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Journal of College Student Development, Volume 48, Number 5, September/October 2007, pp. 509-524 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/csd.2007.0048

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The Black Box: How High-Achieving Blacks Resist Stereotypes About Black Americans

Sharon Fries-Britt    Kimberly A. Griffin

This qualitative study explores the academic and social experiences of nine Black high achievers attending a large public university. Findings indicate that despite their participation in the honors program and high degree of academic ability, Black high achievers felt that they were judged based on prevalent social stereotypes regarding the academic abilities of Black students. These external perceptions pushed students to engage in various behaviors and actively resist stereotypes with their behaviors both in and outside of classroom.

High-achieving Blacks have been described as “the best and the brightest” and are predicted to achieve the highest levels of academic and professional success (Solano, 1987). Indeed, many of these students go on to enroll at and graduate from some of the most prestigious institutions in the country (Bowen & Bok, 1998). Because they are labeled as high-achievers, university staff may assume that academically talented Blacks do not need special support services or that they experience the same issues as academically talented White students (Ford & Harris, 1995; Freeman, 1999; Fries-Britt, 1997). In reality, academically talented Blacks often need and report the desire for services that reflect their specific experiences (Fries-Britt, 1997; Person & Christensen, 1996). In addition to the normal difficulties of college life faced by all students, minority students endure strains that can interfere with their adjustment to college, integration into the campus community, and development of feelings of belonging (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). Despite their increased academic capability, high-achievers continue to be vulnerable to these stresses and may encounter stereotypes about their racial group affiliation and their academic ability (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Smedley et al.; Strommer, 1995).

The purpose of this study was to examine the collegiate experiences of a select group of high-achieving Black students. [In this article the terms high achiever, gifted, and academically talented are used interchangeably and are defined as having superior intelligence that is measurable by IQ and other quantitative tests (Fries-Britt, 1997) and/or exceptional academic performance (Freeman, 1999).] Black high achievers remain an understudied segment of the student population; consequently we know far less about their academic, social, and psychological needs and experiences. Understanding more about the within-group differences in communities of color is important as institutions endeavor to successfully retain and serve a diverse and complex student body. Two broad questions guided this study: (a) how do high-achieving Black students view their academic performance and academic struggles? and (b) What coping mechanisms, strategies, and support structures do high-achieving Black students utilize to relieve the stresses associated with their academic performance?

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Based on the findings of this study, we argue that despite their participation in their campus’s honors program, Black high-achievers are still judged based on prevalent social stereotypes regarding the academic abilities of Blacks. This pushes them to actively resist these stereotypes with their behaviors both in and outside of the classroom. Although this study confirms much of what we already know about Black high achievers, it reveals a great deal about and adds to our understanding of how Black high achievers process their experiences. Importantly, it also offers vivid examples of how these students resist the ways in which Black students are put in a stereotypical “box.” In this manuscript we identify it as a Black box to capture the confinement expressed in their stories and because the box is often a racial box in which their racial/ethnic background limits how their peers and faculty perceive and interact with them. They describe how some peers and faculty see their Blackness and begin to attribute negative characteristics based on assumptions and stereotypes about the Black community. These are the experiences that create the Black box that these high-achieving students consistently resist.

BACKGROUND

Freeman (1999) emphasized that for many academically successful Blacks, dropping out of college is not related to their ability to do college work or their GPA. Rather, highly talented Blacks withdraw from college often because they feel a lack of support and connection to their institution. Person-environment relationships are more closely related to persistence rates for academically talented Black students than actual ability (Ford & Harris, 1995), and dissatisfaction with one’s social life can have a negative impact on grades and other student outcomes (Allen, 1988, 1992; Mow & Nettles, 1990; Person & Christensen, 1996). Unfortunately, it appears that many high-achieving Blacks do not have the opportunity to make social connections with others like themselves. Person and Christensen (1996) found the high-achieving Blacks in their study to be more satisfied with their academic experiences in college than social ones, and 90% of the sample expressed a need for an identifiable Black community. In Fries-Britt’s (1998) study of Black students in a high profile honors program, respondents expressed feeling shunned by both Black and White students at their university: White students doubted Black students’ abilities and claimed that they received opportunities only because they were Black, and Black students believed the Black high achievers thought that they were better than everyone else.

Facing a hostile campus racial climate can also adversely impact the achievement, integration, and retention of high-achieving Blacks. Although all students experience certain life stresses, academically talented Blacks face racism and hostility at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) that White students do not (Fries-Britt, 1997, 2000; Nolden & Sedlacek, 1996; Person & Christensen, 1996; Smedley et al., 1993). Smedley et al. reported that minority students are subject to unique “minority status stressors,” which include being the target of racist acts, having the legitimacy of one’s presence on campus questioned, and feeling pressured to prove one’s cultural identity to same-race peers. These stressors are debilitating to students because they undermine their confidence, heighten their concerns over their academic preparedness for college, and limit their ability to bond to the university. Consistent with this framework, another study found that 53% of sampled Black students at a highly selective institution reported having experienced discrimination and described being followed in bookstores, asked to explain the Black
experience, or expected to portray certain stereotypes (Person & Christensen). These experiences may be particularly difficult for academically talented Black students due to their tendency to be perfectionists and believe in moral order (Lindstrom & Van Sant, 1986).

The racist actions academically talented Blacks are subjected to may be very blatant; however, it appears that there are many instances when the discrimination they face is more subtle. Rather than encountering blatantly racist acts, Black students may find themselves facing subtler judgments and expectations by students, faculty, and staff according to broad social stereotypes. According to cognitive and social psychologists, stereotyping is a natural function that humans employ to categorize individuals into groups that are believed to embody certain characteristics, allowing us to make sense of our environments without consuming more time in gathering information (Fiske, 1989; Stephan & Rosenfield, 1982). Stereotypes, which are often based on interactions with family, friends, and the media, allow individuals to quickly guide their interactions with others by both creating expectancies for a group member’s behavior and giving them a basis for their interactions (Fiske, 1993; Neuberg, 1989; Stephan & Rosenfield). When a specific trait is associated with a group, the members of that group are believed to be homogenous and, therefore, different from other groups based on this trait (Stephan & Rosenfield).

In the larger social milieu, Blacks are often portrayed and stereotyped as criminals, gang members, athletes, and entertainers, but rarely as academics. To some “gifted Black” is an oxymoron; high levels of academic talent are associated primarily with Asian and White students, whereas expectations for the academic abilities of Black students are low (Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998; Steele, 1997). Therefore, although Black students are highly rewarded for their achievements in athletics, many Black students may fear that their academic achievements will be met with doubt, hostility, alienation, or resentment (Harvey, 1986). Overcoming these stereotypical perceptions can add additional burdens to Black high-achievers who are struggling to define their identities, and doubts of the academic abilities and talents of Black students have been found to be particularly damaging to their achievement and self-esteem (Smedley et al., 1993; Solorzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002; Solarzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Steele, 1997).

The research literature documents many instances of academically talented Blacks being questioned about their intelligence, and some academically talented Blacks have reported feeling like they are always being watched and judged by both peers and faculty (Ford, Baytops, & Harmon, 1997; Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Black participants in an honors program described having their academic capabilities doubted and being accused of unfairly gaining access to the benefits and recognition associated with the program by their White peers (Fries-Britt, 1998). Black students attending predominantly White research institutions also reported enduring a less overt form of racism referred to as “microaggressions”; subtle and often unconscious racist acts that cumulatively add stress to the experience of people of color. Blacks reported many instances of peers and professors questioning their academic abilities both in and outside of the classroom and reported sensing that they were seen as being less intelligent students that could not have been admitted to college without affirmative action (Solorzano et al., 2000, 2002).

Students subjected to these stereotypes often attempt to resist and disprove negative assumptions about their intelligence. Solorzano et al. (2002) found that one response of
students who had their abilities doubted was to work doubly hard and show their peers and professors that they belonged. Successful Black students interviewed by Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) shared that they often encountered students who made comments based on stereotypical images of Blacks, and that they felt that they repeatedly engaged in a “proving process” to establish themselves as worthy and academically able both in and outside of the classroom. A high-achieving Black male attending a PWI who was interviewed by Bonner (2001) also reported feeling pressure to be “ten times as smart as everyone else” (p. 11), and that he constantly had to prove himself and his capabilities. High-achieving Black males participating Shaun Harper’s national study also noted that their academic achievement and engagement in campus activities and highly visible leadership positions enabled them to challenge and disprove pervasive stereotypes about Black men held by faculty and staff (Harper, 2005; Harper & Quaye, 2007). Even though there’s some limited understanding of this process of resistance that Black students engage in, especially within the classroom, there’s little understanding of acts of resistance students may engage in outside of the classroom and when interacting with their peers. Further, it is important to give voice to these students as they engage in the process of resistance, creating a richer understanding of these students’ experiences.

METHODS

This study is best described as a sociological multi-case study, which directed the researchers to give attention to the society people live in, social problems, roles individuals play in society, and different classes that individuals fall into relative to their educational experiences (Merriam, 1998). This study was designed to be interpretive—an effort to understand what Black honors students experience in college in relation to research on Black students and their experiences with subtle and overt racism and why they respond in the ways that they do. A sub-sample of the Black students enrolled in the Honors Program at State University served as the respondents in this study. We employed purposive methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) to solicit the sample for this study; students were selected based on their race and engagement in the Honors Program at State University to create a sample that would provide the most insight into this study’s research questions.

Institutional Data

The site for this study was “State University” (pseudonym), a large, extensive research university that serves as the flagship of its state’s public university system. Census data indicates that in 2000, there were over 5 million residents in the state in which the university is located, and the state’s racial/ethnic composition was 64% White, 28% Black, 4% Latino, 4% Asian, and .3% Native American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). State University enrolls approximately 35,000 students (25,000 are undergraduates), and just over 75% of undergraduates are in-state residents. Although not completely proportional, the undergraduate enrollment of State University somewhat mirrors the wider state population: 68.0% of undergraduates are White and 32.0% are minorities. Specifically, 12.0% of undergraduate students are Black, 14.0% are Asian American, 6.0% are Latino/Hispanic, and 0.3% are Native American.

Enrollment in State University’s Honors Program was used as the characteristic that defined students as “high-achievers,” largely due to the rigorous academic standards required to gain admission to this university-wide program. All State University applicants, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender, were
considered on an individual basis for acceptance into the Honors Program if they met the requirements of a 3.0 GPA and 1200 on the SAT. The students who were admitted to the Honors Program for the Fall 2000 semester had, on average, a 4.1 GPA on a four-point scale (students are able to achieve GPAs above a 4.0 by enrolling and achieving As in advanced placement [AP] courses). Further, 50% of students admitted to the Honors Program had SAT scores between 1360 and 1470. In comparison, the average high school GPA of the incoming class at State University in 2000 was 3.72 overall, and 50% of the students had SAT scores between 1170 and 1330.

Student Sample

The sample size was intentionally small because we were interested in interviewing students who were more engaged on campus and in the honors program. We wanted to have an opportunity to interview students who would have a wide range of experiences both in and outside of the classroom. Based on the input of the staff, we identified a total of 9 Black high achievers (6 females and 3 males) who participated in the study. The participants' average age was 19.6, ranging from 18 to 23. Four participants were sophomores, making them the most represented class in this study. The sample also included 2 freshmen, 1 junior, and 2 seniors. All participants were full-time students, though 7 worked part time during the academic year. Six of the students had attended public high schools before attending State University, 2 had gone to private schools, and 1 had attended both public and private high schools. Seven of the students reported having taken AP courses in high school and 4 had participated in SAT preparation courses.

There was significant diversity in respondents' family backgrounds. The reported family incomes of participants ranged from $10,000 to over $150,000. Parents' educational level also varied. Three participants reported that their mothers had obtained high school diplomas, one mother had completed some college, two mothers had bachelor's degrees, and three mothers had master's degrees. Fathers' educational levels were also mixed, with two fathers having completed some high school, two having graduated from high school, one father having completed some college, two with bachelor's degrees, one with a master's degree, and one with a professional degree.

Data Collection

Student participants in this study were recruited from the Honors Program at State University in the spring of 2001. One of the researchers met with a key administrator in the Honors Program to obtain permission to both focus the study on students in the program and obtain an initial list of potential participants who were engaged in the program and might be willing to participate. Identified students were contacted via e-mail and invited to participate in the study. We attended three meetings of the Black Honors Caucus to observe the students' interactions and to understand the concerns that students had about their campus experiences. We also recruited a member of the Honors Caucus to inform students about the project and enlist additional potential respondents.

All students who agreed to participate met individually with one of the researchers. Each participant first completed a short demographic questionnaire and then participated in a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews offer researchers the opportunity to respond to new ideas or emerging worldviews presented by their respondents during the course of the interview (Merriam, 1998). Consequently, many of the core questions were complemented by a series of probing questions that added depth and detail to subjects'
responses and allowed exploration of issues not covered by questions in the protocol. Interviews were 60-75 minutes in length, audio taped, and later transcribed for analysis. In order to ensure their anonymity, all study participants were assigned and referred to by pseudonyms.

Analyses and Instruments

Both qualitative and demographic data were collected from participants. A 5-minute demographic survey about their background and family characteristics was administered before every interview. The primary source of data, however, came from the interview transcripts. The interview protocol was formulated based on a review of the literature on the challenges and experiences of academically talented Black students. Interview questions were composed to assess subjects’ perceptions of their sources of motivation, feelings about their academic transition, views on the prevalence of stereotyping, and opinions about what factors served as barriers to their academic achievement. This protocol was tested in a pilot interview with a Black female student prior to its use in this study.

After all participants were interviewed and their narratives were transcribed, data were manually coded. The research literature on stereotyping and the experiences of academically talented Black students was reviewed to identify recurring themes, from which a coding scheme was developed. We also read through participants’ narratives, adding themes that appeared in these interviews to the coding scheme, and then revisited interview transcripts, applying the codes to organize the data. Once the data were organized, the student narratives were analyzed by utilizing the “pattern matching” technique (Yin, 1994). In this process, data are compared to existing theories and research. Thus, categorized sections of narratives were compared to the findings of studies on student achievement and research on the experience of high achievers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The students in this study expressed a high degree of self-confidence, and they displayed humility when discussing their academic abilities. Although they were proud of their intellectual achievements, they did not feel that they had more talent than their Black peers who were not enrolled in the honors program. A female student expressed this sentiment when she described her academic ability as representing one type of accomplishment but acknowledged that other students excelled in other ways that were equally important. The majority of the students indicated that they did not reveal to others that they were in the honors program; however, if the honors program came up in conversation and someone learned that they were enrolled in the program, they did not try to hide their involvement.

As the students described their encounters on campus with peers and faculty and their experiences as high achievers, several interrelated themes emerged. First, many of the students talked about the fact that they were still the only Black person in a classroom, and they noticed the low numbers of minority professors they encountered on the campus. It also became evident that these students encountered stereotypes about Blacks both in and outside the classroom. Students felt they had to dispel stereotypes and myths about Blacks from peers and faculty and described feeling pressure to behave in ways that are considered “non-Black,” involve themselves in events so that they could serve as a positive example of Blacks, and prove that they were smart so that people would not think they were accepted into the honors program because of affirmative action. Their experiences and
insights illustrated the tensions that often exist for high-achieving Blacks who attend traditionally White institutions and they offered insight into the ways that high achievers cope and deal with the stresses in the environment, especially underrepresentation and stereotypes.

**Challenging Stereotypes and Myths About Blacks**

All participants talked about the stereotypes about Blacks they encountered on a regular basis. Although a few students expressed significant concerns about how their own behaviors may confirm stereotypes, the majority of the students expressed minimal concern about their own individual behaviors confirming stereotypes. On occasion, some students did say that they felt pressure to be aware of their actions and not to exhibit stereotypical behaviors. Usually this pressure surfaced when they were being identified as an honors student in a public forum and/or if they were asked to participate in an event on behalf of the university.

Julian described this well, explaining that he felt pressure to carry himself in a certain way, especially when he was introduced as an honors student. Anna also reported a sense of fear that she might confirm wider societal stereotypes with her behavior. She shared that she would switch the way she communicated based on who was around. Many students who have bicultural abilities and who understand the rules of communication and interaction in multiple communities will switch communication patterns and styles to apply rules and ways of communicating that are accepted in each context. Anna felt that it was important to let people know that Blacks had a range of speaking ability and could use different communication patterns.

Thompson and Fretz (1991) identified these bicultural patterns as coping mechanisms reflective of a student’s ability to manage the demands of a predominately White campus. They suggested that there are a number of adaptive strategies that Black students can employ to be successful in a dominant cultural context. Two are particularly relevant to this study. First, Black students with high levels of communalism tend to be more resourceful and direct in coping in White environments. Hence it is important for Black students to connect with other Black peers to provide them with the support they need to deal with the dominant context. Another coping strategy for Black students is to simultaneously value learning about Anglo-centric stimuli and Afro-centric stimuli. Investment in learning from both of these perspectives allows Black students to relate to the dominant context while protecting their own psychological development and learning about ideas and information germane to the Black culture. Clearly Black students who attend PWIs will continue to be challenged with Anglo-centric stimuli in the social and academic milieu of the campus. However, what may be essential to their success are the opportunities they have to connect to Afro-centric stimuli. These interactions are more likely to happen if there are greater numbers of diverse students and faculty and if the experiences of White students and professors reflect an appreciation and knowledge of both Anglo- and Afro-centric perspectives.

Many students at PWIs will find themselves in a position of being the only or “token” Black student. These situations require them to develop coping skills that allow them to feel comfortable and whole. Nathan shared that sometimes he felt like a “token” when he was asked to serve on various university committees. For the most part he did not mind being involved because he felt that it was important for him to be at the table expressing his ideas and learning from the opinions of others. It was clear that Nathan struggled with his involvement and why he was being invited to
participate. He shared that

I feel like the only reason they want me to be a part of it is because I’m a Black guy and I’m a nice guy. And just because I’m a Black, nice guy doesn’t mean I want to be a part of everything.

Embedded in Nathan’s comment is the pressure he feels to represent a segment of the Black male population that is “nice,” a tame Black man, one that the majority culture can relate to and tolerate. The stereotypes of Black males as hostile, angry, and violent may add to the pressure that Nathan felt to be involved just to demonstrate that there are nice Black males. Not far below the surface however was Nathan’s anger that he may be invited because he is a nice Black guy. Although on one hand he accepted this characterization that he is a nice Black male, he was not willing to be in many respects the token Black male as a part of “everything” on campus. It was more than being a token Black male—Nathan felt particular pressure because he had been identified as a “nice Black male,” as if this characteristic is unusual for Black males. If this was Nathan’s identity, his particularity in the majority community, what options did he have to express his anger or disapproval on these campus committees when issues surfaced that offended him or with which he did not agree? Did he risk losing his role if he ever exhibited other types of emotions than those for which he was rewarded?

Many of the students commented that they liked to disrupt people’s stereotypes by behaving in ways that are considered incongruent with being Black, and they enjoyed seeing the surprise on their peers’ faces when they defied their perceptions. Janice offered the most compelling example of this, saying that she often sang Mozart in Latin while she was taking a shower in the residence hall community bathroom. She knew that as she was singing the song it would attract attention, and she commented that she enjoyed seeing the shock on people’s faces when they learned that it was a Black woman singing Mozart in Latin. She was very aware that she did not fit their image or stereotype of who would be singing Mozart in the shower. Janice was very intentional about trying to be incongruent with stereotypes about Blacks, and her strategy demonstrates the level of effort that some students put into dispelling stereotypes about Blacks and into proving that Blacks have behaviors and abilities that are “normative” and like everyone else (Whites).

To be incongruent with stereotypes about Blacks means that, at some level, these students give up part of what it means to be Black. Stereotypes are in many ways over-exaggerated truths. The problem is the degree to which society over-attributes these truths to a group. Blacks tend to be assigned negative stereotypes associated with the larger Black community, both at the individual and group levels. If individuals felt like they were truly judged based on their own individual actions and not the stereotypes of the group, there might be less of a desire to be incongruent with stereotypes about Blacks. Singing Mozart in Latin was a form of coping for Janice—a way of establishing her own identity and boundaries around what it means to be Black and/or White.

Ashley’s way of dispelling myths and stereotypes about Blacks was by confronting issues in the classroom that seemed to leave out the Black perspective. Whenever she found herself in a classroom where there was a lot of discussion and where different perspectives were shared, Ashley felt like it was important to explain how she felt the subject matter impacted the Black community. She commented,

I feel like there’s a whole other side of it [the topic being discussed] when it’s Black,
regardless of what the topic is... especially talking about history and things like that. You have to feel that you straightened this out. So you always have to kind of explain yourself.

Ashley was comfortable and familiar with discussing her perspective on Black issues. She felt that it was important to be able to talk to them [Whites] maybe in a way they will understand it, or explain it to them in a way they understand it so that they understand where I am coming from or where the majority of Black people are coming from.

Ashley’s commitment to helping White students understand more about the Black experience was influenced by her early experiences with a White roommate who had little exposure to Blacks prior to college.

[My roommate] never went to a school with a Black person before. . . . She always had so many stereotypes. . . . she definitely thought that Black people did tend to do worse on the SATs just because they were dumber. . . . So we used to talk all the time about all the different types of stuff, about whether it would be, like our economic statuses, our families, our schools, and where we came from. . . . I think that she learned more from me than she could have learned from any course on[sic] the university. And she did, she did say she had learned a lot.

Ashley’s attempts to educate her White roommate may be viewed as desirable by some of her White peers. In fact, interactions across race and culture have been supported by the literature as instrumental in the academic and social development of students (Hurtado, 2001; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). Although benefits are likely to accrue for Ashley and her roommate, it is important to assess the degree to which Ashley’s energy was devoted to educating her roommate, peers, and faculty, thus diverting her focus away from her academics. These repeated conversations may produce different outcomes for Black and White students over time. In a study examining the experiences of Black students who attended a PWI versus a historically Black college or university (HBCU), Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) found that students at the HBCU tended to describe interactions that cultivated their energy, whereas Black students at the PWI had their energy diverted from academics. A Black male student described how the HBCU helped developed confidence and gave him the “adrenaline” to accomplish his goals. The Black students attending the PWI gave examples of having to explain to and educate their White peers.

To the extent that Black students have a primary role in explaining cultural differences and serving as cultural informants on college campuses, they are likely to encounter negative attitudes that can foster conditions that impede their academic progress. Over time, they may be typecast as hostile for always raising “racial issues,” labeled as intellectually narrow-minded because they continue to place race on the agenda, and more likely to become socially isolated as their peers perceive interactions with them as confrontational.

Proving Academic Worth and Ability

As the students discussed their experiences, it became evident that, in addition to feeling that they needed to disprove negative stereotypes, they encountered pressure to prove their academic ability to White peers and, to a lesser extent, demonstrate their racial affiliation to Black peers. First, they felt like they had to prove to their White peers that they were admitted into the Honors Program because they were smart and not just because they were Black. Some students commented that this constant proving process added a layer of
doubt to their sense of worthiness. Black students on White campuses have their academic competency questioned in part because of the commonly held misperception that affirmative action policies and efforts to diversify college campuses have eroded quality and excellence. Thus, it is assumed that Black students continue to be admitted to college because of policy initiatives like affirmative action and diversity and not because they are actually qualified scholars (Chang, 2001; Milem, 2001).

Several students shared accounts of how people assumed they had not earned their place in the Honors Program. Ashley noted that she had people questioning her or making statements about her admission into the program. She reflected that people made comments to her like, “Oh, you’re going to get in there because you’re Black . . . or thinking that everything that I was getting was because I was Black—that was the only reason.” Similarly, Nathan, who was in his senior year, had a student say to him that he had received a scholarship and was accepted to a prestigious Ivy League institution only because he was Black.

Ashley explained that, in some cases, there was a degree of competition between her and her White peers because they would ask about her scores on exams. In cases where the White students’ scores were higher they would inform her and then ask her “how come they didn’t get into the program,” as if scores were the only criterion for selection. This question is precisely the type of question and interaction that Steele (1992; Steele & Aronson, 1995) described as inducing stress and anxiety. Steele (1997) submitted that threat of stereotype “is in the air” once students begin to talk about scores on exams and admission into the program, particularly within the context of the Honors Program. Most students are aware that Blacks tend to perform lower on standardized exams. Consequently, the assumption is that the Blacks in the Honors Program are likely to have lower scores than White students, yet they were admitted into the program. The truth is that in some cases Black students’ scores were higher than their White peers in the Honors Program and in other cases lower. These types of interactions and discussion about scores divert Blacks students’ energy away from academics, and they send a message to Black students that they are not perceived as capable.

The students in this study were confident that they were as prepared as other students in the Honors Program. However, the questions they encountered from White peers over time tended to chip away at their self-confidence causing them to internalize feelings of self-doubt. These findings are consistent with findings of other studies (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Smedley et al., 1993), which demonstrated that Black students feel that their academic ability is constantly questioned. Perhaps the most compelling example of stereotype threat came from Janice, who felt like she encountered resentment from her White peers because she was in the Honors Program. Her perception was that individuals who were closed-minded believed she was in the Honors Program only to fill a quota. Her response to this was, “I know I’m not a quota filler . . . I don’t believe that I am. . . . I don’t think that [quotas] exist, you know.”

A closer examination of Janice’s comment reveals the damage of the stereotypes that she faced. Her observations reflect just how the threat of a stereotype can be internalized even if she does not intend to let the stereotype affect her. Janice boldly stated that she was not “a quota filler.” With this assertion she was confronting the stereotype that Black students are assumed to be quota fillers. Being a Black student meant that at some level the stereotype could apply to her, even though she knew it
was not true in her case. Her own truth suggested that she was not a quota filler and that her admission into the Honors Program was based on her ability. Or was it? The next part of her statement demonstrates the doubt that quickly emerged as she commented, “I don’t believe that I am.” In a matter of seconds, Janice moved from a bold assertion that she is not a quota filler to questioning if it could be true. If she were a quota filler, what would that mean? Would that mean that she did not belong in the Honors Program and that she was less capable than her peers? Even more important, would she ever know?

Finally, in the last part of her statement, she was able to reconcile this issue as she questioned the existence of quotas. She stated, “I don’t think that [quotas] exist.” If quotas do not exist, then she could not be a quota filler. In fact, quotas are illegal; however, the pervasive myths about affirmative action continue to distort images of policies and programs designed to level the playing field. The internal dialogue that Janice had with herself is an example of how energy got diverted from academics and went into affirming her right to be in the program and to reassuring herself that she was worthy. It is an example of what Steele and Aronson (1995) referred to as a race-primed condition in which the threat of being a quota is likely to create conditions that induce stress and anxiety.

Julian described the degree of pressure that he felt in the classroom to prove his ability. For Julian it was the broader stereotype that Blacks are less intelligent that made him want to perform better in the classroom.

They still think that, you know, we are a subdivision of human folks and we are lower than they are. So it’s important for me to prove that, you know, I can do everything that you [Whites] can do . . . there is no difference between you and I except our skin color.”

Anna also gave a vivid description of how the proving process manifested for her:

Well, when I find that I’m the only Black person in a class, I feel that I have to prove myself just as intelligent, just as smart, just as worthy, you know, of the same grade as somebody else who’s not my race. I am not extremely competitive, but I feel competitive in that instance where I have to prove myself to be as strong student, you know, to compete with those in my classroom. It’s been that way since high school because I was going up against mostly Asians and Whites . . . so I’ve always felt that I had to prove myself when I’ve always been the one Black person in the class.

In both Julian’s and Anna’s cases it may seem that the pressure to prove their academic ability was a self-imposed pressure and unrelated to anything in the classroom. Julian described it best when he said that the larger stereotypes about Blacks in society made him feel like he had to prove his intellectual ability in the classroom. In both examples the students felt the threat of the stereotype about Blacks as less intelligent because they were dealing with perceptions in the domain of the college classroom, which represents precisely where these abilities are evaluated. The stereotypes that are held about Blacks as a referent group in the larger society are precisely the ones that get carried over into the environment of the campus.

The challenges faced by Blacks by no means suggest that White students enter the classroom devoid of pressure or free of stereotypes. In fact, it is characteristic of most high achievers to feel a degree of pressure about their academic ability. In another study we compared the experiences of high-achieving Whites and Blacks who were participants in an honors program. These data are still being analyzed, however preliminary findings suggest
that both groups experienced a degree of alienation from peers because of their interest in academics. The difference in Black and White students’ experiences was the intensity and nature of the alienation. A key difference for White students is that they perceived that assessments made about their academic ability were aimed at them individually and were not applied to the larger community of Whites. Put differently, White students were less likely to perceive that others stereotype them as less intelligent because they are members of the White community. Black students described something different altogether. They perceived that individual Blacks are assumed less intelligent precisely because they are members of the Black community, a community that historically has been perceived as less intelligent.

Proving academic ability was by far the greatest test faced by these students. However, to a lesser extent, these students felt pressure to prove their Blackness, as evidenced by their choice in extracurricular activities and cultural preferences. When the students did not fit the stereotyped images that their White peers had about Blacks they were not sure how to respond to them. Janice observed, “The population feels that there is a certain way to act Black, a certain way to act White.” Katrina shared that she had been referred to as “not Black” by her White friends; because she did not fit many of the societal stereotypes that people had of Blacks, her Black friends saw her as being less Black because of the way she expressed herself and because she was less fond of rap and hip-hop music, which are associated largely with the Black community. Teddi’s comments capture this dilemma well:

[J]ust because I’m Black doesn’t mean I like Puffy Combs [popular hip-hop artist], you know. Just because I’m Black doesn’t mean I cannot drink alcohol . . . smoke weed. I have never drank any alcohol, never had any drugs; I have never carried a

Glock [gun]. I have never, you know, had a boom box on my shoulder walking down the street bopping.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study bring attention to the ways in which Black high achievers have been “boxed in” based on stereotypes about their race, assumptions about their abilities, and thoughts about their social activities and behaviors. The students in this study talked about the ways in which they felt pressure to prove that they are academically capable and to dispel myths and stereotypes about the Black community. In our work, we have found that the resistance process that Black students undertake, and the time they spend dispelling myths and stereotypes about the Black community, have the potential to divert energy away from studying. As we bring our work to a close we would like to offer several observations about the importance and impact of this work as it relates to the students ability to cope with stereotypes.

The degree to which students were able to effectively cope varied. Janice chose to sing “Mozart in Latin” as a way of dealing with the threat of a stereotype. In her own words she described this behavior as being incongruent with images of how Black students behave. In the short run this strategy may have worked for Janice, but what is the impact over time for Janice and other students who feel that it is necessary to be incongruent with images of Blacks in order to be successful? What is the emotional price that students pay as they find themselves increasingly isolated from their cultural community in order to fit into the dominant culture? Nathan, who was often referred to as a “White boy,” admitted that his involvement on campus was primarily with Whites and that he did not feel as connected to the Black community.

A number of the observations offered by
The Black Box

The students in this study occurred in the classroom with peers and faculty who either questioned their academic capability and/or made comments during class discussions that demonstrated that they held a number of stereotypes about Blacks. These interactions resulted in the participants spending significant time “teaching” others. The time that students spend “teaching” about the Black experience can be both beneficial and detrimental depending on the sustained nature of the conversations. The extent to which Black students manage conversations about race in the classroom can also be costly. Even though they do not mind talking to White peers, and in some cases faculty, about the complex factors that shape their experience, each conversation adds to the level of scrutiny they encounter about their ability to be successful at a PWI. They become more vulnerable to the judgments and views of others as they freely share their own experiences. Black students frequently reveal their feelings and experiences without the benefit of knowing what others feel and think.

Although the resistance that the high-achieving students in this study exhibited did not derail their academic success, there were emotional costs and stresses associated with the process. Solorzano et al. (2002) reminded us that, in an effort to resist stereotypes about minority students, students of color often “push themselves to exhaustion and still are not able to reap the fair rewards for their work” (p. 67). Research on stereotype threat also confirmed that high-achieving minority students are often highly aware of the stigma associated with their racial groups and that students of color are often distracted from academic tasks by their attempts to disprove social stereotypes about members of their race (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). In most cases, stereotype threat does not cause high-achieving Blacks to completely give up on academic tasks. Rather, stereotype threat serves as a distraction; it diminishes students’ efficiency and causes them to spend more time re-reading texts and re-thinking questions (Steele & Aronson, 1998), all of which can impact overall performance. In the most extreme cases, Black students who experience chronic stereotype threat may dis-identify with academic achievement by switching to less rigorous courses or majors, or at the extreme, dropping out of college, to escape the pressure and anxiety related to potentially fulfilling a negative stereotype (Steele & Aronson, 1998). Thus, there is a tenuous balance between resistance as motivation and resistance that is detrimental to students’ academic and psychological well being. Students need support as they encounter these experiences, and it is important to create opportunities for Black high achievers to come together to provide each other with encouragement and understanding.

Black faculty can also offer an important form of support as they face these experiences. During his interview, Nathan offered a clear example of how Black professors can support their students as they struggle with their efforts to resist. He commented that “the teachers that I’ve had, like, real conversations with . . . that stand out to me have been Black, both men and women.” The “realness” in the conversation that Nathan observed is likely to have occurred because Black faculty are in a better position to understand the spoken and unspoken experiences encountered by Black students. Black faculty are likely to have a connection because they are able to use their own experiences as additional insight to go below the surface of the conversation and to engage students on substantive issues that impact their lives on and off campus.

Many Black professors were former high-achieving college students who attended both Black and White campuses. In order to be successful in their own academic careers, they
too have encountered many challenges to their academic sense of self. Hence, they are more likely to understand the challenges that Black students often face at PWIs and can instinctively know how to support Black students. Not only have Black faculty traveled similar academic paths as many Black students, they may also be encountering racial experiences on the campus that challenge their sense of self as a professor (Allen, Epps, Guillory, Suh, & Bonous-Hammarth, 2000; Banks, 1984; Johnsrud & Sadao, 1998). Consequently they are likely to have an innate understanding of the subtle cues that Black students send about their academic and social condition on campus and their overall level of satisfaction. This intuition is likely to be enhanced because they may share similar cultural understanding and knowledge of informal and formal rules of interaction and communication. These shared experiences create a connection between Black faculty and Black students that can be fundamentally unique and critical to the survival and satisfaction of both groups on the campus.

It is important to note that we do not recommend that Black students resist sharing their experiences in the classroom. What is important is that Black students feel a sense of control over what they wish to share rather than feeling like there is pressure for them to take on the role of “educating” White America. Thompson and Fretz (1991) found that Black students used a number of adaptive strategies on White campuses:

In the classroom, Black students who have positive attitudes toward working with (cooperating) rather than against (competing) or away from their peer group may desire the opportunity for others to learn about them as individuals. These students may be of the mindset that in order to overcome racism, members of a community must be willing to break down barriers to communication by sharing thoughts and ideas rather than perpetuating stereotypes beliefs through minimal contact. (p. 440)

Although this strategy is useful for some Black students, for too long minority students have been viewed as sources of expertise on issues of race and ethnicity in the classroom. Non-minority peers and faculty have relied on the willingness of Black students to share their experiences in ways that enhance discussions on race and racial relations in the classroom.

Even though the contributions of students can be significant, faculty members must understand the important role that they have in guiding and constructing conversations about race. Faculty must understand that they too have been shaped by race in ways that are likely to influence their perceptions of students and the teaching process. In Teaching to Transgress, bell hooks (1994) submits that:

despite the contemporary focus on multiculturalism in our society, particularly in education, there is not nearly enough practical discussion of ways classroom settings can be transformed so that the learning experience is inclusive. If the effort to respect and honor the social reality and experiences of groups in this society who are non-White is to be reflected in a pedagogical process, then as teachers—on all levels, from elementary to university settings—we must acknowledge that our styles of teaching may need to change. (p. 35)

Encouraging discussions that include complex topics like race in the classroom can present a number of challenges. First, there are a number of curriculum changes that need to take place. To the extent possible, faculty should incorporate readings and assignments that educate from a diverse perspective. In cases where faculty may not have had opportunities or resources to enhance their teaching materials, presumably they should acknowledge that the issues being discussed are likely to
have different implications for other racial/ethnic groups. It is also important to establish a climate in the classroom that invites students with differences of opinion and diverse perspectives to participate. These can be important teaching tools that help to inform the debate and enhance the exchange of ideas. Finally, on a practical level, it is important to allow time in class to process discussions that involve race. Not only do students need time to process their own thoughts and feelings, they also need time to understand the perspective held by others that may differ from their own.

Like students, faculty must also feel comfortable talking about race in the classroom. To do so, faculty must be comfortable with a degree of vulnerability and openness in the classroom as they share some of their own experiences and observations about race. For some faculty this will be a significant challenge to their teaching style; discussions of race can require more risk taking, which can enhance or impede discussions and interactions in the classroom. For some students, talking about race is likely to engage them more in the class, whereas others may feel silenced. Finding teaching techniques that are effective across groups is important. Using only one pedagogical style is not enough to respond to the needs of a multicultural classroom. In incorporating these new pedagogical techniques, faculty must take risks that are not unlike those taken by Black students everyday on college campuses.

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REFERENCES


