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Racial Identity and Academic Achievement

Davita Fitzgerald

Pennsylvania State University

“The evolution of old-fashioned racist beliefs to modern racist beliefs has presented elusive and subtle challenges to African American success in higher education.”

The success of African Americans in higher education has been plagued by a history of racism. African Americans have progressed from a time when they were barred from education to the present, when equal opportunity is legally upheld. The barring of African Americans from education represents old-fashioned racist beliefs that have evolved into modern racist beliefs (McConahay, 1986). Old-fashioned racist beliefs entail support for subservient roles for African Americans, differential treatment of African Americans as compared to European Americans, and stereotypes about a lack of competence of African Americans.

The evolution of old-fashioned to modern racist beliefs has presented elusive and subtle challenges to African American success in higher education. The effects of these beliefs are visible in higher attrition rates, lower academic achievement levels, lower enrollment in post-graduation programs, higher levels of dissatisfaction with college life, and lower occupational earnings after graduation (Allen, 1985; Griffin, 1991; Steele, 1992). The purpose of the empirical study upon which this presentation is based was to examine the coping mechanisms and identify other factors in African American success in higher education.

Participants were 70 African American students from two predominantly White institutions of higher education. Participants completed the Amirkhan coping strategy indicator, Center of Epidemiological Studies' depression scale, and Parham and Helms' racial identity questionnaire. The coping strategy indicator was issued in two forms (general and academic) to determine what stressors were present in the environment of the students and how they dealt with them. On the general form, students wrote about a stressful event in their lives and then answered 33 questions about how they coped with the event. On the academic form, students wrote about a stressful event within their academic life and answered the same 33 questions. The instructions indicated that if the event on the general form occurred within academic life, then it was not necessary to complete the academic form. The depression scale involved 20 questions and was included to determine the psychological state of the students. The racial identity attitude questionnaire was included to assess how the student felt about African Americans and European Americans. This scale consisted of four categories of attitudes that represented pro-European American beliefs, a desire to learn more about African American culture, Afrocentric beliefs, and positive beliefs about being of African descent in America. It was hypothesized that students with problem-focused coping strategies, lower levels of depression, and internalized racial attitudes would have higher grade point averages than those who engaged in avoidance, higher levels of depression, and other racial attitudes.

An examination of correlation matrices and the results of multiple regression analyses showed that racial identity attitudes were found to have the strongest relationship to grade point average and that these attitudes emerged as the strongest predictor of academic achievement. Surprisingly, the findings of the study showed that African American students who endorse pro-European American attitudes were most likely to achieve academic success while African American students who endorse Afrocentric attitudes were most likely to achieve minimal academic standards. This study has implications for the improvement of academic and social campus climates at predominantly White institutions of higher education.

PRESENTER

Davita Fitzgerald is enrolled in the social psychology program at Pennsylvania State University. She holds a B.A. in psychology from the College of Wooster (1994). She is a member of Psi Chi, the national honor society for psychology majors. Before graduating from the College of Wooster, Fitzgerald worked on the development of a coping strategy questionnaire and a study of teenage pregnancy in an African American community during an internship at the Pennsylvania State University. She has been actively involved with research on racial identity, evaluation of an intervention program that addresses high African American attrition rates at a predominantly White institution, and a study of everyday experiences with prejudice (which is being submitted for publication).