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Who is My Brothers' Keeper? Stressors that African American Males Encounter during Their
College Experience

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to address the stressors that African American males encounter during their college experiences, specifically at Predominantly White Colleges and Universities (PWCUs). At minimum, African American males carry the burden of two negative social identities as they move through society; one as a member of the African American race (i.e., anti-Black racism) and the other as a Black male (i.e., Black misandry and oppression). African American male collegians constantly confront negative stereotypes about their intellect and must excel academically despite racially biased course content and racially insensitive instructors. I created a 51 item questionnaire according to stressors (minority stress, racism-related stress, group based discrimination, and upbringing and socioeconomic stress) discussed in the literature. Findings from the study showed that African American male students did experience these stressors but the variance was scattered. Moreover, further research is needed to properly address the impact of stress on the academic success of African American males.

Keywords: African American, Minority Stress, Racism-Related Stress, Microaggression, Macroaggression, Racial Battle Fatigue, Discrimination

Who is My Brothers' Keeper? Stressors That African American Males Encounter during Their College Experience

There is a continuous decline in the number of African American males completing their college degree. This is a mounting concern for Predominately White Colleges and Universities (PWCUs) and Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs) as they struggle to retain this population of students. Research shows that African American males comprise close to four million or 7% of the U.S. student population; yet they are consistently over-represented in poverty and underrepresented in higher education (Palmer, 2014). Approximately 12.9% of them have a baccalaureate degree compared to 22.3% of White males (Naylor, Wyatt-Nichole & Brown, 2015). Only 6.3% of African American males hold master's degree compared to 13.2% of their White counterparts (Naylor, et al., 2015). The differences are less stark when comparing African American females to White females: Whereas 14.3% of African American females earned a baccalaureate degree, 21.7% of White females did so (Naylor, et al., 2015).

For African American males, hopes of achieving the "American Dream," of being employed with a college degree, are far too often thwarted (Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007). Approximately 60% of the fastest growing occupations require an associate's degree and 46% require a bachelor's degree or higher (Rosser-Mims, Palmer & Harroff, 2014). Nearly 11.5% of African American males leave college without degree attainment after year 1, 48.9% by year 3, and 83% by year five (Wood, 2012). This represents the highest college dropout rate among every racial, ethnic and gender sub-group (Wood, 2011). Declining college graduation rates of African American males means lower earning across the lifespan as a whole (Spurgeon & Myers, 2010).

Despite the fact that the national graduation rate for African American males has

increased by 10 percentage points from 42% in 2001-2002 to 52% in 2009-2010, they are the least likely to obtain a regular diploma four years after beginning high school (Palmer, 2014). In 38 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, African American males have the lowest graduation rates among African American, Latino, and White male and female students (Palmer, 2014). In general, only 52% of African American males graduate from high school in four years while 78% of White males graduate in four years (Palmer, 2014). African American male graduation rates in New York State alone are among the lowest in the nation. A meager 37% of African American males graduate from New York high schools in four years in comparison to 78% of their White male counterparts (Palmer, 2014). While the plight of African American males in schools is well documented, there has been little change in policy or practice and little learning from this student group on how best to assist them in obtaining academic success (Palmer, 2014).

The purpose of this literature review is to address the stress that African American males encounter during their college experience specifically at PWCUs that are impacting their ability to succeed in obtaining a college degree. Stress has been defined in many ways, but all definitions involve an environmental demand that potentially exceeds the person's ability or resources to meet the challenges impacting the body's normal state of functioning (Bridges, 2011). Many scholars and professionals have shared their insights on the many stressors that African American males face from the time they are born and throughout their academic years with little or no resolve. Additionally, society plays a major role in the stress that African American males endure on a daily basis. In order to address the academic crisis, it is important to explore the culture of stress that exists on and around the college campus and the impact it has on the African American male's ability to thrive during their college experience. The following

literature will review social stressors, minority stress, racism-related stress, group based discrimination, and socioeconomic barriers.

Social Stressors

African American males are both admired and loathed in the community. At minimum, African American males carry the burden of two negative social identities as they move through society; one as a member of the African American race (i.e., anti-Black racism) and the other as a Black male (i.e., Black misandry and oppression) (Smith, et al, 2007). Most people in American society, including many African Americans, view African American males as problems requiring control, handling, or other forms of management. They are praised, encouraged, and recruited for their athletic talent and abilities. Society endorses them for their musical genius and skillfulness as actors. Yet, portrayals in popular culture and media characterizations of African American men fully support the notion of African American men as problems, scary, untrustworthy, and repulsive. They are often profiled and harassed by police, portrayed negatively in the media and in literature, judged by their appearance and language, and unduly victimized by socially imposed stereotypes. All of this plays out for African American males on the college campus and in their environment. Being forced to learn under such conditions creates stress that other gender and ethnic groups do not experience.

Minority stress

On the college campus African American males are facing various forms of stress that impact their ability to succeed. Minority status stress is a unique source of stress that emanates from psychosocial difficulties related to racial and ethnic background (Wei & Liao, 2011). Such stressors can include exposure to racial discrimination, strained relationships with faculty members outside of one's racial and ethnic group, being the first in one's family of origin to

attend college, and racial and ethnic underrepresentation in academic courses (Greer & Brown, 2011). Minority students in general often experience stress because of their invisibility on and off campus, racial tension, racial segregation during in-class study groups, nonverbal racist actions, low faculty expectations for them because of the stereotype of low intelligence, peers' beliefs that their admissions were due to a racial quota, and the constant pressure from the need to prove that they can succeed in school (Greer & Brown, 2011). This form of stress has been linked to adverse college outcomes such as low grade point average, poor psychological health, low social involvement, and decreased academic motivation (Greer & Brown, 2011). It can interfere with college adjustment and integration into the university community (Wei & Liao, 2011). Moreover, the presence of few minority faculty members may limit opportunities for African American male students to find faculty mentors or role models from their own group for support.

Racism-related stress

Racism-related stress is defined as “the race-related transactions between individuals or groups and their environments that arise from the dynamics of racism, and are perceived to tax or exceed existing individual and collective resources or threaten well-being” (Tovar-Murray, Jenifer, Andrusyk, D’Angelo & King, 2012). African American male collegians constantly confront negative stereotypes about their intellect and must excel academically despite racially biased course content and racially insensitive instructors. It is important to consider how campus environments, subjectively reported as unsupportive and racially hostile, lead to alienation, dissatisfaction, academic disidentification, disengagement, and blocked academic aspirations for many African Americans males (Smith, et al., 2007).

African American males not only experience racial microaggressions that are mini-assaults

by individuals or groups, they also experience macrostressors or racial macroaggressions. Racial macroaggressions are large scale, systems-related stressors that are widespread, sometimes becoming highly publicized, race-related traumatic events (Smith, et al., 2007). An example of racial macroaggression would be “driving-while-Black,” which is racial profiling of Black motorists that are pulled over by police simply for being Black and involves being questioned and searched by police in hopes of finding something to bring charges against them. Racism has a systemic, powerful, and far reaching effect in the lives of African Americans. Racial microaggressions can range from racial slights, recurrent indignities and irritations, unfair treatment, stigmatization, hyper-surveillance, and contentious classrooms to personal threats or attacks on one’s wellbeing (Smith, et al., 2007). As a result, African Americans perceive their environment as extremely stressful, exhausting, and diminishing to their sense of control, comfort, and meaning while eliciting feelings of loss, ambiguity, strain, frustration, and injustice.

Racial battle fatigue addresses the physiological and psychological strain exacted on racially marginalized groups and the amount of energy lost dedicated to coping with racial microaggressions and racism (Smith, et al, 2007). The concept of racial battle fatigue synthesizes and builds on the extensive physiological and psychological discipline-specific research literature and studies of stress responses to racism and its impact on health and coping. Racial battle fatigue uses the literature regarding posttraumatic stress disorder for understanding the effects of hostile environments. The social condition that produces racial battle fatigue for African Americans is enveloped in societal ideologies and beliefs about African Americans as a group (Smith, et al., 2007).

Group based discrimination

Group based discrimination and prejudice are sources of stress specific to members of

ethnocultural minorities living in majority society. Campus interview data and reports from FBI and the U.S. Department of Justice clearly describe campus environments where African American males tend to be the primary target of verbal and physical abuse and racially motivated hate crimes (Smith, et al, 2007). FBI data recorded 250 reported incidences of racial hate crimes on college campuses, and the number is likely an underrepresentation of the actual level of hate crimes at PWCUs (Beamon, 2014).

Local and campus police have also been a source of stress and discrimination at PWCUs for African American male students. They are constantly under surveillance for being a man of color. Even walking off campus has proven to be challenging for many of them. Because systemic, primeval White fears toward Black men have justified questioning, searching, detaining, and sometimes brutalizing African American males, the power of Black misandry should not be underestimated for its psychological and physiological impact (Smith, et al., 2007). African American males have experienced their campuses and surrounding communities in ways that most students seldom experience – as outsiders who appear to be out of place, and constantly reminded of the perception of “fitting the description” of an unwanted element (Smith, et al., 2007). African American men have a greater than 1 in 4 chance of going to prison in their lifetimes, as compared to a 1 in 23 chance for European American men (Landers, Rollock, Rolfes & Moore, 2011). As a result, it is not unreasonable to suspect that police contact may be a considerable area of stress for students and young adults of color.

Upbringing and socioeconomic stressors

For African American males, the challenge and stressors in education are a continuum from childhood. The literature shows that they are disproportionately born into lives of challenge; they suffer inexplicably high infant mortality rates, are reared in chronic and abject

poverty, and are overrepresented in underfunded schools. Many Black families reside in elementary or secondary districts where there are fewer academic offerings, less-qualified teachers, out-of-date materials, and lower quality curricula. This can lead to under-preparation to compete in collegiate-level coursework, thereby placing some African American males at a disadvantage before they step onto a college campus (Wood, 2011).

Often times the stress of being the first member of the family to attend college can be a source of stress for African American males as they put additional pressure on themselves to succeed. The stress is even more severe when they have family responsibilities and struggle with family/work/school balance. Having a parent as a role model who either never went to or did not finish college also seemed to have a negative association with African American males completing college (Wood, 2012).

Leading into adulthood, black males experience chronically high unemployment, over-incarceration, disparate health conditions, and ultimately lower life expectations than any of the largest racial/ethnic and gender groups in the United States (Palmer, 2014). African American males are more likely than other student groups to be classified as mentally deficient or to be identified as suffering from a learning disability and placed in special education. They account for 33% of students classified as mentally retarded, 27% of students classified as emotionally disturbed, and 18% of students classified as students labeled disabled (Palmer, 2014).

Developmental gaps likely correlate with dismal realities for many African American males including low birth weight, foster care, poverty, hunger, among other challenges to this kind of development. In addition, low-income families often live in neighborhoods where growing children are exposed to toxic pollution, leads, etc. These have known effects on a child's growing nervous system, which in turn can lead to many of the developmental, learning, and

behavioral challenges seen in this group.

African American male students are prevented from the benefits associated with well-resourced community schools. Most urban districts spend at least \$500 less per student than suburban districts (Palmer, 2014). African American male students are noticeably underrepresented in gifted and talented programs in the United States and very few are allowed to take Advanced Placement (AP) classes. In New York City, few students in predominantly Black community school districts, if any, are tested for admission to gifted and talented programs. In other states, magnet schools are found to promote AP participation among White students but reduce participation among college-bound Black students, particularly Black males (Palmer, 2014). Furthermore, teachers and counselors disproportionately track Black students into low academic-ability classrooms, whereas many of their White counterparts are placed in advanced courses that prepare them for college placement in competitive institutions (Palmer, 2014).

The negative impact of racial and socioeconomic segregation in public education contributes to disparities in higher education. Some of the most vulnerable students are often left to be taught by the least experienced individuals (i.e. uncertified teachers) causing a negative impact on their achievement. African American students from poverty-ridden environments do not always have educational or reading materials available in their home. Additionally, as achievement gaps increase from grade to grade, those that drop out do not have much support at home or at school. Moreover, low-income and minority students are more likely to attend lower-tiered universities and more likely to graduate with larger student loan debt than high-income, nonminority students (Naylor, et al., 2015).

Summary and conclusion

African American males are among the most stigmatized ethnic groups in the United States and the least understood. They are fighting a constant battle for acceptance and equality in a society that both loves and hates them. An unfriendly learning environment represents a foundation of stress that leads to low grades, poor psychological health, and decreased academic motivation. At PWCUs, they are outnumbered in the classroom and unable to find their likeness in faculty members as they seek support and role models. Although African American males see the “American Dream” as an attainable goal, the steps to obtain it can come with great difficulty and stress.

Society fuels the negative stereotypes that African American males are struggling to overcome. The effects of discrimination have a physiological and psychological consequence on African American males very similar to posttraumatic stress disorder. Universities and colleges, particularly traditional White institutions, are blind to the significance of how racism and discrimination can affect African American male students and their successful matriculation and the impact on their college population as a whole. Colleges need to be aware of the undertones of the campus environment that are driving the hostility toward this population of men. The learning instructors have a responsibility to acknowledge and address their biases to prevent conscious and subconscious labeling of African American male students. Until these stressors are addressed, the African American male will continue to fall short of the American Dream.

Method

Participants attending a community college in the northeast volunteered as part of the anonymous study. The community college's population is 53% female, 47% male, and 37% minority. Enrollment for the 2014-15 academic year was 32,841. The graduation rates by race/ethnicity for the fall of 2011 were: 30% White, 10.8% Hispanic, 9.1% African American, 30.6% Asian, 9.1% American Indian or Alaska Native, 22.2% Non-resident Alien (International), and 21.8% Multiracial. Institutional review board approval was obtained in December 2015 from the community college. African American male participants were recruited from the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), Project SOAR (self-directed, over-achieving, and responsible), and outside the offices of transitional studies. These areas were selected for their concentration of African American male students in their programs.

Participants

The proposed number of participants for the study was 150 African American male students from EOP and Project SOAR. EOP consists of first-time students with limited financial resources who need additional support to succeed academically. It offers a four week pre-freshman summer program, tutorial program, individual counseling, and workshops to enhance the college experience. Project SOAR is a program designed to improve retention rates of first semester African American and Latino male students who are at risk of dropping out.

IRB process consisted of completing the research request form found on the college website. An abstract was provided to describe the intent of the research project along with a copy of the statement of informed consent and the questionnaire. The human subjects review form was completed and signed by the project director and submitted with IRB application. All documents were sent via interoffice to the committee and approved within two weeks.

Emails were sent out to 25 Project SOAR students identified as African American requesting them to stop by the EOP office if they were interested in participating in the study. The remaining African American male students were recruited during their monthly appointments with their EOP counselor and outside the offices of transitional studies by approaching them and explaining the purpose of the study. An EOP counselor was available to answer questions if needed. The total number of questionnaires that were handed out was 100. A total of 45 African American male students completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire took about 15 minutes or less to complete. All students were 18 years of age or older with the oldest being 48. With the exception of two participants, all had at least completed 1 semester or more with the most completed as 7 semesters.

Instrument

I created a 51 item questionnaire according to stressors (minority stress, racism-related stress, group based stress, and upbringing and socioeconomic stress) discussed in the literature. Two examples from the questionnaire are: *I have had to miss class due to work obligations* and *I have been discriminated against by faculty and staff on campus*. Four of the items were short answers questions. Two of the short answers were for demographic purposes to identify age and semesters completed. The other two short answer items were to uncover additional stressors and ways of coping. A 5-point Likert-type scale with options of 1 (Never), 2 (Rarely), 3 (Sometimes), 4 (Very often), and 5 (Always) was used. For missing variables the number 99 was used as a place holder. As patterns were identified with the “other stressors” and “ways of coping” short answers, numbers were assigned to them. For example, students who identified *failing* and *having to pass all my classes* as a source of stress were categorized as failing.

Sampling procedures

Because there was not an opportunity to solicit Project SOAR participants in a group setting as had been originally planned, emails were sent out to 25 Project SOAR students self-identifying as African American males requesting them to stop by the EOP office if they were interested in participating in the study. The remaining 125 African American male students were to be recruited during their monthly appointments with their EOP counselor and outside the offices of transitional studies by approaching them and explaining the purpose of the study. As a result of missed appointments and students not interested in participating, the total number of questionnaires that were handed out was 100. Of the 100 that were handed out, 45 African American male students completed the questionnaire. An EOP counselor was available to answer questions if needed. The questionnaire took about 15 minutes or less to complete.

Data analysis and management

Descriptive statistics were computed for this study using SPSS. The research question to be answered was, “What stressors do African American males face that impact their college experience?” African American male students who were informed of the study were able to obtain a copy of the questionnaire at the front desk of the EOP office stapled to a copy of the *statement of informed consent* form stating the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation and my contact information for any questions. The questionnaires were assigned a number randomly for tracking purposes. The 45 completed anonymous paper questionnaires were returned to the EOP office and stored securely in a locked office on campus.

Results

Minority status stress is a unique source of stress that emanates from psychosocial difficulties related to racial and ethnic background (Wei & Liao, 2011). The stressors consist of exposure to racial discrimination, strained relationships with faculty, being the first in one’s

family to attend college, and racial underrepresentation in academic courses (Greer & Brown, 2011). The items from the Likert type questionnaire ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always) reflecting minority status stress and their results are displayed in the Minority Status Stressors Table 1 below. With the variance scattered, the mean shows that the some of the participants very often put pressure on themselves and sometimes feel pressure from their family.

Minority Status Stressors Table 1

| Variable | Mean | Std. Deviation | Variance |
|---|------|----------------|----------|
| Put pressure on myself | 4 | 1.066 | 1.136 |
| Feel pressure from family | 3.53 | 1.392 | 1.936 |
| Respected by non African American classmates | 4.16 | 1.127 | 1.271 |
| Discriminated by faculty and staff on campus | 1.80 | 1.133 | 1.283 |
| See representation of successful African American males on campus | 3.16 | 1.160 | 1.346 |
| Discriminated by classmates | 2.07 | 1.421 | 2.018 |
| Feel isolated in the classroom | 2.50 | 1.151 | 1.326 |
| Able to raise my hand | 3.80 | 1.091 | 1.190 |

Racism-related stress is defined as “the race-related transactions between individuals or groups and their environments that arise from the dynamics of racism, and are perceived to tax or exceed existing individual and collective resources or threaten well-being” (Tovar-Murray, Jenifer, Andrusyk, D’Angelo & King, 2012). The findings for racism-related stress are noted in Table 2. Although variance was scattered for being harassed by police/public safety, the results

reflect that there were some students that experienced this stressor along with being reminded of their race constantly.

Racism-related Stress and Group based discrimination Table 2

| Variable | Mean | Std. Deviation | Variance |
|---------------------------------------|------|----------------|----------|
| Harassed by police/public safety | 1.80 | 1.236 | 1.527 |
| Able to get help from professors | 4.20 | .869 | .755 |
| Feel safe on campus | 3.86 | .930 | .865 |
| Easy to talk to classmates | 3.76 | 1.151 | 1.325 |
| Reminded of my race constantly | 2.27 | 1.453 | 2.110 |
| Not comfortable talking to professors | 2.14 | 1.231 | 1.516 |

Group based discrimination and prejudice are sources of stress specific to members of ethno-cultural minorities living in majority society. Campus interview data and reports from FBI and the U.S. Department of Justice clearly describe campus environments where African American males tend to be the primary target of verbal and physical abuse and racially motivated hate crimes (Smith, et al, 2007).

For African American males, the challenge and stressors in education are a continuum from childhood. The literature shows that they are disproportionately born into lives of challenge due to their **upbringing and socioeconomic stressors**; they suffer inexplicably high infant mortality rates, are reared in chronic and abject poverty, and are overrepresented in underfunded schools. Many Black families reside in elementary or secondary districts where there are fewer academic offerings, less-qualified teachers, out-of-date materials, and lower

quality curricula. This can lead to under-preparation to compete in collegiate-level coursework, thereby placing some African American males at a disadvantage before they step onto a college campus (Wood, 2011).

Table 3 shows results for group based discrimination, upbringing and socioeconomic stressors. Again variance is scattered and reflects a need for more research on these stressors that result from socioeconomic status and upbringing.

Upbringing and socioeconomic stressors Table 3

| Variable | Mean | Std. Deviation | Variance |
|--|------|----------------|----------|
| Oversleep due to work | 1.84 | 1.098 | 1.207 |
| Oversleep due to family | 1.91 | 1.074 | 1.154 |
| Can't concentrate when tired | 3.33 | 1.074 | 1.154 |
| Can't focus when hungry | 2.80 | 1.268 | 1.608 |
| Rely on public transport | 2.95 | 1.661 | 2.760 |
| Miss class due to work | 1.87 | 1.160 | 1.345 |
| Miss class due to family | 2.07 | 1.169 | 1.367 |
| Worry about paying bills | 2.78 | 1.636 | 2.677 |
| Miss class due to health | 2.33 | 1.261 | 1.591 |
| Concern about violence in neighborhood | 2.56 | 1.575 | 2.480 |
| Get same support in high school | 3.53 | 1.032 | 1.064 |

Other stressors that participants identified with the short answer portion of the questionnaire that were not part of the study aligned with academic and social stressors. The other stressors were failing, having to pass all my classes, personal things, tests, not able to make up any missed work, having enough time, feeling like I missed or forgot something, rushing to complete assignments, juggling multiple heavy courses, being the oldest of my siblings, being away from home, being looked at funny in hallway, and tired easily.

Discussion

Limitations

Several studies in the literature had a relatively small sample size of participants in comparison to the population of college students with some as few as six participants. Self-reporting of persistence attitudes rather than actual behavior was also a limitation. The findings were limited to the college or university where the studies took place. Additionally, the views that were expressed in the study do not represent all African American males' experience at college.

With my study it is unknown how the participants interpreted the five options on the questionnaire. Always and Never can be self-explanatory but Very often, Sometimes, and Rarely needed to have guidelines of interpretation. The sample size of the participants was not a true representation of the African American male college population. The community college used for the study did not represent all PWCUs. Several items in the questionnaire could benefit from further follow up or clarification i.e., responses to "I am not comfortable talking to my professors" did not tell us why or why not the participants were not comfortable talking to professors. Moreover, a qualitative study would yield more information than the anonymous Likert-type scale used that does not have the participants expand on their answers..

Implications for Future Research

Although the sample size was small, it provided a glimpse at the underlying stressors African American males are facing on campus that are not receiving the necessary attention for resolution. Cultural diversity training needs to be a part of the professional development of faculty and staff on a continuous basis. Universities and colleges, particularly traditional White institutions, need to be aware of the significance of how racism and discrimination can affect African American male students and their successful matriculation and the impact on their college population as a whole. Additional studies are needed to address the non-traditional African American male experience to see if there are similarities or marked differences. Moreover, further research is needed to properly address the stress and impact that it has on the African American male's academic success.

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