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## **Exploring Mental Health and Racial Esteem for African Americans in Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

African Americans have a unique perception of society and how it relates to them. For many African Americans, there is dissonance about identifying as Black in the United States. This dissonance extends to educational settings as well. The education system plays a vital role in developing identity and esteem in American culture. This conceptual article will discuss a set of criteria on the educational system's impact on racial identity, esteem development, and mental health. Recommendations are provided for institutions of higher education.

**Key Words:** African Americans, racial esteem, racial identity, imposter phenomenon, microaggressions

### **Introduction**

A central problem for many African Americans is their dissonance in identifying as Black in the United States. This dissonance is a result of the socialization process from the American education system. Although the U.S. educational system plays a vital role in developing identity and esteem in American culture, higher education institutions should emphasize the importance of racial identity development to facilitate a positive learning environment for African American students. (Dugan et al., 2012). Racial identity can be understood as a collective identity shared among people who have socialized to perceive themselves as racial groups. Racial esteem comprises four critical aspects that explain how an individual's self-concept relates to the racial group in which they subscribe. The four aspects incorporate private racial esteem, public racial esteem, identity salience, and membership affiliation (Dugan et al., 2012). These four aspects impact any human being's social development, including all phases of the educational system.

Educational institutions can affect students' learning and behavior. Stewart (2007) posited that educational institutions influence social development through its structure, staffing, and climate. The institution's climate can be understood as unwritten beliefs, values, attitudes, and various interaction forms among teachers, students, and staff. One can assume that the overall societal culture can, to a certain degree, influence the institutions within the society, which can affect the individual. It can potentially go further and, in some instances, affects the students' sense of belonging and contributing to psychological distress (Stewart, 2007). This conceptual article aims to expand upon the interaction between American education and African American identity. The article will examine the American education system's impact on African Americans' racial esteem and examine how the American education system shapes African Americans' understanding of their racial group identity.

### **Literature Review**

Racial discrimination in higher education has been well documented. According to Hunter (2006), colored-based racism in schools is a subsystem of institutional racism. At various school levels, African Americans are affected by the unconscious bias by the interactions among administrators, teachers, students (Hunter, 2006). The effects of colored based racism are present in many school aspects, including classroom dynamics, teacher-student interactions, and school discipline procedures. Color-based racism emphasizes white and Anglo aesthetics' hierarchical placement, which places positive attributes to whiteness and negative attributes to Blackness (Hunter, 2006).

### **Racial Identity and Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem is critical in building self-worth and psychological well-being. Self-esteem influences individuals' daily lives and dramatically shapes their self-perception, affecting their behavior and emotions (Kernis, 2003). High self-esteem can be characterized as a favorable self-image that is secure and maintained across contexts (Deci & Ryan, 1995). In African American college students, high self-esteem has been associated with better academic performance and psychological well-being (Hope et al., 2013). Conversely, college students with low self-esteem tend to procrastinate more, have lower attrition rates, and poorer psychological well-being (Peterson-Graziose et al., 2013).

The benefits of high self-esteem are essential for African American college students. Hope et al. (2013) found that African American students who felt positively towards a Black identity and membership within the Black community reported high self-esteem. These students also had higher grades than their African American peers, who held pessimistic views towards Black identity and had less racial pride. Although some researchers reasoned that racial identity and societal stigma would threaten self-esteem, it has been demonstrated that racial identity promotes positive self-esteem for African American students (Lige et al., 2016).

### **Racial Socialization**

Researchers have posited that racial socialization to be an essential element in developing racial identity. The term racial socialization describes implicit and explicit verbal and nonverbal messages African Americans receive that help shape their beliefs, values, and attitudes regarding the self as a person of color and a representative of the Black community (Scott, 2003). The racial socialization process is necessary to help African Americans understand their social contexts while assisting them in coping with discrimination (Moualeu, 2019).

Moualeu (2019) asserted that racial socialization might be a quintessential defense, reducing racial discrimination's negative impact on minority individuals' health. For example, Fisher and Shaw (1999) examined the impact of African American college students' racial socialization. The scholars explored potential moderators of the discrimination, looking at socialization messages and beliefs, self-esteem, and social networks. The findings revealed that more significant discrimination was related to poorer mental health for African Americans who reported low racial socialization messages. These findings suggest that racial socialization messages play a vital role in developing resilience. This resilience is needed for African American students to navigate an educational system unwelcoming of their Black identity (Moualeu, 2019).

### **Nigrescence Model**

Cross (1991) developed a Nigrescence Model of Racial Identity that discusses the healthy progression of Black identity development. The Nigrescence model is a widely cited racial identity theory within higher education, particularly as it relates to African Americans. The model suggests that individuals immersed in the various stages learn to embrace and appreciate their Blackness fully. The Nigrescence model consists of five stages (as cited in Ritchey, 2015):

1. Pre-encounter – Individuals in the pre-encounter stage hold views that range from low salience to race neutrality to anti-Black (Cross, 1991). Little importance is afforded to race in this stage, and individuals' interest in other aspects of their lives, including employment, lifestyle, and religion, as more salient. Individuals do not accept race as something that has influenced their lives thus far. There are some Black individuals for whom being Black is vital, and there are some Black individuals who can hold an extreme attitude of anti-Blackness. Cross (1991) asserted that "anti-Blacks loath other Blacks; they feel isolated from them and do not see Blacks or the Black community as potential sources of personal support" (p. 191). Normally, this stage emerges when someone does not realize that they have been raised with White westernized beliefs because it is entrenched in their culture. Cross (1991) said that "persons have frequently been socialized to favor a Eurocentric cultural perspective" (p. 193).
2. Encounter – Individuals in the encounter stage must work around the importance of their worldview. Simultaneously, others must provide some idea of the direction to point the person to be re-socialized or transformed (Cross, 1991). The encounter stage comprises two steps, encounter and personalize. In the encounter step, an event happens that shapes how one views their race.

Personalize occurs when an individual acts due to the event's impact on that person's world view. Cross (1991) pointed out that the encounter "need not be negative" (p. 197) for the event to have an impact and steer a person towards Nigrescence. What matters is that the encounter has a personally substantial impact on encouraging change in their thinking.

3. **Immersion/Emersion** – The immersion-emersion stage of Nigrescence addresses Black identity development's most sensational aspect, for it represents the vortex of psychological Nigrescence (Cross, 1991). During this stage, Black individuals will begin to shed their old worldview and construct a new reference frame with the information they now have about race. The individual has not yet changed but commits to change. Cross (1991) stated that "immersion is a strong, powerful dominating sensation that is constantly energized by rage, guilt, at having once been tricked into thinking Black ideas and developing a sense of pride" (p. 203).
4. **Internalization** – Internalization embraces a transition period working through a new identity's challenges and problems (Cross, 1991). During this time, individuals move away from how others view them to how they view themselves. Cross (1991) asserted, "the internalization marks the point of dissonance resolution and reconstruction of one's steady-state personality and cognitive style" (p. 220). Black individuals begin to think critically about their newfound racial identity and how it has developed their life. In conclusion, they encompass what it means to be Black and have the Black self-love they emit into the world. Most importantly, "Black identity functions to fulfill the self-protection, social anchorage, and bridging needs of the individual" (p. 220).
5. **Internalization/Commitment** – Internalization-commitment focuses on Black affairs' long-term attention over an extensive amount of time (Cross, 1991). This stage is combined with internalization. Cross (1991) emphasized that "consequently other than to repeat what has already been said about internalization a more differential look at internalization-commitment awaits results of future research" (p. 220).

Individuals transition from pro-White toward Pro-Black attitudes and toward a full dedication to understanding and respecting the Black race, culture, and values. Utilizing this model, Cross (1991) discusses the Nigrescence Model's psychological component related to adjustment in society. Individuals immersed in the pre-encounter stage neglect to see race as a salient factor and, therefore, may denigrate the reality and influential negative impact of racism on Blacks.

**Table 1** Cross (1971, 1991) Nigrescence Model of Racial Identity

STAGE 1 Pre-encounter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Race does not tend to be a salient issue.</li> <li>• Don't give much thought to race.</li> <li>• General tendency to value majority culture and to devalue own culture.</li> <li>• Some may see race as a stigma.</li> <li>• Some may harbor "anti-black" attitudes.</li> <li>• In extreme, may see "black self-hatred".</li> </ul>
STAGE 2 Encounter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Something "catches person off guard."</li> <li>• Encounter causes to re-think one's racial identity.</li> <li>• Encounter need not be negative.</li> <li>• May cause "alarm, confusion"</li> <li>• New motivation to develop a different sense of self as black individual.</li> </ul>
STAGE 3 Immersion/ Emersion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active exploring of aspects of cultural identity.</li> <li>• Fueled" by energy of Encounter.</li> <li>• Intense process of immersion in own culture.</li> <li>• May involve rejection of dominant culture.</li> <li>• New identity is embraced.</li> <li>• May show anger at "White Culture."</li> <li>• Emersion: Process of "Leveling off" -emerging from the intensity of the immersion experience.</li> <li>• Emersion -beginning of transition toward a "realized" black identity.</li> </ul>
STAGE 4 Internalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A deeper, integrated sense of one's own ethnic identity.</li> <li>• May (or may not) result in high degree of "involvement" in own culture.</li> <li>• Newly organized, stable, sense of self as a Black individual.</li> <li>• Synthesis of "Blackness" with one's personhood.</li> </ul>

<p>STAGE 5 Internalization/ Commitment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exhibit positive self-esteem.</li> <li>• Ideological flexibility.</li> <li>• Openness to one's Blackness.</li> </ul>
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Consequently, Hamilton (2009) stated that this denial may serve as either a buffer towards racist experiences or may place them at a harmful risk of not being psychologically prepared to cope with racist encounters. During the encounter stage, race arises as a salient factor. This is often a result of being impacted by several racial events that challenge pre-encounter world views. As a result, individuals may feel uncertain, apprehensive, and depressed as they begin to re-frame the value of their racial identity. Through the immersion-emersion stage, an anti-White attitude view is internalized, and an attempt at alienation from Whites is made. This stage is characterized by hypersensitivity to encounters with bigotry and enragement over such experiences. Through the internalization phase, individuals adopt a high level of Black identity and are synchronized and content with their new level of Blackness. They are more mature and refined in their approach towards handling racism; they more often utilize support mechanisms and may blame "the system" for racial problems instead of acknowledging any self-culpability, even when appropriate. Lastly, individuals immersed in the internalization-commitment stage typically allocate a lifetime towards serving the Black community. Additionally, racial experiences are managed similarly to those in the internalization phase (Hamilton, 2009).

### High Schools and Racial Identity

Racial identity has been described as an ongoing, stagnant, and relatively simplistic concept, especially in the United States (Thorne, 2020). The emerging research suggests that high schools should teach racial identity as a part of social studies (Davis, 2007). Research has found that minority students' identity is greatly connected to their school experience. School can be considered an environment for exploring race and identity without being affected by stereotypical roles more familiar to the larger society. Students tend to self-segregate and not learn about other cultures when engaging in extracurricular; however, they can be forced to deal with race and culture issues. The curriculum of educational institutions can be designed by teachers to inform students of the positive aspects of different cultures (Davis, 2007). However, this is not a common practice in the school system to date. According to Davis (2007), high school would be the ideal educational period to develop a positive racial identity. This is an indication that this practice is not common or even practiced. This research explains that racial identity can be developed and affected during high school years.

Leath et al. (2019) stated that high school racial discrimination experiences may be uniquely damaging racial esteem development and academic engagement. The researchers found that schools are environments where youths spend significant proportions of their time in curricular and extracurricular activities. As such, interactions with teachers and peers at high school influence how they think about themselves as learners and, subsequently, their motivation and engagement (Daniels, 2011). Stereotype-based treatment and overt harassment may undermine African American students' sense of value and belonging, increasing the possibility of school disengagement (Dotterer, et al., 2009). Admittedly, racial discrimination has been linked to various consequences relevant to school success for African American youth—such as declines in grades, academic and social integration, and more school problem behaviors (Smalls et al., 2007).

### University Setting and Racial Identity

The research focusing on the achievement of African American college students continues to receive increased attention. The role of identity in the academic achievement of African American college students remains a prominent issue. Theorists postulate that academic success is related to low identity salience for African American students (Awad, 2007). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argued that African American students who minimize their connection to their cultural backgrounds increase their chances of succeeding in college. This phenomenon, described as "the burden of acting White," contends that Black students become raceless to compete in academic areas.

There are different outcomes for African American students attending predominately white institutions (PWIs) and historical black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Allen (2010) studied the college experiences of African American students who attended HBCUs and PWIs. The researcher found that African American students attending PWIs reported less favorable relations with professors than their counterparts attending HBCUs. African American students attending PWIs reported lower academic achievement and self-concepts and lower levels of social involvement.

Negga, et al. (2007) conducted a study consisting of 344 undergraduate students enrolled in southern HBCUs, and 165 enrolled at PWIs. The researchers measured the students' stress levels, self-esteem, and social support. The findings revealed that African Americans at PWI need an additional culturally sensitive intervention to combat racial discrimination and isolation (Negga et al., 2007). Results suggest that outcomes were influenced by the immediate social context, while interpersonal relationships bridged individual disposition and institutional context (Bush, 2015).

Additional research examining African American college students' racial identity development at PWIs has revealed that African American students' self-doubt appears to involve their beliefs about academic preparation, not natural abilities (Cokley et al., 2003). The researchers revealed that self-doubt concerning one's natural abilities was related to discouragement felt at the university setting. One explanation of this finding is that when African American college students get discouraged about the school, the discouragement is not because they doubt their abilities but because they are disappointed in their institution's treatment. Cokley's (2002) research also demonstrated that African American college students, compared to White college students, tended to develop negative performance expectations about school while simultaneously being satisfied with their efforts. This research signifies that negative expectations regarding academic performance are related to, but separate from, one's belief about their efforts (Bush, 2015).

### **Being Black at Predominantly White Institutions**

Attending college is already a complex and rigorous journey for students. From understanding how to balance a social life with academics, it can be overbearing for anyone. For African American students, the journey is even more complicated because of their race. Students who identify as African American or black have already beaten one of many statistics by attending college. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 34.9 percent of black students attended college in 2015. However, beating the odds stacked against black students is only the first step in being successful.

Out of the thousands of universities and colleges in the United States, most of them are labeled PWIs. These are institutions where the community make-up has more white people than any other ethnic group on campus. Historically, PWIs have been places where Black students must compromise their Blackness to be accepted and recognized. At PWIs, African American students are keenly aware of their physical racial attributes, which intensifies their identification as minorities compared to whiteness's dominant norm (Glenn, 2002). This awareness of racial identity isolates Black students at PWIs due to their notable physical and cultural differences (Cannon, 2014).

### **The Imposture Phenomenon**

The Impostor Phenomenon (IP) is marked by an individual's persistent perception of incompetency despite contrary evidence. IP has been found to pervade most areas of an individual's functioning, including social, cognitive, interpersonal, and academic (Ross & Krukowski, 2003). For African American students, IP plays an essential factor in their educational attainment. While racial identity is associated with high self-esteem for African American students, low self-esteem is associated with higher levels of IP (Sonnack & Towell, 2000). Low self-esteem is characterized as fragile, context-dependent, and reliant on external validation. The relationship between self-esteem and IP is understandable considering that African American students with low self-esteem are profoundly troubled about how their performance compares to those around them and tend to set very high standards and expectations for themselves (Deci & Ryan, 1995).

Research has shown that ethnic identity has a negative relationship with IP. Bernard et al. (2017) conducted a study on the phenomenon of high achieving African American students having difficulty internalizing and accepting their success. The researchers found that African American students feel persistent sensations of incompetency, despite evidence that displays competence. Their self-worth is derived from meeting their self-imposed high standards and the expectations of others. Bernard et al. (2017) also theorized that some African American students are cognizant of the institutional racism that made it difficult to pursue higher education. The researchers stated that African Americans are more susceptible to IP because of other students' cues as an inferior group in higher education and society. This is more than likely a by-product of years of conditioning from interactions with society and formal education.

### Microaggressions and Racial Esteem

Microaggressions are intentional or unintentional brief exchanges that communicate hostile, derogatory, negative slights and insults that result in harmful or unpleasant psychological influence on an individual or group (Sue et al., 2008). Allen (2010) posited that microaggressions affect marginalized groups and exhibit environmental cues through verbal and nonverbal hidden messages. The individuals who experience microaggressions have feelings of self-doubt and confusion, resulting in anger, irritation, and a decrease in self-esteem. Microaggression theory posits that any expression or comment is judged by the individual to be inappropriate or hurtful.

Sue et al. (2008) investigated several microaggressions and observed three distinct categories: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. As cited in Maiden et al. (2020, p. 58-59), the researchers described the three types:

1. Microassaults were described as racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt or to be purposefully discriminatory actions (Sue et al., 2008, p. 274). An example of this is a restaurant hostess seating an African American customer in the back of a restaurant while reserving seating for American customers in the front.
2. Microinsults were described as overlooking individuals of color. For example, a professor may cut off students of color during class discussions or make facial expressions (rolling eyes) when a Black person speaks in class (Sue et al., 2008).
3. Microinvalidations were described as communications that purposely exclude or express indifference to the psychological thoughts or feelings of a person of color (Sue et al., 2008). The fundamental premise is that microaggression experiences can have long term effects when people of color find themselves repeatedly in microaggressions and are unable to find validation for their perceptions.

**Table 2 Categories of Racial Microaggressions**

Microassaults (Often Unconscious)	Blatant, verbal, nonverbal, or environmental attack intended to convey discriminatory and biased sentiments. "Phrase such as faggot, spic, or kype fit this category.
Microinsults (Often Conscious)	Unintentional behaviors or verbal comments that convey rudeness or insensitivity or demean a person racial heritage/gender identity, religion, ability, or sexual orientation. Ex. " girly men".
Microinvalidations (Often Conscious)	Verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or dismiss the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of the target group. Ex. Wow! I didn't know women were so good in math?

Racial microaggressions among African Americans students have been the focus of much research over the past decade (Maiden et al., 2020). Researchers mainly centered on how educators can perpetrate microaggression that harms students and impairs their learning (Sue et al., 2008). Consequently, these barriers prevent African American students from obtaining educational and other health-related services. African American students have wrestled with distinctive experiences with racial microaggressions. These are often attributed to the stereotypes and prejudices typically associated with their Black identity and community affiliations (Allen, et al., 2013).

Additional studies focusing specifically on college students suggest that racial microaggressions do indeed occur on college campuses, resulting in African American students to feel distressed, which may, in turn, have an impact on their academic performance and mental health (McCabe, 2009). For college students, in particular, some research suggests that distress based on marginalized identities may negatively impact the lives of students of color, particularly on their self-esteem. For example, African American students reported self-doubt when faced with microaggressions in their academic environment (Yosso et al., 2009). Additionally, Black men reported a sense of not belonging after being targeted by microaggressions (McCabe, 2009).



Nadal et al. (2014) examined the adverse impact of racial microaggressions on college students' self-esteem. The study revealed that when individuals encounter a significant amount of racial microaggressions, these experiences' total accumulation may hurt their self-esteem. Specifically, it was found that microaggressions in educational or workplace environments have a negative influence on self-esteem. In other words, when individuals encounter microaggressions in work and educational settings, they will likely experience lower self-esteem. This suggests that microaggressions in educational settings are more harmful to individuals' self-worth (Nadal et al., 2014).

### **Mental Health Challenges in Educational Settings**

Racial discrimination is a social stressor that is harmful to African American's mental health. Several researchers have examined racism in the form of discrimination among African Americans and found discrimination associated with mental and physical health symptoms. Carter (2007) posited that racist encounters lead to trauma, psychological distress, cultural mistrust, low quality of life, less life satisfaction, and depression. Cokley et al. (2013) examined ethnic identity, racial centrality, minority status stress, and impostor feelings as predictors of mental health in a sample of 218 Black college students. The research revealed that ethnic identity was a significant positive predictor of mental health, whereas minority status stress and impostor feelings were significant negative predictors. Although ethnic identity was the strongest predictor of mental health, racial centrality represented a nonsignificant, negative predictor (Cokley et al., 2013).

African Americans do not seek mental health treatment which is one of many factors contributing to existing disparities in mental health services. This is detrimental to students of color combating discrimination in the educational system. For African Americans, the stigma connected with mental illness has been identified as a principal barrier to the progress made in mental health treatment (Barksdale & Molock, 2009). African Americans have more stigmatizing views about individuals with mental illness and express more concern about stigma related to mental health treatment. Mitchell et al. (2007) examined African American college students' attitudes and beliefs toward mental health treatment. The researchers reported that less than 5% of their sample reported that they seek assistance from counseling. Additionally, most of those students reported that they were more likely to rely on religion to deal with mental health issues because of the perceived stigma associated with mental health treatment and negative attitudes towards seeking mental health services.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Racial identity has been generally defined as how individuals see themselves. Racial identity development during college plays a large role in the experiences and outcomes of African American students. Unfortunately, a critical problem for many African Americans is their dissonance about identifying as Black in educational settings. Educators need to understand how race and culture manifest in education and how race shapes how African Americans see their worlds. The following recommendations are suggested for institutions of higher education:

1. Educators must lead by example. Racial identity is regarded as an asset in assisting students of color to negotiate "exposure to risk associated with racial injustice" (Zimmerman et al., 2013). For African American students, racial identity can be a protective and promotive factor of achievement-related outcomes (Oyserman et al., 2003). Educators can help their students acknowledge the socio-political and historical role of race in the United States.
2. Educators must promote culturally responsive instructional practices. Educators have looked to the role of cultural background, beliefs, and practices in student achievement. To enhance African American academic outcomes, the curriculum and instructional strategies in public schools should begin to reflect students' out-of-school cultural experiences (Oyserman et al., 2003). Educators must improve cultural continuity between their students' home and school experiences by identifying and activating student strengths learning about the student's community system.
3. The impact of racial discrimination had a negative influence on mental health for African American students. In a review of the state of mental health on college campuses, Wood (2012) argued for an increase in mental health care services due to the many violent events that have taken place within these environments. Wood (2012) also stated that although there is a clear for mental health care services on college campuses, many college campuses are ill-equipped to meet students' needs. Higher education institutions must create culturally competent counseling centers to work with diverse students.

4. Finally, university initiatives should create inclusive environments that foster racial identity development and self-esteem for African Americans to reduce IP and microaggressions experiences. In order for universities to create an inclusive community, they must educate staff about how they could unknowingly perpetuate microaggressions and make students of color feel uncomfortable in campus settings. Comprehensive multicultural education and training are direct ways to combat racial microaggressions and understand the negative effect of IP on African American students. These strategies can be implemented in many ways, such as incorporating multicultural books in instructional practices or teaching content using issues in the students' community.

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