Psychological Well-Being Among African American University Students

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This investigation compared African American students attending a predominantly White university with those attending a predominantly African American university on measures of depression, suicidal ideation, hopelessness, psychosocial stress, self-identity, and self-esteem.

The academic success and retention of African American students are influenced more by the person-environment transactions and related sociocultural influences within the institution than by intellectual and academic factors (e.g., aptitude scores and high school preparation) (Pillerman, Myers, & Smedley, 1989). Likewise, the academic performance and well-being of African American students at predominantly White universities often suffer as a result of the difficult psychological and social adjustments required by these high-pressure and often non-supportive environments (Allen, 1985; Fleming, 1984).

Tracey and Sedlacke (1985) indicated that factors such as positive self-concept, an understanding of racism, and the existence of support systems are more predictive of African American student retention than academic ability. Positive self-concept is related to African American students' expression of their self-identity. For instance, Parham and Helms (1985) found that African Americans who have low self-concepts tend to report lower levels of self-esteem. An individual with high vulnerability and low self-esteem in the face of stressors (e.g., blows to self-esteem) often feels hopeless (Jenkins, 1982).

Cross (1971, 1978) proposed a developmental model of African American racial identity consisting of four stages: the Preencounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and Internalization stages. Preencounter stage refers to the individual having a European frame of reference and devaluing and denying their African identity. During the Encounter stage, the individual begins to question his or her identity because of some startling experience, and subsequently becomes euphoric over the decision to become African American. Immersion-Emersion stage consists of an increased level of African American pride, idealizing everything that is African American. The final stage, Internalization, is characterized by a sense of inner security with one's ethnic identity.

Researchers are beginning to focus on African American student adjustment and achievement from a multivariate perspective. For instance, Allen (1985, 1988), Fleming (1984), and Nettles (1988) have revealed that nonintellectual, psychosocial, and contextual factors (self-concept, ethnic ideology, relationships with faculty, feelings and experiences of racism and discrimination, and feelings of social isolation) were some of the strongest predictors of nega-
tive outcomes for African American students. Multidimensional models of stress have been suggested as useful conceptual tools with which to investigate the well-being of African American students (Prillerman et al., 1989).

The purpose of this study was to address the following research questions: Were students at a predominantly African American university (PAAU) at a reduced risk for psychological dysfunction (i.e., depression, suicidal ideation, and hopelessness) and psychosocial stressors (i.e., life events, feelings of alienation, environmental dissatisfaction, and ethnocentrism) than their counterparts were at a predominantly White university (PWU)? Were there differences in the self-esteem and self-identity of African Americans attending a PWU versus African Americans attending a PAAU? The following hypotheses were tested: (a) rates of depressive symptomatology, suicidal ideation, and hopelessness will be higher for African American students who attend a PWU than for those who attend a PAAU; (b) young African American college students from a PWU will report experiencing more psychosocial stress than will African American students from a PAAU; (c) students from a PWU will have higher Preencounter racial identity attitudes (European idealizations) than will students from a PAAU, whereas students from a PAAU will have higher Immersion-Emersion attitudes (African American idealizations); (d) Immersion-Emersion attitudes and Preencounter attitudes will be negatively correlated with low self-esteem; and (e) feelings of alienation, environmental dissatisfaction, and ethnocentrism will be more significantly correlated with life stress, depression, hopelessness, low self-esteem, and Preencounter racial attitudes for African Americans attending a PWU than for African Americans enrolled in a PAAU.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

A total of 202 students were randomly selected from a PWU, Texas A&M University (TAMU) (n=100: 34 men, 66 women), and from The Barneyker Honors Program at a PAAU, Prairie View A&M University (PVAMU), (n=102: 43 men, 59 women). The students’ mean age at TAMU was 20.11 (range of 17–28 years) and at PVAMU was 18.75 (range of 18–25 years). The majority of students at PVAMU (78%) and TAMU (60%) were underclassmen (freshmen and sophomores). With respect to socio-economic status, 80% of the TAMU students and 83% of the PVAMU students came from families with annual incomes of $16,000 or more. Most of the TAMU students (89%) as well as the PVAMU students (68%) were currently living with roommates. Participants were recruited via letters requesting their participation (400 sent to TAMU students and 311 to PVAMU students). In an attempt to obtain more PVAMU students at the end of the semester, 200 additional questionnaires were mailed to students’ homes. Response rates were 25% for the students at TAMU and 20% for students at PVAMU. The PVAMU honors students were comparable to the TAMU students with respect to precollege admissions criteria (high school class rank and Scholastic Aptitude Test scores).

**Instruments**

*The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI).* The BDI is a 21-item inventory that assesses the intensity of depression and measures 21 symptoms of depression (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979). Item 9 on the BDI measures suicidal ideation. The BDI is both a reliable and a valid instrument (Beck, Steer, & Garbin, 1988), with a mean alpha of .81 for internal consistency (range = .73 to .92) when used with 15 nonpsychiatric samples. Test-retest reliability coefficients ranged from .60 to .83. Content validity reflected six of the nine criterion in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III* (American Psychiatric Association, 1980) for a major depression episode, and concurrent validity coefficients ranged from .55 to .73 (M=.60) between the BDI and clinical ratings for nonpsychiatric participants.

*The Hopelessness Scale (HS).* The HS is a 20-item true-false scale that was designed to reflect different facets of negative attitudes about the future. This scale includes statements that occurred frequently in patients’ verbalizations (Beck, Weissman, Lester, & Trexler, 1976). A high degree of internal consistency, coefficient alpha of .93, and significant correlations with other clinical ratings of hopelessness (r=.74) have been obtained with the HS. The HS has been shown to correlate with self-
administered measures of hopelessness such as the Stuart Future Test (.60) (Stuart, 1962) and the pessimism item of the BDI (.63).

Life Experiences Survey (LES). The LES is a 57-item measure of life stress that requires participants to indicate events that they have experienced in the last year (Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978). Participants are instructed to indicate which events have occurred, as well as the degree to which those events are perceived as having a positive or negative impact on their lives. Ratings are on a scale that ranges from extremely negative (0) to extremely positive (6).

Summing the impact of ratings designated as positive provides a positive change score, whereas the negative change score is obtained by summing the events experienced as negative by the student. The total change score is obtained by summing the negative and the positive change scores. The LES has been demonstrated to be moderately reliable (.88) in terms of negative change scores and total change scores (.64). Regarding validity, a significant relationship was revealed between negative change scores and the BDI, r=.24 (Vinokur & Selzer, 1975), and between total and negative change scores and state-trait anxiety, .37 and .29 (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Luschene, 1970).

University Alienation Scale (UAS). Alienation of college students was measured along three distinct dimensions: meaninglessness, powerlessness, and social estrangement. Meaninglessness refers to a sense of loss of direction in terms of one's purpose and meaning in a university. Social estrangement is defined as feelings of loneliness, and powerlessness is a feeling of lack of control over one's own life. The UAS is a 24-item scale that has been shown to be reliable and valid when used with a sample of freshman college students (Burbach, 1972). Split-half reliability coefficients were .79 for the powerlessness subscale, .89 for the meaninglessness subscale, and .72 for the social estrangement subscale. The reliability coefficient for the total scale was .92. Every item-to-item correlation coefficient was found to be significant at the .01 level, which indicated that all scale items contribute to the measurement of the scale's general property. Regarding criterion-related validity, correlation coefficients for the subscales of the UAS and Dean Alienation Scale (Dean, 1961) were significant at the .01 level.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE). The RSE is a 10-item scale that measures a general favorable or unfavorable global self-attitude (Rosenberg, 1979). This scale has been demonstrated to be both reliable and valid (Tippett & Silber, 1965). The reproducibility and scalability coefficients, .92 and .97, suggest that the items have satisfactory internal consistency. Test-retest reliability was .85 with a college student sample. Construct validity has demonstrated that 80% of a sample obtaining low scores on the scale also received high ratings on depression (r=.3008), whereas only 4% with high scores obtained increased depression ratings (Rosenberg, 1965).

Racial Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS). The RIAS was designed to measure racial identity attitudes proposed by Cross (1971, 1978) in his model of Black self-actualization. This 30-item scale measures four stages of attitude development: the Preencounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and Internalization stages. The RIAS has been shown to be moderately reliable and valid. Internal consistency reliabilities for the Preencounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and Internalization subscales are .67, .72, .66, and .71 (Parham & Helms, 1985). Regarding validity, the three forms of the scale are highly correlated, and it was also revealed that Black college students with Preencounter attitudes preferred White counselors, whereas those with Encounter attitudes tended to prefer Black counselors (Parham & Helms, 1981).

Environmental Satisfaction Questionnaire (ESQ). The ESQ is a questionnaire designed to gather specific information regarding the fit between university students and their environment and, thus, does not have psychometric properties. This questionnaire also indicates the amount of perceived stress within each part of the environment (Corazzini, Wilson, & Huebner, 1977). A statement regarding ethnocentrism was also included in the ESQ.

Demographic Questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed to obtain information on age, sex, marital status of parents, parental income, religious affiliation, and self-reported health.

Procedure

Following the administration and mailing of the instruments, all students identified as having elevated depression, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation (i.e., scores greater than 8 and 18 on the HS and BDI and a score of 1 or greater on the suicidal item) were referred to their univer-
sity counseling centers. Eleven such students were identified, with 3 from the PWU and 8 from the PAAU.

RESULTS

To assess the comparability of samples on demographic variables, descriptive one-way analyses of variance were conducted and found to be nonsignificant between the two PVAMU samples. The two PVAMU samples were then combined and compared with the TAMU sample. There were no significant differences between the TAMU and the PVAMU samples on sex, socioeconomic status, parents' marital status, religious activities, and size of hometown. They did differ on the class variable, with the PVAMU sample including more underclass students than did the TAMU sample, \( F(1, 199)=8.76, p<.003 \). In addition, there was a significant difference between the two groups on living arrangements. More PVAMU students lived with their parents, whereas more TAMU students lived with roommates, \( F(1, 187)=11.63, p<.0008 \).

A 2 (PVAMU students, TAMU students) \times 4 (freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) analyses of covariance, using socioeconomic status as a covariate, was performed to test the first, second, and third research hypotheses. There were no significant differences revealed between the PVAMU and TAMU samples on depression, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation as measured by the BDI, the HS, and the suicidal item on the BDI.

The two groups did differ on their stress scores as assessed by the LES and the UAS. Regarding the LES, a significant main effect for group was found with the PVAMU students scoring higher on positive stress than did the TAMU students, \( F(1, 183)=17.69, p<.0001 \). A significant main effect for group was also revealed on the total stress score with the PVAMU students scoring higher than did the TAMU students, \( F(1, 183)=13, p<.0004 \).

Similarly, there were no significant differences found between the two groups on the UAS total alienation score, the meaninglessness score, and the powerlessness score. A significant main effect for group, however, was demonstrated on the social estrangement subscale with the students at TAMU experiencing more social estrangement than did the students at PVAMU, \( F(1, 176)=11.24, p<.001 \).

Findings from the RIAS were used to test the third hypothesis predicting higher Preencounter racial identity attitudes for the TAMU sample and higher Immersion-Emersion racial identity attitudes for the PVAMU sample. Although a significant difference was barely missed on the Preencounter racial identity scale, \( F(8, 180)=1.97, p<.0527 \), the means were in the predicted direction with the TAMU students scoring higher \( (M=19.17) \) than did the PVAMU students \( (M=17.51) \). As hypothesized, there was a significant main effect for group found on the Immersion-Emersion racial identity scale, \( F(1, 178)=11.53, p<.0008 \); PVAMU students scored significantly higher than did the TAMU students. Interestingly, the two groups did not differ on the Encounter scale, although they did differ significantly on the Internalization scale with the PVAMU students scoring higher than did the TAMU students, \( F(1, 173)=7.28, p<.0094 \).

Correlational analyses, based on the RIAS and the RSE, were performed to test the fourth hypothesis. Pearson correlations revealed a non-significant relationship between Immersion-Emersion attitudes and self-esteem. Preencounter attitudes were found to be negatively related to self-esteem, \( r(198)=-.29, p<.0001 \). Internalization racial attitudes, however, were positively related to self-esteem, \( r(191)=.24, p<.0009 \), whereas a nonsignificant relationship was found between Encounter attitudes and self-esteem.

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to test the fifth hypothesis predicting that feelings of alienation, environmental dissatisfaction, and ethnocentrism would be more significantly correlated with psychosocial stress, depression, hopelessness, low self-esteem and Preencounter racial attitudes for TAMU students than for PVAMU students. A model using feelings of alienation, environmental satisfaction, ethnocentrism, parental income, class, and group membership was used to predict the dependent variables of total stress score, depression, hopelessness, self-esteem, and Preencounter racial identity attitudes.

When total LES stress score was used as the dependent variable, results of the regression analysis indicated that 8% of the variance was explained by the model, \( F(6, 182)=3.96, p<.0009 \). Partial correlation coefficients for group membership, \( F(1, 182)=17.89, p<.0001 \),
and parental income, \( F(1, 182) = -6.91, p < .0092 \), were significantly related to total stress score. These correlations indicated that PVAMU students had higher total stress scores than did the TAMU students, and that the higher a student’s parental income, the lower a student’s total stress score.

The full regression model with depression (BDI score) as the dependent variable was also significant with 12% of the variance explained by the independent variables, \( F(6, 182) = 5.52, p < .0001 \). The lower a student’s score on the UAS scale (i.e., stronger feelings of alienation), the more depressive symptoms reported. Similarly, when hopelessness (HS) was used as the dependent variable, 10% of the variance explained by the independent variables was also significant, \( F(6, 182) = 4.78, p < .0002 \). The feelings of alienation variable (UA total score) was again the most significant predictor, \( p < .0001 \). In other words, the more alienated a student felt, the higher was his or her hopelessness score.

When self-esteem was used as the dependent variable, 14% of the variance was accounted for, \( F(6, 182) = 6.38, p < .0001 \). Feelings of alienation again emerged as the sole predictor, \( F(1, 182) = 29.59, p < .0001 \). The positive correlation indicated that the less alienated a student felt, the higher was his or her self-esteem. Finally, when Preencounter racial identity attitude was used as the dependent variable, 16% of the variance explained by the independent variables was significant, \( F(6, 179) = 7.27, p < .0001 \). Although group was not a significant predictor, feelings of alienation did predict Preencounter racial identity, \( F(1, 179) = 25.90, p < .0001 \). This inverse relationship revealed that the lower a student’s score on the UAS (i.e., the stronger the feelings of alienation), the higher his or her Preencounter racial identity score (see Table 1).

Post-hoc analyses of covariance were conducted on the items of the Environmental Satisfaction Questionnaire. A 2 (TAMU students, PVAMU students) \( \times 4 \) (freshmen, sophomores, 

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### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>TAMU&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt; Students</th>
<th>PVAMU&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt; Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( M )</td>
<td>( SD )</td>
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<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>7.02</td>
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<td>Hopelessness</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>1.69</td>
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<td>Suicide item</td>
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<td>0.39</td>
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<td>Life Experiences Survey</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total stress score</td>
<td>22.38</td>
<td>17.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive stress</td>
<td>11.97</td>
<td>8.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative stress</td>
<td>10.41</td>
<td>12.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Alienation Scale</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total alienation score</td>
<td>60.92</td>
<td>13.15</td>
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<td>Meaninglessness</td>
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<td>Powerlessness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social estrangement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Racial Identity Attitude Scale</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Preencounter</td>
<td>19.17</td>
<td>5.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encounter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Immersion-Emersion</td>
<td>18.46</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalization</td>
<td>34.77</td>
<td>5.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Satisfaction</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Living conditions</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American studies</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of isolation</td>
<td>1.56</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnocentrism</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>1.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opportunity to date</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>23.24</td>
<td>3.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>TAMU = Texas A&M University.  <sup>b</sup>PVAMU = Prairie View A&M University.

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Note. Scale ratings for Depression are 0-3; for Hopelessness, 0-1; and for Suicide item, 0-3. Scores for the Life Experiences Survey range from extremely negative (0) to extremely positive (6); for the University Alienation Scale, from strongly agree (0) to strongly disagree (4); for the Racial Identity Attitude Scale, from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (5); and for the Environmental Satisfaction Questionnaire, from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (4).
findings suggest that primary prevention programs need to be developed to help African American students cope more effectively with stress in both settings. An interesting difference was obtained between the two student groups regarding the number of students referred to their counseling centers. There were 2.5 times more students referred from PVAMU (n=8) than from TAMU (n=3) due to elevated scores on the BDI and HS. Students at the PAAU may have been more willing to express such psychological concerns because of the knowledge that they could gain support and encouragement in that context.

In summary, we would like to emphasize the limitations involved in generalizing our findings to other institutions. This study focused on a sample of African American students attending two state universities in Texas. It is the case, however, that many of our findings (i.e., regarding psychosocial environmental factors and personal variables) have been corroborated by other investigators (e.g., Parham & Helms, 1985; Suen, 1983). Future studies need to incorporate longitudinal approaches to assess the effectiveness of supportive, educational and multicultural, and primary prevention programs designed to combat African American students' psychosocial stresses, particularly on PWU campuses.

REFERENCES


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REFERENCES


