The Myth of the Black Monolith: Reconstructing the Black Identity on College Campuses

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There are three main groups within the Black community and the African Diaspora: Africans, Caribbean's, and African Americans. However, there are other groups; within this paper, these groups will be mentioned regarding universities within the United States. Black immigrants make up a significant portion of our society in the United States. In 2016, 4.2 million Black immigrants were living in the United States. Approximately 1 out of every 10 Black people are foreign-born (Anderson & López, 2020). In student affairs practice, there is a constant push for racial and ethnic diversity among the college population (Martin, 2020), especially in the wake of racial unrest. How does this push apply to Black students? Is there a particular type of Black student this messaging refers to? There is a typical image of what a Black person looks like and their perceived ethnicity. There are multiple ethnicities within the Black community aside from African Americans, yet in the U.S., Black ethnic groups are told they are Black and African American. The umbrella term "Black" obscures Black immigrants' ethnicity and erases their background when these same Black immigrants present themselves in the United States.

When race and ethnicity are used interchangeably, it can skew our understanding of what it means to be Black and have an ethnicity other than African American. Even though Black immigrants may distinguish themselves from African Americans, is there a shared racial experience? Within this body of text, it is argued that there is a shared racial experience among the Black community regardless of ethnicity. As it relates to higher education, colleges and universities need to support Black students in searching for their racial and cultural identity beyond society's perception of their identity.

There is a search for racial and cultural identity beyond society's perception. Colleges and universities are meant to serve as microcosms of society and inform the development of students regarding their identities. As it pertains to racial identity and Black students in higher education, there are layers informed by racial identity theories, assimilation theories, and relationships formed within the Black diaspora. Ultimately, this paper will identify student development theories, apply those to the related literature on the subject matter, and eventually develop conclusions that disprove the monolithic nature of Black student support.

When referring to populations in this text, African Americans will refer to those born within the United States who are Black. Caribbean Immigrants will refer to those born in the Caribbean and emigrated to the United States who are Black. Lastly, African Immigrants will

refer to those born in Africa and who emigrated to the United States and are Black. "First generation-immigrant" will refer to those who emigrated to the United States. "Second generation-immigrant" will refer to the children of first generation-immigrants.

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory can provide much-needed context. Social identities refer to socially defined groups in which a person's characters indicate membership. Social identity development refers to how people come to understand their social identities and how these identities affect the different parts of their lives (McEwen, 2003). Social identity theory relies heavily on social structures as well as psychology. When Black individuals come to the United States, they enter an established racial context that is typically different from their country of origin. In this case, Americans place meaning on Black identity and act based on assumptions and stereotypes for both Black immigrants and African Americans. There is a history of American enslavement and systemic racism projected upon Black immigrants that do not apply to them. With other groups within the United States, there is a malleability of racial identity that Black people do not have, just based on phenotypic features that Black people have. This proves that race is a perceived social identity with multiple inputs from different parts of society and is grounded in social construction, stratification, and creates a caste system based on skin color (Patton et al., 2016). There are four levels of social identity development: Individual, relational, collective, and material (Patton et al., 2016). To a degree, each level influences another. Collective identity mainly focuses on ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc. (Patton et al., 2016). Collective identities imply community, and in this matter, the African American identity can be placed upon individuals whether they wish to be a part of this community.

Along with the African American identity, stereotypes are also placed upon Black immigrants. The individual does not solely establish social identity; it is set by those in proximity as well. "Aspects of self that other people, not just the individual, evaluate, and make judgments about '' (Patton et al., 2016). The process mentioned previously describes the way in which identify formation takes place. This confirms the concept of social identity place not being an exclusively intrinsic process but one that involves those within proximity.

Racial Identity Theory

Racial and Cultural Identity Development (Sue & Sue, 2003) provides a framework for different racial identity theories applied in the context of the United States. These theories were developed on Black people who primarily identified as African American and is used in levels.

The first level is Conformity. At this level, individuals are actively engaged in white culture and have negative internalizations of their racial and ethnic identity. The next level is Dissonance. At this level, racialized experiences begin to not align with the White dominant culture nor the expected outcomes. The third level, characterized by exploration of one's racial and ethnic identity, is Resistance & Immersion. Some individuals will begin rejecting alignment with the dominant culture and, instead, start identifying further with their racial and ethnic culture. These individuals will continue to reject the dominant culture because they do not fit within it, and their experiences do not correspond. In the fourth level, Introspection, people begin trying to balance the dominant culture and their own racial or ethnic culture within themselves. Those who continue this intensive reflection enter the final level of Synergistic & Awareness. At this level, people begin to bridge the gap between the dominant culture and their heritage. They accept themselves and appreciate other groups' contributions and recognize that their racial identity is one aspect of their identity as Black immigrants live in the United States and discover that they are not immune to racial violence. In turn, this identity theory model may not account for all the experiences of immigrants. This model was developed from the experience of African Americans and can only be applied to that one individual community within the larger community of Black people. Immigrants' racial identity development does not occur in the same context as American-born Black people.

Immigration Context and Identity Theories

Within the conversation of Black immigration, it is crucial to explain why people immigrate to the United States. Political rhetoric on immigration is concerned with the willingness to migrate, and not necessarily the amount of distress, instability, and exploitation that leads to immigration (Rice, 2012). Images of perceived American living are projected in these countries of origin, and indirectly, these populations are encouraged to emigrate to the United States. These images fed to these populations are representations of White Americans and their attainment of this perceived American dream. The discussion of who can achieve the American dream based on racialized inequality is an image not given or a conversation in the portrayal of the American zeitgeist. Black immigrants come to the United States for an opportunity, but they confront racial realities.

Assimilation Theory

Assimilation is how immigrants are absorbed into the dominant culture around them. When discussing the role immigrants play in their socialization into racial groups within the United States, the Segmented Assimilation Theory (Xie & Greenman, 2011) can provide the necessary context for understanding immigrants' challenges when assimilating into communities

within the United States. Segmented Assimilation Theory argues that social contexts matter. Portes & Zhou (1993) propose assimilation is an unequal process since inequalities exist within our society based upon race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

There are three paths in which immigrants can assimilate. Path one, straight-line assimilation, refers to immigrants being integrated into mainstream American society and included within White, middle-class America. Path 2 is classified as Downward Assimilation*.* This is when immigrants are socialized within the urban underclass. The final level of assimilation is Selective Acculturation. Selective Acculturation is the "deliberate preservation of the immigrant community's culture and values, accompanied by economic integration" (Xie & Greenman, 2011, p. 967). At its core, Segmented Assimilation is the ideology that there are multiple ways to become American. In many cases, immigrants are not socialized within the same contexts. These pathways are not strictly accounted for in immigrant communities; however, these theories and patterns help us make sense of the realities immigrants can face when coming to the United States.

Literature

The way social identity is placed upon Black immigrants, the intergroup tension of the Black community, and how and why Black immigrants will distance themselves from African Americans theory plays a role in our understanding of the complex nature of racial identity development in immigrants. Literature has gone from focusing on the development of racial consciousness in Black people to centering on what makes Black people develop racial lenses differently (Mangum & Rodriguez, 2018). With this came the research on Black ethnicities and how these experiences align in the United States. A central theme within the study was that the experiences of African Americans, Black Caribbean people, and Black Africans could be different. Research indicates that when immigrants do not think of themselves as Black Americans, they begin to distance themselves from African Americans to avoid dangerous stereotypes and ultimately downward mobility (Waters, 2001). This distancing can result in anti-African American sentiments. Intergroup dynamics form and reinforce biased ideas that African Americans are inferior. Literature has begun to pursue this group dynamic and how African Americans, Black Caribbean, and Africans operate in the United States under intense racial stratification.

Social Identity Formation

The social identity of African Americans, and their history, is projected onto Black immigrants based on phenotypic features; Black immigrants are then given the title of "Black Americans." Even though this population is told they are Black Americans, they cannot relate

and often have different experiences than African Americans. Black immigrants will use distancing techniques to avoid racial stereotypes and discrimination associated with being Black in the United States (Benson, 2006). Depending on where a particular Black immigrant is from, race can hold different meanings and operate differently in the United States (Benson, 2006). Immigrants carry the native country's racial context in addition to the U.S. context.

Even though Black immigrants might not align themselves with African Americans, they still experience the racial stratification African Americans face. Other populations with racially ambiguous phenotypes have options about how they identify themselves. This seems to be how other groups distance themselves from Blackness, such as Puerto Ricans and Dominicans who do not appear dark-skinned (Itzigsohn et al., 2006). Skin color alone dictates how someone is perceived, and thus, racialized in the United States, confirming race is based upon perception. Eventually, after years of racial stratification and racial discrimination, Black immigrants began to align themselves with the interests of African Americans. However, they might still carry their ethnic identity with themselves as well (Benson, 2006).

Social identities are formed by how people are perceived and how people see themselves. When it comes to racial identity within the United States, many Black immigrants identify themselves with their ethnicity before their race to distinguish themselves from African Americans (Jones & Erving, 2015). This stems from fear of stigmatization from White people and Downward Assimilation. Black immigrants are indirectly instructed to differentiate themselves from their African American counterparts by using cultural clothes or distinct accents and avoiding Black Americans altogether (Carter & Hall, 2006). As social identities form and push and pull our societies further, Black immigrants are pressured to establish themselves as American and even further as Black Americans. There is also a pressure to abandon their culture and take on an African American identity (Mangum & Rodriguez, 2018). It is the expectation that when immigrants come to the United States, they must conform to the identity of the majority. Conformity is expected, but there is resistance since Black immigrants do not want to be perceived as African American. Adopting a Black American identity would mean limiting their chances at an opportunity in the United States.

Implications for Second Generation Immigrants

The children of Black immigrants navigate complex structures as they begin to define themselves within a society of racial stratification and rigidly defined labels. Authentic identity is questioned as students explore their racial and ethnic identities. Are children too African American? Or are they too Caribbean/African for their immediate communities?

A central theme within the development of second-generation immigrants is this idea of

living in limbo between cultures. Within, *Identity Constructions and Negotiations Among 1.5- and Second-Generation Nigerians: The Impact of Family, School, and Peer Contexts* (Awokoya, 2012), the Nigerian experience is described. This study took college-aged participants, 1.5 generation and second-generation immigrants from Nigeria, and interviewed them on their experiences navigating what it means to be African, Nigerian, and to some extent, African American. In the discussion of identity development, it is mentioned that first-generation immigrant parents constructed both the African identity and the African American identity and presented both to their children (Awokoya, 2012). There were concerns about the loss of their Nigerian culture. The African American identity is considered wrong and detrimental to their child. While the African identity is being praised at home, in their other immediate environments, such as school, the African identity is associated with primitivism (Awokoya, 2012). At the same time, these African children cannot fully relate to their African American peers on any basis beyond their skin color. Students attempting to navigate both identities run into roadblocks where their social identity is questioned within themselves and within constituencies around them (Awokoya, 2012). Parents held a considerable amount of weight when enforcing their cultural agenda, and their African children were not allowed to be African American.

African parents expressed the need for cultural integrity, but unfortunately, this came with its problems of promoting anti-African American rhetoric (Awokoya, 2012). Earlier in this paper, it was mentioned that media consumption plays a role in how Black ethnicities see African Americans. It is described that African parents would emphasize the cultural differences by calling African Americans lazy based on their media consumption (Awokoya, 2012). Would these second-generation African immigrants have to sever their ties to Africa and become African American? Or would they pick the other side that maintained their African identity but isolated them in different settings that were not mainly African?

The central theme of identity confusion was highlighted within, *In Search of an Authentic African American and/or Black Identity: Perspectives of First-Generation U.S.-born Africans attending a Predominantly White Institution.* This case study explored the concept of the Black identity with U.S.-born Africans attending a predominantly white institution. In an interview, one of the participants mentioned, "You look like them, but you're not part of their actual tribe" when describing the tension between Africans and African Americans (de Walt, 2011). The Africans that stand at this middle ground have feelings of confusion regarding their identity. Africans born in Africa were considered "real" Africans while their African peers would tell those born in the U.S., "You're Black. You're not *really* Ethiopian. That's a culture that you just try to be in" (de Walt, 2011, p. 490). Being perceived as Black American while being African has its implications

of identity confusion. When it comes to the U.S.-born Africans attempting to claim the African American identity, they are conflicted because one of the primary perceived markers of the African American identity is the legacy of American slavery (de Walt, 2011).

Within *Challenging American Conceptions of Race and Ethnicity: Second Generation West Indian Immigrants* (Butterfield, 2004), the experience of Caribbean immigrants' identity development is described and characterized as "contextual fluid." Like the one prior, this study took college-aged, second-generation Caribbean immigrants and posed racial and ethnic identity development questions. Whether or not these immigrants identified as African American or as Caribbean-American depended upon whom they referred to in conversation (Butterfield, 2004). Second-generation young adults catered their responses to the audience. When dealing with strangers, research suggests that these second-generation immigrants identified as African American to protect their culture from ridicule and other forms of racism from those who were non-West Indian (Butterfield, 2004). When identifying themselves as African American, they encounter many cultural differences that they must navigate that ultimately, they did not understand. When considering who was African American, second-generation Caribbean immigrants noted a context they were missing regarding the knowledge of African American culture and influence in the United States, such as the Civil Rights movement (Butterfield, 2004). Second-generation Caribbean Americans feel guilty for not knowing much about the fight for equality in the United States, thus furthering the cultural divide between African Americans and Caribbean Americans. Caribbean Americans reconcile their identity differences by labeling themselves as racially Black and Caribbean as their ethnic identity. (Butterfield, 2004).

The findings confirm the dissonance second-generation Black immigrants feel when navigating multiple identities and different contexts. Being African or Caribbean at home would mean something different when identifying as such outside of the home and in the eye of the public. Second-generation immigrants would be labeled as not African or Caribbean enough while not fitting in with their African American peers. Multiple factors tug and pull at second-generation immigrants trying to navigate the cultural differences between African American culture and their native culture. The research findings understand that these identities do not have to exist opposing one another but can exist simultaneously (Butterfield, 2004). Conversations surrounding ethnic and racial identity topics imply a fixed, dichotomous nature to how someone identifies when identity is contextually fluid and never fixed or constrained. Through social identity theory, the understanding of race and ethnicity, and the experiences these second-generation immigrants have had, it's clear that identifying with African American culture in some capacities does not negate someone's African-ness or Caribbean-ness. Instead,

these identities can coexist.

Implications for Higher Education

When it comes to understanding the populations of students who are currently being encouraged to go to college, higher education professionals must treat disadvantaged populations as priorities for their diversity, equity, and inclusion plans. Every Black student is not African American, and assuming such can result in tensions between students. With every Black student being different, they will interpret their surroundings differently and thus need equitable resources.

Identity Exploration & Affirmation

College retention researchers identified three factors that play a role in the retention of Black students: faculty support, family support, and, finally, Black student affinity spaces (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). With specific attention to the student affinity groups, students of color will gravitate towards communities that validate their experiences while attending a predominantly white institution (Griffin et al., 2016). Student-organized affinity spaces exist as a way for students to find their community on their campus, whether in their ethnic group or racial group and serve as a service to combat the lack of racial community that can appear on majority-white campuses. With spaces like this existing, there are barriers to the full actualization of these ethnicity-based organizations. Allowing the students full autonomy over these organizations and how they are governed can dramatically improve the willingness to participate and cultivate a student space that these groups may need. Racial and ethnic affinity spaces allow for student identity exploration to exist and allow students to feel affirmed in their identity and experiences.

Second-generation students may identify with African Americans while having Caribbean or African parents. This gives students the agency to pick their affiliation with the Black community and find a community within the greater Black population. As mentioned above, students identify with being Black but cannot relate to one another in an authentic way (de Walt, 2011). Doing so allows students to recognize diversity within the Black community and creates a more well-rounded peer education for non-Black students. Having only one Black student organization can be detrimental as students explore their identities. A "one size fits all" approach to this racial and ethnic work is not only more damaging but can lead to identity confusion. There should be multiple organizations that provide service and community to all Black students that intermingle and work together for solidarity and to reconcile intergroup tension. Race and ethnicity do not oppose each other, but they are two different things. Race and ethnicity can coexist, and students do not have to pick one or the other, but students should know and

recognize the differences between the two and be assured they do not have to choose one or the other. As student affairs practitioners, systems should be in place to promote different ways of identifying oneself regarding race and ethnicity.

Clear Commitment to Black Students & Reconciling Oppressive Structures

Given the structures in place at colleges and what serves as barriers to Black students, there should be a clear commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion and the protection and validation of Black and Indigenous populations at their college or university. Higher education has been traditionally made up of White students, and a lot of the resources are catered to serve this population. Taking a critical look at the resources offered to students can expose different perspectives in which Black students may not feel comfortable utilizing essential resources that they could benefit from.

Being transparent about the racial climate on the campus can serve Black students as well. In describing their college, Black and Brown students noted that their schools were not structurally diverse (Griffin et al., 2016). Understanding the institutional barriers that prevent structural racial and ethnic diversity supports students. It breaks those same barriers down so colleges can provide students with a more well-rounded faculty, staff, and administration who can help students further. Coming to terms with the historical context of every college can be a challenge. Still, it also provides students with much-needed security in their experience and allows students to recognize that the college or university does indeed take their history of exclusion seriously. Colleges and universities should continue to identify populations that have been historically discriminated against and disenfranchised and then provide them with opportunities to succeed in college and thrive within their experience.

While addressing the social inequalities and actively dismantling racist systems that operate on campuses, higher education professionals should provide multiple outlets for students to relieve their race-related stress. Whether that is having additional counselors for students to report to that specialize in minority stress or having support systems for these students. This would ensure that Black students would receive the support needed to finish a degree and increase retention rates among Black students. Students mentioned in *Challenging American Conceptions of Race and Ethnicity: Second Generation West Indian Immigrants* (Butterfield, 2004) that they would limit the scope of describing who they were ethnically to protect their culture from unnecessary scrutiny. This scrutiny exists because racism and xenophobia are still present on college campuses. The threat of racism prevents students from fully actualizing their cultural identities in their college years.

Future Research

Racial Consciousness in Immigrant Populations

Future research should ask questions of racial consciousness in these communities. When do immigrants begin to perceive themselves as Black and a part of the Black community in the United States? Current research mentions time as a factor in the development of racial consciousness. However, there should be additional variables that contribute to immigrants understanding the racial context of the United States. Immigrants begin to accept that they cannot exist outside of the racial conditions and are affected by them.

To further this idea of racial consciousness development, research should look at Black immigrants' socialization into their communities. It could be helpful to do comparative research with Black immigrants from various backgrounds, other immigrants of color, international students, and white immigrants. Researchers might ask if and how these groups understand the racial context of the United States before and after their arrival. It is told that Black immigrants begin to understand it over time and as they encounter racism in the country. However, white immigrants are not facing the same racial stratification as the community of Black immigrants. Is it possible for white immigrants to assimilate into white communities fully? Do they begin to fit this traditional model of whiteness? Is interpersonal xenophobia reserved for immigrants of color? Is there a racial consciousness formed in white immigrants?

Intersectionality and Identity Exploration

Future research should focus on the intersectionality of identities as they amplify or mitigate identity exploration within race and ethnicity. Socioeconomic status can decide where an immigrant family lives within the United States. That influence can determine how immigrant students perceive themselves within a racial and ethnic lens. Religion, sexuality, gender, and other identifying factors can influence how one sees their racial and ethnic status.

Limitations

Upon reflecting on the current research and the literature offered, there was a lack of research specializing specifically in the development of racial consciousness in immigrants, as it relates to educational settings and situations. As this research relates to specific immigrant groups, the generalization of Africans erases the cultural differences in each specific country. This also points to the lack of research on Africans regions as it relates to their experience in the United States. This logic can also apply to those within the Caribbean. There may be cultural similarities, however, they are not the same grouping of people. Generalizing can cause more harm than good as it relates to these populations.

Conclusion

The current push for more diverse populations to attend predominantly white institutions

frequently overlooks the political nuances of racial and ethnic identity in higher education. When there is a push for Black students, who are they talking about? Do they want African American students, Black Caribbean students, or Black African students? Grouping students together in their diasporic group can result in identity confusion. Not every Black student is African American, and assuming such displays the invisibility of other Black ethnicities and encourages the disillusion of the Black community.

Social identity theory mentions that identity is placed upon an individual by the society around and within oneself. Going into the racialized context of the United States, immigrants are automatically placed within the racial categories and immediately socialized as Black Americans. Non-Black people will begin the process of assuming an immigrant's race. While the immigrant may not know it, they are being associated within the racial categories of the United States. Eventually, immigrants identify with their ethnicity to distinguish themselves from African Americans, separating themselves from the negative stereotypes associated with Black Americans. They internalize these negative stereotypes and project them into the world. Since Non-Black populations perceive Black people, Black Caribbean's and Africans in a similar manner. Thus, these populations face the same racial discrimination that African Americans face. Even though these immigrants are not African American, these damaging stereotypes exist for Black people overall, not just exclusively U.S.-born Black Americans who are descendants of enslaved people. Thus, racial consciousness is formed, and immigrants perceive themselves as Black and Caribbean or Black and African.

This research shows a racialized experience of Black people in the United States. Under white supremacy, every Black body within the United States is subjected to racist realities. Black immigrants can attempt to distinguish themselves from Black Americans. However, this reality exists for every Black person in the United States. With the provided understanding of racial identity theory, assimilation theory, and the literature, we understand how damaging assumptions of the Black community can be. It can expose tensions within the community and lead to identity confusion among students and children. With the number of Black immigrants coming into the United States, we must continue to break down this idea of the Black monolith and continue to encourage diversity within the Black community.

The shared racial experience also exists within the realm of higher education. Practitioners should provide spaces where students can safely participate in identity exploration and identity affirmation while breaking down the barriers that keep these spaces hidden or nonexistent. Continuing to fight for the placement of African American students in higher education establishments and fighting the xenophobic rhetoric that plagues communities of

Black immigrants should be central in welcoming these populations at colleges and universities. Abolishing the Black monolith should be centered in conversations on the enrollment of Black students and the retention of these students. Understanding the different ethnic identities and their group relations within the Black community can improve policies, procedures, and overall campus climate regarding equity, diversity, and inclusion.

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