Institutional Identity and Self-Esteem among African American Males in College

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Social identity theory maintains that one's self-concept is partially determined by the social groups to which the individual belongs. Using this as a theoretical framework, this study examined the relationship between multiple dimensions of institutional identity and self-esteem in 411 Black male college freshmen. It was hypothesized that self-esteem would be related to institutional identity and that there would be no differences in this relationship amongst students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and those attending Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). The results suggested that there was a relationship between self-esteem and institutional identity; however, this relationship varied according to institutional type. Although a sense of belonging predicted self-esteem in all institutions, perceptions of others' appraisal (public regard) of their institution predicted self-esteem in HBCU participants, while one's personal appraisal (private regard) of their institution predicted self-esteem in PWI participants. The self-concept of Black male freshmen at PWIs appears to be explained by an internalized appraisal of their institution, while the opposite occurs in Black male freshmen at HBCUs. Further investigation may also suggest a difference in this relationship according to different HBCUs.

The state of African American males in the American education system is an issue that has to be addressed, especially considering that the system is failing them. In 33 states, African American males are the least likely group to graduate from high school. They are also punished more severely than their White counterparts and are more frequently removed from general education because of misclassification (Schott, 2010). Scholars have theorized and explained the phenomenon of the underperformance of African American males in schools in a few different ways. For example, Steele and Aronson (1995) theorized that African Americans underperform, in part, due to the existence of negative stereotypes alleging intellectual inferiority. This theory,

stereotype threat, refers to being in a situation in which individuals stand the chance of confirming a negative stereotype about a group to which they belong. In this case, African American males suffer from a negative stereotype (i.e. African American males do not perform well academically); therefore, when reminded of the stereotype in the context (i.e. schools), they underperform. Furthermore, Steele (1992) explains academic underperformance in African Americans. He proposes that a lack of a relationship between academic self-esteem and global self-esteem will occur possibly due to the perpetuation of stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1992). As a result of this process, academic disidentification occurs, whereby students dis-identify with their educational pursuits; instead, detaching their academic performance from their self-esteem. This problem is endemic to Black students, as they regularly encounter stereotypes in the classroom. For example, in a study with over 1,000 male adolescents, Osborne (1997) found that African Americans were the only racial/ethnic group to dis-identify with academics.

Experiences with Racial Prejudice on College Campuses

Some African Americans face a great deal of racism once they reach the post-secondary level. Sedlacek (1987) found that many are rejected for admission because of their scores on culturally biased standardized tests or they are admitted because of "lower standards" which results in reduced self-esteem. African American students consistently report that teachers are prejudiced against them. Prejudice can manifest itself in a number of ways including lower expectations, excessively positive reactions to work quality, and reduced quality of communication. There is also a serious shortage of positive role models in that there are very few Black faculty and staff at colleges and universities. Campus environments are often seen as confusing and hostile to African American students because of the contradictory norms and the tolerance of people with racist or bigoted attitudes. This is important to consider, given that the manner in which African Americans adjust to predominantly White institutions affects how they will view their place in America (Sedlacek, 1987). Considering many of the things African American students have to struggle through, it is understandable that they may feel unwelcome on many college campuses.

A study by Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Hagedorn (1999) was conducted to assess the role that perceptions of discrimination and prejudice play in the college adjustment of African American and White students. This longitudinal study collected data from 1,454 first year students attending four-year institutions. The study was based on the Student Adjustment Model (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). The model proposes that students' experiences at their institution are shown in two domains: social and academic. The social domain consists of experiences with other students (e.g., attending campus events, participation in clubs) and informal experiences with teachers. The academic domain consists of experiences with teachers and more formal experiences with fellow students (e.g., participation in study groups). Commitment to the institution is enhanced to the extent the students see their institution as instrumental in valued outcomes. Their findings suggested that African Americans are less likely to have positive experiences with peers and that those experiences were dominated by perceptions of discrimination. This exposure to discrimination lowered their commitment to the institution. The results of these studies and the data on African American males can be further tied together by Social Identity Theory (Cabrera et al, 1999), described in the next section.

Social Identity Development

Social identity theory assumes that part of the self-concept is defined by the social groups to which one belongs. Individual's categorize themselves into social groups and evaluate the value of these groups. Thus, the social identity consists of information about the groups to which one belongs and an evaluation (good group, bad group, or neutral rating) of the groups (Trepte, 2006). Given that people have a natural drive to maintain and enhance their self-esteem (Baumeister, 2009), they want to develop positive social identities. As such, a process begins in which the individual compares their in-group to relevant out-groups. This, in combination with the drive to enhance their self-esteem, causes in-group biases and intergroup differentiation. The extent to which individuals identify with the group determines the extent to which all value connotations and emotional experiences with the group are associated with the individual as well (Yzerbyt & Demoulin, 2009).

Ethier and Deaux (1994) found that there were two ways that students negotiate their ethnic identity in new contexts. Students with strong ethnic identities become in involved in cultural activities that enhance their identification. Students with less developed ethnic identities perceive more environmental threat and show decreases in their self-esteem; this lowers their identification with the ethnic group. Also, Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje (2002) found that group-level threat and high group commitment is related to the group attempting to reassert itself in terms of value or distinctiveness. While it is important to look at individuals in unfamiliar contexts, such an examination should also be juxtaposed with how individuals react in familiar contexts as well.

Historically Black Colleges/Universities and Predominantly White Institutions

Allen (1992) looked at the differences in the experiences of African American undergraduates who attended HBCUs and those who attended PWIs. The study used a multivariate approach to examine relationships among many outcomes such as academic achievement, personal adjustment, and social involvement. The total sample size was 2,531 students with 953 from HBCUs and 1,578 from PWIs. The findings suggested that African American students attending PWIs have lower academic achievement in comparison to those that attend HBCUs. They also report lower social involvement and less favorable interactions with their professors. Another interesting finding is that African American females reported higher self-confidence and better grades than African American males. In contrast, Kim and Conrad (2006) found that there was no difference in the mean degree completion rate or the students' Grade Point Average (GPA) between the two types of institutions. This contradicts the study by Allen (1992) which suggested that HBCUs have a more positive impact on African American students. The literature on this matter is mixed and more research needs to be done in order to fully understand the context under which African American students live today and the related outcomes.

There also appears to be minimal research examining African American males' identity development during the transition to college. Much of the aforementioned literature did not frame the issue within the context of social identity theory. Social identity theory would be of value in this research because it could explain how African Americans adjust to college and how that adjustment enhances or diminishes their self-esteem. Furthermore, a multidimensional approach would be appropriate to frame institutional identity, in that social identity development

involves a multi-step process. That is, individuals must 1) become aware of the various groups to which they belong, 2) understand the significance and meaning of belonging to those groups (e.g., privilege or disadvantage; resources held by the group; how the group is perceived by other groups), 3) accept their group memberships or reject their membership and possibly attempt to exit a group (if membership is not based in physical characteristics). The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which institutional identity is related to self-esteem in African American males during their transition to college (i.e., freshmen). It is hypothesized that institutional identity is positively related to self-esteem and that the relationship between the two variables will not differ by institution type (HBCU and PWI).

Methods

Participants

This study included a sample of 411 African American males from 26 PWIs (8 private, 18 public) and 24 HBCUs (13 private, 11 public). Two hundred sixty-one participants attended HBCUs and 150 attended PWIs. Ninety-six percent of participants were between the ages of 17 and 23. The average age of participants was 18.13 years old; 1.4% described their family as very poor, 15.1% described their family as low income, 22.1% as working class, 35.7% as middle class, 19.2% as upper middle class, and 6.5% as wealthy; 42.5% were from an urban environment, 22.9% from small cities, 29% from the suburbs, and 5.6% from rural areas. Median math/reading/writing SAT scores were 1591.80 and all institutions were located in the eastern, southern, and mid-western United States.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via flyers, direct e-mails, and social networking sites. The survey was administered online over three semesters and consisted of demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral questions.   Upon completion of the 20 – 25 minute survey, the participants were given $20 as compensation.

Measures

Institutional identity. This is a self-report measure in which the individual reports the extent to which he identifies with his academic institution and how he feels about his membership in the institution. The Institutional Identity Scale is a 5-dimension scale with three items per dimension and uses a 7-point Likert response scale (1 strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree) (see Appendix).   The *centrality, private regard, and public regard* dimensions are adaptations of dimensions of the same name from the Multi-dimensional Inventory of Black Identity (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). The remaining two dimensions, *belonging* and *bonding*, were created by the authors for this study. The *Private Regard* (α = .738) subscale assesses how positively one feels about his academic institution (e.g., "My college is not a good school"). *Public Regard* (α = .688) assesses how one thinks others feel about his academic institution (e.g., "In general, my college is considered by others to be a good school"). *Centrality* (α = .569) examines how central being a part of the institution is to one's identity (e.g., "Being an incoming student at my college is an important part of who I am"). *Belonging* (α = .579) measures the degree to which one feels a part of the institution (e.g., "I have a strong

sense of belonging to my college"). *Bonding* (α = .573) assesses how connected the individual is to others in the institution (e.g., "I expect to have a strong identity to other students at my college").

Self-Esteem. Six items from the original 10-item *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (α = .826) was used to measure self-esteem. This is a self-report measure in which individuals evaluate their self-worth via their agreement/disagreement with an equal number of positively worded items (e.g., "I feel that I'm a person of worth at least on an equal level with others") and negatively worded items (e.g., I certainly feel useless at times); negatively worded were reverse-coded for data analysis. The items are assessed on a Likert scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Results

Black males at both HBCUs and PWIs reported high levels of self-esteem. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the self-esteem scores amongst these two groups. There was no significant difference in self-esteem scores for HBCU males (M = 3.56, SD = 0.45) and PWI males (M = 3.51, SD = 0.54); t (382) = -.91, p = .36 (two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = -.05, 95% CI: -.16 to .06) was very small (eta squared = .002).

Because the HBCU sample comprised an over-sampling of participants from one particular school of interest (Morehouse College, an all-male HBCU), a one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted along with post-hoc comparisons (using the Tukey HSD test) to explore the impact of school types (Non-Morehouse HBCU, PWI, Diverse PWI, and Morehouse) on levels of self-esteem. There was a statistically significant difference at the p < .01 level in self-esteem scores between Black males at Morehouse (M = 3.64) and other HBCUs (M = 3.45): F(3, 401) = 4.81, p = .00 . Although the statistical test reached significance, the difference in means was rather small (.19 on a scale ranging from 1-4 points). The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .03. There was no significant difference in levels of self-esteem between PWIs and Morehouse: F(3, 401) = 4.81, p = .12.

There were significant differences in levels of belonging (F(3, 401) = 7.12, p = .00), between Morehouse (M = 5.88, SD = .97) and all other institution types: PWIs (M = 5.39, SD = .95), other HBCUs (M = 5.45, SD = 1.16), and diverse PWIs (M = 5.25, SD =.87). Although significant, the mean difference in scores was small, as calculated using eta squared (.05). There was a significant difference in levels of public regard (F(3, 401) =18.76, p = .00) between Black males at Morehouse (M = 6.22, SD = .75) and those at other HBCUs (M = 5.41, SD = 1.38). This was a medium to large effect (.12). Lastly, there was a significant difference in levels of private regard (F(3, 401) = 14.87, p = .00) between Black males at Morehouse (M = 6.60, SD = .68) and those at other HBCUs (M = 5.83, SD = 1.35) with a magnitude of .10 using eta squared.

Relationships between variables were investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients. All dimensions of school identity were strongly correlated to self-esteem: belonging r = .38, public regard r = .36, private regard r = .40, centrality r = .19, and bonding r = .33. Additionally, all dimensions of school identity were strongly correlated to each other. See *Table 1*.

Table 1
Correlation Coefficients for Institutional Identity Dimensions and Self-esteem

	Belonging	Public Regard	Private Regard	Centrality	Bonding	Self Esteem
Belonging						
Public Regard	.428***					
Private Regard	.529***	.679***				
Centrality	.451**	.367**	.507**			
Bonding	.626**	.486**	.582**	.523**		
Self-Esteem	.380**	.359**	.404**	.193**	.330**	
Mean	5.58	5.98	6.27	5.35	5.6	3.53
Standard Deviation	1.03	1.06	1.01	1.16	1.06	0.50

Table 2
Standard Multiple Regression model for self-esteem

Institution Type		ß	Sig.
PWI			
	Belonging	0.33***	.001
	Pub Regard	-0.07	0.52
	Private Regard	0.46***	.001
	Centrality	-0.17	0.06
	Bonding	-0.07	0.5
HBCU			
	Belonging	0.17*	0.03
	Public Regard	0.20*	0.01
	Private Regard	0.1	0.26
	Centrality	-0.06	0.4
	Bonding	0.09	0.29

Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Standard multiple regression was used to assess the ability of five dimensions of school identity (Belonging, Public Regard, Private Regard, Centrality, and Bonding) to predict self-esteem in HBCUs and PWIs (see Table 2). The model explains 31% of the variance in self-esteem among Black males attending PWIs, $F(5, 116) = 10.59$, p<.001. Only 19% of the variance in self-esteem was explained by the model for Black males attending HBCUs, $F(5, 254) = 12.00$, p<.001. Belonging was a significant predictor of self-esteem in both PWI students (β = .33, p<.01) and HBCU students (β = .17, p<.05). Additionally, the greatest predictor of self-esteem in Black males at PWIs was private regard (β = .46, p<.001). Conversely, the greatest predictor of self-esteem in Black males at HBCUs was public regard (β = .20, p = .01).

Discussion

This study hypothesized that institutional identity would be positively related to self-esteem, and that the relationship would not differ by institutional type. Correlation analysis did indeed reveal that each dimension of institutional identity was positively correlated with self-esteem. Regression analysis, however, indicated that certain dimensions of institutional identity weighed more heavily on self-esteem when all dimensions were entered into the model. Specifically, centrality and bonding were unrelated to self-esteem in the regression analysis, but having a sense of belonging to one's institution positively predicted self-esteem among students attending HBCUs as well as those attending PWIs. Belonging is typically seen as central to self-esteem, and is one of Maslow's basic human needs (Maslow, 1970). Regard also predicted self-esteem amongst students and both institution types, but different types of regard predicted self-esteem for the different institution types.

Private regard predicted self-esteem amongst students attending PWIs. This relationship may be a reflection of the sample. The majority of PWI students in the sample attended large public institutions. Students attending these schools receive benefits from going to these large schools. Many have larger budgets as well as cutting edge facilities and infrastructure that compare favorably to the resources of HBCUs. Enhanced resources may explain why these students' self-esteem is most strongly predicted by the private regard dimension of institutional identity. These students may respect and appreciate their schools for having these positive characteristics, which can in turn impact their private regard.

Unlike students at PWIs, public regard predicted self-esteem for HBCUs students. Much like the relationship found at PWIs, this may be related to the sample. Most HBCUs represented in the study were small liberal arts colleges. Unlike large public institutions, these small schools place more emphasis on community service and involvement with the surrounding neighborhoods (Freeland, 2009; Parcarella & Terenzini, 1991). As such, these students may place significant value on how these communities, and the African American community at-large, view their schools; the more positively their school is perceived by the community, the better students may feel about themselves (i.e., higher self-esteem) for attending their school.

Recommendations for Practice

Moderate to high levels of self-esteem has been shown to have several benefits, including but not limited to confidence in doing the right thing, taking the initiative, speaking up in group settings, initiating conversation and making new friends, resisting the influence of others, coping

with traumatic life events, willingness to persist through difficult tasks, overall happiness, and is correlated with GPA (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Diener & Diener, 1995). Thus, having a thorough understanding of the factors that enhance self-esteem is a worthy goal of both individuals and institutions. Although all the dimensions of institutional identity were related to self-esteem, it appears that a sense of belonging to the institution is a strong predictor of African American male freshmen attending HBCUs and PWIs. Consequently, colleges and universities should be sure to create environments that are welcoming and affirming for all students. Practical strategies that may facilitate belonging include 1) positive attitudes and pleasant demeanor among faculty and staff when interacting with Black male students, 2) having events and speakers that reflect the culture and interests of Black males, 3) encouraging Black males to join campus organizations or supporting the development of activities or organizations that are created and maintained by Black males, and 4) placing qualified Black male students and staff in highly visible and influential positions.

Given the strong correlation that belonging was shown to have with private and public regard among the total sample, the aforementioned strategies should also prove effective in raising the levels of both types of regard. The positive impact that private regard has on self-esteem at PWIs, however, suggests that these institutions should place more emphasis on students having a clear and personal understanding of the physical and human assets of their institutions and how these assets are designed to help students succeed. The positive impact of public regard on self-esteem among Black male students suggests that special attention should be paid to communicating the role that HBCUs and their graduates play in improving the communities surrounding HBCU campuses and the larger African American community. Students should be reminded of 1) the rich legacy that HBCUs have of educating high achieving African Americans in various fields, and 2) the significant role that HBCUs played in desegregating educational institutions (e.g., Howard University alumni and faculty's role in Brown vs. Board of Education) and the civil rights movement (e.g., sit-ins by students at North Carolina A&T).

The extent to which students identify with, integrate into, and engage in their respective institutions has been shown to foster many positive outcomes, including enhanced academic performance, retention and graduation (Tinto, 1988, 1993; see Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005 for a review). These and other researchers, however, very rarely examine variables related to institutional identity among Black males, a group of students with less than optimal academic outcomes, but with significant potential to perform on par with the top students in any other racial/gender group. Thus it is imperative that the higher education community pay closer attention to the psycho-social profile that Black males bring with them to campus and how these attitudes and perceptions impact and are impacted by the college experience.

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Appendix

Institutional Identity Scale

1.	In general, my college is considered by others to be a good school	Public
2.	I feel like a stranger when I am on my college campus **(R)**	Belonging
3.	In general, I am glad that I attend my college	Private Regard
4.	Being a student at my college is an important part of who I am	Centrality
5.	I have a strong attachment to other students at my college	Brotherhood
6.	In general, others do not respect my college **(R)**	Public
7.	I have a strong sense of belonging to my college	Belonging
8.	My college is not a good school **(R)**	Private Regard
9.	Overall, going to my college has very little to do with how I feel about myself **(R)**	Centrality
10.	I do not feel a connection with students and alumni of my college when I meet them off-campus **(R)**	Brotherhood
11.	People with whom I interact off campus respond positively when they find out the college that I attend	Public
12.	I feel accepted by other students at my college	Belonging
13.	I am proud to be a student at my college	Private Regard
14.	In general, being a student at my college is an important part of my self-image.	Centrality
15.	It is my responsibility to help another student at my college whenever I can	Brotherhood

Note: "(R) = reverse coded"