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The Educated Black Man and Higher Education

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Abstract

In this manuscript, we discuss the seemingly fundamental conflict between the desire among African Americans, and particularly African American males, to improve their socioeconomic status, as demonstrated by their enrollment in institutions of higher education, and the reinforcement of unjust practices within academia. We examine family systems and individual personal characteristics and the role they play in Black male academic achievement through the theoretical lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory. Using this conceptual framework, we review the experiences of Black males, characterized by microaggressions, stigma, and internalized conflict, within academic and social settings in higher education, and the opportunities available for student affairs professionals to help ameliorate these struggles. We conclude with calling upon counselors to gain a better understanding of how their direct work with African American students in general, and with African American males in particular, as well as counselors' ability to advocate for this group to promote systemic change, could have widespread implications for Black male student achievement.

Introduction

According to the dominant culture, education provides an arena of opportunities for fundamental equality among various racial groups. The pursuit of postsecondary education is paramount for a plethora of minority groups. Although the embedded belief that education is an equalizer is debatable, this belief is prevalent in institutional and educational contexts throughout society. Thus, many African Americans and other marginalized groups desire to be highly educated. An individual's race/ethnicity,

socioeconomic status, and educational endeavors are seemingly intertwined; and according to statistics from 2011, less than 16% of Black males had bachelors' degrees or greater, compared to 29% of White males (U. S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Grusky (2011) defined socioeconomic status as a combination of income, education, and social class. An individual's socioeconomic status plays a significant role in his or her ability to progress through the educational system. Education is often seen as an indiscriminant entity, and individuals within certain racial groups are thought to have equitable options in regards to obtaining knowledge. Nonetheless, and as it relates to African American males, relevant statistics tell a slightly different story. Although there was an increase of 45% in Black student college attendance between 1980 and 2000, the increase was largely attributed to academic achievements of African American women (Griffin, Jayakumar, Jones, & Allen, 2010). By contrast, the U. S. Census Bureau (2010) reported that Black males only accounted for 4.25% of the population in United States colleges and universities. Studies have also shown that highly-touted recent gains in college attendance among Black students are driven in significant part by international African students, thus further masking our country's ongoing failure in attracting and retaining African American male students in higher education (Bennett & Lutz, 2009).

Theoretical Perspective

Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979; 1986; 1988; 1989; 1990; 1993; 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Liles & Juhnke, 2008) examines the relationship between developing individuals and their environment. Ecological systems theory recognizes the relevance of shared experiences among individuals within a particular group. These shared experiences create observable parallels within the context of the environment. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979):

The ecology of human development involves scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which persons live, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. (p. 21)

The individual is essentially impacted by his or her bi-directional interactions with the environment; and likewise, individuals influence their environment. Ecological systems theory consists of the following sublevels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem comprises the immediate surroundings of the individual. Examples of a microsystem include family or a school classroom. In most cases, people live and operate within multiple microsystems. The mesosystem focuses on the connections between an individual's various microsystems. For example, the links between a young child's family and his or her childcare setting would clearly illustrate the second level of the theory. The exosystem and macrosystem explore the relationship from a wider perspective. The exosystem examines the social settings affecting the immediate surroundings of the person, and the macrosystem considers the overarching cultural values and customs impacting the individual (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Historical Perspectives

The literature highlights important factors related to the consistency and discrepancy of African American males' educational endeavors. Parental level of education and parental occupational status directly and positively correlate with the Black male's ability to be academically successful (Pais, 2011). First-generation college students are shown to have different experiences in college and lower chances of success (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004). Historically, mothers' level of education has been viewed as an adequate index for social class (Kohn, 1979; Kohn & Schooler, 1983; Tudge et al. 1999; Wickrama, Conger, Lorenz, & Elder, 1998), and the notion of mothers' level of education as a predictor of children's academic and other success continues to find support in the literature. However, there is another trend evolving that suggests a positive correlation between Black male students' grade point average and the father's highest academic degree (Taylor & Olswang, 1997). By contrast, Madyum and Lee (2010) found that as female headed households increased, African American male academic performance decreased, and their reading achievements were directly and negatively affected as well. The correlation between Black males and their father's educational achievements highlights the developmental influence of microsystemic relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Generally speaking, more educated parents tend to value education, encouraging academic success among their children (Lee, Sax, Kim, & Hagedorn, 2004). Harper (2006) proclaimed that African American males are not hindered because of their intellectual abilities and are supported (or not) and encouraged (or not) by other individuals within their peer microsystems, including parents and peer groups. Peer support networks and the development of personal resiliency have considerable impact on Black male pre-college success (Marsh, Chaney, & Jones, 2012). Supportive social bonds continue to be critical pathways to persistence and success among African American male college students (Jackson, 2012). Overall, parenting and the formation of peer relationships have a complex connection, but are not independent of Black male educational success (Brown & Bakken, 2011).

Parental support appears to coincide with an individual's ability to succeed; however, certain individuals can and do persist without parental support. These persons appear to be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to matriculate through college. Ecological theory suggests there are certain personal characteristics (i.e., force, resource, and demand) which may explain academic success in spite of more hostile contextual influences. Force characteristics are those which are described as either "developmentally instigative" or "developmentally disruptive" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 1009). Those behaviors which *instigate* academic success (e.g., school attendance, assignment completion) differently impact academic success from those behaviors which *disrupt* success (e.g., truancy). Resource characteristics refer to innate talents and abilities. So, for example, a child with greater intellectual capacity may be deemed less vulnerable to negative academic outcomes than one with limited capacity. Finally, demand characteristics are ones which are largely biologically set and unchanging (e.g., race/ethnicity), provoking or encouraging both positive and negative contextual interactions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Counselors and student affairs personnel are well-positioned to observe and capitalize upon those person characteristics deemed

helpful to Black male college success. Nevertheless, and even in view of individual personal characteristics, the transference of knowledge from parents to offspring, pertaining to the rigors associated with earning advanced degrees, is a factor attributable to African American males' academic success (Levin & Levin, 1991; Perrakis, 2008; Wright & McCreary, 1997).

Considering the dismal statistics and grave limitations surrounding African American male college student transition into institutions of higher education, it behooves counselors and other student affairs professionals to recognize that although collegiate environments provide opportunities for growth and overall student development, positive experiences are not necessarily guaranteed. Predicting college student success in general is complicated due to many intrinsic and extrinsic factors; however, it is more complex when considering Black males, especially those of lower socioeconomic status. When viewing Black male experiences through the lens of ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), it becomes apparent that the individual's perceptions, environmental factors present with college matriculation and transition, and individual characteristics play concurrent roles in student adjustment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). When working with African American males in curricular and co-curricular environments, it is imperative that attention be given to issues of diversity constrained through ecological theory, allowing for cultural and individual differences, thus hopefully allowing campuses to be more conducive to Black male student success.

Schlossberg (1981) mirrored ecological theory, suggesting that special attention should be given to an individual's situation, self, support, and strategies. Common wisdom suggests that students should separate from their pre-transition communities and fully immerse and assimilate themselves into their collegiate environments. However, upon further inspection, it seems that successful social and academic integration with higher education institutions does not necessarily have to result from a dichotomy between contact on campus and contact with family. Sustained communication with family may complement the educational experiences of African American males, allowing them to place more value in, and invest more time into their academic pursuits and to engage more readily into the academic social environment. As proposed by Tierney (1999), assimilation into college life can be enhanced by capitalizing on the cultural backgrounds and support systems of Black males (as cited in Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011). Maintaining familial involvement within the lives of African American male college students may provide sources of encouragement and motivation, as well as academic, financial, and emotional support for students.

Black males from more affluent economic backgrounds generally enjoy greater educational opportunities than others within their racial group (Griffin et al., 2010; Pais, 2011). African American males are capable of exhibiting intellectual abilities tantamount to any other population when conditions are equivalent. Moreover, African American males of similar SES are capable of exhibiting similar achievement results as their Caucasian counterparts (Pais, 2011).

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) hypothesized that academically successful and intellectually gifted Black students must cope with the negative implications of "acting White" by their peers (as cited in Harper, 2006; Stinson, 2011). High-achieving African American students must manage their success while maintaining their place in Black

culture. Though Fordham and Ogbu described the Black educational experience across gender, it seems safe to assume that any negative shared African American experience may be exacerbated from the perspective of African American males seeking higher education. By contrast, Harper (2006) found that Black students often reject the notion that academic success is in conflict with their cultural loyalties. Many African American students refuse to recognize any perception of inadequacy, prefer to embrace their cultural identity, and continue to achieve scholastically.

Black Males and Higher Education

Racially-derived environmental stressors have a major effect on Black male college students (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011; Wilkins, 2012). Constantly asserting one's identity is mentally fatiguing, yet many African American males continue to balance societal and personal expectations with their academic performance. Student affairs professionals can ameliorate the struggles that pervade African American student life, and particularly African American male academic and social educational experiences. Assisting students with the internal and external struggles associated with "acting White" within their family and peer groups, and with the psychological stressors associated with a changing identity, can come in the form of Black student groups, positive mentorships with Black faculty, multicultural training for faculty and staff, and evaluation of faculty/staff multicultural competence. Douthit and Guiffrida (2010) posited that understanding these factors allows for student affairs professionals to support individual students and to enact systemic change. Although student affairs professionals may not be directly involved in each of these measures, their role on campuses situates them nicely to transform collegiate cultures.

Most college students struggle with developmental issues and stressors related to transitioning into a new environment. They also find finances, coursework, and self-identity to be challenging. These issues are particularly aggravating within the African American male college student population at Higher Educational Institutions (HEI), particularly Predominantly White Institutions (PWI). Black male college students report experiencing condescension, isolation, invisibility, and supervisibility. They also report pervasive feelings of discomfort, frustration, and exhaustion. More troubling, African American males tend to deny mental health issues and to be reluctant to seek mental health services (Davis et al., 2004; Grier-Reed, 2010; Solorzano, Seja, & Yosso, 2000; Watkins, Green, Goodson, & Guidry, 2007). Black males frequently report experiencing microaggressions (e.g., negatively nuanced suggestions of affirmative action) within a myriad of social and academic environments. These experiences can saturate everyday life, making microaggressions difficult to avoid, ascertain, and abolish, and possibly leading to decreased self-efficacy, increased attrition, and psychological distress.

Accommodating African American male students by providing environments which encourage social involvement, as well as academic enrichment, could enhance the college experience among Black males (Davis, 1995; Taylor & Olswang, 1997). Acknowledging the social component of the individual's life and exploring opportunities to create a comfortable social and intellectual environment probably allow students to flourish. When these conditions are present, research suggests that African American men adjust well to college environments, exhibiting higher levels of self-esteem and

ambition; cultural pride and determination (Griffin et al., 2010; Taylor & Olswang, 1997).

Although Black males are capable of assimilating into the college environment, those attending Predominately White Institutions (PWI) report less congruency between their pre-college high school/community life and their collegiate experiences. By contrast, Black males attending historically Black colleges or universities (HBCU) describe their social environment as warm and welcoming and more congruent with their pre-college environments. Thus, the institution's ability to provide an environment which encourages learning, but embraces social welfare, is paramount (Brock, 2010).

Self-efficacy is a concept related to the advancement of African American males within the college environment. According to Okech and Harrington (2002), self-efficacy is predictive of academic achievements for African American males. The belief in one's ability to succeed is integral to an individual's academic success. Self-esteem has also been positively linked to academic performance. Identifying specific strengths among Black males and incorporating these strengths into outreach efforts could possibly increase enrollment, retention, and ultimately graduation rates of this group.

Spirituality may serve as an ever-present factor in the ability of an individual to persist despite psychosocial and other obstacles. Both spirituality and religion have been identified as elements of increasing retention for Black college students (Jett, 2010). Spirituality and Church are two major proponents related to religion in the African American community. Research indicates African Americans are more likely to pray privately and attend religious activities than Caucasians. Many African Americans rely on prayer, the Bible, and the Church community to meet their daily psychological and mental health needs (Abernethy, Houston, Mimms, & Boyd-Franklin, 2006). Both spirituality and Church are significantly important to the African American community and may positively impact Black male college student academic endeavors, helping them to persist at PWIs by coping effectively with internal conflicts and alienation.

Colleges and universities should be fully and equally vested in the educational pursuits of all students. Catering to the unique needs of a diverse student population may enhance the experience and achievement aspirations of the collective group. Administrative support and mentorships have been found to be conducive to African American males' academic achievements (Thomas, Manusov, Wang, & Livingston, 2011). Creating an egalitarian and transparent environment will encourage Black males and other persons of minority status to achieve at an optimal level.

The burden of financing education is cumbersome and can deter some students from pursuing advanced degrees. African American males identified financial aid as a main factor in determining their college of choice (Cho, Hudley, Lee, Barry, & Kelly, 2008; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). It is safe to assume that financial aid is imperative for individuals with few if any financial resources. Individuals with pecuniary difficulties rely heavily on the availability of funds from financial aid. Financial constraints are also present among African Americans in pursuit of doctoral degrees. Such underrepresentation has cascading effects whereby Black faculty mentors are fewer in number and are subsequently less available to mentor or serve as role models for African American students. The underrepresentation of African American students and African American faculty members in the United States probably reflects the lack of funding available to academically and intellectually capable students (Garcia, 1980).

Counseling Implications

A better understanding of the complex nature of the relationship between socioeconomic status and African American male academic achievement could have widespread impact on African American student achievement. Recognizing the impact of one- or two-parent households could encourage policy makers and institutions of higher learning to create opportunities to ameliorate the discrepancy between the two groups. Often, two-parent households command greater income, which may result in increased educational opportunities and additional social opportunities (Griffin et al., 2010). In particular, recognizing parental support as a key component of background and socioeconomic status in contributing to Black males' academic success would be paramount. This realization could also have cultural ramifications for other marginalized groups.

Support groups that focus both upon positive role modeling and issues of interest to African American men have proven highly successful (Feintuch, 2010). Academic institutions may introduce focus groups or other support mechanisms for Black male college students as they manage the potential difficulties associated with transitioning into college, especially in PWIs. Unfortunately, Black male college students at PWIs report continued experiences with microaggressions, subtle and covert forms of racism (Solorzano et al., 2000; Smith et al., 2011). Microaggressions are challenging to manage and may become difficult for African American male college students to handle. Developing and implementing a Black male focus group template and focusing on issues related to the overall success of individuals within this marginalized group seems humanistically correct and helpful to African American males, and may also benefit other minority populations on college campuses.

Counselors and student affairs professionals working in settings such as college counseling centers, academic advising, orientation offices, career counseling, multicultural affairs, and residence life, are uniquely poised to contribute to individual and institutional level changes to increase the success of Black males at PWIs (Douthit & Guiffida, 2010). Student affairs programming could benefit from the positive role that many African American families play in their children's – especially their sons' – lives. For instance, by including parents in programmatic efforts (e.g., having more than one multicultural weekend near the beginning of the school year instead dispersing them throughout the school year), students are able to maintain contact with their home communities and their new communities. Having intentional ways for Black males to strengthen relationships with family members while concomitantly encouraging healthy separations (as discussed and cited in Douthit & Guiffida, 2010) could contribute to success at PWIs.

Although the campus culture may contribute to African American college student reluctance to seek assistance from student support services, student affairs professionals are in optimal positions to transform the institutional culture. Student affairs professionals could provide a safe place for Black college males to establish a peer network, have genuine conversations, establish constructive atmospheres, and make sense of microaggressions. As Grier-Reed (2010) stated, utilizing the group experience as a sanctuary and counter-space for African American males will likely help them to understand and cope with their experiences at PWIs.

Furthermore, Davis et al. (2004) provided insight into the necessity to amalgamate social, academic, familial, and institutional/systemic factors into work with Black males and to provide opportunities and support for social integration. Overall, student affairs professionals should offer opportunities for Black male students to examine the layered complexity of their collegiate experiences and gain an increased sense of control. This can be done by partnering with faculty, thus working to address multicultural competence across academic and student affairs realms. These opportunities could lead to (a) mandatory and continuous multicultural trainings for all faculty and staff, (b) departmental initiatives for faculty to reach out to students and encourage them to share their personal stories, and (c) additional components to faculty and staff evaluations to measure multicultural competency and their work to respect and celebrate differences across the campus community.

Conclusion

Exploring factors related to Black male academic success is important. Inequitable educational experiences appear to exist at and beyond the undergraduate level, thus potentially impeding African American male matriculation through higher education, and particularly through master's and doctoral programs (Garcia, 1980). As a practical and unfortunate matter, the underrepresentation of Black males in university settings practically reduces positive mentoring opportunities, and may perpetuate deeply ingrained beliefs of inferiority, grounded within pseudoscience and historical accounts of the past (Asim, 2007). The significance of socioeconomic status may be a factor affecting scholastic success of African American males. Thus, future exploration of the subject could remedy disparities for African American males and other marginalized racial groups.

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