Exploration of the Influence of Perceived Discrimination and Academic Stress on Dating Satisfaction For College Students of Color

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORATION OF THE INFLUENCE OF PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION AND ACADEMIC STRESS ON DATING SATISFACTION FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS OF COLOR

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Admission of college of students of color into predominately white institutions (PWIs) is a wide historical phenomenon embarked with continuous research. Yet, there is necessity of discovering a wide variety of challenges students of color face at PWIs. This study examined how academic stress and perceived discrimination influences dating satisfaction for college students of color at PWIs. Interviews from 4 participants with dating relationships lasting one year or longer were analyzed. Through qualitative methods and phenomenology, three themes emerged from the data. Despite academic, social, and partner relationship conflicts, the discussion and clinical implications of this study provide a comprehensive outlook on students' endurance and problem-solving abilities.

Keywords: academic stress, dating satisfaction, emerging adults, higher education, perceived discrimination, sustainability
EXPLORATION OF THE INFLUENCE OF PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION
AND ACADEMIC STRESS ON DATING SATISFACTION
FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS OF COLOR

BY
JAHLEEL D. SHEPHERD
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MASTER OF SCIENCE

SCHOOL OF FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCES

Thesis Director
DeAnna Harris-McKoy, Ph.D
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Exploration of the Influence of Perceived Discrimination and Academic Stress on Dating Satisfaction for College Students of Color

Introduction

There are many entities that shape emerging adults’ experiences and influence their decisions during their formative years. Many emerging adults may have hopes of pursuing higher education. Pursuing higher education comes with many tasks or expectations for college students to focus on throughout their experience. College students manage many tasks, such as academics and extracurricular activities causing overall academic stress (Hartley, 2011). Besides academic stress, college students may explore various social aspects. Generally, social aspects refer to the place where people live as it pertains to emotions, memories, experiences, and people that they encounter (Pani-Harreman, Bours, Zander, et al., 2021). Sustaining social aspects can include joining clubs/organizations or attending social gatherings. Making friends and dating are also significant characteristics of managing social aspects (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Students can participate in the dating pool at a university, and as emerging adults, they can gain social benefits from it (Schrag, Brown, et al., 2021). Dating for college students is important because it’s an opportunity to have close, more intimate companionships with an individual while trying to
navigate the hardships of college and increase their means of socialization leading to personal and social growth (Tang & Zuo, 2000). While many students may consider the importance of dating and understanding the importance of social relationships, navigating the hardships of higher education without guidance or resources can be challenging, particularly for students of color. While college students of color face the expectations of academic stress and social life, they also face perceived discrimination at predominately white institutions (Reynolds, Sneva, et al., 2010). Due to academic stress and discriminatory experiences students of color may face struggles in sustaining a dating relationship and exhibit decreased satisfaction levels.

To understand how students of color experience higher education as part of their emerging adult experience, this study examined how academic stress and perceived discrimination affect college students' dating satisfaction. Exploration on this topic painted a framework on how students of color guide their way in higher education while sustaining a dating relationship.

Theoretical Framework and Application

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) provided a theoretical framework for this study, which focuses on setting-level influences, guiding the development of contextual models to explain a range of phenomena including urban adolescent psychological and academic outcomes (Neal & Neal, 2013), likewise, environmental structures influence relationships between individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, relationships are explained within various concentric systems that are centered around the individual. The microsystem explains that within frameworks of school, neighborhood, and family, there is a direct, bi-directional influence in which subjects influence one another. The mesosystem highlights the connections the subject has
between two or more frameworks, in which the individual can form deeper relationships with multiple individuals, such as social ties and social bonds. The exosystem involves the individual having indirect contact with community organizations; however, the individual could be affected by its outcomes such as community projects, judicial system, and institutions. Individuals have less influence as larger institutions create or change global rules and systems. The individual would illicit emotional responses to bigger systems. The macrosystem explains that people are subjected to laws, culture, policies, morals, and social norms to govern individual lives. Finally, the chronosystem discusses how the elements of a person’s environment, internal or external, can impact aging and cognition across time (Paquette and Ryan, 2001; Pittenger, Huit, & Hansen, 2016).

Ecological Systems Theory has been widely adopted by developmental psychologists interested in understanding individuals in context (Neal & Neal, 2013). Students of color are examined as independent and dependent variables in relation to ecological systems theory. Perceived discrimination, academic stress, and dating satisfaction fit into at least one of these systems. Academic stress is part of the microsystem in the context of the direct influence of school on college students. Academic stress could be a major factor in dating relationships as students try to navigate how to maintain academic expectations while trying to maintain dating relationship expectations. In other words, due to academic stress, students faced lower dating satisfaction because students had lower amounts of time, opportunity, or energy to invest in a dating relationship. Perceived discrimination fits into the macrosystem as it relates to how laws, customs, traditions, morals, and norms shape people. In the context of dating satisfaction through the lens of perceived discrimination, individuals make personal decisions about dating based on insights and racial experiences with certain groups of people. The relationship between an
individual and a partner could be influenced by race, negative experiences, traditions, and characteristics. Perceived discrimination can limit the dating selection process of finding a compatible partner based on judgments or justified interests. Furthermore, once the selection process is limited, those who have similar experiences of perceived discrimination increase dating satisfaction in the dating process.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

College Students of Color

Students of color make up an increasing number of the college student population in the United States (Lundberg, 2010; Swail, 2002). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), between the years 2000 and 2018, 40 percent of students of color were admitted to 2–4-year institutions post-high school graduation or graduate school post-undergraduate. Results showed that college enrollment rates among 18- to 24-year-olds increased for those who were Black (from 31 to 37 percent) and Hispanic (from 22 to 36 percent) (NCES, 2020). The college enrollment rate was higher in 2018 than in 2010 for those who were Hispanic (36 vs. 32 percent) and lower in 2018 than in 2010 for those who were American Indian/Alaska Native (24 vs. 41 percent) (NCES, 2020). The college enrollment rate among 18- to 24-year-olds is higher for those who are Asian (59 percent) than for those of other reported racial and ethnic groups (NCES, 2020). Within the past decade, universities have been successful in recruiting and enrolling racial and ethnic minorities, but the retention and graduation rates of students of color continue to be lower than the overall student population (Adams & McBrayer, 2020; Kuh, Cruce, et al., 2008; Stebleton & Soria, 2012; Stuber, 2011).

This study focuses on how students of color manage stressors in a predominantly white institution (PWI). A PWI is an institution that has a low rate of enrollment from underrepresented non-white racial groups (Bourke, 2016). Many PWIs exhibit covert microaggressions and racial stereotypes that cause attrition among students of color despite
appearing diverse on the surface (McClain & Perry, 2017). Unfortunately, despite this growing literature, the perception remains that PWIs have not been successful in fully integrating African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American, Caribbean, Native Alaskan, Hawaiian, students into the mainstream of the educational system (Holmes, Ebbers, et al., 2001; Nettles & Perna, 1997).

Dating Satisfaction

Dating satisfaction is one of many research topics to study dating outcomes. Dating satisfaction is an intrapersonal evaluation of the positivity of feelings for one's partner and attraction to the relationship (Rusbult, 1983). The terms and phrases used by Western culture today to describe their romantic relationships, romantic experiences, and sexual engagements (or romantic interactions) are numerous (Powell, Freedman, et al., 2021). In terms of dating satisfaction, there is a positive correlation between partners' subjective viewpoints and attitudes (Hendrick, Dicke, et al., 1998). Partners in relationships are more likely to view a relationship positively if they experience positive outcomes. Furthermore, they could feel more comfortable in their relationship and have a positive attitude overall. A person's dating satisfaction tends to be higher when they experience outcomes that exceed what they expected from their partner (Arriaga, 2001). Satisfaction in romantic or dating relationships is a complex phenomenon. A person's affect and behavior, as well as their partner's actual affect and behavior strongly influence their satisfaction and perception (Meeks, Hendrick, et al., 1998). In constructing this research, I used the definition of dating satisfaction in relation to one's affected behavior, which impacts the partner's satisfaction and perception of oneself (Sacher & Fine, 1996; Rusbult, 1983).
Academic Stress

Academic stress is when students face and respond to challenges, expected or unexpected, in pursuit of their educational goals (Struthers, Perry, et al., 2000). Pursuing higher education, such as college, is a tense time for many students as they navigate the process of adapting to new educational and social environments and pursuing their educational goals (Misra & Castillo; 2004; Struthers, Perry, et al., 2000). Stress among undergraduate and graduate students is multifactorial, arising from academic and non-academic factors, including socio-cultural, environmental, and psychological attributes (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015; Brand and Schoonheim-Klein, 2009). Academic factors were the predominant cause of stress in most students, followed by physical (health), social (making friends), and emotional (emotional regulation, expression) factors (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015). Many students also experience college as chronically stressful due to academic requirements such as tests, papers, and presentations (MacGeorge, Samter, et al., 2005; Murphy & Archer, 1996).

College may be even more stressful for international students due to the added strain of learning different cultural values and languages in addition to academic (Essandoh, 1995; Mori 2000; Misra & Castillo, 2004).

Due to academic stress, students are likely to deal with intense illnesses or behaviors such as depression, anxiety, alcohol consumption, or isolation (Reddy et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the strain on students achieving higher success can be quite challenging, so intense that suicide attempts have heightened fivefold (Reddy et al., 2018).

The microsystem explains the directional effects of academic stress on students of color. When students of color face academic stress, students may not always desire to seek general resources institutions provide with predominately white staff. Students of color may seek
resources from other students and staff who look like them. For instance, there is a continued demand for safe spaces on campus among black students, making them more successful in offices, mentoring programs, peer groups, and other support mechanisms such as Black cultural centers (Patton, 2006). The question is, do students of color experience similar stress? What about academic success? There can be a lot of stress associated with academic success, but the focus becomes the type of access students of color have in higher education. Some research suggests that for African American children, there are potential conflicts between strongly identifying as one’s race and strong academic performance (Sellers, Chavous, et al., 1998).

More research has found that African American college students whose race was negatively perceived at colleges performed worse than those who were not racially predisposed (Chavous & Cooke, 1998). Latinx students continue to face biased and prejudicial treatment related to their racial/ethnic minority status that has been described in terminologies such as perceived discrimination (Pérez, Fortuna, et al., 2008; Cheng, McDermott, et al., 2019). Additionally, Latinx students may be vulnerable to academic distress in the context of perceived discrimination (Cheng, McDermott, et al., 2019).

Academic Stress and Dating Satisfaction

While I could not find studies that focus on how academic stress influences the dating satisfaction of college students of color, dating satisfaction is expected to be adversely affected by academic stress for students of color. College is a stressful time for many students as they navigate the process of adapting to new educational and social environments (Misra & Castillo, 2004). In the microsystem, college students experience a direct influence of academic stress that impacts their overall well-being. Students' interests in social scenes and activities such as dating are likely to decrease as they become more focused on academics. Dating is seen as a recreation
activity or opportunity to have fun (Tang & Zuo, 2000; McDaniel, 1966), as well as a means of socialization leading to personal and social companionship (Tang & Zuo, 2000; Erikson, 1968). Specifically for dating, students could gain additional support from a dating partner. Students expect their dating partners to fulfill their dating purpose. If students experience academic stress or strain, students could engage with their partners to cope with their stress. Dating satisfaction will be affected if your dating partner isn't available, or if they choose not to provide support or comfort.

Perceived Discrimination

In exploring perceived discrimination rather than racism and racism oppression, I aimed to understand how the structures of oppression are built from racial cognitions. Perceived discrimination involves individuals' perception of negative attitudes, judgment, or unfair treatment due to their specific characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, and social status (Banks, Kohn-Wood, et al., 2006). Discrimination is based on one's background or racial or social group that constitutes a prejudiced event (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002), and the position of one’s own power and group within the social structure (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). The degree of prejudice that one is likely to feel depends on the nature of intergroup relations at a given historical point, and on the position of one's own group within society (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). The impact of racial dislike based on perceived prejudices on daily life is significant, whether the person is discriminating against another, or someone is subjected to the discrimination. By this, I identified groups of people who are suppressed by the discriminatory nature and devaluing nature of racism. Comprehensively, many campuses are struggling with racial tensions among students from diverse racial groups (Suarez-Balcazar, Orellana-Damacela, et al., 2003). Just like stress amongst college students, perceived discrimination has multiple
factors that create constructs of negative attitudes based on past traumas, external messages from social networks, and racism in real-time to influence individual cognitions.

Perceived Discrimination, Dating Satisfaction, and Students of Color

There was once a racial divide between white people and people of color. The racial divide between white people and people of color was legal and enforced through various laws. There was oppression of people of color, including biased laws and amendments, due to the preference for white groups and circumvented society. Among the ways in which these laws are regularly subverted to benefit white people is through the subversion of civil rights law (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995). The histories, experiences, cultures, and languages of other students of color are often devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted from formal education, despite their being the holders and creators of knowledge (Bernal, 2002).

Many dating relationships are forged within social groups or when people intersect. Furthermore, there are different cultures in the world that have customs regarding what is acceptable and what is not acceptable regarding dating and relationships. Through life experience, unfortunate circumstances and situations occur that shape the way people interact and make decisions to avoid uncertainty. People of color may have suffered from traumas related to segregation and mistreatment in the past. The phrase, “date within your race”, can be seen as a type of message that restricts those who choose to date outside their cultural group because of cultural customs, values, perceptions, and norms within the group system. Individuals are therefore highly encouraged to date within their racial group or due to cultural differences, people avoid dating outside their race. Additionally, how individuals receive and interpret messages from their social networks and close family members about dating partners, could influence dating satisfaction based on race and attitudes to perpetuate perceived discrimination.
In dating terms, higher perceived discrimination would positively influence dating satisfaction. To explain, if students of color engage in the dating experience, students of color are more likely to date other students of color because both partners can either support each other when faced with discrimination or have previously faced discrimination. Because of increased dating exploration and changes in laws, interracial relationships are more prevalent (Field, Kimuna, et al., 2013). Thus, dating satisfaction data could be skewed or lack diversity as a result. During times of segregation, several states outlawed interracial relationships (Rose & Firmin, 2013). Over the past five decades, Black and White people have been dating due to education, changes in beliefs, dating outside their racial groups, changes to equality laws and interracial dating becoming more acceptable in society. Current research shows the perspective and attitudes of dating relationships and interracial dating and found that it is still not accepted by some people in the United States (Field et al., 2013).

Summary

This literature provided an overview of how academic stress, perceived discrimination, and dating satisfaction manifest in students of color. One of the concepts that the literature provided was academic stress. Academic stress demonstrated how academics can stress many students as they navigate higher education. Specifically, students of color may experience it differently than White students due to the added layer of discrimination. The added layer of discrimination can influence a different realm of research like dating satisfaction. Current literature provided an explanation surrounding the dating phenomenon and committed relationship satisfaction. The dating phenomenon can include how potential partners' perceptions of positive and negative dating outcomes are highlighted by their overall dating satisfaction. Even so, dating might look different for students of color if they decide to pursue other races
besides their own. These experiences may have shaped their lives positively or negatively. Prior research suggests how perceived discrimination affects lives because of biases, discriminations, and prejudices. For students of color who’ve endured discriminatory wrongdoing, their college or graduate experience can be skewed positively or negatively depending on their experiences at institutions dominated by White students. I hypothesized that high academic stress among students of color influences low dating satisfaction, while high perceived discrimination among students of color influences high dating satisfaction.
Participants for this study consisted of undergraduate or graduate students of color at PWIs who are at least 18 years of age, and currently in an exclusive dating relationship for one year or more. Students can either be in an opposite or same-sex relationship. Students of color included individuals who identified as African, Caribbean, Asian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Latino, Black, and Native Alaskan students. To gather the data, 4 interviews were conducted. I gathered participants for the interviews through inner networks, various university cultural centers or social media. Interviews were recruited through inner networks, including asking friends from different universities across the United States if they knew of individuals who were also interested in being interviewed. Connecting with various cultural centers included emailing and speaking with representatives that knew of students interested in participating in the research. Lastly, social media utilized to expand the range of inner networks and potentially connect with other students of color outside of the United States. A flyer was used to have participants sign up for an interview through a QR code.

Additionally, I used qualitative methods to conduct the study. Qualitative research focuses on individuals, events, and contextual factors, creating a unique idiographic style or a particular finding of analysis that lends itself to a qualitative approach (Gerring, 2017). Through qualitative means, the procedure of this study is backed by the concept of phenomenology. Phenomenology is the idea of exploring a phenomenon between the researcher and an object via a first-person point of view (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). First-person can include interviews. The
function of interviews, specifically, is to produce first-person accounts of the participant's experiences as well as to speak with participants who are willing to be interviewed as one of the major sources of qualitative data (Polkinghorne, 2005).

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I used thematic content analysis and transcribed the interviews. I used Microsoft Teams to schedule, record, and execute the interviews. Interviews were conducted and each interview lasted between thirty minutes to one hour. Then, I rewatched the recordings to transcribe participants’ responses to ensure the transcriptions were accurate. Using an independent qualitative descriptive approach, data patterns (themes) were considered for data analysis. To analyze the data, I coded the interviews into open and axial codes. Open coding was used first followed by axial coding for each interview. In conjunction with open and axial coding, I devised a theme based on the codes.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The four participants interviewed in this study were all graduate students. All names are changed to protect participants’ identity. Ricardo is 29 years old and identifies as a heterosexual, Hispanic/Latino male. Max is 27 years old and identifies as homosexual, Hispanic/Latino male, and is an international student. Josephine is 24 years old and identifies as a heterosexual, female Hispanic/Latina. Andrea is 29 years old and identifies as heterosexual, female Hispanic/Latina. All graduate students attended a predominately white institution in the Midwest.

Through analysis of the in-depth interviews, the data revealed three themes about students of color's experiences with academic stress, perceived discrimination, and dating satisfaction at a PWI. The three themes include: Sustaining a healthy relationship through stress; financial stability; and racial, sexual, and gender identity (see Table 1).

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<tr>
<th>Thematic Category</th>
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<td>Financial Stability</td>
<td>Discusses how participants’ awareness and need for financial support as participants progress through higher education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial, Sexual, and Gender Identity</td>
<td>Discusses how participants are self-conscious and self-aware of their identity and how others perceive their identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustaining a healthy relationship through stress</td>
<td>Addresses how participants reference negative feelings when experience academic stress inside and outside the classroom and navigating those feelings and scenarios with their partner.</td>
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The first theme, financial stability, discussed participants' awareness and need for financial support as participants progress through higher education. Financial stability included acquiring assistantships, financial waivers, and financial grants. Participants managed an assistantship to earn funds while dealing with the cost of work and academic stress. Participants’ reflections on the matter encompassed how stress is prioritized in the relationship and negatively impacts dating satisfaction.

The second theme, racial, gender, and sexual identity discussed how participants are self-conscious and self-aware of their identity and how others perceive their identity in various spaces in the form of perceived discrimination. Furthermore, this theme addressed how participants would discuss their experiences of perceived discrimination with their partners which gave them emotional support in the relationship.

The final theme, sustaining a healthy relationship through stress, addressed how participants reference negative feelings when experiencing academic stress inside and outside the classroom, and how the stress impacts them individually and transfers to the relationship. In the relationship, academic responsibilities had a major influence on how participants adjusted to certain outcomes in managing their relationships. Therefore, participants created strategies on how to cope with academic stress and discussed how coping with stress can influence communication with their partner to manage potential relationship difficulties and decrease dating satisfaction.

Theme One: Financial Stability

Most of the participants identified how they managed work responsibilities as well as having a focus on academic studies. Some participants reported their specific circumstances
regarding the need for financial support from financial aid. In addition, participants had realistic expectations of achieving higher education; however, there are requirements that students must fulfill to be successful in and outside the classroom. Students have varying levels of accessing funds based on their social location and international status. Besides personal responsibility in accessing other funds to support students, having a graduate assistantship is part of their academic stress. For example, Max reported working an assistantship to manage the costs of school and the overall ability to sustain financial stability.

I think my other stressor which influences my stress is finances. I think that's another piece of my academic stress; having to figure out in classes and being in a program that's really intensive and trying to do everything. As well as having an assistantship that helps pay for my schooling and like that also ties into the financial stress of being an international student, the fees are a little bit higher than the other ones. And also, I think partially is like inflation too. Things are expensive now too, so that's also another thing.

Josephine mentioned how accessing course materials can be stressful, in addition, to their status as a low-income student. She shared her perspective as a Hispanic/Latina from a low socioeconomic background.

Also, like buying textbooks. It's really stressful, like as a low-income student. I think that there's some books that are just very expensive. I think because of the nature of the higher Ed program, we try to stay away from more expensive textbooks, but still having to buy like two or three books, for a class or three classes can get pretty pricey.

The burden of paying for class materials or attending a master's program, however, was not discussed by all participants. Andrea, however, mentions the need to work in addition to experiencing stress while attending school. Andrea says, “Just like having to work while you're in school too is very stressful.” Nevertheless, participants identified how finances are crucial for academic success.
Theme Two: Racial, Sexual, and Gender Identity

Participants reported having experienced either direct discrimination or issues related to discrimination based on their social location. Participants explained how their experiences can be perceived as discrimination but did not directly describe their experiences as such. Participants mentioned microaggressions, gender identity, international status, and nonverbal communication to classify their perceived discrimination. Specifically, participants realized that their racial identity would attract attention and cause participants to be consciously self-aware of their surroundings, being self-conscious when entering spaces or experiencing perceived or potential mistreatment from others. Additionally, a sense of inferiority was conveyed in addition to gender discrimination being defined as a microaggression. One participant, Josephine, shared their viewpoint specifically discussing how gender discrimination plays a role.

I feel like a majority of the discrimination that I have encountered has been with specific people who all identify as male, and like as a female, some of the comments haven't always been so positive. I wouldn't say, for lack of better words, I feel like sometimes men try to, like undermine. I feel like I don't know how else to put it other than the fact that they feel like they have the power to do so and like I've encountered that in the workplace, but also like in classes with some of my cohort.

Another participant, Ricardo, described how it feels to be discriminated against outside the classroom.

I would have to say I’ve experienced some discrimination, but it's been mainly like outside the classroom. Just like going to the establishment where you just definitely stand out and just having eyes on you like, he's standing out right now. I would have to say by skin color. I want to say often, just depending on where exactly I’m going, like establishment wise. Like if I'm going to a restaurant or a bar that’s known, just to not have the same crowd of people of my skin color or stuff like that. Like the opposite. Sometimes, especially like if we both notice it, it really bugs us.

Max, an international student, explained their story of areas where discrimination may exist that causes him to be self-conscious of himself.
I think for me, it’s how I speak. I think that's one of the biggest things that I tend to be more conscious about. Like people making comments about that, from students or people that are affected somehow. This shows up in the classroom where I feel the need to be understood correctly just because of the kind of perceptions I get sometimes. Like, oh maybe I need to be clearer or figure out how to say this better? It does show up. Sometimes it does show up in the classroom and not like my professor discriminates against me, but my perceptions of what they may be thinking about me because I’m overthinking things. It's more like the perceptions are already there. Like it's the perceptions of how I speak are set in my mind and it kind of just shows up when I do homework and assignments and when I’m in the classroom, it's like it’s there because I already have a previous experience from another university. It’s fresh in my mind.

In some ways, identity becomes an issue based on the messages they are getting from others in a social context such as, i.e., grocery stores, and peer interactions. What’s validating for the participants is discussing their experiences with their partners. It’s a way for the participants to process their experience with someone who may understand their perspective and, in fact, positively influence their relationship satisfaction. When asked about how perceived discrimination influences relationship quality, Ricardo responds,

I would have to say positive, also like it's good hearing another person’s opinion and feedback. Like you don't feel like you're, you're not thinking you're the crazy one. Thinking about it or not assuming like, oh this happened and stuff like that, you know because I've seen like people may feel that they're being discriminated against, but it's not even like that. So it's good to like have somebody there to also like back you up on your claim like, yeah, I felt out of place too or just feel I got a weird vibe from being there.

Josephine explained the comfort of having difficult conversations with their partner and how to address discrimination.

I feel like it's comforting because he gets it. I feel like because he has such a good understanding of, like what social justice is, I feel like it's very validating when I'm like, and this person said this and this and this is why it's wrong.

Josephine continued with processing and addressing discriminatory issues with their partner, in addition to their identity.

Between my boyfriend and I, our careers revolve around, what does it mean to be like, culturally competent and what does it mean to be like an active bystander? What does it mean to be like an advocate and all that stuff. And I feel like a lot of what we do is like sharing. Sure, like our experiences and like some of the work that we're doing in addressing
some of the things that are happening. So I feel like that's something that we're able to connect on a lot just because we have a lot of similar experiences when it comes to like being people of color and like for me to be a woman and for him to be undocumented, I feel like a lot of the things that we encounter are like very similar. So that's like something that we constantly talk about and like white supremacy, obviously.

Max shared the impact of discrimination on their relationship.

Discrimination does affect the quality of the relationship, especially when experiencing homophobic comments. Whether it’s relational or people outside our inner circle or outside the relationship. Sometimes the conversation is about discrimination; not being able to discuss how our day was and talking about these negative things that we experience kind of becomes less of like enjoying the moment. We learned to support each other well.

Then, Max discussed how his identity and discriminatory experiences is similar to his partner’s experiences, but other areas of Max’s identity that his partner may not understand is challenged.

Therefore, Max and his partner addressed how they worked through this barrier.

Additionally, one of the things that makes it easy to talk about is we're both gay, and having talked about people being homophobic before, and understanding that aspect. And even though he doesn’t understand parts of racial discrimination, he understands how maybe it feels when it comes to homophobic comments as well, so it's easy because it's equal to understanding. Also, not playing the role in trying to fix things but just hear it. It's more about understanding and figuring out how to talk through my emotions in that aspect. The conversation goes well because we're not about fixing. It's more about talking and understanding each other's point of view, and how that affects us.

Max proceeded to explain how the relationship continues to grow positively despite the barrier.

I never thought about that. I truly don’t know how to answer that. I think at least from my relationship with my partner, since we communicate, I think that if things were an issue, we would talk about it. For example, my issue that I had before was me being foreign, how the immigration process worked. We seemed to have a subject of misunderstanding because of the type of discriminatory comments. Even though my partner makes good points regarding the process, he may not understand where the comments are coming from. Not in a bad way, but eventually coming from a place of misinformation that comes across as perceived discrimination. When I talk about it, it increases understanding, but that's something that was kind of early on in our relationship and we were able to overcome that. It used to be early on in our relationship that these types of topics and the things I would say affected him. So, it's not as present at this point in our relationship.

On the other hand, Andrea is the partner having to support their spouse, as Andrea does not report being or feeling discriminated against. Essentially, their partner is always conscious of their identity.
We've had conversations mainly where; I mean his job is very corporate. So, I mean, I think he's maybe the only Hispanic. If not, there's the second person of color who is Hispanic also, and so he always goes into work with that in mind. So it's him going into the office in a corporate world like he was very sensitive about him being the only Hispanic versus me. Like, I feel like I’m comfortable in any scenario that I'm in sometimes like yeah, I know that maybe there aren't as many Hispanics around me as I would like, but it’s not something that’s in the back of my mind. But to him, it causes anxiety.

Andrea continued by describing the difficulty in supporting their partner.

I don't think there's anything that I can say to make him feel better, but just be there and listen. Because to me it’s like, well, like, you’re probably one of the smartest people. Well, that is why you're there, like you should embrace it, you know. And to him, it was just frustrating. And maybe he wanted words of encouragement, and I wasn't always there to give him that.

Participants described situations in which they experienced blatant discrimination or situations that came close to discriminatory behavior. Participants found that it was validating to discuss unfair, uncomfortable experiences, even though some people describe themselves as supporting or receiving support from their partners regardless of the way in which they do so and not supporting or receiving support.

Theme Three: Sustaining a Healthy Relationship through Stress

Sustaining a healthy relationship through stress addressed how participants navigate the difficulties of managing their academic stress and their relationships. Due to the importance of completing assignments, studying, and having work responsibilities, participants explained how stressful it can be to consistently maintain a healthy relationship. In other words, participants would learn to compromise and communicate in the relationship while valuing the importance of completing assignments and getting good grades. For participants, they make a conscious effort to understand the perspective of their partner to work through stress. Nevertheless, the heaviness of academic stress, more likely than not, strains and negatively influences the overall quality of
the relationship and affects conflicts. Andrea described her experiences managing a relationship and stress.

It makes me not want to spend time with them. When I get too stressed, there's only certain things that I can think about and just being with somebody else who probably doesn't understand what I'm going through is not healthy for me.

Andrea continued to explain the difficulties.

Well, you don't spend time with the person, or at least I don't. So I had a really, really hard time trying to separate everything like trying to separate time to do homework, separate time or work and my classes and come home to see my family. And so it just kind of turned into like, oh I can't see you today. You know, it causes problems because you want to have quality time.

Even though it matters to participants to sustain their relationship and contribute to their academics, stress continues to be prevalent in their conscious minds and disrupts the participants' perception of the relationship. Andrea said,

It definitely has brought it down. I don't think that there were many meaningful conversations or activities, and it wasn't a way for me to, like, hang out with him. And kind of forget about my academic stress because the academic stress just kind of lingers. And so if I don't get an assignment done and I'm hanging out with my partner, then I'm, like, constantly thinking about that assignment that has to be due.

Josephine alluded to setting priorities in the relationship as well as sacrifice.

So for context, I am in my second year of my grad program. My boyfriend is in his first year of his grad program. I have an assistantship that's 20 hours a week. He has an internship that is 24 hours a week and we both are taking three classes each. Which at the masters level with this much additional internship and assistantship. I feel like we don't get to spend a whole lot of time together. Also, the distance between us is a factor. I moved an hour and a half away from him, or like an hour and 15. We usually try to get like most of our work done during the week so that we can spend weekends together, but even then, like yesterday, we're trying to hang out and like he has to do laundry because he doesn't have time any other time during the week because of classes and internship and like homework and stuff. So I feel like it's really hard to find the middle ground of like, oh like I'm driving to you this weekend. You're driving to me this weekend, but like also the weekend that you're here, I need to do laundry because I went to your house last week and things like that. So it just makes it very complicated to navigate everything at once. So I would say that between the academic stress that also comes with, like, you know, we have deadlines to meet, but we want to hang out like that also makes it super difficult. It's also hard because just as a relationship we like to think like a bigger picture because we're both
graduating together in May because his is a one year program. So he's also graduating in May.

In a similar way, Ricardo pointed out the need for priority setting.

I would have to say in my relationship with my fiancé, it’s just making sure we're like, we're both getting things done. Assignments done on time, like our individual assignments and so forth, because we're both in graduate school. So, I would make it like a priority for both of us to make sure, like we're keeping ahead of work over studies.

Max explained that stress is so intensive, consequently, the participant made individualistic decisions that are detrimental to the relationship.

So I feel like because I'm so stressed and figuring out classes and all that, I think it’s best to be distant sometimes because I don't want to engage in conversation, I just want to relax, retreat and destress and I see some of the issues arising in the relationship on that because I’m more retreating but not because I want to spend time with my partner. I just want to be by myself for a second and that's taking more of a toll in our relationship.

Despite the stress, participants revealed how they can resolve, overcome and justify their strategies for dealing with stress and the relationship. Participants reflected on the value of being in a relationship with a partner who shared and understood their stress. Josephine provided a reflection of the relationship.

I feel like to some extent it makes it stronger, like it makes it a better relationship just because I feel like we got to see each other under stress very early in our relationship just because we were both undergrads at the same time and like finals were always stressful. Like very early on, we were able to see what we look like under stress and what the support looks like under stress. So like, I feel like one of the things that were really good about are like, how do we comfort each other during those high stress times. But I do think that a lot of the academic related stuff has persisted in various places in our relationship where we're not always necessarily happy or not entirely sure if we want to be together. And I also think that just because we have seen each other under stress and have dealt with as much as we've dealt at this point, I feel like the quality of our relationship is pretty good when it comes to that.

Ricardo shared how he and his partner overcame the challenge of stress.

Making sure that we're both feeling like we're supporting one another, but also giving each other the space and time to complete homework. Like for example, neither one of us are pushy to spend time with one another, and we have things going on. Needs to go do homework or has to meet with students for group projects stuff like that. Like she can go
do that and I'm OK with staying back and just hanging out in the house and so forth while she's doing that. School work comes first, then our relationship or quality time.

Finally, Max explained the good that comes out of the struggle with stress in the relationship.

I feel like in our relationship, the stress becomes more like a checklist situation—we just talk. But also, at least from my experience with my partner, he went to a like a PhD program when we met and I kind of did some of the same thing. I think it's kind of a different point of view because we both in a sense, experienced the same kind of feelings I would say. So I think that's one of the positive aspects we have, like we can understand where we’re coming from, yet the stress can impact our communication and maybe the way we connect to each other personally. We can understand each other, you know.

Max continued to discuss stress and the benefits of having a partner to have reciprocal validation from their partner.

I think it has some effect on our relationship. We have a similar experience but the reverse. It’s kind of good to have more of a new understanding because now we're like that. It’s like, now I understand how my partner was feeling while he was going through his academic stress. Now that I’m going through stress, my partner understands what I’m dealing with. It’s helpful to see each other in different roles than before. So, I think that's helpful because now I can relate to him like an experience that I never understood.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

About the researcher

I’m an African American male, aged 24 who identifies as heterosexual. As a student at a predominantly white institution, I have been able to pursue higher education for the past six years. I also worked as an undergraduate student and graduate assistant in the student affairs department for five years.

Through the years, I experienced successes and challenges in managing academic stress, in addition to navigating work-related difficulties, such as crisis response and supervision. My schoolwork and job responsibilities became superior to social relationships. As an African American student pursuing higher education, the narrative that I received from my inner networks was that higher education is stressful, date romantically with different people, developing close friendships, and be aware of my surroundings. I assumed that because I managed many responsibilities, I had no time to be social, let alone engage in the dating pool. My reality notwithstanding, I was also curious to know if students of color at my PWI faced similar challenges or felt valued. I questioned whether I was valued as an African American student. Although I have not personally experienced direct discrimination at my PWI, there have been instances where other African American students, the African American community, and possibly other students of color have faced discrimination at my PWI.

Therefore, I was interested in the experiences of students of color who coped with academic stress, encountered perceived discrimination, and sustained their committed
relationships simultaneously. It's possible that students of color could experience achieving higher education differently if they navigated all three variables simultaneously, which caused me to investigate further.

Summary

This study examined how academic stress and perceived discrimination impacted dating satisfaction of students of color on college/university campuses. To gather the data, 4 interviews were conducted. I gathered participants for the interviews using inner networks, various university cultural centers, or social media. A flyer was used to have participants sign up for an interview through a QR code. To analyze the data, I used thematic content analysis to transcribe the interviewer's responses.

Students of color described their experiences with perceived discrimination, academic stress, and dating satisfaction as a challenging and validating phenomenon. Participant responses revealed three major themes that include: racial, gender, and sexual identity; sustaining a healthy relationship through stress; and financial stability. The participants reflected deeply on how academic stress and perceived discrimination influenced their relationships. Participants explained the intricacies of how challenging it can be to compromise in their relationships and never compare the importance of getting good grades and making sure their partner is happy. Participants revealed how their discriminatory experiences can be discussed and validated with the help of their partner or vice versa. Even though participants understood that they were powerless against others’ actions, they found value in talking to their partners and processing their experiences. The literature presented explanations as to how perceived discrimination, academic stress, and dating satisfaction were reiterated by participants in this study. Based on dating satisfaction, relationship partners are more likely to view a relationship positively if they
experience positive outcomes. For participants, most of them felt validated when the participants discussed their stories of perceived discrimination. For academic stress, the literature explained that dating satisfaction could be negatively influenced if their partner is not or could not provide support to navigate academic challenges. The participants shared many ways to cope with academic stress at the cost of spending time with their partner.

The findings from this study have various implications for students aiming to complete their higher education journey. Theme one addressed financial stability. Considering all the participants work while getting an education, there’s a difference between working because you need to and working because you have to. The reality is, that not all students have the funds to pay for school without needing to work or earn money for school supplies and tuition. It’s not a matter of having to work to pay for school, it’s needing to work so that earning an education is possible. Students of color are at increased risk of dropout in their first year attending college, influenced by family income, parental education, and amount of financial aid (Cadaret & Bennett, 2019). Although I did not ask questions surrounding graduate assistantships or working to alleviate financial stress, graduate assistantships and working resurfaced as part of their stress. At the same time, participants recognized the pressure to be financially secure and deal with stress no matter what.

Theme two addresses racial, sexual, and gender identity. Participants expressed how their social location impacts others. From the impact of others, participants face discrimination based on others’ perceptions. Some may believe that their social location may grant certain power and privilege based on race/ethnicity, hence driving the individual to exercise potential discriminatory behavior. Participants realized that their social location impacts people and people’s responses, verbally or nonverbally, impact the participants. For example, one of the
participants is an international student. The international student found it necessary to learn how to adapt to a different culture and location during their immigration process. In contrast, the international student learned how to constantly be self-conscious of their identity and language barrier in a new culture due to negative perceptions of others based on their social location. The third theme is sustaining a healthy relationship through stress. Participants alluded to the necessity of skills needed to address and overcome conflict. Direct communication, compromise, and understanding were necessary to sustain the relationship. The participants were fortunate to have partners who had similar experiences or were currently experiencing the challenges of navigating stress and conflict. What participants didn’t ignore was how the relationship shifted if both partners did not contribute effectively to sustain the relationship.

As a result of the data in this study, all participants are Latinx students with commonalities that weren't mentioned in the interviews. Several participants mentioned that they want a successful future with their partners, and academic stress is part of student life. Academic support on campus is not only feasible but can also be beneficial when discussed with peers and relationship partners. It may be possible to increase positive feelings at a PWI by allowing students to feel and express a sense of belonging. However, students of color may not be able to achieve this if they question why their social location is problematic. For Latino/a student specifically, previous literature indicated that on university campuses, Latinas/os experience racial microaggressions as a rejection of their attempts to integrate (Yosso, Smith, et al., 2009). Participants made choices to overcome, resolve, and work through difficulties. The idea of terminating their relationships due to stress or perceived discrimination never surfaced in the interviews.
Limitations

In my capacity as a researcher, I acknowledge the limitations of this study. All participants were graduate students, which was the first limitation of the study. Students' experiences are framed from the perspective of those who have graduated from college and are now at the graduate level. They may have learned how to navigate stress better than undergraduate students, which may influence how it affects their satisfaction. For example, one of the participants mentioned how they navigated their relationship, with the same partner, during final exams during undergraduate school. The second limitation of the study was the limited number of participants. Since the sample size was small, few students of color were interviewed to gain a more varied perspective on the research topic. Thirdly, all participants are from the Midwest. Due to this, the findings of this study may not apply to all students of color at other institutions. While the study has limitations, I was successful in the overall methodology process. The positive outcomes included recruiting the participants and the participant's willingness and vulnerability to reflect on their relationships.

Using the findings from this research study, the researcher recommends the following for future research: (1) Extend the research by increasing the number of participants from various PWIs that vary by geographical location; (2) Future research could examine other variables that potentially influence dating satisfaction, i.e., family stress, religion, trauma; (3) Include first-generation students of color; and (4) Extend the research to include more college students of color from varying PWIs.
Clinical Implications

The findings of this study have some clinical implications for college and graduate students studying marriage and family therapy, as well as those working in university student affairs. Working with couples to navigate potential barriers and conflicts that can interrupt dyadic relationships is an important skill for MFT students—as well as understanding how a couple's relationship can be shaped by a combination of positive and negative experiences. Similarly, student affairs professionals can benefit from identifying resources and mentors that graduate students can utilize to manage stress, cope with adversity, and support mental and emotional health. Also, highlighting academic support and advocacy resources for students of color attending PWIs that could potentially face perceived discrimination.

Conclusion

In this article, three emergent themes in analyzing how perceived discrimination and academic stress influence dating satisfaction were discussed. Each theme highlighted a particular story that tells us how students of color navigated potential hardships during their time at PWIs and higher education overall with their relationship partners. Having a partner could make a difference to those who could sustain a relationship in college or graduate school. The decision to do so is subjective. Social location, financial stability, and sustaining a healthy relationship through stress, each have their own stress that many students manage. Uncovering these correlations can paint a framework of what it means to be a student in higher education at PWIs and what it means to desire a better future in the face of challenges.

There are thousands of students and students of color across the country who recognize the importance of attending college and graduate school, who are involved in intimate
relationships, and who are self-aware of their identities. In contrast, there are students who don't face financial difficulties, aren't involved in relationships, and have never experienced discrimination. Thus, it's essential to enhance campus environments so that discrimination is reduced and students of color feel more affiliated to their institutions of higher education (Hussain & Jones, 2021).

The voices of those seeking graduate degrees and managing a personal life deserve to be heard. To ensure that students of color have a positive experience in higher education, it's important for other students, professionals, professors, educators, and staff to acknowledge external motivators to help reduce stress in higher education for emerging adults.
References


