

This article was downloaded by: ["University at Buffalo Libraries"]

On: 22 July 2012, At: 21:26

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Race Ethnicity and Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cree20>

The academic opportunity gap: how racism and stereotypes disrupt the education of African American undergraduates

Robin Nicole Johnson-Ahorlu ^a

^a Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, USA

Version of record first published: 24 Feb 2012

To cite this article: Robin Nicole Johnson-Ahorlu (2012): The academic opportunity gap: how racism and stereotypes disrupt the education of African American undergraduates, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, DOI:10.1080/13613324.2011.645566

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2011.645566>



PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

The academic opportunity gap: how racism and stereotypes disrupt the education of African American undergraduates

Robin Nicole Johnson-Ahorlu*

Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, USA

Using Critical Race Theory as a framework, this article reveals how racism and stereotypes obstruct the academic success of black students. Through the use of focus groups, African American undergraduates from a large California State University campus, share the ways in which campus racism impacts their achievement potential as well as their behavior and emotional well-being. The results of the study illuminate how research on the difference in black–white grade performance must begin to examine the role of racism, and the way in which it constricts the academic opportunities afforded to African American undergraduates.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory; African American; opportunity gap; stereotypes

As African Americans¹ face tremendous struggles in the US K-16 education system; racist notions and stereotypes are often used as the basis of research and theories designed to explain why black students are not faring well in school. We consistently hear through mainstream media and research that black students do not value education; that they are attracted to crime and violence; their families are broken; or that they are distracted by poverty (Cosby and Poussaint 2007; Ogbu 2003; Valencia 1997). These diagnoses do a poor job of illuminating the consistent and generational struggles of African American students for the past 145² years, and fail to point out that African Americans have not had access to equal opportunity in education since Reconstruction. Ultimately, racism is the core problem facing and sabotaging black students today.

In this article, I will explore the role of racism and stereotypes in the lives of African American undergraduate students. Specifically, this article will reveal how racism and stereotypes contribute to an ‘opportunity gap’ in higher education that affects the academic performance of African American undergraduates.

*Email: rjohnson@ucla.edu

The black–white ‘opportunity gap’ in higher education

On the whole, African American students face many challenges in higher education. One of these challenges is the lower grade performance they experience in relation to white undergraduates. Studies have shown that African American undergraduate students average a difference of .30 to 0.50 grade points below their white counterparts (Kane 1998; Massey et al. 2003; Vars and Bowen 1998).³ Often coined as an ‘achievement gap,’ this difference in grade point average (GPA) appears as early as the first semester of the freshman year. Although grades are subjective and oftentimes faulty measures of academic ability, they are relied upon to distribute a number of coveted opportunities in US society. For example, undergraduate GPA is used as a major criterion for graduate school admission. The lower GPAs of African Americans can adversely affect their chances of admission to competitive advanced degree programs. Moreover, GPA is also a key determining factor in the job hiring process. Data from the Job Outlook 2008 Survey reveal that 62% of employers surveyed screen candidates by undergraduate GPA, and 61% use a 3.0 average as a cutoff (NACE 2007) It is cause for concern that black students may not be competitive enough in terms of grades to achieve their goals. In light of this fact, it is important that educational research seek to understand why a GPA difference exists between black and white undergraduates and work to close this gap. Unfortunately, scholars who have investigated the GPA difference between black and white undergraduates have come up with very few answers as to why African Americans are earning lower GPAs.

The majority of such research has explored pre-college factors that may affect student achievement. Major works have examined SAT⁴ scores, high school GPA, socio-economic status, family background, high school cultural capital, and parent involvement. Controlling for these factors only reduces the gap by about 40%, leaving 60% of it unexplained (Bowen and Bok 1998; Massey et al. 2003; Spenner et al. 2005; Vars and Bowen 1998). When these pre-college factors are taken into account, African Americans still underperform by about a third of a grade point (Bowen and Bok 1998; Massey et al. 2003).

Additionally, research that investigates the black–white GPA gap in higher education can be misleading when relying on the SAT to understand African American academic achievement. SAT scores have been shown to over-predict the GPAs African Americans will earn in higher education (Geiser and Studley 2001; Vars and Bowen 1998). Vars and Bowen (1998) found that the higher African Americans scored on the exam, the worse they performed academically (as measured by GPA) in relation to white students.⁵ Overall, African Americans with high SAT scores are still in danger of underperforming in relation to their white counterparts.

Many of the traditional pre-college factors do not completely reveal why African Americans are underperforming. Moreover, as mentioned, measures

such as SAT scores can be somewhat unreliable in explaining the variation of African American college GPA. This indicates that a comprehensive understanding of the GPA gap cannot be found solely by investigating skills and characteristics students bring with them to college. When research is framed in this way, it endorses a perspective that GPA is exclusively related to achievement potential. This explanation allows no room to consider structural or environmental factors in college that can hinder student achievement.

Achievement can be defined as an accomplishment gained through personal effort or skill. Conceptualizing the difference in GPA between blacks and whites as an issue of achievement, implies that African Americans are not exerting enough effort, or may not have enough talent to accomplish desirable grades. Accordingly, the majority of research that investigates the gap looks for factors that may depress African American effort (such as socio-economic status) or that indicates a lack of skill (such as SAT scores) to understand the grade difference (Bowen and Bok 1998; Massey et al. 2003; Spenner et al. 2005; Vars and Bowen 1998). This is a student-centered deficit perspective that leads researchers to explore ways in which African American students may be inadequate, as opposed to focusing on ways in which social or institutional structures are inadequate.

I contend that the difference in grade performance between black and white students is not solely a reflection of individual achievement, but of differences in opportunity. Specifically, African American students are robbed of the opportunity to perform and excel to the best of their ability. Inequitable school conditions and resources are largely related to the disparate outcomes in achievement between black and white students throughout our education system (Akiba, LeTendre, and Scribner 2007; Johnson-Ahorlu 2008; Oakes and Lipton 2007). This cannot be omitted in educational research regarding the lower GPAs African Americans earn in post-secondary education. Thus, the difference in GPA between black and white undergraduates must be framed as an 'opportunity gap,' as opposed to as an 'achievement gap,' in order to highlight and challenge the institutional inequalities that contribute to student achievement. Framing the problem in such a way will lead researchers to explore factors outside of individual student attributes (such as SAT scores, and socio-economic status) and draw their attention to the inequitable distribution of educational opportunities. In this article, I demonstrate that racism and stereotypes in higher education are forms of opportunity obstruction for African American undergraduates.

Through focus groups, I use the personal testimonies of African American students to examine the relationship between racism, stereotypes, and the ways in which they hinder academic opportunity. This article does not seek to directly show how racism and stereotypes contribute to the GPA gap between black and white undergraduates. The overall goal is to reflect how racism and stereotypes disrupt the education of African American undergraduates, creating conditions that are very hard to excel in.

Additionally, based on this fact, I argue that educational stakeholders must reframe the way in which they study and understand the difference in GPA between black and white undergraduates.

In the following sections, I will present an overview of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as it is the theoretical framework that supports this work. CRT centralizes the role of racism and stereotypes in this examination of the academic opportunities of African Americans. Next, I will review the definitions of racism and stereotypes, and their relevance to African American education. This is followed by an overview of campus racial climate. In this study, campus racial climate serves as a lens to explore the ways in which racism and stereotypes impact African American students in a college environment. Finally, the methods, findings, and a discussion of the significance and implications of the research data will conclude the article.

Critical Race Theory

As stated, Critical Race Theory serves as the theoretical framework of this study. It centralizes the role of racism and stereotypes in this study's examination of academic opportunity. Moreover, CRT guides education research that seeks to challenge the dominant discourse that positions Students of Color as deficit and solely responsible for their academic struggles. It leads researchers to examine the racial inequalities that largely contribute to the academic lives of minority students. Additionally, CRT emphasizes the experiential knowledge of People of Color, and treats their testimonies as valid and useful data. CRT scholars recognize that one of the best ways to understand the consequences of racism is to seriously examine the lived realities of its victims (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Valdes, McCristal, and Harris 2002).

CRT guides scholars and activists in education who strive to bring about social justice and equality. Accordingly, education research that uses CRT adheres to the following five tenets: (1) the centrality of race and racism; (2) the challenge to dominant ideology; (3) the centrality of experiential knowledge; (4) the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches; and (5) the commitment to social justice (Solórzano 1997, 1998; Yosso 2005).

This article uses all five tenets of CRT. It abides by the first tenet by centralizing the role of racism and stereotypes in the investigation of factors that impede the opportunities of African American undergraduates. The second tenet is adhered to by challenging the dominant discourse that African Americans themselves are deficit and therefore solely responsible for their educational challenges. The study adheres to the third tenet by using focus group interviews to insert the experiential knowledge of African American undergraduates. The fourth tenet is met by combining the disciplines of Education, Sociology, and Psychology. Finally, the study is a reflection of my commitment to achieve equal educational opportunities for

African American students, which is a social justice agenda, and adheres to the fifth tenet. In accordance to these tenets and the overall goal of CRT, the following sections will demonstrate how racism, stereotypes, and campus racial climate are central and relevant to an examination of academic opportunity.

Racism and stereotypes

Racism can be defined as the combination and interaction of the following three factors: '(1) one group believes itself to be superior; (2) the group that believes itself to be superior has power to carry out racist behavior; and (3) racism affects multiple racial/ethnic groups' (Solórzano, Allen, and Carroll 2002, 24). From these characteristics we can see that racism is not solely about racist beliefs, but it encompasses the power to act on such beliefs. This is important to note, as People of Color in the United States have never possessed significant amounts of power in any realm of our society (i.e., institutionally, monetarily, and socially). Thus, People of Color have traditionally been victims, and not agents of racial oppression in this country (Kohli and Solórzano 2011).

Stereotypes can be defined as gross generalizations applied to a group of people with some level of shared characteristics. In terms of African Americans and other People of Color, stereotypes are often used to justify racism and can provide a rationale for racial oppression and marginalization. Unfortunately, in our education system, there are educators who believe stereotypes that characterize Students of Color as not valuing education, not being intelligent, and not having the desire to take advantage of educational opportunities (Kohli 2008; Valencia 1997). These beliefs affect their treatment of such students, and thus impede their ability to provide them with a quality education (Kohli 2008; Valencia 1997). Accordingly, racism and stereotypes go hand-in-hand. Racism is a system of oppression and stereotypes are the rationale for such oppression. Together they have the power to disrupt the education of African American and other Students of Color.

In an effort to investigate the impact of racism and stereotypes on the academic opportunities of African American undergraduates, this study explores how these constructs manifest in a college environment. Therefore, as previously mentioned, racism's influence, and its relationship with stereotypes will be investigated through an examination of campus racial climate. Studying campus racial climate allows us to explore the specific functions of racism and stereotypes in a college context.

Campus racial climate

Campus racial climate is the overall racial environment of a college campus (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000). One of the most widely cited articles on

campus racial climate, *The Campus Racial Climate: Contexts of Conflict* by Sylvia Hurtado (1992), found the experience of a hostile racial climate to be a common one for Students of Color. Using a nationally representative sample, Hurtado (1992) discovered that one in every four survey respondents reported their campus climates to be hostile.

In addition to Hurtado's study, the majority of research on campus racial climate has consistently reported that Students of Color (particularly African American and Latino students) experience racism at predominantly white colleges and universities. Moreover, from the literature on campus racial climate, we are able to gather that African American, Latino, and white students perceive the climates of their shared campuses differently. Blacks and Latinos often report perceptions of racial hostility, while whites perceive the same campus climate to be positive and inclusive (Hurtado 1992; Nora and Cabrera 1996; Rankin and Reason 2005).

It is also evident that a hostile campus racial climate causes African Americans and Latinos to experience extreme psychological distress. They consistently feel marginalized, anxious, and do not feel a sense of belonging or connectedness to their campus community (Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler 1996; Smedley, Myers, and Harrell 1993; Solórzano et al. 2000). These psychological consequences are often a result of the vicious stereotypes Students of Color face on their college campuses, where they are characterized as unintelligent and all around inferior to their white counterparts (Hurtado et al. 1996; Smedley et al. 1993; Solórzano et al. 2000). On the other hand, the research also highlights the benefits that a positive campus racial climate can bring to undergraduate students. A positive racial climate that supports interracial interactions can decrease racial divisions and enhance the psychological and emotional well-being of students (Chang 1999, 2001; Gurin et al. 2002; Pike and Kuh 2006).

The research on campus racial climate has reaffirmed and expanded much of what we know about racial environments and the academic lives of students. Unfortunately, much of the research on campus racial climates has been conducted at predominantly white institutions. The findings about climate detailed above do not provide much insight as to environments and challenges Students of Color may face at institutions with majority enrollment of racial minority students. This study was conducted at an institution where the student population is majority African American and Latino. Therefore, it provides insight into the impact of campus racial climate at campuses where Students of Color make up the majority and not the minority of the student body.

Additionally, the study includes the personal testimonies of African American students. What are often missing in racial climate research are the voices of students who are impacted by their campus environments every day. As the majority of information gathered about racial climates are translated through quantitative means (Harper and Hurtado 2007), the personal

testimonies of students are rarely included. Using a Critical Race Theory framework, this study contributes to the literature on campus racial climate by including the experiential knowledge of research participants regarding campus racial climate.

Methods

Sample and setting

Three focus groups were conducted to explore how campus racial climate (with a focus on racism and stereotypes) affect the academic opportunities of African American undergraduates. The interviews were one hour in length with approximately six participants in each focus group. Seventeen self-identified African American undergraduates in total were sampled from a large California State University (CSU) in the Los Angeles area. All students who self-identified as African American, and were enrolled as full-time students were allowed to participate in the study. Students were recruited for focus groups through snowball sampling, classroom announcements, and advertisement through campus list-serves. Of the students sampled, seven were male and 10 were female. On average, the students were between 17 to 21 years of age ($SD=1.14$). Participants had an average GPA of 2.87 ($SD=.34$).⁶ Additionally, seven of the participants were in their senior year, seven were sophomores, and three were juniors. All of the students sampled for the study came from a variety of majors, seven from the humanities and social sciences, six from biochemistry and four from engineering.

The California State University is a public university system established by the state of California and designated to accept the top 33.3% of the state's graduating seniors (UCOP (University of California Office of the President). 2007). The CSU system has minority student enrollment above 53% (California State University 2006). The CSU selected for this study was chosen because of its large African American student population. As previously mentioned, African Americans and Latinos comprise the majority of the student population, and white students are a minority group on campus. The specific CSU campus sampled will not be named in order to protect the anonymity of participants.

Much like the national trend, African American students throughout the CSU system have lower GPAs compared to their white counterparts. African American first-time freshmen at all CSU campuses earn an average of .43 grade points below white first-time freshmen (California State University 2009). At the particular CSU campus selected for this study the gap is even wider, with African Americans freshmen performing .70 grade points below white freshmen (California State University 2008).⁷ From this data, it is apparent that the selected campus and the CSU system at large serve African Americans who are struggling academically. Thus, the CSU selected for this

study is an appropriate context to investigate factors that affect the academic experiences and opportunities of African American undergraduates.

Data collection and analysis

As previously stated, the main goals of this study are to determine how racism and stereotypes impact the academic opportunities of African American undergraduates; and to highlight the importance of examining academic opportunity in research that investigates African American grade performance in higher education. Racism and stereotypes are explored through an evaluation of campus racial climate. Therefore the research questions that guided the study are as follows:

- (1) How do African Americans perceive the racial climate on their campus?
- (2) Are African Americans stereotyped by faculty, staff, and non-black students on campus?
- (3) How does the campus racial climate impact the academic opportunities of African American undergraduates?

Again, this study does not explore how racism and stereotypes directly relate to the difference in GPA between black and white undergraduates. Specifically, it is not designed to determine whether these constructs cause black undergraduates to underperform academically in relation to white undergraduates. Instead, the study is designed to explore how racism and stereotypes might obstruct the opportunities of African American undergraduates.

I oversaw all focus groups and posed all questions in each session. In order to encourage honest and valid responses, I assured students that their identities and responses would be kept confidential. Additionally, I spent the initial portions of each focus group building trust with participants by sharing with them information about my personal background, my purpose for conducting the study, and the exact ways in which I would use the information they shared with me.

In each focus group, participants were asked: (1) about their perspectives of the campus racial climate; (2) whether they felt members of their campus community harbored any stereotypes against them; and (3) to identify how the campus racial climate impacted their grade performance and that of other African American students. The focus group responses were tape-recorded, transcribed, and coded for emergent themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

In line with CRT, I probed for students' personal experiences and struggles with race. CRT honors personal stories or narratives about racism and treats them as the upmost forms of evidence of racism (Bell 1987; Carrasco 1996; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Oftentimes, stories about struggles with race and racism are met with doubt. Members of privileged groups,

frequently treat personal narratives of oppression as a source of distortion as opposed to a resource for understanding (Lawrence 1995). People of Color continually find themselves pressured to provide so-called 'objective' proof that they have been assaulted as a result of their social group membership (gender, race, religion, etc). This is frustrating to those that are marginalized as it is nearly impossible to produce evidence that satisfies doubters.

CRT challenges this atmosphere of suspicion and doubt by elevating the personal accounts of racism as the ultimate forms of evidence that racism exists and is experienced. Accordingly, the narratives in this study are honored as valid. If students state that racism has impacted them or their academic lives, such statements are treated as legitimate sources of data and reported in this manuscript.

Findings

Howard,⁸ a bright African American student, sat in class beaming one day, as his professor singled out his essay as a model piece of work. The professor began to praise Howard, and point out to the class the strengths in his essay, and how he met all of the requirements of the assignment. Howard sat back in his chair feeling really proud. His prideful moment, however, came abruptly to an end when the professor stated 'good job Howard,' walked past him, and promptly handed his paper to the only white student in the class. When Howard raised his hand to identify himself as the rightful author of the paper, the professor was in complete shock.

This is one of many stories shared by focus group participants that illuminate the hostile racial environment they and other African Americans experience on campus. In the case of Howard, his professor⁹ did not expect that he submitted such a stellar essay, and instead assumed that the only white student in class must have been the author. It was inconceivable to the professor that any other member of the majority African American class could have produced such sound work. Based on the stereotype of African American intellectual inferiority, it is not surprising that the faculty member made such a conclusion.

Similar to Howard's encounter, focus group participants expressed over and over again that they experienced racial hostility on campus, particularly from faculty members. Moreover, the hostile campus racial climate included students being negatively stereotyped. In the following sections, I will discuss the nature of the racial climate and how it led students to encounter: (1) low expectations from faculty; (2) stereotype threat; and (3) a lack of support from faculty.

Racial stereotypes and low expectations from faculty

Participants consistently lamented that the campus community viewed African Americans through the lens of vicious stereotypes. Participants were

also clear that faculty were the main perpetrators of stereotypical thinking towards African Americans. Participants noted that faculty had various ways of expressing their racist beliefs in the classroom, but that they were frequently expressed in very overt and harsh ways.

One student shared, 'I had a professor say last semester...to the class...that he felt like the black students are trying to hustle¹⁰ their way through college.' The student went on to say that this professor's comment was motivated by the stereotype that African American students are lazy. Therefore, based on this stereotype, the professor felt that African Americans at the university are continually trying to avoid hard work, or 'hustle' their way through school. A student shared another harsh example, 'I used to have a teacher...he was African American and he would just tell you straight up, "Oh, if you're from the hood or from this area,¹¹ you're not going to succeed. You're ghetto.'" This quote is not only an example of how some professors can express their stereotypical and racist views in overt ways, but that African American faculty are also guilty of harboring negative beliefs about African American students. This can be due to racism that they have internalized about their own racial group in their lifetime.

Students also revealed that stereotypical beliefs about African Americans can be expressed in very subtle ways as well. One student claimed '...it could be [as] simple as a professor [asking] a question...[asking] everybody in class, and then skipping over you.'

Additionally, focus group participants lamented over the fact that the stereotypes that many faculty harbor against African American students causes them to have low expectations of the group. One student shared that a large number of faculty often do not expect African Americans and other Students of Color to achieve academically and professionally, and do not encourage them to go on to graduate and professional programs. She went on to say:

There are low expectations of the students here at CSU because they are majority black and brown. Many of the faculty don't expect us to achieve. They never encourage us to go on to doctoral programs or law programs. They always push us into vocational careers like nursing. There is no blatant racism here. No one is going to come out and say, 'you're not smart enough.' It's not said. But they don't think that you'll do well in certain fields.

This particular student wants to go on to pursue a PhD in psychology. She felt that other Students of Color like herself, are not encouraged to go into graduate programs and professional programs because faculty believe they do not have the intellectual capabilities to handle such programs.. This can have detrimental effects on the academic and career trajectories of African American students.

Some students also expressed being encouraged to pursue vocational careers such as teaching, nursing, or secretarial work over careers in law or academia. One student shared that she was discouraged from going into

certain professions and graduate programs by both black and white faculty. Another student said she was discouraged from majoring in certain undergraduate degree programs. It was not until she joined the Africana Studies major that she felt welcomed and supported. She stated:

I've gotten support because...I think because of my major, Africana Studies, but versus other majors that I was in...they weren't welcoming to the African American students... I've been a business major, I've been a communications major...there's not a lot of African American students...you were treated differently than a Caucasian student, than an Asian student...

Another student shared a similar experience. She went from department to department, trying to find a major that was best suited for her and was consistently discouraged from applying to or joining each major. She went on to say:

...it didn't seem like [faculty] were very helpful or receptive to what I was trying to do or my goals. [When I would inquire about a major they would say] 'Maybe you should try something else.' You know, basically, 'Get out of this major.' ... and some of them told me, 'You know, this is not for you. Maybe you should go somewhere else.'¹²

The students were very clear that the low expectations and discouragement they experienced in academic programs on campus was motivated by racism. Due to stereotypes, many faculty were convinced that African Americans could not handle rigorous and challenging course work and careers.

It is apparent that a number of faculty harbor stereotypical views of African Americans and often reveal their racist biases in very overt or subtle ways. Additionally, these racist views cause many faculty to have low expectations of African American students. They try to push them off into vocational careers which are often deemed as less intellectually challenging, and do not encourage them to participate in certain majors or to pursue graduate and professional programs. The low expectations and discouragement from faculty limits the academic opportunities of black students by preventing them from pursuing their dreams and exercising their right to choose a course of study that best suits them. It can also cause students to feel insecure about their own academic abilities. If faculty do not believe in black students, it may be difficult for them to believe in themselves. Furthermore, research has shown that when faculty are encouraging and engage with students, this can positively impact GPA, degree attainment, and enrollment in graduate and professional school (Astin 1993; Avalos 1994; Kuh and Hu 2001). African American students who lack positive engagement with faculty are missing out on the benefits such interactions can induce.

Moreover, the way in which students described faculty as expressing racist and stereotypical views in the classroom can be disheartening and emotionally painful for them. Emotionally assaulting students and stifling their goals is inhumane, and is one of the vicious consequences of racism Students of Color frequently endure. Unfortunately, focus group participants went on to further reveal that the stereotypes faculty harbor against them impacts their own behaviors and choices, often impeding their ability to perform well academically.

Stereotype threat

After detailing story after story of the stereotypical perceptions faculty harbor against them, participants began to slowly reveal the emotional toll of such abuse. They painted a picture of how psychologically draining and taxing it was to be seen as inferior on a daily basis. They expressed that they resented being stereotyped by faculty, and wanted desperately to be viewed as individuals with their own unique characteristics. As a result, students relayed that they did anything in their power to not confirm the stereotypes they were well aware their campus community laid upon them. In essence, they were revealing that they are victims of stereotype threat. According to Claude Steele (Steele 1992, 1997; Steele and Aronson 1998) stereotype threat is anxiety or stress triggered by the fear that one might fulfill or be associated with a relevant stereotype. Thus, participants are under extreme psychological pressure to battle and not confirm any stereotypes that people, especially faculty, subscribe to them.

This was a surprise finding as the study was not designed to explore stereotype threat. However, the construct revealed itself as an important theme in the focus groups. Participants seemed to be most sensitive to African Americans being stereotyped as unintelligent. They expressed that they were willing to do what was necessary to not confirm this notion. What was shocking was that students battle this stereotype to their own detriment. They refuse to ask questions in class, ask for help on assignments, or even go to tutoring, all in the name of not confirming this vicious stereotype. They do not want others interpreting their need for help or support as evidence that they are intellectually incapable. Many of the students stated that their 'pride' keeps them from asking for help when they need it; that they're too proud to allow others to look down on them. One student admitted, '...we're not going to ask somebody for help because we don't want to get looked down on.' Another stated that she didn't ask questions in class because she did not want to appear to be ignorant. She went on to say:

[Stereotypes] would prevent me from asking for help [in class]...you know, [the professor would say] 'Write an essay, a three-page essay.' [I would think] 'Ok, what are the steps? What's supposed to be on the [essay]...how do you

want this broken down?’ But I wouldn’t raise my hand to ask because, [everybody would think], ‘You’re the ignorant black girl.’

Another student stated, ‘I’ll admit, I even don’t [go to tutoring] myself sometimes. Even when I need help myself, I don’t ask because I’m too prideful.’ These quotes reveal that African American participants are in need of academic help, but are concerned about how others will interpret their asking for help. The level of stereotype threat they experience is preventing them from accessing the support they need. Unfortunately, students admitted that they are so worried about confirming racist perceptions, that they won’t seek assistance, even when they know not asking for support will hurt their grade performance. One student admitted, ‘Not validating the stereotype [is] more important...at times...more important than me getting a good grade.’ Some students are well aware that protecting their personal image and the image of their race can come at great costs.

Students admitted feeling great anxiety and pressure around trying to prove on a day-to-day basis that they are not inferior intellectually. It even affects the way they participate in class. One student shared, ‘I think real hard about what I say in class before I say it. I don’t want to sound stupid. I know a lot of people think black people are stupid and I don’t want to prove them right.’ Unfortunately, students don’t even feel secure enough to share their thoughts freely in the classroom.

The focus group participants made it clear that it is taxing to try to avoid confirming stereotypes that persist on their campus (and in society in general). They expressed feeling tired and overwhelmed by this task. Additionally, students expressed that they felt that they are constant representatives of their race. They often will feel guilty or frustrated if they make a wrong move and possibly confirm a stereotype for the race as a whole. At times, they want their mistakes to be their own and not that of the whole race. One student expressed:

There’s so many dynamics you have to get over when you’re a black student and you go in a classroom because...I don’t want to represent my group right now. It’s just me... who doesn’t know math or isn’t doing good in math.

What this student is expressing is that it is a burden to always be a representative for the black race. She wishes her weakness in math could be viewed as her own individual weakness, and not one that is derived from the fact that she is black, or viewed as a weakness that all black people share.

Demonstrated through numerous examples above, the hostile campus racial climate causes African Americans to experience stereotype threat. Moreover, the stereotype threat encourages behaviors that are not conducive to strong academic performance. Students are purposely not asking for assistance or support when they need it, because they do not want these requests

to be viewed as evidence of a lack of intelligence. Stereotype threat directly limits the academic opportunities of African American undergraduates, by making them feel uncomfortable in their college communities, and by disrupting their ability to take advantage of resources at their disposal (e.g., tutoring) without feeling vulnerable. Additionally, it appears to be an unfortunate by-product of being subjected to negative stereotyping. Thus, stereotypes not only impact the way instructors view students, but it impacts the way students conduct themselves in their education environments. No student should feel that their self-worth is on the line if they express a need for academic support. As the next section will show, racism and stereotypes can also affect the opportunities of African American undergraduates by influencing their relationships with faculty.

Lack of support

Participants cited that a lack of support by faculty disrupted their academic achievement. It seems that the unwillingness of faculty members to support black students is connected to the stereotypes they harbor against them. As detailed earlier, stereotypes often serve as a rational or justification for racism or racist treatment. For those CSU faculty that perceive African American students through the lens of stereotypes, it makes sense that offensive behaviors toward these students would manifest as a result. Almost all of the students in the focus groups felt that many faculty members did not try to build supportive relationships with African American students.

Participants revealed that oftentimes they did not receive the attention that they needed from their professors. One student who transferred from a historically black college to CSU because of Hurricane Katrina, expressed that faculty at CSU have no concern for African American students and are not motivated to support them. She went on to say:

...it's like the teachers don't really try to reach out to you... At [my old university], the teachers...if they see you have a problem, they actually reach out... Here at CSU there are lower expectations of black students. Students aren't living up to high standards because no one sets them for them. My GPA has gone down since I came to CSU.

This student was clear that the lack of support from faculty was racially motivated. She expressed that she was a high achieving student at the university she attended in New Orleans, but felt her GPA has suffered due to the alienation she's experienced from faculty at CSU.

This quote demonstrates one of the harsh effects racism can have on students academically. By simply feeling that faculty did not care about her because of her race, this participant's GPA decreased. She frequently expressed that she longed for the environment of her former black college,

where she knew she was cared for. Her experience reflects that a lack of concern and support from faculty can negatively impact the grade performance of students.

Another student expressed that it is difficult for black students to get academic help from faculty. She went on to say, '[Black] students...aren't able to get help from their professors because a lot of the times they just give them B.S.¹³ You know, they don't give them the attention that they need.' Another student shared, 'I asked a professor for help in class one time and he told me to "go figure it out."'

In these two quotes students revealed that it is oftentimes difficult for them and other African American students to receive support from professors in grasping and understanding class material. In the first quote, the student felt that faculty members will just make up any answer, or give an African American student 'B.S.' to avoid having to commit real time supporting them and providing them with the clarification they need. The quote that follows shows that professors can often be blatant about their not wanting to support or spend extra time with African American students. In this case, when the student asked for help in grasping the classroom material, the professor told her to basically go away and to, 'go figure it out' on her own. By not providing African American students with academic support, many faculty are stifling their academic progress, as well as causing them to feel rejected and uncared for. This marginalizes African American students, and again ruins the quality of their education.

Focus group participants also expressed that many faculty members do not offer support when they witness African Americans facing racism in their classrooms. Oftentimes, professors are idle and do not intervene. As a result, African American students are silenced by this and are less willing to work with or approach professors who do not intervene on their behalf. One student revealed that on many occasions, she witnessed professors not support fellow African American students when they experienced racism in the classroom. She went on to say:

I've seen other students, African American students, who tried to read...digest the [course] information in terms of the African American experience...[and when they talk about this experience in class]...you know, 'At my home, grandma does this...,' you hear a lot of [sighing from the class] and you [know they are thinking], 'Here you go with that black stuff again,' and you can see the disheartenment on [African American students'] faces and then you see subsequently down the semester, they're less willing to raise their hand and answer questions when they're not validated in the classroom. How motivated are you going to be...to go talk to your professor, who didn't say anything when all that [sighing] and blowing breaths and stuff...didn't come in and intercede to say, 'Hey, look, let's respect this student,' how likely are you to go talk to that professor [and say], 'I need some extra help,' or, 'You know what, when I was in that classroom, I needed you to run some interference for me or something...'

Several points are being expressed in this quote. One is, when professors don't intervene on behalf of African American students in the face of racism, African American students often become silenced and are less willing to participate in class. Additionally, the student points out that they may be less likely to even engage with the professor, or ask them for help or clarification in regards to coursework. A lack of positive engagement with professors can cause students to feel less motivated and enthusiastic about school. Moreover, not being able to receive clarification about coursework can adversely impact grade performance.

Overall, it is evident that African American participants and many of their peers are not feeling connected and supported by many CSU faculty and it is taking a large toll on their education. The lack of support given to African American students by faculty is blatant and cruel. African American students are not even able to receive basic academic support or clarification of classroom instruction from faculty without being dismissed. As revealed in the stories of the students, this not only can have dire consequences for African American students in terms of grade performance or on the quality of their education, but it can cause emotional turmoil as well. All in all, when African American student do not receive support from faculty, they are being cheated out of a connection that is conducive to overall success in their undergraduate program. This is a direct assault on their opportunity to learn and excel.

Conclusion

As the data demonstrates, racism and stereotypes can disrupt the academic opportunities of African American undergraduates and have an adverse affect on their ability to achieve. In this study, racism and stereotypes were explored through campus racial climate. Racism on campus was perpetuated by negative stereotypes about African American undergraduates. Racial stereotypes caused many faculty members to have low expectations of black students, and to discourage them from pursuing certain careers and majors. Additionally, the stereotypes caused black students to experience stereotype threat; and motivated faculty to not build supportive relationships with them. Simply put, campus racism produced stereotypes, and these stereotypes served as the basis for the inequitable treatment of African American undergraduates. Their opportunities to be judged as competent and worthy students, to be supported as such, and to feel included and welcomed within their campus community were taken away. These conditions can negatively impact the academic achievement of students.

Although the findings in this study cannot be generalized to all campus communities, they do contribute to our knowledge about the potential harms of racism and stereotypes on the academic experiences of African American undergraduates. It is also important to note that this study was conducted at

an institution that does not have a majority white population. The findings indicate that issues of inequity and opportunity impacting African Americans are relevant at campuses where Students of Color comprise the majority of the student body. It also points to the fact that diversity on campus does not necessarily mitigate issues of equity.

Additionally, the findings reveal how racism and stereotypes can disrupt the learning opportunities of African American students, and subsequently compromise their achievement. Research that investigates the academic achievement of African Americans, specifically the grade performance of the group, must consider the racial environments these students are subjected to, and how it interferes with their academic opportunity to excel. Specifically, research on the black–white ‘achievement gap’ can benefit from an examination of the ‘opportunity gap’ between black and white undergraduates. When such research only focuses on factors like standardized test scores, socio-economic status, and high school GPA, there is no room to consider structural or environmental factors in college that can hinder student achievement. When examining the difference in grade performance between blacks and whites, we really should be asking if they have been given the same opportunities to excel. As this study demonstrates, an understanding of the achievement of African Americans can be enhanced by exploring the opportunities that they are provided on campus. More research should be concerned with the difference in academic opportunities afforded to black and white students, and the role of racism and stereotypes in the distribution of such academic opportunities. When framed in this way, research on the difference in grade performance between black and white undergraduates, might better inform our understanding of why a gap exists between these two groups.

Notes

1. The terms ‘African American’ and ‘black’ are used interchangeably
2. The Freedmen’s Bureau was founded in 1865, 145 years ago. This is the first time in US history that public education became available for blacks. Since then, African Americans on the whole, have never in the history of the United States, experienced equal opportunity in education. The group has consistently been burdened with inferior educational resources and facilities, lower educational funding, and barriers to college access (among other inequitable conditions).
3. This grade performance gap reflects the average overall performance of African American and white students. It does not reflect average performance in a specific subject area.
4. ‘SAT’ refers to the SAT Reasoning Test, formerly known as the SAT I.
5. Frederick Vars and William Bowen analyzed the predictive power of the SAT on college performance for African Americans and other racial/ethnic groups using the College and Beyond Database.
6. The average GPA of African Americans at all CSU campuses is a 2.44 (California State University 2009).

7. These data reflect the performance of first-time freshmen.
8. Names of participants have been changed
9. The professor was a white female.
10. In this context, 'hustle' refers to individuals who are trying to avoid hard work, or who cheat to make gains in the University.
11. The school is surrounded by a predominantly African American and Latino community
12. The CSU has an academic advising unit that provides academic advising to all students, as well as assists students in the selection of majors and minors. Despite this resource, student participants often consulted faculty about their academic and career goals and plans.
13. In this instance 'B.S' (an abbreviation of an expletive) refers to faculty giving students the 'run-around' or not providing them with concrete help and assistance.

References

- Akiba, M., G. LeTendre, and J. Scribner. 2007. Teacher quality, opportunity gap, and national achievement in 46 countries. *Educational Researcher* 36, no. 7: 369–87.
- Astin, A. 1993. *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Avalos, J. 1994. November. Going beyond the decision: An analysis of the reasons for leaving college. Paper presented at the meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, November 10–13, in Tuscon, AZ.
- Bell, D. 1987. *And we will not be saved: The elusive quest for racial justice*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bowen, W.G., and D. Bok. 1998. *The shape of the river*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- California State University. 2006. *The impact of the State of California University*. <http://www.calstate.edu/impact/access.shtml>.
- California State University. 2008. *Fall 2007 entering first-time freshmen* [Data file]. Sacramento, CA: Office of the Chancellor.
- California State University. 2009. *Fall 2008 cohort of new freshmen* [Data file]. Sacramento, CA: Office of the Chancellor.
- Carrasco, E. 1996. Collective recognition as a communitarian device. Or, of course we want to be role models!. *La Raza Law Journal* 9: 81–101.
- Chang, M. 1999. Does racial diversity matter? The educational impact of a racially diverse undergraduate population *Journal of College Student Development* 40, no. 4: 377–95.
- Chang, M.J. 2001. The positive educational effects of racial diversity on campus. In *Diversity challenged: Evidence on the impact of affirmative action*, ed. G. Orfield and M. Kurlaender, 175–86. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group.
- Cosby, W., and A. Poussaint. 2007. *Come on people: On the path from victims to victors*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- Delgado, R., and J. Stefancic. 2001. *Critical race theory and introduction*. New York: New York University Press.
- Geiser, S., and R. Studley. 2001. *UC and the SAT: Predictive validity and differential impact of the SAT I and SAT II at the University of California*. Sacramento: University of California Office of the President.

- Glaser, B.G., and A.L. Strauss. 1967. *The discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Gurin, P., E. Dey, S. Hurtado, and G. Gurin. 2002. Theory and impact on educational outcomes. *Harvard Educational Review* 72, no. 3: 330–66.
- Harper, S., and S. Hurtado. 2007. Nine themes in campus racial climates and implications for institutional transformation. *New Directions for Student Services* 120: 7–24.
- Hurtado, S. 1992. The campus racial climate: Contexts of conflict. *Journal of Higher Education* 63, no. 5: 539–69.
- Hurtado, S., D. Carter, and A. Spuler. 1996. Latino student transition to college: Assessing difficulties and factors in successful college adjustment. *Research in Higher Education* 37, no. 2: 135–57.
- Johnson-Ahorlu, R. 2008. The psychology of racism: How internalized racism, academic self-concept, and campus racial climate impact the academic experiences and achievement of African American undergraduates. PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles.
- Kane, T. 1998. Racial and ethnic preferences in college admissions. In *The black–white test score gap*, ed. C. Jencks and M. Phillips, 401–27. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Kohli, R. 2008. Breaking the cycle of racism: Critical race reflections of women of color educators. PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles.
- Kohli, R., and S. Solórzano. 2011. Racial conflict in communities of color and high school student activism. In *Marching students: Chicana/o identity and the politics of education 1968 to the present*, ed. L. Urrieta and A. Revilla, 131–47. Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press.
- Kuh, G., and S. Hu. 2001. The effects of student–faculty interaction in the 1990s. *Review of Higher Education* 24: 309–32.
- Lawrence, C. 1995. The word and the river: Pedagogy as scholarship as struggle. In *Critical race theory. The key writings that formed the movement*, ed. K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller and K. Thomas. New York: The New Press.
- Massey, D., C. Charles, G. Lundy, and M. Fischer. 2003. *The source of the river, the social origins of freshmen at American's most selective colleges and universities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- NACE (National Association of Colleges, Employers). 2007. *Job outlook 2008*. Bethlehem, PA: National Association of Colleges and Employers.
- Nora, A., and A.F. Cabrera. 1996. The role of perceptions of prejudice and discrimination on the adjustment of minority students to college. *Journal of Higher Education* 67: 119–48.
- Oakes, J., and M. Lipton. 2007. *Teaching to change the world*. 3rd ed. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.
- Ogbu, J. 2003. *Black American students in an affluent suburb: A study of academic disengagement*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Pike, G., and G. Kuh. 2006. Relationships among structural diversity, informal peer interactions, and perceptions of the campus environment. *Review of Higher Education* 29, no. 4: 425–50.
- Rankin, S., and R. Reason. 2005. Differing perceptions: How students of color and white students perceive campus racial climate for underrepresented groups. *Journal of College Student Development* 46, no. 1: 43–61.
- Smedley, B., H. Myers, and S. Harrell. 1993. Minority-status stresses and the college adjustment of ethnic minority freshmen. *Journal of Higher Education* 64, no. 4: 434–52.

- Solórzano, D. 1997. Images and words that wound: Critical race theory, racial stereotyping, and teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly* 24: 5–19.
- Solorzano, D. 1998. Critical race theory, racial and gender microaggressions, and the experiences of Chicana and Chicano scholars. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 11: 121–36.
- Solórzano, D., W.R. Allen, and G. Carroll. 2002. Keeping race in place. Racial microaggressions and campus racial climate at the University of California, Berkeley. *Chicano-Latino Law Review* 23, no. 15: 15–112.
- Solórzano, D., M. Ceja, and T. Yosso. 2000. Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education* 69, no. 1–2: 60–73.
- Solórzano, D., and T. Yosso. 2002. Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 8, no. 23: 23–44.
- Spenner, K., C. Buchmann, and R. Landerman. 2005. The black–white achievement gap in the first college year: Evidence from a new longitudinal case study. In *The shape of social inequality: Stratification and ethnicity in comparative perspective*, ed. D. Bills, 187–216. New York: Elsevier.
- Steele, C. 1992. Race and schooling of black Americans. *The Atlantic Monthly* 269, no. 4: 68–78.
- Steele, C. 1997. A threat in the air, how stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist* 52, no. 6: 613–29.
- Steele, C., and J. Aronson. 1998. Stereotype threat and the test performance of academically successful African Americans. In *The black–white test score gap*, ed. C. Jencks and M. Phillips, 401–27. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- UCOP (University of California Office of the President). 2007. California Master Plan for Higher Education. <http://www.ucop.edu/acadinit/mastplan/mpsummary.htm>.
- Valdes, F., J. McCristal, and P. Harris, eds. 2002. *Crossroads, directions, and a new critical race theory*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Valencia, R. 1997. Conceptualizing the notion of deficit thinking. In *The evolution of deficit thinking, educational thought and practice*, ed. R. Valenica, 1–12. Washington, DC: The Falmer Press.
- Vars, F.E., and W.G. Bowen. 1998. Scholastic aptitude test scores, race and academic performance in selective colleges and universities. In *The black–white test score gap*, ed. C. Jencks and M. Phillips, 457–79. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Yosso, T. 2005. Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 1: 69–92.