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The White Factor in Determining African and African American Relationships in Predominantly White Institutions

Abstract

The session would explore the impact of white Americans on the relationship between black African and African American undergraduates in a predominantly white campus. This session would be discussed in the broader context of the black African, African American relationship. This presentation is from a section of a dissertation done by the presenter on the general African, African American relationship in a predominantly white academic institution.

Peter Gitau, Ph.D.

Director of Multicultural Affairs and Executive Assistant to the President for Diversity at Manchester College.

The relationship between Africans and African Americans is a subject that has attracted great intellectual debate. Some have argued that a timeless, irrevocable bond continues to connect people of African descent because of their skin color and common heritage (Phinney & Onwughalu, 1996; Parhams & Helms, 1985; Cross, 1991; Ghee, 1990; Lake, 1995). Others have argued that such a bond has been systematically broken with time and distance, and that black people in Africa and their counterparts in America have developed radically different identities (Emoungu, 1992; Wilson, 1990; Osunde et al., 1996; Palh, 1995; Asante, 1999). Indeed, some have stated that the two groups acculturate to mainstream white culture differently and that these differences in acculturation may contribute to feelings of separation and antagonism between Africans and African Americans (Adelejan and Parks, 1985; Arubayi, 1981; Emoungu, 1992; Tatum, 1992; Waters, 1999).

The broader study from which this abstract is derived explored the manner in which African and African American undergraduate students at a major predominantly white, research university in the Mid-West perceive themselves and each other and how such perceptions impact their interactions with one another. The study examined the manner of the self perceptions of these groups through their preferred racial self-designation labels and the consequent identity models that shape their self perceptions. The twentyone African and African American participants in the study detailed the nature of their interactions with each other in the classroom and in the social context of the university.

Findings from the study suggest that African and African American undergraduates at this university related poorly to one another in an academic context. Stereotypical perceptions gathered from the media and direct or indirect experiences between members of both groups were found to influence the nature of the relationship. Members of both groups seemed to have limited contact with each other.

This study also uncovered basic differences in the way African and African American undergraduates at this university related to whites. The Africans in the study reported positive relationships with whites than that reported by African Americans. Africans attributed this to their perception of whites as being more genuinely interested in them compared to their perception of African Americans as being indifferent. On the other hand, most African American participants reported being wary of interacting with whites citing continuing racism and discrimination as reasons for minimizing interaction with whites.

The participants' relationship to whites, and the participants' perceptions of the other group's relationship with whites seemed to affect the nature of the relationship between Africans and African Americans. This difference in predisposition towards whites was seen as a contributor, in part, to the apparent social distance and apathy characterizing the African, African American relationship on this university. It could be argued that for the African to identify with the white American and be oblivious of that white American's racism towards the African American could be logically interpreted as an act of racial betrayal, thus creating a wedge between African and African American students.

The findings of this study suggest that skin color was not a binding factor among African and African American undergraduates at this university and that the two groups were separated by vast differences that precluded positive interactions. But, the results of this study also indicate that members of both groups acknowledged a common ancestry whose bonding effect could be strengthened through more contact opportunities and education.

Presenter

Dr. Peter Gitau is a native of Kenya, East Africa. He is currently the Director of Multicultural Affairs and Executive Assistant for Diversity at Manchester College in North Manchester, Indiana. He has a Ph.D. in Higher Education (Policy and Leadership) with a Minor in Public Administration from the University of Kansas. He has a M.S. in Educational Administration from Eastern Illinois University and a B.A. in Secondary Education from Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya.