

Racial Identity Development and Psychological Coping Strategies of Undergraduate and Graduate African American Males

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African American men face many socio-cultural, academic, and negative stressors that generate stress experiences and identity conflicts. These stressors, in turn, may lead to psychological pressures that negatively affect relationships that African American men have with African American women, children, other African American men, and the African American community. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that racial identity has on the development of psychological healthy coping strategies among African American males at a predominantly White university in the southeastern United States. The goal of the study was to see what factors helped young African American men at this institution succeed academically.

For years, researchers have tried to determine what characteristics enable African Americans to achieve in a society which has, and continues, to be hostile to their survival (Kambon & Bowen-Reid, 2010; Utsey & Payne, 2000). Stevenson (2002) stated that African American men face many socio-cultural and academic challenges, along with other negative dilemmas that generate stressful experiences and identity conflicts. These dilemmas include denigrations to their manhood (e.g., physical beatings, castration, police brutality, lynching, educational tracking, and high rates of imprisonment). Unfortunately, Stevenson (2002) noted that the outcomes of these denigrations have been the creation of stressors that have often prevented African American men from living up to their full potential as men and human beings. These stressors, in turn, may lead to psychological pressures that negatively affect relationships that African American men have with African American women, children, other African American men, and the African American community.

Veroff, Douvan and Kulka, (1981) offer an alternative picture of African American men. The picture these researchers paint depicts a description of African American men as human

beings who have somehow managed to be psychologically resilient and healthy through their effective use of coping strategies in dealing with a hostile society. Even though they face tremendous stress, many African American men manage to live happy and fulfilling lives.

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that racial identity has on the development of psychological healthy coping strategies among African American males at a predominantly White university in the southeastern United States. Coping, in this study, is defined as the process whereby an individual attempts to manage, through cognitive and behavioral efforts, external or internal demands that are assessed as exceeding an individual's resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The goal of the study was to derive implications that may be used to help young African American men at these institutions learn to more successfully navigate their educational experiences.

Relevant Literature

African American Ethnic Identity

African American ethnic identity has been discussed in social science literature using various terms. Black identity, "sense of people-hood," "sense of Blackness" are all terms that have been used by researchers (Belgrave & Allison, 2010). The most widely known model of African American ethnic identity is Cross' (1971a, b) model of Nigrescence. The Nigrescence model describes the profile of African Americans in relation to the majority White culture and the various phrases of their ethnic identity development. Cross states in his book, *Shades of Black* (1991), that his stage theory is a re-socialization experience that seeks to transform a preexisting identity (one that is non-Afrocentric) to one that is Afrocentric.

The Nigrescence model has five stages of Black racial identity development: (1) Pre-encounter, in which an individual rejects one's own culture and accepts the norms of White society; (2) Encounter, where events occur that open an individual's eyes to one's own culture and the way it has been oppressed; (3) Immersion-Emersion, where individuals immerse themselves in African American culture and reject the dominant White culture; (4) Internalization, where individuals accept their African heritage, while also accepting the traditions, beliefs, and values of other cultures; and (5) Internalization-Commitment, characterized by positive self-esteem, ideological flexibility and openness to one's Blackness just as in stage four. The difference between stage four and stage five is that individuals find activities and commitments to express their identity (Cross, 1971 a, b).

The revised model of Nigrescence includes substantial changes, particularly in the pre-encounter and internalization stages. The pre-encounter stage now includes three distinct identity clusters (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). The *pre-encounter assimilation* identity gives little attention to race and maintains a strong orientation toward being an American. The *pre-encounter mis-education* identity internalizes negative stereotypes about being Black (i.e., being lazy or criminal). The *pre-encounter self-hatred* identity holds extremely negative views about African Americans and is anti-Black and self-hating (Cross & Vandiver, 2001).

The immersion-emersion stage is theorized as consisting of two identities. The *immersion-emersion intense Black involvement* identity celebrates everything Black as good, and the *immersion-emersion anti-white* identity views everything White as evil (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). Individuals in the immersion-emersion stage immerse themselves in their Blackness. Instead of conceptualizing this stage as a single identity with two components (i.e.,

pro-Black and anti-White), Cross (1971a, b) conceptualized it as two separate identities under the umbrella of immersion into Blackness (Cross & Vandiver, 2001).

The revised internationalization stage is also now theorized to consist of two identities. The first, *Black nationalism*, adheres to an Afrocentric and pro-Black perspective with a non-reactionary mindset towards people who are not Black. The second internalization identity, *multiculturalist inclusive*, embraces a Black identity while acknowledging the cultures of those persons who are not Black (Cross & Vandiver, 2001).

Cross' (1991) critical review of empirical studies on racial identity led to major theoretical changes in the internalization stage. Many people equated internalization with a universal or humanistic view about relationships among diverse cultural groups. African Americans who are in the internalization phase could differ in their acceptance of members from diverse cultural groups. The second change in the revised internalization stage was the uncoupling of Black self-acceptance and mental health. Fhagen-Smith et al., (2010) argued that while changes from pro-White to pro-Black attitudes might result in changes in a person's worldview, value system, ideology, or reference group orientation, it may not necessarily result in changes of an individual's general psychological functioning or personality. In other words, acceptance of one's Blackness does not guarantee a positive change in a Black person's level of psychological functioning. The acceptance of Blackness does not insulate African Americans from experiencing depression nor does it change fundamental personality characteristics (Cross, 1991; 1995).

African American Men and Ethnic Identity

The history of America and its' relationship with African American males have been acrimonious, to say the least. African American men, in the past and presently, suffer from the chronic stress of living in a racist and oppressive society. This condition has historical roots, which dates back to enslavement and deportation from Africa (Elligan & Utsey, 1999). Today, African American males are marginalized in political, economic, and social arenas. The media and classroom textbooks project images of Eurocentric power and dominance (White & Parham, 1990). In academic settings, African American males are placed in remedial and special education classes at a greater rate than European Americans or African American females (Irvine, 1990). Given the absence of positive feedback from school and the media, and the frequent encounters with violence, police harassment, and incarceration, African American males historically have developed a sense of pessimism towards the future (Harris, 1995).

Phinney, Lockner, and Murphy (1990) suggest that African American males need to resolve two primary issues or conflicts that stem from their status as members of a marginalized group in American society. First, African American males must resolve prejudicial attitudes from society. Second, African American males have to adopt two differing sets of values, one from the dominant culture and one from their own culture. According to Phinney et al. (1990) African American males may actively explore resolution to these issues that result in an achieved ethnic identity or they may ignore them, resulting in identity diffusion. African American males must realize that prejudicial stereotypes will only affect their identity development if they accept and believe the stereotypes (Corbin & Pruitt, 1999). In fact, African American males have the power to reject these stereotypes and redefine themselves and the African American community in more positive terms (Tajfel, 1978).

The second issue appears to be more difficult to resolve. This issue is concerned with African American males' feelings of exclusion from society. In attempting to resolve or redefine their ethnic identity, they become individuals that many times have to choose between being African and American. This conflict is a core issue in the identity struggle of African American males and may promote feelings of anger and indignation (White, 1984). African American males must struggle with adopting two divergent value systems, one African American and the other European American (Corbin & Pruitt, 1999). Total rejection of either reality can restrict their choices, personal growth, social interactions, and economic opportunities (White & Parham, 1990). If African American males exclusively identify with Eurocentric values of individualism, competitiveness, emotional suppression, and dominance, they may achieve at the cost of being isolated from the African American community and alienated psychologically from who they are as persons of African descent (Corbin & Pruitt, 1999; Kambon & Bowen-Reid, 2010). While African American males exist in an individualistic and competitive culture, they must continue to embrace the positive aspects of their African American culture, including communalism, emotionality, shared power, and interdependence.

In order for African American males to resolve the ethnic identity issue, there are a number of possible outcomes that have been suggested: alienation, assimilation, withdrawal, and integration. These four outcomes are each affected by social factors such as discrimination, poverty, and education level (Phinney et al., 1990; Tajfel, 1978). Alienated individuals are those who accept the negative image of Blackness that society presents and excludes themselves from the African American community and culture. According to Corbin & Pruitt (1999) these individuals accept the fact that they are inferior to European Americans. Assimilated individuals attempt to become part of the majority culture and are not connected with the African American community. They attempt to think and behave in ways that minimize, devalue, or deny their African American heritage. Withdrawn individuals become immersed in their own culture while withdrawing from the dominant culture. In order to counterbalance the negative images they receive from the dominant society, they over-identify with African American culture to minimize any loss of self-esteem resulting from comparisons with the dominant group (Corbin & Pruitt, 1999).

Although some African American males may view these first three identities as healthy defense mechanisms, they leave them unprepared to cope with the reality of racism when they are not within the boundaries of the African American community. Integrated individuals find a way of accepting their African American ethnic identity while integrating with the dominant culture. They feel secure in their African American identity, while maintaining contact with European Americans (Corbin & Pruitt, 1999). While interaction with the mainstream White community may not be an easy task for some African American males, it is more beneficial to African American males if they are to be both a viable part of American society and remain connected to the African American community.

Psychological Health

Defining psychological health is not an easy task. No theory or model of adult psychological health has achieved consensus among researchers or accumulated a convincing body of empirical evidence that has produced an exact definition of psychological health (Belgrave & Allison, 2010). In addition, while existing work on psychological health claim to be universal, meaning that they are applicable and explanatory for all humans. In fact, existing

models of psychological health usually have very little to say about the unique social and cultural circumstances of African American males and the impact of these circumstances on their psychological health.

“Universal” or western models of psychological health are varied. The standard model used in medicine was that psychological health is freedom from symptoms of illness (Belgrave & Allison, 2010). Another accepted definition was that psychological health was like the average or “modal” member of society, or being “adjusted” to one’s social and cultural surroundings. These definitions are rarely used today.

According to Azibo (1996), western psychology, lacking a prior model of psychological health, infers that sanity is the absence of insanity. Azibo (1996) goes further by defining mental health, Africentrically, as the state at which mental processes are self-preserving. Wade Nobles (1986) gives a holistic definition of mental health as the behavioral representation of ordered thought that is consistent with one’s spirit. Welsing (1991) defines African American mental health as patterns of perception, logic, thought, speech, action and emotional response, whether consciously or unconsciously determined. Welsing (1991) believes that African Americans’ mental health reflects personal and extended self-respect and extended self-affirmation. Thus, African-centered mental health providers tend to define mental health, not only for the individual, but the relationships that the individual has with the extended community.

African American males must live and adapt to a unique social and cultural environment. This environment and the necessity that African American males adapt to it have implications for any model that claims to define and understand the psychological health of African American males (Belgrave & Allison, 2010). The following issues are important in characterizing the aspects of the environment that are relevant to the psychological health of African American males: racism, the need to adapt to White institutions and culture, remaining situated in the African American community, and coping with limited social and political power (Belgrave & Allison, 2010).

Most African American males remain connected to the African American community and its culture, as well as adapt to White American culture and institutions. While most African American males live, have families, friends, and attend churches in the African American community, they must adjust to White managed institutions, workplaces, and military settings. This adaptation, many times, requires African American males to juggle different values, behavioral styles, and aspirations. This situation has led many social scientists in the opinion that African American males have to be bicultural to function in both cultures (Belgrave & Allison, 2010).

Coping Strategies

There has been a recent growth of research dealing with coping strategies. This research has provided a large amount of evidence that helps to explain the strategies by which people cope with stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stress has been associated with many diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, and substance abuse. African American men are more susceptible than other populations to these illnesses. Stress has also been associated with homicide and suicide, which occurs at higher rates in African American communities (Plummer & Slane, 1996). While stress has been defined in many ways, all of the definitions involve an environmental demand to which the person must react and where stress is perceived as at least

potentially exceeding the person's ability or resources to meet the challenges (Belgrave & Allison, 2010).

According to Belgrave and Allison (2010), coping refers to efforts to master environmental demands when a previous response is unavailable or ineffective. This is similar to the definition that is proposed by Utsey and Ponterotto (2000). Stress and coping responses are linked by cognitive appraisal of the stressor and the internal/ external resources of the person (Belgrave & Allison, 2010). Cognitive appraisal refers to the significance and meaning attached to a stressor. Internal resources refer to individual factors, personality traits, racial identification, social class, and cultural beliefs. External resources refer to family or social ties, work relationships, and church affiliations (Belgrave & Allison, 2010). The model then is one where stressor(s), an appraisal of the stressor(s) and the person's internal/external resources in turn produce a coping response that leads to an adaptive or distressful outcome (Belgrave & Allison, 2010).

Researchers generally agree that there are two major types of coping strategies. Problem focused coping strategies function to change a troubled person-environment relationship by directly acting on the environment or the individual. In contrast, emotion focused coping strategies attempt to change either commitment patterns (e.g., one avoids thinking about a threat) or the meaning or interpretation of what is happening, which may mitigate the stress although the actual reality of the relationship is not changed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Examples of problem-focused coping are planning strategies or suppression of competing activities, whereas receiving emotional social support and religious activities are examples of emotion-focused coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Along with emotions and problem focused coping strategies, the use of certain coping styles and strategies appear to depend on personal characteristics and the way they appraise the nature of an event and situational factors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, particular types of coping strategies are more or less effective, according to the type of stress encountered (Lemaire & Wallace, 2010). Plummer and Slane (1996) pointed out that some coping strategies that may be viewed as maladaptive (e.g. avoidance or distancing) or adaptive under some circumstances and some coping strategies that are viewed as adaptive may be maladaptive under other circumstances.

Racism, Coping and African American males

There is limited research that examines coping strategies used by African American males. More problematic, there is limited research which deals with the destructive effects of racism as a stressor on the psychological health of African American men. This issue has largely been ignored within the research literature (Elligan & Utsey, 1999). As noted by Utsey & Payne (2000), few researchers have noted a relationship between chronic exposure to racism and poorer psychological and somatic health among African American men (Utsey & Payne, 2000).

Racism has been implicated in the onset of several stress related diseases including hypertension, coronary heart disease, cancer, and cirrhosis of the liver. Chronic exposure to racism has been associated with increased levels of depression, lowered life satisfaction and self-esteem, feelings of trauma, loss, and helplessness (Utsey & Payne, 2000). Given the insidious nature of racism and its deleterious effects on the psychological health of African American men, more research is needed that examines the impact of racism as a stressor in the lives of African American men.

Racial discrimination permeates many aspects of African American life. According to Jones (1997), the experience of racism is multidimensional and can be classified using a tripartite typology. The first type of racism posited by Jones (1997) is individual racism. With individual racism, African Americans are likely to experience racial discrimination on a personal level. An example of individual racism is when a security guard targets an African American and follows that individual while they shop at a store. The second type of racism suggested by Jones (1997) is institutional racism. Institutional racism is experienced by African Americans as a result of social and institutional policies that exclude African Americans from full participation in American society. An example of institutional racism is the criminal laws that relate to the possession of illegal drugs.

The final type of racism highlighted by Jones was cultural racism. Cultural racism occurs when the cultural practices of the “dominant” group are generally regarded by society and its institutions as being superior to the culture of a “subordinate” group. Cultural racism can be observed in the manner in which the contributions of African Americans have been largely ignored in the annals of American history. Given that racism in all its forms is a powerful stressor in the lives of many African Americans, particularly African American males, research aimed at delineating those coping behaviors that effectively ameliorate its potential harmful psychological and somatic consequences is warranted.

In previous studies on racial discrimination as a source of stress, researchers have conceptualized the coping behaviors of African Americans from the theoretical framework of Lazarus and Folkman (1984). According to their theory, stress is a particular relationship between individuals and their environment that is appraised to be taxing or as exceeding their resources and endangering their well-being. Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) theory also states that as stressors occur, depending on one’s view of the impending threat and the resources at the individual’s disposal to handle the threat, individuals can become overwhelmed. When individuals are overwhelmed, individuals risk becoming vulnerable to the onset of physical and psychological disorders. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as the process whereby individuals attempt to manage, through cognitive and behavioral efforts, external or internal demands that are assessed as exceeding their resources. These cognitive and behavioral efforts can be described as positive or negative (Berman, Kurtines, Silverman & Serafini, 1996). Negative coping strategies (e.g., distraction, withdrawal, self-criticism, aggression, blaming others, wishful thinking, and resignation) consist of asocial or antisocial avoidant behaviors that are focused on the stressor itself. Positive coping strategies (e.g., problem-solving efforts, seeking information, and social support) include prosocial approach behaviors which are focused on self-care or on changing the problem situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In general, it has been shown that positive, problem-focused strategies are correlated with better outcomes, whereas negative, avoidant strategies are associated with greater difficulties (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Plummer and Slane (1996) conducted an empirical study utilizing Lazarus and Folkman’s theoretical framework for coping to examine the coping behavior of African Americans. Plummer and Slane (1996) found that African Americans engaged in less active coping efforts in racially stressful situations, that racially stressful situations generally demanded confrontational coping strategies, and racially stressful situations tended to restrict the coping options available to African Americans. Overall, in comparing the coping behaviors of African Americans to those of Whites, Plummer and Slane (1996) found that African Americans compared to Whites used significantly more emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies.

A qualitative study was conducted by Feagin and O'Brien (2003) where African Americans were interviewed regarding their experiences with racism. The study's findings suggest that the response to racism that African Americans used was influenced by the context in which it occurred. For example, racial hostility encountered in the street was most likely to be met with withdrawal, resigned acceptance, or verbal retort. In situations in which African Americans experienced racism in public accommodations, the response was generally a verbal counterattack or resigned acceptance. Feagin and O'Brien (2003) found that in many of these situations, acquiescence, or withdrawal, was the preferred response because confrontation was viewed as being too costly in time and energy. Moreover, due to the often subtle nature of racism, many African Americans responded to racist's events with a careful evaluation of the situation (Feagin & O'Brien, 2003). Feagin and O'Brien (2003) also noted the advantages of middle-class African Americans in terms of their access to resources, both psychological and material to enhance their coping efficacy- despite these middle-class advantages; however, the individual costs of chronic strain associated with racism is great and has a cumulative affect over the life span of most African Americans.

While there is no consensus among researchers on a conceptual definition for ethnic identity, this qualitative study uses Cross' (1971) definition that African American ethnic identity is related to a "sense of Blackness". The definition used to describe psychological health is the definition proposed by Welsing (1991). This definition states that psychological health is those patterns of perception, logic, thought, speech, action, and emotional response, whether consciously or unconsciously determined that reflect personal and extended self-respect and extended self- affirmation. Lastly, this study defines racism as those activities and behaviors- practiced by individuals who classify themselves as White to suppress, oppress, and maintain global power in nine areas of people activities: education, entertainment, economics, labor, law, politics, religion, sex, and war (Welsing, 1991).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine African American ethnic identity development and psychological coping strategies of African American males at a predominantly White university. The major question to be examined: does ethnic identity identification influence the psychological coping strategies of African American males as they deal with racial stress. Cross' (1971, a, b) research in the area of African American ethnic identity development has demonstrated that the emergence of an African American identity is complex, multifaceted, and contingent on the context and historical spaces that individuals find themselves.

Focus group interviews, conducted from a phenomenological approach, were used to examine the relationship of African American males' ethnic identity and their psychological coping strategies. The use of focus group interviews was an attempt to understand the participants' everyday experiences from their perspectives.

Before the interviews were conducted, each participant was assigned a pseudonym which was used throughout the study. Three focus group interviews were conducted, and each interview session was video-taped. Field notes were also taken during the three interviews.

Assessment Measures

In light of the development of his theory of psychological nigrescence which explains the various stages of African American ethnic identity, Cross (2001) developed the Cross Racial Identity Scale (CRIS) in collaboration with Vandiver. The CRIS consists of 40 items that gauge attitudes correlated to the four stages of African American development described in Cross' revised model of psychological nigrescence. Internal consistency ranges for pre-encounter assimilation, miseducation, and self-hatred are .85, .79, and .89 respectively; .90 for immersion-emersion; .83 for internalization afrocentricity and .82 for multiculturalist inclusive. The range of scores on the subscales are from 5 to 35. Reliability estimates for the CRIS, based on Cronbach's (1951) alpha, range from .78 to .90. Exploratory factor analysis for the CRIS was investigated using a sample of 279 students (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). Subscale intercorrelations based on this sample ranged from absolute value of .40 to absolute value of .42, with a median of an absolute value of .16. Confirmatory factor analysis intercorrelations ranged from absolute value of .06 to an absolute value of .46, with a median of absolute value of .16.

Convergent validity was tested by examining the relationship between subscales of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI) developed by Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, and Chavous, (1998) and the CRIS, using bivariate and canonical correlations (Worrell & Watson, 2008). Like the CRIS, the MIBI is a measure of African American ethnic identity. Several MIBI subscales measure content related to those measured by the CRIS. These subscales on the MIBI are: assimilation, centrality, humanist, nationalist, oppressed minority, private regard, and public regard (Sellers et al., 1998).

Description of the Context and Participants

The study took place in a mid-sized college city. The city is the home of the state's flagship institution, a nationally renowned center of learning. The total number of students attending the university in 2003 was 31,384. African Americans comprised 5.56% of this total population, which was a total of 1,774 African American students. African American males were 1.9% of this population comprising 596 students. A highly charged campaign during the 2002-2003 academic school year was undertaken by students to address the low percentage of African American males at the university.

Historically, the university has been viewed by African Americans in the states as an unwelcoming place. The university was integrated in the early sixties by two African American students. A year later, an African American woman enrolled as a graduate student. Their matriculation was followed closely by the African American community and the media. They were constantly harassed and taunted by many of the White students. However, all three managed to graduate. Since then, the number of African Americans attending the university has increased even though it has been comparatively low.

The Participants

All six of the participants attended the university. Four were graduate students and two were undergraduate students.

Pierre. Pierre at the time of the study was 31- years old and a third year graduate student in counseling psychology. He is married, with two daughters, and is originally from Chicago.

He attended a historically Black college for his undergraduate degree. Pierre's CRIS score placed him in the Internalized Nationalist phase of the African American ethnic identity development scale.

Dallas. Dallas at the time of the study was 34- years old. He is from Washington D.C., and was completing his Ph.D. in the area of pharmaceutical sciences. Dallas' CRIS score placed him in the Internalized Multiculturalist Inclusive phase of the African American ethnic identity development scale.

Highjohn. Highjohn at the time of this study was 28- years old. He has a wife and two sons-- one from a previous relationship. Highjohn completed his master's degree in educational psychology and subsequently enrolled in the educational psychology Ph.D. program. Highjohn's wife is completing her Ph.D. in adult education. He is from Georgia and describes his hometown as rural and predominantly White. Highjohn's CRIS score placed him in the Internalized Multiculturalist Inclusive phase of the African American ethnic identity development scale.

Xavier. Xavier at the time of this study was also 28- years old, and a fourth year Ph.D. student in educational psychology. He self-identifies as gay, and was born and raised in South Carolina. Xavier's CRIS score placed him in the Internalized Multiculturalist Inclusive phase of the African American ethnic identity development scale.

Sampson. Sampson, at the time of this study, was 25- years old and played NCAA college football. He opted not to play his last year to dedicate time to his academic studies. He is from South Georgia and describes the community where he was reared as rural and mostly White. Sampson's CRIS score placed him in the Internalized Multiculturalist Inclusive phase of the African American ethnic identity development scale.

Stokely. Stokely, at the time of the study, was 22- years old. He is from North Carolina and played collegiate football. He plans to continue his education by pursuing a master's degree. Stokely's CRIS score placed him in the Internalized Multiculturalist Inclusive phase of the African American ethnic identity development scale.

The Interviews

The three focus group interviews were held off campus in a private home. The interviews were held during the second and third weeks of July 2003. The first interview was a discussion of the issues that the participants deemed important. Their key concerns related to the following questions: (1) Did they view the university as a welcoming place? (2) What does it mean to be a Black man? (3) What are interactions with the larger (4) African American community like? and (5) What advice (e.g. academic, social, Black male and female relations) would they give to other African American males considering attending the university?

Findings

The University as a Welcoming Place for African American Males

The university where this study was conducted has grappled with the issue of boosting retention among African American males. College administrators needed to understand how and why African American males behaved and reacted to societal conditions, particularly to racism. In terms of the university being a welcoming place for African American males, several participants thought that the university only saw African American males as athletic

commodities. To them, this plays into the stereotype of African American males as athletically gifted, but intellectual lazy. Stokely, the former undergraduate football player stated:

“It’s kind of hard, I don’t think they really welcome the students per say or like you said people already have a preconceived notion that you’re Black on this campus. You’re automatically an athlete and with that comes the stereotypes of not being smart or lazy amongst other things and at the same time they want you to play, but they don’t want to look pass you being an athlete either. They don’t want to get to know you as a student and they’re not really doing anything to know the person either. So it’s kind of hard or whatever, it’s a constant battle or whatever. You want to show, you kind of try harder to show that you can be, that you can strive in this environment or whatever, but there’s really no programs.”

This stereotype of the African American male as just an athlete while disregarding their intellectual needs was also shared by Sampson, the other undergraduate student and former football player:

“I’m done with football and my fifth year I decided not to try to play professional football or anything. So from my fourth year to the fifth year it was a big difference. It went from phone calls making sure that you go to class, study hall or have you seen your tutor, have you registered for class, why were you late to class? Until now I have registered myself for class. I have to know when I need a certain class or what I need to graduate to if I don’t get out of bed. They don’t call and say why you didn’t get out of bed anymore and basically they don’t care if you graduate. That’s good because it’s helping their percentages to say we’re graduating African American males, but when you get to your fifth year it’s basically about what you have inside of you to say alright they got all of the stuff that they are going to get out of me, I need to do what I can to get something out of them. And that’s the only reason why I’m getting my degree because it’s something inside of me not so much of what they’re doing.”

Stressful Experiences at the University

The second topic discussed concerned how the participants handled stressful situations related to race. The participants were asked to describe a stressful experience during their enrollment at the university. In conjunction with describing a stressful experience, the participants also shared how the stressful situation developed and how they coped. Dallas shared a stressful experience which occurred in the downtown area where the university is located.

“Being downtown, yeah start right there, I forgot the name of what the bar was, It was either (name of bar) or (another potential name) whatever, and I’m sitting there with a White friend of mine from my department and an older White guy comes up to me and says, huffing to me, I need to be blasting, need to tell you something. We need to talk, Black man to White man. I need to tell you what’s going on. He proceeds to tell me about, you know, the Confederate Nation and how his forefathers and ancestors were just great men of great valiance and why would any Black man have a problem with all of this? He was pretty drunk or whatever, he couldn’t get around to finally shutting up so I

could answer his questions. Before I had a chance to answer his question and stuff starting off with, those were the same people who had all of my people enslaved and a hundred years of Jim Crow and so forth. He got taken up out of there by security and I didn't really get a chance to find him and that stayed with me for about a month and a half. I'm looking around for this dude (and asking) where he is and stuff so I can talk to him."

When asked how he felt when he could not talk to the man harassing him and what he would have done if he did have the chance to confront the man, Dallas says:

"I don't even know man, I would have tried to directly address the issue and not going off because he needs somebody to talk to him in a sensible matter rather than just start flicking off and coming back with the accusations because that wouldn't go into his head at all."

Dallas thought that even though the White man was acting irrationally it was important that he remain in control of his emotions. Another racial experience also occurred off campus at a local bank to Stokely:

"I got a scenario. You know (name of bank) is located downtown probably sixty feet from the (school symbol). I'm going in there I just got my check, it's like a thousand dollars or whatever and I'm going to the bank. I realize I don't have my license. I'm out of state but it's cool because I have my school ID. So, I get up to the counter and I was like I need to get some money out to pay my rent but I want to deposit the rest and the lady told me my account balance was too low to even deposit my check. I'm like hold up now, you know what I'm saying? I just noticed the person before me, she (the teller) made the issue that I didn't have a license, I had my school ID and that was a problem, that wasn't the policy. But I noticed that the person before me, it was a White guy, he was probably younger than me and he didn't have his license, he had his university ID too. So, I called her (the teller) out on it and she was like that it didn't happen. I didn't make it a racial issue, I was like I needed my money. I was like, 'ma'am can I see your boss', and it was a Black guy. I actually knew him and he came out there and he corrected the whole issue. She was trying to say that I didn't want to take this check because it might bounce. I told her the town would burn to Hell before this check bounces, but she went on and cashed it. The gentleman pulled me aside and said they had some complaints about this lady by a lot of Black people coming in and complaining and this made me upset. I mean, I'm coming in here trying to do business with the people and whatever, but I can't get any service."

This description by Stokely demonstrates Feagin's (2003) notion that the response of an African American to racism is influenced by the context in which it occurs. For example, racial hostility encountered in the street is most likely met with withdrawal, resigned acceptance, or verbal retort. In situations in which African Americans experience discrimination in public places, as in this instance, the response is generally verbal counterattack or resigned acceptance. Stokely demonstrates this in his assessment of this particular situation. Stokely was asked if he thought this was a racial incident and he responded as such:

"I think how I dealt with the situation in the bank was the correct way. I didn't want to deal with her about, you know what I'm saying, no race card or nothing like that. I wanted to talk to the manager because I felt like that was the thing to do. But what she failed to realize was that I knew the manager. I think it was a race issue and a class issue 'cause I mean a Black guy coming in here first of all, is it stolen, the check? I don't work, you know what I am saying, or I sell dope, they don't pay drug dealers with a check."

African American males are demonized by American society. White America fosters an environment hostile to the existence of the African American male (Utsey & Payne, 2000). Along this line, Stokely reflects on the way African American males are portrayed by the school and local newspaper as criminals and rapists, he says:

"You get one crime committed by a Black person, wherever. It's blasted all over the paper, front page. Like I swear man, since my freshman year it's been the same Black guy raping people for like the last five years or whatever. They still haven't caught him if he hasn't died from AIDS. The local newspaper, all the local papers you might get a blur of it in the back about we are looking for a White suspect, 5'10' or whatever, call this number if you see him opposed to them putting the guy on TV. You got the posters all around downtown, you got the little leaflets in the school newspaper and that's making it harder on me to go to school here because White girls on campus aren't really looking at this guy's face. They just see it's a Black guy."

The media often portrays African American males as criminals. This places African American males in a precarious situation because they are singled out by Whites, particularly the police who may think they have committed a crime. This can be stressful for African American males because they must always guard against being seen as threatening by Whites.

Coping strategies at the university

A number of researchers have examined the relationship between the strategies used by African Americans to cope with the stressors of everyday racism that they impact their psychological and somatic health (Utsey & Payne, 2000). Coping strategies that buffer African American males from the stressful effects of chronic exposure to racism are essential to healthy psychological functioning (Utsey & Payne, 2000). Effective coping strategies incorporated cognitive flexibility in response to racist's encounters. Inversely, maladaptive coping strategies generally result in poorer psychological and physical health. These coping strategies may include excessive drinking, sexual promiscuity, anger, domestic violence, substance abuse, and suicide. Racism's impact on the psychological functioning of African American males is complex and poses the question as to why some individuals experience the full force of racism's harmful effects, and why others are relatively untouched by their personal encounters with this societal problem.

The participants in this study used various techniques in coping with the stress of being an African American male on a predominantly White campus. One of the most common coping strategies was distancing themselves from Whites, physically or psychologically. In their seminal work, *Black Rage*, Grier and Cobbs (1968) maintain that it is necessary for an African American

man in America to develop a profound distrust of his White counterparts and of America itself. If this is the case, African American males must be on guard when in contact with Whites to protect them from physical and psychological harm. Physically distancing themselves from Whites for the participants in this study was hard because Whites made up over 80% of the student population. Therefore, they could not help but interact with Whites on some level. Psychological distancing was the method used most often by the participants because while one could be in the presences of Whites, an individual could mentally disconnect. Pierre expresses this sentiment throughout the interview:

“Yeah, I think I’ve changed from being here but I think that when I started moving into distancing myself and kind of keeping up a little bit of wall between me and some of the White folks, anticipating that there was going to be a problem at some point with the down the line because you just feel like at some point they are going to say something stupid or do something that’s going to be a misunderstanding or something. I think in a way it’s coping and in a way it’s keeping me free of what I think is inevitable like I just feel like at some point White folks are going to do something that either they deliberately do or more like just out of ignorance. I don’t want to put myself in a situation where I have to deal with it again because I don’t feel like I should always have to be clarifying some statement that they’ve made or addressing them about something or anything that will take me out of the direction that I think I should be going--- like dealing with school work and taking care of my family. I don’t want to have to deal with somebody else’s ignorance about something.”

Gurin and Epps (1975) conducted a series of studies at several historically Black colleges from 1964 to 1970 to study Black students’ level of Black consciousness, Black identity, and achievement. A number of students discussed the pride they felt in being part of an ethnic group that has the ability to overcome obstacles and having a history of survival in the face of overwhelming hardships. In this study, the students talked about strength of character, specific historical events, landmarks of representing progress and accomplishment, and figures who have stood for determination, courage, and revolution. Dallas expresses this same sentiment when he stated:

“I feel like, the first Black graduate to graduate from the department came to speak to us and what he went through and stuff and man, there’s no way I could not do everything in my power to get through all the rest of the obstacles here and overcome them. The responsibility of the people who came here before me makes it easier for me to deal.”

The chronic nature of racial discrimination is a major quality of life issue for African Americans in contemporary society (Feagin, 2003; Hacker, 1992). While the focus of this study was not life satisfaction, the ability to enjoy life versus the stress of dealing with racism is not without implications. When African American males have to deal with the insidiousness of racism as a regular occurrence in their life, life satisfaction diminishes.

Throughout the focus group discussions, the participants described several behavioral and attitudinal responses they used to deal with racism. Withdrawal and assertion were primarily used by the participants, along with the added attitudinal behavior of psychological distancing.

Psychological distancing was especially used by Pierre, who uses the term to describe the way he relates to Whites.

Implications & Conclusion

There are several implications that can be made from this study. As Ford (1996) stated, African American males need and seek greater self-awareness, self-understanding and appreciation. Ford (1996) goes further to assert that African American males seek stronger relationships with their peers and the African American community. Self-awareness includes an understanding of who one is with an understanding of the history of African Americans, both at the university and in the larger American society.

Furthermore, African American males also seek greater opportunities to express their emotions and feelings in productive ways. The statements made by the participants attest to the importance of these affective needs in their lives. The relationships they had with other African American males, African American women and their families allowed them to cope with being a small minority at a major White university. The African American males in this study used what Larazus and Folkman (1982) termed as problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies to deal with stress caused by racism. Examples of problem-focused coping strategies were demonstrated by Dallas when he was confronted by the White man in the downtown bar, Stokely and the bank teller who would not give him service, and Pierre and his ability to psychologically distance himself from Whites.

Conclusion

Universities and colleges, particularly traditional White institutions, should be aware of how racism can affect African American male students and their successful matriculation. Universities, especially those with a negative history of discrimination and racism, should implement programs which nurture and support African American males. Aggressive recruitment of academically gifted African American males is a beginning. Once enrolled, programs such as mentorships among upperclassmen African Americans and African American student organizations can be avenues for psychosocial support for African American male students. African American professors, particularly tenured professors, can be important role models and possible mentors to African American males, however, an area that many times is overlooked is the hiring of tenure track and subsequent promotion of African American faculty at traditionally White institutions.

It is the hope of the researcher that readers will come to have a greater understanding and appreciation of African American males and their resiliency. The participants in this study provided inspiration for the researcher with their dedication to excellence and their courageous spirits. The author leaves the participants and future African American males who attend college with the words of Marcus Garvey, *Up you mighty race; you will accomplish what you will.*

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