

# **The Role of Stereotype Internalization in Defining Normative Behavior Among Black Students in Predominantly White Institutions**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this research is to determine whether some African American students enrolled in a predominantly white institution (PWI) act out ascribed behaviors as a result of perceived group norms. Thirty-two African American students (18 male and 14 female) at a PWI were surveyed. Respondents were questioned about: (1) their perceptions of how African Americans behave; (2) how they personally behave; and (3) how their immediate peer group behaves with respect to ascribed black stereotypes. Initial results revealed a strong correlation between the respondents' behavior and their perception of how their peers and other African American students behave. These findings suggest that some black students at this PWI may internalize at least some stereotypes regarding their behavior and academic performance, and behave accordingly.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The title of a recent book asks, "Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" (Tatum, 1997). An underlying assumption prevails in the United States that African Americans are a naturally homogenous group. What has not been addressed is whether the negative self-perceptions of students affect normative group behavior within the black academic community. It has been proposed by some that attitudes and perceived norms apply independent and additive effects on behavioral objectives, which, in turn, influence obvious behavior (see Terry, 2000). The question addressed here is: how are these attitudes and perceived norms created and maintained within the African American student population? Individual perceptions and their effects on intergroup behavior need to be considered when seeking the answer to this question.

Intergroup behavior and social identity models (e.g., Tajfel, 1971) assert that individuals categorize their social world into distinct social groups. In these models, "group" is defined as a collection of individuals assembled on the basis of internal and external criteria (Tajfel, 1982). Further, choosing a group to belong to plays a significant role in the creation of an individual's identity.

The need to assimilate into a group, in addition to how an individual chooses a social group, is described in Tajfel's (1971) social identity and intergroup behavior model. Tajfel's position is that social categorization is a function of society, and a group serves the individual as a function of his or her social identity (Tajfel, 1982). Students entering a new environment such as

college are likely to position themselves into a group or social category as a function of their growing self-identities (Chavous, 2000).

Social identities classify an individual's place within a community's social order (Tajfel, 1971). A social identity establishes what kind of social, economic, and political privileges will be given to an individual (Chavous, 2000). Tabbye Chavous (2000) claims that in the United States, one's phenotype is the determining factor in a person's social identity. Chavous states that "race essentially is used as a defining category for students for comparative purposes." This implies that African American students entering a PWI may be singled out and identified according to their physical appearances.

One reaction that may take place within an individual who is incapable of leaving his social category is to interpret the attributes of the group so that its unwelcome features, (e.g., low status) are either justified or made acceptable through reinterpretation (Tajfel, 1974). This research proposes that black students at PWIs may interpret ascribed stereotypes as normative, positive, "black" behavior.

Cross' (1971) model of psychological nigrescence, or black self-actualization, infers a Negro-to-Black conversion experience (Parham and Helms, 1985). Nigrescence theory proposes that there are five distinct stages to the "nigrescence" phenomenon. These stages, as described by Cross (1971), are preencounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment. Immersion-emersion is a phase in nigrescence in which the African American idealizes what he or she believes to be "black" or "blackness" (Cross, 1971, 1978). Individuals immerse themselves in everything they consider to be "black:" "...Everything of value must be black or related to blackness" (Parham and Helms, 1985). Black students at PWIs are likely to be engaged in the immersion-emersion stage of racial identity development due to their age range and minority status, and are more likely to assert their "blackness" while experiencing immersion-emersion (Parham and Helms, 1985a).

Cross posits that his model of the African American identity process is one that occurs under conditions of perceived oppression (Cross, 1971, 1978). Further, and "[a]ccordingly, self-actualization and feelings of self-acceptance were preceded by feelings of inferiority, shame, guilt, and rage, as well as feelings of black pride" (Parham and Helms, 1985). Black students, in the manner of African American stereotypical behavior, may act out internalized feelings of inferiority, shame, and rage. For example, black students on PWIs may criticize those who receive "A's in their classes for trying to act "white." They unknowingly assert their ascribed mental inferiority, and maintain group stereotypes.

The repertoire of beliefs concerning blacks in America can be construed as Eurocentric idealism (Parham and Hale, 1985). William Helmreich concludes that in the U.S., there exists an attitude, often shared by both whites and blacks, that African Americans are inferior to European Americans. Negative stereotypes, then, have become the definition of what it means to be black in the U.S. This, in turn, may develop into normative group behavior in some situations or under some circumstances.

According to social norms theory, individuals monitor and change their behavior in order conform to perceived norms (Berkowitz, 2000). These perceptions may not reflect reality, but an individual's behavior, as well as the consequences of that behavior, is real nonetheless. A number of particular behaviors may be ascribed to a specific group, such as those behaviors traditionally assigned to African Americans (Miller, et al. 2000). This behavior distinguishes the group from others, and also serves to solidify group relationships by giving them something that they share in common (Miller, et al. 2000). When considering black students at PWIs, these in-group behaviors provide the norm for blackness, black behavior, and/or black identity that is the measure of the in-group.

As already noted, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between perceived group norms and individual behaviors for black students at PWIs. The research was

undertaken at a predominantly white university campus. During the 1999-2000 school, only 466 of approximately 17,000 students were African Americans.<sup>1</sup> The numbers alone suggest that black students entering the institution may experience feelings of anxiety, isolation, and fear, which may, in turn, initiate identity crises. This may then lead to the assertion of an individual's ethnic identity. This inquiry postulates that black students entering such an environment are likely to experience the personal and social dilemma of self-identity actualization and undergo the immersion-emersion stage presented in Cross' nigrescence model.

## **METHODS**

Thirty-two self-identified African American students participated in the study. Eighteen students were male, and 14 were female. Eleven respondents were between the ages of 18-20, ten were between the ages of 20-22, four were between 22-24, and seven were age 25 and above (N=32). A majority of the participants were within the age range indicated by the immersion-emersion stage of the nigrescence model. Grade levels of the participants included seven freshmen, seven sophomores, seven juniors, six seniors, and one graduate student.

The subjects were recruited from Black student groups, from the Black Student Center at the university, and by recommendations from those who had already agreed to participate. To insure anonymity, respondents placed completed packets in a plain, sealed, unmarked envelope. The sealed envelopes were then collected by group representatives and/or placed in the investigators' mailboxes.

Questionnaire items (see Appendix) were developed from existing literature on stereotypes (Helmreich, 1997) and from responses to focus groups regarding Black behavior and identity on campus. Respondents were queried on: (1) their perceptions of how African Americans behave; (2) how they personally behave; and, (3) how their immediate peer group behave with respect to ascribed black stereotypes.

## **RESULTS**

The following provides an initial exploratory analysis of the data. Correlational analyses were conducted between items representing respondents' behaviors and respondents' perceptions of their peers' behaviors, and respondents' perceptions of behaviors of African American students. These analyses were grouped with items addressing the same topics, behaviors, or attitudes. The correlation (r) between items, the mean responses and standard deviations for each item, and the level of significance for the correlations using a two-tailed test of significance are reported below.

The findings reveal a strong positive correlation between the respondents' use of the Multicultural Center and the respondents' perceptions of other African American students' use of the Multicultural Center (see Table 1). Among these respondents, use of the Multicultural Center was minimal, and they report that use of the center by their peers is also low. These results suggest that some African American students expect low attendance of both the Multicultural and African American centers by other black students. This expectation, in turn, appears to express itself in a personal lack of motivation to utilize the tools provided by the school to aid the students with their academic goals.

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<sup>1</sup>These figures were obtained from the Registrar's Office of the institution in which the students were enrolled.

**Table 1.** Perceptions of frequency of use of Multicultural Student Centers

|                                 | <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>Standard Deviation</b> |
|---------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|---------------------------|
| 1. By African American Students | 1.0      |          |          | 2.0983      | 1.0883                    |
| 2. By respondents               | .290     | 1.0      |          | 2.4688      | 1.3909                    |
| 3. By respondents' peers        | .656**   | .673**   | 1.0      | 2.6000      | 1.3544                    |

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

There was a strong positive correlation between the subjects' choice of speech and dress patterns and the subjects' perceptions of how other black students enrolled at the school speak and dress (see Tables 2 and 3). The tendencies of the means are in accordance with the postulation that young African American students may separate themselves from "white" students through behavior and outward appearances. Speech and dress patterns may, in turn, result in self-segregation created by a lack of communication between black and white students. The feelings of isolation from the white community may, then, further enforce the expression of black stereotypes by African American students.

**Table 2.** Perceptions related to dress

|                                | <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>Standard Deviation</b> |
|--------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|---------------------------|
| 1 By African American Students | 1.0      |          |          | 3.8750      | 1.0999                    |
| 2 By respondents               | .617**   | 1.0      |          | 3.6250      | 1.0701                    |
| 3 By respondents' peers        | .704**   | .803**   | 1.0      | 3.3975      | .9483                     |

**Table 3.** Perceptions related to language

|                                | <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>Standard Deviation</b> |
|--------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|---------------------------|
| 1 By African American Students | 1.0      |          |          | 4.1250      | .7931                     |
| 2 By respondents               | .398**   | 1.0      |          | 3.8387      | 1.0032                    |
| 3 By respondents' peers        | .605**   | .491**   | 1.0      | 4.1250      | 0.9755                    |

As with the previous items, there was a strong positive correlation between the respondents' attitudes regarding finding employment and work ethic and their perceptions of other black students' attitudes about employment and work ethic (see Tables 4 and 5). Most respondents were of the opinion that employment rate and work ethic among the African American students was low. The belief that black students choose to refrain from obtaining and keeping employment could be another expression of internalized negative stereotypes within the black student population.

There was a strong negative correlation between the respondents' reported personal use of marijuana and the respondents' perceptions about other African American students' use of

marijuana (Table 6). Responses reflect the opinion that many black college students, including their peers approve of and engage in smoking marijuana. However, many respondents reported that they did not personally smoke marijuana.

**Table 4.** Perceptions related to employment

|                                | <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>Standard Deviation</b> |
|--------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|---------------------------|
| 1 By African American Students | 1.0      |          |          | 2.9375      | 1.1341                    |
| 2 By respondents               | .502**   | 1.0      |          | 3.4063      | 1.2916                    |
| 3 By respondents' peers        | .663**   | .648**   | 1.0      | 3.2813      | 1.0545                    |

This finding is in direct opposition to the predictions. We expected a positive correlation between the respondents' use of marijuana and their perceptions of other African American students' use of marijuana. The perception that other black students engage in illegal drug activity while the respondents' refrain from using suggests that these students possess negative beliefs regarding black students and drug use. Discrepancies such as these may obstruct the internalization of a positive self-image among African American students and impart a negative image of black students to the general student population. The findings raise questions about perceptions regarding marijuana use among black students.

**Table 5.** Perceptions related to work ethic

|                                | <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>Standard Deviation</b> |
|--------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|---------------------------|
| 1 By African American Students | 1.0      |          |          | 3.5161      | 1.1341                    |
| 2 By respondents               | .363**   | 1.0      |          | 4.1613      | 1.0984                    |
| 3 By respondents' peers        | .693**   | .574**   | 1.0      | 3.8065      | 1.1950                    |

**Table 6.** Perceptions related to marijuana use

|                         | <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>Standard Deviation</b> |
|-------------------------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|---------------------------|
| 1 Peers approve of use  | 1.0      |          |          | 3.4063      | 1.2664                    |
| 2 By respondents        | -.527**  | 1.0      |          | 1.4375      | .5644                     |
| 3 By respondents' peers | .372**   | -.553**  | 1.0      | 2.6875      | 1.3060                    |

In summary, the responses provide support for Norms Theory (see Berkowitz, 2000). There is a consistent pattern of association between the respondents' behavior and their perceptions of how their peers and other black students behave. This is also consistent with intergroup behavior models proposed by Tajfel (1974). As indicated in Tables 1-6, stereotypical attributes ascribed to African Americans have been reflected in the reported behavior and perceptions of the respondents (Parham and Helms, 1985, Cross, 1971, 1978). Respondents' perceptions of normative "black" behavior are consistent with several negative stereotypes

(Helmreich, 1997). This suggests that black students, at least at this PWI, may internalize some stereotypes regarding speech, dress, deviant behavior, and academic performance.

Despite the consistent pattern of support there is one anomaly in the findings that requires discussion. That is, the negative correlation regarding marijuana use. The results indicate a surprising discrepancy between the respondents' behavior and their perceptions of other African American students' behavior. This raises an interesting question: Why were other stereotypical behaviors viewed as normative "black" behavior and followed by participants, but not marijuana use? It is possible, for example, that marijuana use isn't as prevalent in the black student body as the respondents believe. It is also possible, of course, that there is some error in the self-reports of personal marijuana use.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

"Fitting in" with social groups and feeling part of a whole is something that all people encounter during their adolescent and early adulthood years. However, for black students at PWIs, fitting in takes on a completely different meaning. Students that are members of ethnic minorities base many of their friendships on ethnicity rather than other commonalities. The assumption of racial homogenization of minorities in the U.S. prevails at PWIs, and the ascription of negative stereotypes to black students is in some ways, a given. What is disturbing about these findings is the suggestion that some negative stereotypes are viewed as normative, and that some endeavor to live up (or down) to these standards.

Further analysis of stereotype internalization of African Americans is required in order to explore this issue thoroughly. Studies suggest that revealing the true nature of the peer group behavior to a subject may result in a change of perceived group behavior and external expression (Berkowitz, 2000). It is possible that normative behavior within the black student body at PWIs can be redefined to include positive affirmation of African American successes, as well as an acceptance of the differentiation that exists within the black community. These changes in attitude would be essential to a positive model of perceived "black" identity. An unbiased model of African American behavior is essential to the establishment of a positive self-image in black college students enrolled in PWIs.

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## APPENDIX

- 1.1 What percentage of African American students at WSU utilize the Multicultural or African-American Centers?
1. 0-20%      2. 20-40%      3. 40-60%      4. 60-80%      5. 80-100%
- 1.2 How often do you utilize the services offered by the Multicultural and African American student centers?
1. Not at all      2. Very little      3. No opinion      4. Use somewhat      5. Use very much
- 1.3 How often do you observe those of your immediate peer group utilizing the services offered by the Multicultural and African American student centers?
1. Not at all      2. Very little      3. No opinion      4. Use somewhat      5. Use very much
- 2.1 To what extent do the people of your ethnic community at WSU speak in a different manner or use different vocabulary than the Anglo students at WSU?
1. Not at all      2. Very little      3. No opinion      4. Somewhat      5. Quite a bit
- 2.2 To what extent, on average, do you communicate or speak in a different vernacular than the Anglo students at WSU?
1. Not at all      2. Very little      3. No opinion      4. Somewhat      5. Quite a bit
- 2.3 To what extent have you observed those within your immediate peer group at WSU speaking in a different manner than the Anglo WSU students?
1. Not at all      2. Very little      3. No opinion      4. Somewhat      5. Quite a bit
- 3.1 To what extent do the people in your ethnic group at WSU dress differently than Anglo WSU students?
1. Not at all      2. Very little      3. No opinion      4. Somewhat      5. Quite a bit

- 3.2 To what extent do you dress in a different manner than Anglo students at WSU?  
 1. Not at all    2. Very little    3. No opinion    4. Somewhat    5. Quite a bit
- 3.3 To what extent do the other members of your immediate peer group dress differently than the Anglo students at WSU?  
 1. Not at all    2. Very little    3. No opinion    4. Somewhat    5. Quite a bit
- 4.1 What do you believe is the percentage of people within your ethnic group at WSU who are employed or actively seeking employment?  
 1. 0-20%    2. 20-40%    3. 50-75%    4. 75-90%    5. 90+%
- 4.2 What is the average percentage per year attending WSU that you have been employed or actively seeking employment?  
 1. 0-20%    2. 20-40%    3. 50-75%    4. 75-90%    5. 90+%
- 4.3 What is the average percentage per year attending WSU that your friends have been employed or actively seeking employment?  
 1. 0-20%    2. 20-40%    3. 50-75%    4. 75-90%    5. 90+%
- 5.1 To what extent do you believe that those within your ethnic community at WSU work hard at their jobs?  
 1. Not at all    2. Very little    3. No opinion    4. Somewhat    5. Quite a bit
- 5.2 To what extent do you work hard at your job while at WSU?  
 1. Not at all    2. Very little    3. No opinion    4. Somewhat    5. Quite a bit
- 5.3 To what extent do the members of your immediate peer group at WSU work hard while employed?  
 1. Not at all    2. Very little    3. No opinion    4. Somewhat    5. Quite a bit
- 6.1 To what extent do those of your immediate peer group approve of marijuana use?  
 1. Do not approve    2. Somewhat disapprove    3. No opinion    4. Somewhat approve    5. Approve wholeheartedly
- 6.2 If you were at a party where there was marijuana being smoked, would:  
 1. Take a hit and keep going    2. Just say no    3. Reprimand those smoking for engaging in illegal drug activities
- 6.3 To what extent do the members of your peer group engage in smoking marijuana?  
 1. Not at all    2. Very little    3. No opinion    4. Somewhat    5. Quite a bit