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Influence of Racism on Minority Students' Mental Health and Academic Performance

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Abstract: This literature review summarizes, analyzes, and evaluates a selection of 15 recent research articles regarding the influence racism has on minority students' mental health and academic performance. All the literature used here was published between the years 2010 and 2021. Of the studies contained in this work, the majority addressed the topic of racism and how it influences student mental health, with an emphasis on minority stress and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or trauma symptoms. Another portion looked at how racism influences academic performance. The literature shows that higher exposure to racism produces negative mental health, which can manifest as minority stress, PTSD and trauma symptoms, or addictive issues. The research also highlights how identifying as Black often makes African Americans feel alienated at predominantly White colleges and universities (PWCUs). Microaggressions aimed at them have a direct influence on dropout rates, school participation, and grades. Coping strategies used by minority groups can have a mixed effect, but being a member of a supportive church is shown to have a positive effect.

In 2020, African Americans made up only 8.3% of students who took an AP exam nationwide, which is only a 1% increase from the percentage who took the same exam in 2006. Without proper access to challenging coursework, these students suffered from lagging academic achievement and reduced college attendance rates (Education in a Pandemic, 2021).

For generations, minorities have had to navigate the school system, whether their socioeconomic status landed them in a poorly funded public school or a more prestigious, predominantly White school. With the rekindling of the Black Lives Matter Movement in 2020, and the rise in hate crimes on Asian Americans due to the spread of COVID-19, the attention of the masses has been brought to scrutinize the conditions of minority populations and the effect racism has on them.

As the welfare of minorities (with an emphasis on African Americans) became a hot topic once again, a small pool of new research emerged looking into the effects racism may have on these populations in regard to education and mental health. Although this new wave of research is small, the content of these studies lays the groundwork for future research and begins to shed light on how learning under a school system that previously only catered to White students impacts minorities. The new research also analyzes possible ways minority students learn to cope, as well as how institutions can

continue to fill in the gap to help minorities truly fit in and reach their potential. The purpose of this literature review is to review the most recent studies regarding racism and its effects on students' mental health and academic achievement.

This review is organized into two general sections looking at students' mental health and academic achievement, respectively, and each section will cover the respective major subtopics related to them. The majority of these studies were gathered from PsycARTICLES which were accessed online through the McKee Library at Southern Adventist University. Any other articles were taken from quality sources found on Google. The key terms used to find the literature were *racism; African-American; minority; student; academic performance; mental health; self-esteem; stress; and ethnic-identity*.

Influence of Racism on Minority Students' Mental Health

Due to the sometimes intense and compounding impact racism can have on minorities, the long-term effects may surface as PTSD or trauma-like symptoms. Similarly, exposure to racism can produce minority stress and depression.

Influence of PTSD and Trauma Symptoms

The Black Lives Matter Movement in 2020 brought to light the reality that racism still has a significant impact on minority populations, who have to endure a high amount of negative racial experiences. These experiences compound and bring about higher mental distress, which may present as PTSD symptoms in people with higher levels of exposure (Pieterse et al., 2012). In a study by Boyraz et al. (2013) they observed that this continued exposure to racial discrimination may compound and surface as trauma- or PTSD-like symptoms. However, of the African Americans who participated in the study, the percentage who displayed trauma or PTSD symptoms was comparatively low overall. Pieterse et al. (2012) concluded that the reasoning behind this was due to the idea that African Americans expect to be treated poorly, which acts as an emotional buffer. However, this does not dismiss or undermine the frequency, intensity, or other lasting impact these racial experiences may have. In Cavallieri and Wilcox's (2021) study, they concluded that 74% of their sample (African Americans entering college) had experienced at least one potentially traumatic event, and 20% reported lifetime exposure to trauma and met the PTSD diagnosis criteria.

Minority Stress and Depression

The mental repercussions of exposure to racism does not only compound to appear as PTSD-like symptoms but can also lead to higher levels of stress and have a negative impact on self-esteem. Minority students at Predominantly White Colleges and Universities (PWCUs) reported higher levels of stress than those at HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), due to the lack of a nurturing environment for minority students and higher exposure to racism (Greer & Brown, 2011). In an older study by Pieterse et al. (2010), they found that exposure to racial microaggressions can produce added worry about future employment. Black participants reported higher worry compared to Asian participants, while White participants reported the lowest score. Additionally, the nature and atmosphere colleges promote cater to the majority, and students are expected to overcome microaggressions and thrive in school on their own, which leads to higher stress. Furthermore, all types of microaggressions (except

environmental) influence stress and depression symptoms (Torres-Harding et al., 2020). In another study (Wei et al., 2010), it was shown that minority stress added to and/or predicted depressive symptoms; this stress then compounds on top of the regular stress experienced by every race. The pervasiveness of racism was illustrated in a study by Volpe et al. (2020), where they concluded that racist acts can happen even in the home of the minority student and are often perpetuated by institutions like schools or take the form of a personal attack toward them. It was also shown that boys experience more direct discrimination, while girls experience subtle discrimination (Cogburn et al., 2011).

Emotional Labor and Coping Strategies on Minority Students Mental Health

Emotional labor is a newer term that is used to explain a relationship dynamic in which a worker constrains their feelings to accommodate others in a social environment. Kelly et al. (2021) applies the term emotional labor to represent the social dynamic between Black women (who are the workers or performers), White faculty and peers (the customers), and HWCUs (the institutional management). The results showed that using emotional labor usually resulted in anger, exhaustion, and feeling alienated from their peers. However, as displayed in a study by Cavalhieri and Wilcox (2021), being subjected to racism and classism seemed to act as a buffer, as the exposure forced African Americans to develop ways to cope.

Greer and Brown (2011) found that students who attempt to address racial issues on campus are at high risk for mental health issues. Disengaging from easy-to-ignore acts of racism reduced minority stress levels; however, there still may be long-term mental health effects. Alternatively, Negrete and Hurd (2021) looked at the use of system-justifying beliefs in college minority students and discovered that it initially boosted student self-esteem. However, in the long term it had the opposite effect and led to internalized negative stereotyping. Another study conducted by Kim (2017) looked at religion's impact on minority mental health and concluded that meaningful involvement in religious activities, where they received congregational support, promoted well-being and positive mental health due to a shared sense of identity. Support from the church, however, is not the only way minorities can feel connected to a group. In a study looking at how African American hair plays a role in their identity, Onnie et al. (2021) showed that when African Americans brought their hair up in conversation in terms of acceptance, they had a more positive look on their identity and even used hair as a way to demonstrate complex situations or obstacles.

Influence of Racism on Minority Students' Academic Performance

Feeling connected to campus plays a large role in student retention, involvement, and grades; however, many minority students feel alienated due to microaggressions. Additionally, experiencing a potentially traumatic event negatively impacts minority female students' retention rates (Thelamour et al., 2019; Torres et al., 2020; Boyraz et al., 2013).

Campus Culture and "Fitting In"

Greer and Brown (2011) assessed that school type plays a large role in minority academic performance, and HBCUs' nurturing environments help students work

harder to achieve higher goals. Being told racist beliefs—like the idea that one is inherently less capable mentally than majority peers—directly impacts academic performance. Enduring microaggressions, such as having more encounters with police or being labeled as criminal or dangerous, also has a negative impact (Torres et al., 2020). Johnson and Strayhorn (2022) observed that 56% of their sample of black male graduate students experienced subtle forms of discrimination and microaggression from peers and college faculty—some of these remarks included slurs and expressed doubt over their status as a graduate student. Thelamour et al. (2019) observed how connected African Americans felt on campus and concluded that those who strongly identified as Black felt less connected to campus. Immigrants did not feel this way and were rejected by American-born Blacks. The effects of White faculty and peers upholding white-supremacy roles and ideals were associated with Black people shifting to make White peers more comfortable at the expense of their mental health (Kelly et al., 2021).

Grades, Involvement, and Drop-out Rates

Boyras et al. (2013) studied the impact of minority students having been through a potentially traumatic event and its effect on female Black students' first-year drop-out rates. In the same study, they showed that women who had a low high school GPA and were enrolled in a PWCU were at a higher risk of dropping out. However, males have a slightly different experience. Gendered racial discrimination aimed at boys and men result in lower academic performance and GPAs (Cogburn et al., 2011). Johnson and Strayhorn (2022) observed that the men in their study were often overlooked or denied access to opportunities for further academic advancement or awards in favor of their White peers with equal or lower qualifications. The proposed explanation for this phenomenon was that mediocrity is associated with minorities, and thus they tend to be looked over in favor of those perceived as more worthy. Additionally, Johnson and Strayhorn noted that a positive and supportive faculty-student relationship is imperative for student growth and achievement, yet those who participated in this study reported fewer positive interactions with faculty.

Critique of the Literature

This literature review looked at research articles published within the last decade regarding the influence racism has on minority students' mental health and academic performance. The main topics addressed were racism and how it influences student mental health, minority stress and PTSD or trauma symptoms, and academic performance. The conclusions were that higher exposure to racism produces negative mental health, which can manifest as minority stress, PTSD and trauma symptoms, or addictive issues (Pieterse et al., 2012; Boyras et al., 2013; Cavallieri & Wilcox, 2021). These studies also showed how identifying as Black often made African Americans feel alienated at PWCUs, and the microaggressions aimed at them have a direct influence on dropout rates, school participation, and grades (Thelamour et al., 2019; Boyras et al., 2013).

Of the limited pool of studies that include college students regarding this topic, many of them had a limited sample in which Whites outnumbered the minorities. For example, the study conducted by Pieterse et al. (2010) consisted of 55% White, 23%

Asian, and 15% Black participants. Similarly, study samples often consisted of mostly women, despite the desire to study men in tandem. Salami et al.'s (2021) study sample consisted of 74% female participants. In general, there was a lack of studies looking at the relationship between racism and academic performance, as the focus seemed to be on mental health alone. This is a missed opportunity, since the involvement of minorities in higher education has been stagnating over the last decade (Education in a Pandemic, 2021). Additionally, the dates in which these studies were carried out are fairly spaced apart. A decent amount of the relevant research on the topic of race, academic performance, and mental health are over eight years old, thus weakening the strength of new research on the topic.

These studies highlight important connections regarding how exposure to racism manifests in the lives of minorities. With this knowledge, educators and clinicians can adapt their method of interacting with minority students, so they can better help these students and not further perpetuate their struggles. Additionally, these studies addressed the factors that influence how connected these students feel on campus. This is important, as colleges often boast diverse campuses yet fail to provide proper support for minorities to feel safe and motivated to remain in school.

Agenda for Future Research

Future researchers should take special care to ensure that their sample includes a sufficient number of minorities as compared to White participants when looking to analyze the influence racism has on minority populations. Similarly, some interview-based studies only consisted of participants from a specific city. This limits the scope and perspective of the participants' responses as they come from a centralized area, thus complicating possible assumptions about the population based on the study results. In order to have a more potent sample, having participants from more than one city or state would broaden the sample. Study samples also predominantly comprised women, which hampers studies when looking at both genders due to the disproportionate amount of data gathered from the female group compared to the male group. Future research should aim to include more men in their samples. Lastly, there is a distinct lack of research looking at the influence of racism on minority students' mental health. More research should be conducted looking at the influence racism has on dropout rates, at-risk students, and academic achievement and performance as a whole. New research should look at Black students' academic performance and mental health at Christian PWCUs and HBCUs and compare the data to that of Black students who attend non-Christian PWCUs and HBCUs to examine the impact a Christian environment may have on minority student outcomes.

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