VISTAS Online
ACA Knowledge Center
counseling.org/knowledge-center/vistas
703-823-9800 x281 | 800-347-6647 x281
By Drs. Garry R. Walz and Jeanne C. Bleuer of Counseling Outfitters, LLC | *Sponsored by the American Counseling Association*

Article 64

Self-Identity: A Key to Black Student Success

Paper based on a program presented at the 2016 Texas Association of Counselor Education and Supervisors Mid-Winter Conference, January 28–29, 2016, Austin, TX.

Andrea T. J. Ross, Angela M. Powell, and Richard C. Henriksen, Jr.

Ross, Andrea T. J., is a counselor education doctoral student at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas. She is a Licensed Professional Counselor working in a community setting. Her research interests are multicultural issues, spiritual counseling, and trauma.

Powell, Angela M., is a counselor education doctoral student at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas. She is a Licensed Professional Counselor-Supervisor and school counselor with 11 years of experience working with at-risk children, adolescents, and their families. Her research interests include youth trauma, school counseling, multiculturalism, and self-identity.

Henriksen, Richard C., Jr., is a professor of counselor education in the Department of Counselor Education at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas. He has been a counselor for more than 18 years and specializes in multicultural issues. He has more than 50 publications including his award winning book, *Counseling Multiple Heritage Individuals, Couples, and Families*, and has given more than 65 presentations on a wide variety of counseling issues at the national and state levels.

Abstract

Many Black students opt out of postsecondary education programs due to feelings of microaggressions, psychological distress, cultural mistrust, and a loss of a sense of self-worth. Self-identity can be instrumental in addressing obstacles that hinder the academic success of Black doctoral students in counselor education programs at predominately White institutions (PWIs). The relationship between positive self-identity, academic success, and the psychological well-being of Black students is explored through a literature review. When Black students strongly identify with their cultural heritage, there is an increase in their self-esteem, self-efficacy, and academic motivation. This phenomenon is important to the academic and professional development of Black students at PWIs. The authors present recommendations to address the disparities of Black doctoral students in counselor education programs. Strategies for counselor education programs and Black student recruitment and retention in counselor education doctoral programs are discussed as well as implications for further research.

Keywords: self-identity, multicultural competency, racial identity, academic barriers, academic success, microaggressions, mentorship

Diversity is valued in the counseling profession; in fact, the *American Counseling Association Code of Ethics* (ACA; 2014) indicates that a core professional value of professional counseling is "honoring diversity and embracing a multicultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts" (p. 3). Similarly, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) supports diversity by affirming, "As an accrediting body, CACREP is committed to the development of standards and procedures that reflect the needs of a dynamic, diverse, and complex society" (CACREP, 2014, para. 1). Yet while the *ACA Code of Ethics* and CACREP have provided vital support of multiculturalism and diversity by implementing professional standards and guidelines, there still seems to be a great deal of disparity among college and university institutions regarding Black student self-identity and their academic achievement (Cokley, McClain, Jones, & Johnson, 2012).

Although there has been an increase in Black student enrollment in counseling programs, there remains a low number of Black practitioners and counselor educators (Haizlip, 2012). While many may perceive that individual effort and perseverance can triumph over circumstances, researchers have identified self-identity as one of the most important factors contributing to academic and career success among Black students (Byars-Winston, 2014; Galles & Lenz, 2013; Hurd, Sánchez, Zimmerman, & Caldwell, 2012; Rolland, 2011). Black students seeking postsecondary education encounter various barriers inhibiting their success (Cokley et al., 2012). Although research related to the experiences of Black counselor educators is increasing, there is little information detailing the experiences of Black students in counselor education doctoral programs (Henfield, Owens, & Witherspoon, 2011). Through this article, we address some of those obstacles that Black students may face while in counselor education programs as well as possible solutions or pathways around those hurdles. We also provide more insight into the existing literature on how self-identity is associated with psychological, academic, and career outcomes among Black students and implications for counselor education programs and future research.

Education Barriers Faced by Black Students

Black and other underrepresented students are often challenged with adjustment difficulties that are not experienced by their White counterparts (Gardner, Barrett, & Pearson, 2014). According to Owens, Lacey, Rawls, and Holbert-Quince (2010), Black students pursuing postsecondary education struggle with the contradiction of the college environment and their cultures. Black students also face a lack of social support and discomfort with the social climate of the school. These students lack a sense of belonging and experience alienation, resistance, and a different dominant culture (Gardner et al., 2014; Heaven, 2015; Owens et al., 2010; Rush, 2012). The experience of navigating back and forth between the dominant culture and one's own culture on a daily basis, or living a bicultural existence, can be stressful (Gardner et al., 2014).

Along with adjustment issues, Black students often feel the need for instructional support and institutional connectedness (Owens et al., 2010). Black students indicated discrimination, negative racial climate, marginalization, and a lack of Black peers and faculty as barriers while in doctoral programs at predominantly White institutions (PWIs;

Henfield et al., 2011). Henfield et al. (2011) explored the perceptions of 11 Black doctoral students enrolled in counselor education programs at PWIs. According to Henfield et al., one student sated that she felt some of her classmates did not take her contributions to class discussions very seriously. She said, "I was always getting challenged when I would speak. That made me feel like I had to explain what I said more than I noticed other people did. So I stopped talking. My participation went down" (p. 234). Henfield et al. identified another student who shared "There is always a lingering thought or feeling that I have to perform twice as well to prove that I too belong at this level of study" (p. 235).

The impact of family may also affect the success of Black students. According to Rush (2012), other barriers to Black student success were: the lack of emotional support from their families; the need to return home frequently due to family constraints that required their physical presence (e.g., caring for a relative); minimal financial support; and the sense that their education was of little value to the family. Others felt guilt about the financial hardship their college education was having on the family unit (Rush, 2012, p. 29).

Additionally, Heaven (2015) expressed the need for institutions to be agents of change through counseling mandates, student leadership and involvement, mentoring programs, and improved career counseling services to enhance Black students' chances for success.

Self-Identity of Black Students

Erikson (1968) defined the fundamental aspects of the life cycle of identity development in his psychosocial development theory. He argued that through each stage, the ego develops as individuals successfully resolve crises in each stage. Erikson introduced eight psychosocial stages that individuals must master in order to successfully progress to the next stage. In each psychosocial stage, individuals will encounter crises. As they meet these crises and are able to successfully manage them, Erikson stated that individuals would be able to successfully emerge to the next stage. Carrying the accomplishment and virtue of success from mastering conflict in each stage, individuals would gradually develop a positive self-identity; whereas failing to master any given stage could result in a negative sense of self (Erikson, 1968).

Harper (2007) suggested that people participate in experimenting and discovering behaviors that eventually lead to their own identity development; however, there is also reason to believe that this evolutionary process unfolds more profoundly and differently for Black students than their White counterparts. Developing a positive self-identity and self-awareness positively contributes to Black students' academic progress and self-efficacy (Hurd et al., 2012). Further, being exposed to any negative race-related interactions increases the negative feelings of Black students, leading them to struggle with their abilities and perceived limitations of their counterparts (Gullan, Hoffman, & Leff, 2011). Lacking a solid foundation of self-identity leaves them susceptible to feeling more unsure of themselves, isolated, and disengaged from academics. Taken in this light, Brittian (2012) suggested that Black students may often develop a negative sense of self or possibly feel rejected. Such negative outcomes and conflicts in the identity process may be dire for students, leading them to maladaptive coping responses in life (Erickson,

1968). The impact of racism and negative stereotypes on identity formation for Blacks is an ongoing battle and may negatively affect their identity development (Erikson, 1968; Harper, 2007). As Black students pursue higher education and professional careers, their negative self-identity may interfere with their motivation to achieve their goals (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Brittian, 2012; Cokley et al., 2012). Students' identity development may become restricted and confined to the stage where the conflict entered their lives. Without successfully moving through the cycles of psychosocial development, students may be in conflict with who they are and have difficulty navigating through various stages of their lives (Gullan et al., 2011).

Spending vast amounts of time processing and enduring others' actions, including microaggressions, and then trying to modify their behavior to prove they are equal, can impair Black students' self-confidence, hence, diminishing their will to continue their plight for success (Harper, 2007; Hurd et al., 2012). Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) defined microaggressions as subtle insults directed towards others, particularly minorities of any sort, that may be verbal or nonverbal. Though subtle and often uninvestigated, Solórzano et al. (2000) purported that microaggressions are pervasive forms of racism that verify Black inferiority. For example, if a White female clutches her purse as a Black male passes by, it may silently insinuate that Black men are criminals. Whether intentional or not, microaggressions communicate negative messages from those harboring negative biases. Sue (2010) contended that minorities frequently experience microaggressions in their day-to-day interactions with others and often feel like untrustworthy, second-class citizens.

Consistently enduring microaggressions and negative stereotypes often has negative effects on Black students' self-identity (Stevenson, 1997). For example, Brittian (2012) described how individuals' identities are influenced and molded by their environment. Stevenson (1997) explained that because Blacks are continuously exposed to negative comments, subtle reminders of their inferiority, and neighborhood violence, they become increasingly sensitive to microaggressions and racism. Additionally, Brittian noted that "misrepresentation of Black culture and the overrepresentation of European American images on television" (p. 175) may lead Black students to feel inferior and uncertain of their position in society. Continuing to find themselves portrayed in a negative light and misrepresented by the popular culture reinforces negative stereotypes against Black students and evokes their feelings of anger, mistrust, and self-doubt (Stevenson, 1997).

According to Arroyo and Zigler (1995), in order for Black students to become successful, they feel forced to dissociate themselves from their culture of origin and adopt behavior and attitudes of the mainstream culture resulting in their increased feelings of guilt, depression, and identity confusion. In the Black community, as Carson (2009) noted, Black college students struggle to divide themselves from their cultural norms as they realize they must learn to speak, look, and behave White in order to be accepted. Further, even more disparaging is the realization that Black students must strive to become above average in order to receive recognition from college faculty (Carson, 2009).

Strong self-identification is associated with determination and academic success (Cokley et al., 2012). Hurd et al. (2012) stated, "researchers have found an association between higher racial centrality and more positive academic performance among African-

American college students, indicating that seeing race as a central part of one's identity may contribute positively to one's academic performance" (p. 1197). Educators also play an important role in eliminating the disparities in Black academic achievement (Rolland, 2011). Studies have estimated the impact of teacher bias and differential treatment on the ethnic and racial disparities for academic achievement (American Psychological Association, 2012). Students' awareness of discrimination, bias, and their stigmatized racial status is directly associated with feelings of despair and educational disparities (American Psychological Association, 2012). According to Rolland (2011), educators must understand the environment of Black students to understand the identity of Black students. A clear understanding of the cultural environment will allow educators to address diversity in curriculum so that Black students may connect with the content (Rolland, 2011). Educators should be responsible for utilizing a culturally-sensitive delivery in their academic curricula as well as practicing multiculturalism in all activities.

Assisting Black Students' Professional Development

Educational institutions and counselor educators can aid students in the development of their self-identity (Heaven, 2015; Owens et al., 2010). The supportive efforts are two-fold, consisting of helping Black students develop self-identity and integrate with the dominant culture. Howard-Hamilton (as cited in Heaven, 2015), argued that once the Black student understands and accepts who he or she is, the individual may then move towards becoming a valuable member of the collegiate community.

Henfield et al. (2011) identified four themes that Black doctoral-level students in counselor education programs expressed that helped them overcome difficulties in their program. Black doctoral-level students at predominately White institutions (PWIs) in counselor education programs perceived that the following elements assisted them with their professional development: individual support or assertiveness, more experienced Black peers, race-based student organizations, and personal and professional care from advisors (Henfield et al., 2011).

Constance, a Black doctoral student in a counselor education program, stated the following about her advisor:

> I need someone who is supportive and honest. I really like him because he helps me to think and believe in myself at the same time. I would say that at this point I need him to motivate me and help me with my critical thinking and writing. Networking with professionals is also a need. At this stage. I need a support . . . someone who will provide feedback, but also someone who will just listen on those days when I need to vent. (Henfield et al., 2011, p. 236)

Strategies for Growth and Professional Development

Through their investigation of Black administrators at PWIs, Gardner et al. (2014) revealed mentoring as an effective method to both facilitate retention of Black students and promote professional growth and development of Black professionals (Haizlip, 2012). Peer and faculty mentoring has positive influences on the experiences of doctoral students in counselor education programs, specifically Black students (Hinkle, Iarussi, Schermer, & Yensel, 2014) According to Henfield et al. (2011), after decades of activism,

social policy, and social justice, nearly half of the Black students in doctoral programs at PWIs surveyed continue to report experiencing feelings of isolation, marginalization, and lack of a substantial racial peer group during their graduate education. Mentoring allows Black students to conceptualize their possible success. It may also provide an avenue to help alleviate isolation for both the student and professional. An illustration is in the case of Constance, a Black doctoral-level student in a counselor education program presented by Henfield et al. (2011). Constance shared her belief with the following words: "I believe that for a minority student, involvement with persons from similar backgrounds aid[s] in the process of getting through the everyday bureaucracies associated with being a minority at a predominantly White institution" (p. 236). Acceptance and validation may support the growth and professional development of Black doctoral students in counselor education programs. Opportunities to address possible barriers, as well as support the professional development of Black students, are visible in the following constructs adapted from Gardner et al. (2014), Haizlip (2012), Heaven (2015), Henfield et al., (2011), Owens et al. (2010), and Rush (2012):

- Create an environment that is encouraging and embracing for Black students throughout the campus. Provide opportunities for Black students to become involved in the activities of the school such as student government associations, school ambassadors, and welcoming organizations. Counselor educators should encourage Black doctoral students to participate in research projects with faculty that lead to publishing and presentation opportunities.
- Walker, Pearson, and Murrell (2010) pointed out that research shows it is students' involvement in their campus life that directly influences both their success in college and their degree of satisfaction with the college experience. Counselor educators can facilitate open forums for discussions on racism and discrimination allowing a dialogue to aid understanding, insight, and acceptance.
- Provide opportunities for networking with faculty and alumni. For professional development, encourage students to join professional and student organizations. Whenever possible, these professional and student organizations should be race-based. The opportunity to connect with others in the Black community helps to alleviate isolation (Gardner et al., 2014; Henfield et al., 2011). Making those connections can prove beneficial to Black counselor education students. Henfield et al. (2011) shared the perception of Taylor, a Black doctoral student in a counselor education program, who was also a member of a Black Greek fraternity. Taylor stated,

  > I am able to find camaraderie and that needed informal release; sort of 'code switching'. . . I mean that I am able to switch between Taylor the doc student at a PWI and Taylor the guy who knows where he is from and who is touch with his circle of friends and community as a whole." (Henfield et al., 2011, p. 236)

- Counselor educators work to become comfortable engaging in Afrocentric conversations. Engaging in conversation meaningful to Black students demonstrates acceptance and validation. An example would be an open forum on the "Black Lives Matter" movement. This may provide individual support as well as professional development.

- Recruit Black speakers and mentors. Mentorship may be critical in the successful matriculation of Black counselor education students from the classroom to the professorate (Henfield et al., 2011; Johnson, Bradley, Knight, & Bradshaw, 2007; Rush, 2012). Universities may seek Black professionals from campus and/or the community for mentorship. A mentoring relationship with a Black counselor educator may be ideal for the professional development of Black doctoral students. Students pursuing a doctoral degree in counselor education and supervision were more successful when mentored by faculty members with shared interests, motivations, and professional endeavors (Hinkle et al., 2014).
- Work to address financial issues through programming, possible referrals, and resource linking. The barrier of financial issues experienced by Black students may be diminished with the assistance of campus support. Counselor education programs should prepare to support Black students by providing knowledge of resources available to help the students. Opportunities for programming and resource linking should be forthcoming. Black students should not have to seek out or investigate possible avenues for assistance, but the information should be readily available. For example, provide a detailed directory of scholarship and grant opportunities with the acceptance letter or orientation packet for newly accepted students.
- Develop policies and practices that bring more Black counselor educator representation into the institution. Possible actions include addressing discrimination, providing competitive compensation, establishing favorable work conditions, providing support from superiors and cross-cultural mentoring, and offering advancement opportunities (Gardner et al., 2014).

Examples of national programs that propose to support Black doctoral students, which counselor education programs may duplicate, include: Compact for Faculty Diversity (a program with the goals of ensuring that underrepresented doctoral students have continuous funding, financial aid, and peer mentors); Holmes Scholars Network (graduate students receive mentoring on the national, regional, and local levels, then become mentors themselves); and Preparing Future Faculty Program (partners with colleges and universities to help underrepresented students by socializing doctoral students to the culture of academia; Johnson et al., 2007).

Implications for Further Research

The implications for further research include a need for qualitative research focused on the experiences of successful strategies used by Black doctoral student completers. There is also a need for qualitative research exploring the perception of the experiences of doctoral students who did not complete their program. Questions remain unanswered in the literature that may help guide and support counselor education programs. Examples of questions to ask Black doctoral students who were both completers and non-completers are: What did you not ask then that you would ask now? and, What did you need when deciding a program?

There is also a need for Black mentors. Is there currently a model for on-campus or across campuses mentorship of Black doctoral students in counselor education programs? Johnson et al. (2007) highlighted the underrepresentation of Black faculty in

CACREP-accredited counseling programs, with less than 3% of faculty members at doctoral institutions who are Black. With such few Black faculty, how can counselor education programs recruit and retain Black faculty? In order to attract and keep Black faculty available for students in counselor education programs, what are the needs of Black faculty at PWIs? Are there any strategies for successful recruitment and retention that may be used as a framework for counselor education programs? The answers to these and other questions cannot only lead to the identification and development of ways to address the small number of counselor education faculty, but could also lead to a better understanding of the challenges faced by members of other racial and ethnic groups.

References

American Counseling Association. (2014). *2014 ACA code of ethics*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association. Retrieved from https://www.counseling.org/resources/aca-code-of-ethics.pdf

American Psychological Association. (2012). *Ethnic and racial disparities in education: Psychology's contributions to understanding and reducing disparities.* Retrieved from https://www.apa.org/ed/resources/racial-disparities.pdf

Arroyo, C. G., & Zigler, E. (1995). Racial identity, academic achievement, and the psychological well–being of economically disadvantaged adolescents. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*, 903–914.

Brittian, A. S. (2012). Understanding African American adolescents' identity development: A relational developmental systems perspective. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *38*, 172–200. doi:10.1177/0095798411414570

Byars-Winston, A. (2014). Toward a framework for multicultural STEM-focused career interventions. *Career Development Quarterly*, 62, 340–357. doi:10.1002/j.2161-0045.2014.00087.x

Carson, L. (2009). "I am because we are": Collectivism as a foundational characteristic of African American college student identity and academic achievement. *Social Psychology of Education*, *12*(3), 327–344. doi:10.1007/s11218-009-9090-6

Cokley, K., McClain, S., Jones, M., & Johnson, S. (2012). A preliminary investigation of academic disidentification, racial identity, and academic achievement among African American adolescents. *The High School Journal*, *95*, 54–68.

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2014). *About CACREP: Vision, mission and core values.* Retrieved from http://www.cacrep.org/about-cacrep/vision-mission-and-core-values

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis.* New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

Galles, J. A., & Lenz, J. G. (2013). Relationships among career thoughts, vocational identity, and calling: Implications for practice. *Career Development Quarterly*, *61*, 240–248. doi:10.1002/j.2161-0045.2013.00052.x

Gardner, L. J., Barrett, T. G., & Pearson, L. C. (2014). African American administrators at PWIs: Enablers of and barriers to career success. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 7*, 235–251. http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.shsu.edu/10.1037/a0038317

Gullan, R. L., Hoffman, B. N., & Leff, S. S. (2011, Spring). I do but I don't: The search for identity in urban Black adolescents. *Perspectives on Urban Education*, 29–41. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ940931.pdf

Haizlip, B. N. (2012). Addressing the underrepresentation of African-Americans in counseling and psychology programs. *College Student Journal*, *46*, 214–222. doi:10.1177/0021934714529594

Harper, B. E. (2007). The relationship between Black racial identity and academic achievement in urban settings. *Theory Into Practice, 46*(3), 230–238. doi:10.1080/14241270701402231

Heaven, A. (2015). A conceptual framework for transforming Black males through student affairs programs. *Race, Gender & Class*, *22*, 54–64.

Henfield, M. S., Owens, D., & Witherspoon, S. (2011). African American students in counselor education programs: Perceptions of their experiences. *Counselor Education & Supervision*, *50*(4), 226–242. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6978.2011.tb00121.x

Hinkle, M., Iarussi, M. M., Schermer, T. W., & Yensel, J. F. (2014). Motivations to pursue the doctoral degree in counselor education and supervision. *Journal of Counselor Preparation & Supervision*, *6*(1). doi:10.7729/51.1069

Hurd, N. M., Sánchez, B., Zimmerman, M. A., & Caldwell, C. H. (2012). Natural mentors, racial identity, and educational attainment among African American adolescents: Exploring pathways to success. *Child Development*, *83*(4), 1196–1212. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01769.x

Johnson, P. D., Bradley, C. R., Knight, D. E., & Bradshaw, E. S. (2007). Preparing African American counselor education students for the professorate. *College Student Journal*, *41*, 886–890.

Owens, D., Lacey, K., Rawls, G., & Holbert-Quince, J. (2010). First generation African American male college students: Implications for career counselors. *Career Development Quarterly*, *58*, 291–300. Retrieved from https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/89568/j.2161-0045.2010.tb00179.x.pdf?sequence=1

Rolland, G. (2011). *African American male students' perceptions of factors that contribute to their academic success*. (Doctoral dissertation, Georgia Southern University). Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1386&context=etd

Rush, L. C. (2012). Not business as usual: Reconsideration of the career needs, concerns, and the career interventions with African-American college students. *Career Planning & Adult Development Journal*, *28*, 27–41.

Stevenson, H. C., Jr. (1997). Missed, dissed, and pissed: Making meaning of neighborhood risk, fear and anger management in urban Black youth. *Cultural Diversity and Mental Health*, *3*(1), 37–52. doi:10.1037/1099-9809.3.1.37

Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *69*(1/2), 60–73.

Sue, D. W. (2010*). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation.* Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Walker, T., Pearson, F., & Murrell, P. (2010). Quality of effort and career preparation differences between African American and White community college students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 34*(9), 738–754.

Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/vistas