designations by the campus, among others (Harris, 2017).

Another area where we can find some form of discrimination, is the financial aid Black students receive while in college. For example, Black students are known to have exceptional large student loan debit due to the increase in tuition at many colleges (Mahony, 2020). Many black students in the United States come from low-income families, which means there may be minimum family support for them to purchase books, pay for housing, or due other things college students need. Statistical data indicates that only 11% of students from lower income families receive their bachelor’s degrees, while 79% of their counterparts obtain their degree (Negga et al., 2017). Nearly 55% of the degrees attained in the US are given to students in the upper-income quarter, while only 9.4% of the degrees are conferred to students from households in the lower quartile.

Some higher education learning institutions’ policies may have that include hidden aspects of discrimination. Institutions have on numerous occasions have been accused of discriminating against people of color due to their low-income levels (Arthur, 2019). Some

Disciplinary action is another area where Black students face discrimination from K-12 including higher education. From K-12 through higher education, disciplinary action for Blacks have ranged from in school suspension to expulsion to lengthy probation, which has a negative impact on their academic success, or it may cause them to drop out. Some of the
reason Black students may face disciplinary action has to do with their lack of understanding university policy, getting familiar with the campus, and making the transition to changing their behaviors so they may fit in rules and policies (Strange & Banning, 2015). Olive (2003) noted that another reason Black student, particularly Black males, face disciplinary action is the perception that may faculty, staff, and students have about Blacks being linked to violence, aggressiveness, and adverse outcomes. Due to this perception, many white students who feel intimidate by Black students take minor incidents and call them out for threatening them. Consequently, a Black student at a PWI must take extra precautions in how they act, what they say, and how they relate or respond to/ with staff, other students, and teachers. Over time, these precautions may lead the student into overthinking, feeling uncomfortable and lack of confidence and doubt which affect their school performance (Mathew, 2011).

2.8 Mental Health and Racism

Racial differences in mental health rely on mental health status indicators (William, 2018). Over the past few decades, research indicates that African Americans may have higher psychological distress and lower psychological rates in cognition than whites. William (2018) noted that the presence of high-level psychological distress may present signs of mental disorders. Due to lack of counseling, family beliefs, and money, African Americans who experience mental illnesses tend to experience it longer and may have more severe incidents than other ethnic group or race. In a study conducted by the National Study of American Life (NSAL), Caribbean Blacks and African Americans experience depression at higher rates than whites (William, 2018).
In recent years, The American Psychological Association have acknowledged that racism and discrimination have an impact on the health of Blacks (American Psychological Association, 2013). One of the areas that has a major impact on health is stress. Studies show how incidences of discrimination can cause chronic and acute stress which negatively impact one's physical and mental health (American Psychological Association, 2013). In a study done by Billingsley & Hurd (2019) where they used the Everyday Discrimination scale to measure how many times an individual was treated with disrespect or was treated unfair or harassed by the police or denied an employment opportunity. This study found that 69% of African Americans experienced at least one form of discrimination and 61% experienced discrimination daily.

2.9 Mental Health

In recent year studies have explore how Black students experience at PWI may affect their mental health. One issue that is discussed in some of these studies is the imposter syndrome. The imposter syndrome “is the experience of feeling like a phony—you feel as though at any moment you are going to be found out as a fraud—like you don't belong where you are, and you only got there through dumb luck” (Cuncic, 2021, n.p.). Many students experience imposter syndrome, which affects them in several ways—academic success, withdrawal, and lack of involvement. Another area that may affect students if the lack of Black faculty who could be there to support and help them navigate their academic journey (Harper & antonio, 2008). The lack of financial support is a major stress area for students, particularly Black students. As stated previously, most Black students come from low to middle income families, which means they must depend on financial aid, loans, work study, and a parttime job. This adds to their stress and may cause some students to dropout or take a
lower load so they can continue their education. These stresses along with other personal and family issues may cause students to feel depressed, lonely, lack of confidence, and cause them to question if this is where they belong. All these issues tend to influence students mental health.

As they attend PWIs, Black students find it challenging to adapt to the system and connect with other white students (Harper, 2008). Lack of connection with their new environment triggers restlessness that seriously affects their academic performance and mental health.

3.0 Conclusion

Racial discrimination and segregation can be experience in everyday life. Black students are disadvantaged and discriminated against based on the color of their skin and viewed as a threat to others. As a student in a PWI, these discriminations create intimidation. Those precognitions and stigmas provoke insecurities within Black students (Harper, 2008). Thus, Black students find being in an environment that they do not have a sense of belonging may impact their mentally and academic success (Strange & Banning, 2015; Harper, 2008).

The critical theory expounds on the foundation of racism. The critical race theory is an organized framework related to legal analysis built on the premise that race is neither a natural nor biological but is a socially constructed category to exploit and oppress Black people. Black students deal with racism, bias, racial discrimination, and segregation from the time of admission to their graduation.

Black students are treated differently by white students, faculty, and staff due to the perceptions they may have towards people of color. For Black students being in a place or
area where they may experience racial bias can indicates that they are likely to encounter individuals who may not be supportive or expect much from them (Harper & antonio, 2008).

Motivation has a large influence on students. It impacts their individual being which leads to higher academic performance. Which goes back to the self-motivation theory that implies goal-driven behavior. Students who are motivated believe in their ability to learn and take responsibility for their learning.

Studies show that faculty, staff, and administrations have developed their perception and expectation about Black students’ way before they meet them (Milem & Umbach, 2008). When teachers or instructors have the wrong perception or do not believe that Black students in their class can do the work or meet the class expectation, students either fail or go beyond the class expectation. This may inhibit the teachers from motivating Black students to become academically successful.

This study sought to discuss how Black students experience being on a PWI. It discussed issues around identity, critical race theory, motivation, discrimination, and mental health. One of the limitations to this study was that the researcher was not able to survey many students to learn more about their experience at a PWI or how it may affect their mental health. Most of the information from this study can from an extensive literature review.

Based on the literature, it is important that PWIs continue to find ways to make the campus welcoming, provide students with a sense of belonging, explore ways to provide financial support for students, and to make sure that the curriculum is diverse, and the achievement gap is narrowed.
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