# African American College Students in Predominantly White Institutions of Higher Education: Considerations of Race and Gender

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## Introduction

Much of the research on African American college students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) indicates that African American students encounter difficulty in social and academic integration. In much of this research, it is assumed, explicitly or implicitly, that African American students experience lower adjustment and performance in these settings due to fewer socioeconomic resources in home and school (Nettles, 1988). Other researchers have attributed Black-White differences in college achievement to a conflict between African American students' cultural and social values and the values and philosophies associated with the PWI environment (e.g., Allen, Epps & Haniff, 1991; Davis, 1995; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Although this latter approach of considering the role of race-related experiences and beliefs in African American students' educational experiences is an improvement over considering only demographic factors, researchers have viewed this group as similar in terms of their backgrounds, beliefs, and, experiences. Consequently, African American students on majority campuses are seen as similarly vulnerable, are less likely to fit in, feel alienated, and adjust poorly to PWI campuses (Stage & Hossler, 1989). More recently, a number of researchers have asserted that African Americans should be examined as a heterogeneous group in terms of backgrounds and beliefs (e.g., Terenzini & Pascarella, 1991). Some have focused on African American students' differing beliefs and philosophies regarding race and how these beliefs and perceptions relate to their academic adjustment in the PWI college environment (e.g., Baldwin, Duncan & Bell, 1987; Sellers, Chavous & Cooke, 1998).

Interestingly, this approach of examining heterogeneity among African American college students often has not included factors related to both race and gender. Most research on gender and college development does not include African American samples or examine racial differences in the relationship of gender and college outcomes. When gender is considered in examining African Americans' educational experiences, the discussion often focuses on the discrepancy between males and females in terms of educational attainment and completion (Cohen & Nee, 2000). The fact that African American males are represented less in higher education than females is one of no small importance. However, the processes related to these differ-

ential outcomes have been less explored, and thus, the ways that race and gender interact to influence college outcomes in PWI settings are not clear. (This is particularly relevant given that even among African Americans who enter college, consistent gender differences have been found in both achievement and attrition) (Fleming, 1984; Hare & Hare, 1991.) In the following sections I describe research related to African American students' adjustment at PWIs, incorporate research pointing to influences of gender within this population, and discuss the importance of future inquiry around issues of race and gender in the educational experiences of African Americans.

## African American Identity and College Adjustment

The college student literature suggests that for African American students, views of the way race functions in PWI environments are especially important in their social and academic adjustment. African American students at PWIs have reported feeling alienated and hypervisible due to their race, and perceiving a hostile racial climate on campus has been associated with lower academic adjustment, performance, and college persistence. For example, African American students who perceive discrimination from faculty and White peers avoid interaction with them outside the classroom (Allen, 1988; Davis, 1995; Fleming, 1984). Therefore, they may be less likely to ask for help from their professors or participate in curricular-related activity with White peers. Such students also are generally less socially involved in the college environment. In contrast, African American students at PWIs who perform better academically report perceiving faculty and peers as generally supportive (Nettles, 1988, 1991; Adan & Felner, 1995).

## Race, Gender and College Adjustment for African Americans

In addition to the impact of racial group membership, one's gender group membership also has a great influence on the way African Americans experience and function in the college environment. However, in the college student literature, there is a lack of research focusing on issues of gender and race. This omission is problematic for a number of reasons. First, frameworks examining gender in education that have been developed and tested in White student populations may not accurately describe African American students. For instance, a consistent finding in the research on gender and academic coping strategies suggests that females (i.e., White females) are more likely to use maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., attributing success to external factors and failures to internal factors, discounting own success) and to be passive learners (e.g., having quiet, predictable, and agreeable behaviors) in negotiating academic contexts, while males are less likely to use such strategies (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Dweck, 1986). Further, [White] males are viewed as having more social power than females, are responded to more positively in class-

room contexts, and have higher self-concepts across social and academic domains (Belensky et al., 1986). A related area of gender research involves gender stereotypes and its relationship to classroom and school treatment, which suggests that males are more likely to be viewed as intellectual compared to females (Beyer, 1999). When considering the research on African American college students, however, these research "facts" may be less clear cut.

One of the few examples of research examining gender issues in college outcomes for African Americans is the work of Jacqueline Fleming (1984). In her comprehensive study of African American students in higher education, she cites gender differences in the social and academic adjustment of students at predominantly White and historically Black institutions. She argues that females fare better at PWIs than males, as women tend to become more self-reliant, while males experience more social control and authority at historically African American institutions. She attributes this to the idea that adverse conditions at White schools are more likely to encourage independence and assertiveness in females but that this is not the case for African American males. These findings are not consistent with the aforementioned research on gender and coping strategies, nor to the research related to gender, social power, and self-concept.

The research relating gender stereotypes to differential treatment of students also does not account for the added factor of racial stereotypes for African American students. Fleming explains gender differences in African American students' experiences and adjustment at PWIs to higher levels of hypervisibility for males (as Black males were and still are even more underrepresented than Black females in higher education) (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). Davis (1995), in his more recent research on African American males in higher education, suggests that educational systems may respond differently to Black males, due to their higher visibility, along with stereotypes around aggression and lack of academic aptitude that are associated with Black males specifically. In this context, the stereotypes regarding gender and academic ability that have favored White males in educational settings appear to be replaced by "racialized" gender stereotypes. This can be readily seen, for example, in discussions of academics and African American college student-athletes, which tend to focus on males in revenue-producing sports. This possibility seems one worthy of consideration, particularly since Fleming's work indicates that African American males fare better in terms of school adjustment at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and that African American males and females at PWIs do not differ in terms of their precollege demographic characteristics (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996).

## Race, Gender, and Identity and African American College Students

There is a dearth of current research, however, examining issues of gender in the college experiences of Black students. Furthermore, there is even less research that moves beyond gender comparisons and examines the individual and institutional factors that relate to how gender and race may influence students' perceptions within the college context and their subsequent adjustment. For instance, gender differences in racial belief systems such as racial identity may relate to differences in academic adjustment for African American students. African American students' beliefs and attitudes regarding race may influence their perceptions and experiences in the college setting (Mitchell & Dell, 1992). For instance, racial identity has been cited as a major factor in African American students' social adjustment, such as daily functioning and behaviors, as well as in academic outcomes in predominantly White educational settings (Mitchell & Dell, 1992). The concept of racial identity and its implications for African American students, however, have been controversial topics in the educational and psychological literature. Some believe that identities which de-emphasize group/cultural identification are most facilitative of educational success for African Americans (e.g., Fordham, 1988; Fleming, 1984; Hughes, 1987), while others assert that group affiliation and awareness can play protective and enhancing roles in students' educational experiences (e.g., Baldwin, Brown & Rackley, 1990; Phinney, 1990; Taub & McEwen, 1992; Taylor, 1994). One factor that has fueled this controversy in the theoretical and empirical literature is the assumption, implicit or explicit, that African Americans are homogenous in terms of what race means to them and, further, that a particular racial identity is optimal or detrimental for all group members. This perspective does not account for within-group differences in the meaning and role of race as well as how these differences interact with specific contexts to affect academic outcomes.

Some researchers have asserted that differences in African American students' educational outcomes lies in their differing worldviews around race. This research has indicated that African American students' group identifications and ideological beliefs about race are related to college performance (Sellers, Chavous & Cooke, 1998), feelings of belonging in their college environments (Chavous, 2000), and self-perceptions of academic and social competence in their college setting (Chavous, Turner, Green, Rivas & Helaire, under review). The main premise underlying this research is that African Americans differ in the ways they see race as functioning in their lives, and these differences in belief systems should be related to how individuals experience and react to situations and experiences within their educational contexts.

Similarly, researchers have suggested that African American men and women may differ in how they construct the meaning of race in their lives, and their research has

examined the role that race plays in women's self-concepts and psychosocial functioning (Poindexter-Cameron & Robinson, 1997; Stevens, 1997; Taub & McEwen, 1992). For instance, Taub and McEwen (1992) found negative relationships between racial identity beliefs reflecting less strong racial group identification and measures of autonomy and interpersonal development for African American undergraduate women at a PWI. They concluded that psychosocial development is delayed for those with more mainstream group identification, making it more difficult to achieve academic goals. Such work suggests that many minority students at PWIs have to negotiate two domains, one related to their ethnicity and development of self-identity and the other which relates to adjusting to and negotiating the values and demands of the PWI school environment.

Other research has focused on African American males, their difficulties in attainment of and adjustment to majority higher education settings, and how culture may be a factor in their negative experiences in those settings (Davis, 1995). However, these studies do not address specifically how issues around race and culture may differ for men and women and further, the extent to which the relationships between these beliefs and adjustment outcomes may be similar or different. For instance, as in the Davis (1995) and the aforementioned Taub and McEwen (1992) study, the researchers' conclusions imply that the interaction of both gender and ethnicity influences college adjustment for African Americans. These gender differences, however, are not examined empirically.

### Research Directions in Examining the Interrelationships of Race and Gender in African American College Students

It is clear that gender and race may play complex roles in the experiences of African American college students. Race and gender may play protective or enhancing roles in school adjustment and achieving academic success for males and females in some contexts, while race and gender may be related to the opposite type of adjustment for the same groups in another context. Both individual factors such as beliefs around race and gender and institutional characteristics (e.g., classroom practices, social treatment) may interact to explain these differences. The above discussion illustrates the need to gain a better understanding of the different experiences African American men and women may have in educational systems and how these differences may be linked to issues of both race and gender. In doing so, we need to engage in research that challenges and explicitly tests current psychological and educational theory and models related to gender and school development for African American males and females. This will allow the development of culturally accurate theoretical frameworks that do not assume that African American males and females view and experience race and gender similarly to one another or to males and females in other racial groups.

*Perspectives*                                                            146

The existing research does suggest, for instance, that gender differences may exist within African Americans in terms of how they experience the college campus. Given that African American males are represented in fewer number on PWI campuses compared to females (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996), they may be more vulnerable to the impact of discrimination in that they may feel more hypervisible and less socially connected, as there are fewer males like themselves to look to for social support when instances of discrimination occur. Another possibility for further inquiry is that for the African American women at PWIs, feeling hypervisible may be less prevalent due to "gendered" classroom and institutional practices (Sandler, Silverberg & Hall, 1996). In educational research, the experiences of female students consistently have been characterized by feelings of invisibility, in that females are noticed and called upon less, and, consequently, often behave in ways that are consistent with traditional views of females (e.g., Hall & Sandler, 1982). For African American females in this type of setting then, perhaps being both a female and ethnic minority could be related differently to feelings of belonging than their male counterparts. Still another possibility is that being a female minority group member may result in African American women being less vulnerable to traditional classroom practices related to gender. So, while African American females may be viewed and responded to in less traditional "gendered" ways compared to White women, they may be responded to more positively than African American males in terms of racial treatment. For example, conditions of racial discrimination at PWIs result in males being more self-reliant and aggressive (as Fleming (1984) asserts for females but does not examine in males), but perhaps those same characteristics in males are viewed and interpreted more negatively than in females.

This is not to say that African American females are not affected negatively by experiences around ethnicity in predominantly White college settings, but that their college developmental and adjustment processes may differ from that of both other females and from African American males. Because there is lack of longitudinal research examining African American college students as they enter and progress through college, it is unclear how or whether African American males and females are receiving different responses and reactions from their college institution (e.g., teachers, peers, community members, local media portrayals), whether, for instance, males are more likely to enter mainstream college environments with more apprehension about ethnicity and belonging, or whether they are more likely to respond to negative performance or experiences in ways that impede their social and academic adjustment. All are questions that are potentially important areas of future inquiry in the fields of psychology, education, and student development, specifically. In particular, the existing research suggests a need to examine individual characteristics and belief systems and how they relate to perceptions and experiences of institutions, as well as the specific institutional structures, policies, and other sources that may convey messages about belonging and fit to African American students.

*Perspectives*                                                                147

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