

Coping Strategies for Students of Color in a Predominantly White College: Voices from the Alumni

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Abstract: University students in general experience stressful situations once they leave home and begin to adjust to the new life on a college campus with its related academic and social demands. However, students of color often have the additional burden of coping with race-related stress. Data from a focus group interview with 18 alumni of color, found students being stereotyped, feeling overwhelmingly invisible, being singled out in the classroom and often witnessing racism and racially related incidents. This paper describes the coping strategies they employed and which helped them complete their program successfully. They reported using a strong net work of social support, became resilient and self-sufficient, and sometimes used detachment and self-selected isolation. While this study is limited to self-report it nevertheless provides significant information to the institution as it attempts to address race-related tension and conflict.

Students of Color in Predominantly White Colleges

University students in general experience stressful situations once they leave home and begin to adjust to the new life on a college campus with its related academic and social demands. However, students of color often have the additional burden of coping with race-related stress (Danoff-Burg, Prelow & Swenson, 2004; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005), especially in predominantly White colleges (Kea, Penny & Bowman, 2003). Some students have reported being stressed out in their academic programs by professors who show little commitment to diversity in their course contents and even devalue the input of students of color (Brown, 2004; Maina, Hampton & Davis, 2007). In some programs, students report feeling lonely and isolated because there are no other peers like them in the class (Maina et al, 2007; Watkins, Green, Goodson, Guidry & Stanley 2007). In such instances, students might feel pressured by well meaning professors who demand that they share their experiences as a representative of their cultural background (Personal communication). In other instances students of color sit in classes where offensive comments are made by other students about race and they opt to keep their silence because they understand clearly the consequences of speaking up (Maina et al, 2007; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Watkins et al, 2007)). Once again, students of color are placed in the position of service where they have to educate their White peers about their own cultural background and sometimes feel forced to accept the status of a second class citizen for fear of the punishment that may result (Maina et al, 2007; Sheu & Sedlack, 2004; Radloff & Knoll, 2003). Consequently, they find themselves in an institution that is not prepared to receive them. They become disengaged from their classroom experiences, emotionally drop out of the classroom activities and ultimately drop out of the course or college (Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Gayles, 2005; Watkins et al, 2007).

Literature Review

In reviewing literature for this study, two themes emerged in relation to the experiences of student of color in college: a) race related stress and b) coping strategies.

Race Related Stress

Reid & Radhakrishnan (2003) found that race matters in regard to how students of color experience the campus climate. The study found that students of color felt like they were not taken seriously as students, did not receive the same level of advising and mentoring and were less confident than their White counterparts. Although the promotion of racial diversity had a positive impact on how the students felt about the university, “this impact was small in relation to the effect of hearing racist jokes or having an advisor’s intellectual respect” (Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003, p.272).

Nora & Cabrera (1996) found that Hispanic students were more likely than other students to sense discrimination in the classroom and on the general campus. Latino students were more likely than White students to report being singled out in class because of their background, perceive a lot of racial tension on campus and hear faculty express stereotypes about racial or ethnic groups in their institutions (Barnes & Lightsey, 2005; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). The consequences of the hostile climate are detrimental to

students' learning and even health. Students of color drop out of college in disproportionately higher numbers; others reported feeling depressed, emotionally distressed, and hopeless and a lack of belonging (Burley, Butner, Bush & Bush (2007). The indicators that students are experiencing a hostile climate would be manifested through self-destructive behaviors such as eating disorders, incomplete assignments, drug/alcohol abuse, absenteeism, chronic anxiety, low self-esteem, low self-concept, cultural isolation and sometimes even suicide (Cress & Ikeda, 2003, Watkins et al, 2007).

Coping Strategies

When people are faced with stressful events in life, often they develop coping mechanism in an “effort to manage and overcome demands that threaten to challenge or harm” their well being (Lazarus as cited in Nangendo, Sebudde & Nalwanda, 2006, p.81). Lazarus further groups coping mechanisms into two broad categories: active and avoidant, explained as follows:

Active coping strategies are either behavioral or psychological responses designed to change the nature of the stressor or how one thinks about it, while avoidant coping strategies lead people to engage in activities, such as drinking, or develop mental states, like withdrawal, that prevent from directly addressing stressful events. (as cited in Nangendo et al, 2006, p.81)

Recent research on coping strategies for students of color on college campuses has revealed similar coping strategies towards the stressful life events. Watkins et al, (2007) found that Black men in a predominantly White college identified racism as an overall major stressor in their lives as shared by a participant in the study: “Within the first three months of me being up here, I experienced five different racial experiences...that just stressed me out” (p. 9). In the same study, another participant felt challenged by the internal struggle to cope with the stressors which has significant implications to his psychological and mental health:

The fact that [Black men] have to go into so much processing to try to figure out the different dynamics and different perceptions kind of let me know that I'm dealing with a lot more psychological pressure and stress than the average person would be. (Watkin et al, 2007, p.11)

The students in this study had developed an active coping strategy by learning to “adapt to their environments and by providing social support for one another” (Watkins, et al, 2007). In a study comparing Asian and Caucasian students, Chang found that Asian Americans were more “pessimistic and use more problem avoidance and social withdrawal coping strategies than Caucasians used” (as cited by Sheu and Sedlacek, 2004, p.132). Likewise, Korean and Filipino Americans reported more passive coping behaviors__ such as distancing; escape avoidance, and accepting responsibilities than their Caucasian counterparts (Bjorck, Cuthbertson, Thurman & Lee as cited by Sheu et al, 2004).

Whether students of color use active or avoidant coping strategies, it is important to recognize that stressors “are demands made by the internal or external environment that upset the balance or homeostasis, thus affecting physical and psychological well-being and requiring action to restore balance or equilibrium” (Lazarus and Cohen as cited by Watkins et al, 2007, p. 3). Students of color deserve an environment in which their

physical and psychological well being is taken care of, “resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and to cope with adversity” (The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as cited by Watkins et al, 2007, p.3). While it is clear that students in our study employed active coping strategies, there is no doubt that some of their peers were unable to maintain a mental health that would help them find ways to “acknowledge and positively cope with the stressors in their lives” (Watkins et al, 2007, p.3).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to find out how students of color who have successfully completed their program coped with race related stress. But more importantly, how could those coping strategies could be replicated for others in similar situations to lessen the impact and enable successful completion of the program and obtain a college degree? This paper describes how students of color who have successfully completed their program and are working in various careers across the United States dealt with race-related stress while on campus. They were invited to participate in the study through a focus group interview during a time they had returned to the campus for a reunion.

Methodology

Research Participants

Eighteen (18) alumni who identified as people of color participated in this study. This population was targeted because of their common characteristics as alumni of color with a connection to their alma mater. Ewell (2005) also reminds us that alumni data is becoming increasingly important in ways in which colleges and universities “could harness to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs” (p.19). The former students were therefore invited to participate in one of two tape recorded evenly split focus groups while on campus for a two-day reunion. Focus group was selected as the effective method for collecting this type of data because of our need to gather as much information within a limited time frame. Focus group as a study design has also been found to capture the complexities of the thinking and behavior of a target audience in greater depth and the group dynamic can help elicit in-depth thought and discussion as well as brainstorming, because participants can build off one another’s ideas (Watkins et al, 2007).

The participants were asked to respond to two open ended questions. a) How would you describe your experiences as a student of color on this campus? b) What in your opinion would you consider to be an ideal campus for a student of color? These questions were then followed with transitional statements meant to probe deeper and the participants introduced new topics and responses. By the end of the focus group, a number of topics including: behavior pertaining to professors and students, campus safety, views on campus climate in general were discussed.

In recruiting participants for the study, we indicated that they would be required to sign a consent form in compliance with the Campus Human Subject Committee guidelines and that each focus group sessions would take approximately one hour. Additionally, we assured participants that confidentiality of information would be carefully protected. No names would appear on any reports. Tapes from focus groups

would only be identified numerically and any description or publication of the research would be reported in terms of groups. Only the researchers would have access to the raw data and which would be destroyed six months after the study. The research team consisted of three faculty members all self-identified as people of color and all taught in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction.

Data Analysis and Findings

The focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim by a local transcription service. Each 1-hour focus group discussion took an average six hours to transcribe. The transcribed data were entered by a graduate assistant into NVIVO, a computer program that analyzes qualitative data. In analyzing the data, we found that the alumni who participated in this study constantly used the active coping strategy which “refers to the behavioral and psychological techniques that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize stressful events” (Taylor et al, 200 as cited by Nangendo, et al, 2006, p.81). Students reported being resilient and self sufficient, they formed and build strong social support networks and communities within themselves, actively engaged in the political activities, they developed ambivalence towards their White peers, they detached and disengaged in some activities and sometimes, chose self-isolation as a means of survival.

Resiliency and self-sufficiency

Students of color found ways to cope with the difficulties they encountered in many different ways. They became resilient, self-sufficient and strong in many ways as reported by one participant: “we did all these things and we did them on our own. We just became, it made us strong”. These sentiments were echoed by another participant who said “I just want to say that it made us strong”. And yet another said “it made me to grow, you know, as a person”. In retrospect, participants are proud of how they coped with difficulties as shared by one: “I'm glad we became very self-sufficient! A net work here made it possible for us to achieve a certain level of excellence”. And even more fulfilling is the fact that the students became “resilient and so in total I think it was worthwhile”. The level of resiliency expressed by the students helped them remain focused on the end goal as expressed by a participant who said:

Oh yeah, they, they rolled the [car] window in the snow to call you the N word, and I just say, HEY! You know, because I won't let you mess with me like that. You understand, I won't allow it. You don't have the right to do that. So, I just went on my way and say, you know what you can say whatever you want to say. I've got a free education and I ain't gonna let it go. I'm not going to mess it up because I'm upset with you.

By and large, the participants are grateful to the college campus for the positive experiences they had and especially the preparation it gave them for their consequent careers. One participant reported that the “learning was fabulous, it was wonderful”. This feeling was later reinforced by another one in the same focus group who said:

But in the classroom, I mean we got respect. Our professors treated exactly the same. They challenged us, they listened to us. I mean a lot of, like professor X. I mean I remember sitting in the class being stimulated. I mean and they respected

us and when we needed, you know, to be reprimanded for not handing in our work, they treated us exactly the same. We were students.

Social support network and community

The students learned to rely on each other for social and moral support “back then we were all very close. We all knew one another very closely, that's how we resolved some of our issues”. And as another person said “we were a family, back then in that time frame”. The students stayed together and “we would all hang around together, kind of became like a family”. The sentiments were expressed by yet another participant who shared: “They really made us a family. It was a great experience up here for me and I talk to everyone, I say, I love my college years because it's the people who I've met”. The way the students developed a social support network was summarized by a participant who said:

We just had to be creative and , you know, the party, or somebody else got a party at Funnelle or where ever and we would, everybody it was just word of mouth, hear about it and we would just ad hoc, just show up, bring this bring that and just, and survive socially.

The students extended their social support network to some of their professors and professional staff on campus. They remembered with nostalgia some of the individuals who really made a positive impact on their life as described by one participant: “but Mr. H. and crew were our counselors and if it wasn't for them we probably would have all been home by November”. A similar sentiment was expressed by yet another participant who shared the following about her mentor:

She would tell me what to do [her mentor]; she would come to my apartment to say, look, you need to not give up on this. You need to do this or that. So, there were some good things that actually happened here.

Even when it came to academic work, found a supportive network of staff who cared and stayed with the students even when things were tight. One participant, who was also an Equal Opportunity Program (EOP) student, appreciated a lot that the staff intervened on their behalf with the professors if they noticed grades were sliding.

That means that they made sure that if your grades were sliding that they let the professor know that there was somebody who took an interest in us and so they would prop. I mean I wasn't really, after the first year I wasn't EOP anymore but it was even...

The resiliency to stay and overcome the difficulties was also attributed to the upperclassmen as shared by yet another participant:

There were 30 upperclassmen who kind of helped us along the process, the one thing I will say is that the experience brought us far closer than I think anyone could have even known. I mean we were forced to like each other.

A similar sentiment was expressed by another participant who shared:

Those guys came up there, they said ___ girl, don't you let me down and that was all it took. Yes sir, okay, I didn't know what that meant, but I, I mean and so they mentored you in that respect just kind of being an adult over you 'cause most of us were 17.

A few professors were also given credit for the support they provided the students:

I know I had an English teacher that was phenomenal and now I look back, I realize what he was trying to do. He was just on my back trying to tell me, help me indirectly, that man really worked with me. But, I didn't know at that time, I'm young, 17 _

The participants acknowledge that developing a social support network required and effort from both ends. They did not passively wait for help to come to them but they did know how to seek help and look for the right people as explained by one participant:

I found that you had to go to them. You had to seek them. That's one of the things I did find as opposed to them seeking you. I did not feel as though I had an individual counselor that you had to, so that I could speak to and say, okay, I'm not so well right now.

Ultimately, when students found the right people, they got the support they needed as share by yet another participant:

But, yes they were very supportive, yes; they were there when you went there. But, did I feel though I had someone individually to counsel and guide me, no I didn't. May be that's what's lacking with some of the students today.

Inter/intra racial friendships and relationships

The participants shared with joy the friendships and relationships both within their groups and also across races that they formed during their college years which have lasted a lifetime. One participant shared, "we made great, great friends". Another one shared that she got "great experience because we made some lasting relationships here". These sentiments were echoed by yet another participant who said:

I would just echo that um, frankly and I think this is the case for most of us. Friendships, I mean it's been 30 years now since I was here. The friendships I made here, I think I can count on one hand the number of friends that I have made since I left here.

Friendships and positive relationships is what really helped a lot of the participants to survive in an often hostile environment. These sentiments were accurately described by one participant who explained:

We developed lifetime friendships as many others have done as well but there was such closeness that we do collectively; we don't speak to each other personally on a day-today basis. But, we do happen to then ask have you heard from so and so and then we truly enjoy the opportunity to come together on something like as far as this weekend is concerned.

Friendships were not limited to just the students of color, although that seems to have been more cohesive. They do talk about the friendships they made even with their White counterparts. One participant described her experience sharing a cultural exchange with some White women:

White [women] pierced my ears, sterilized the needles, burn the ___ on the needle and what not, and pierced my ears. Um, I in exchange told them how in the project since you get your ears pierced and you put the broom, um, stick through the ear to hold the hole. I said what are we gonna put, what are we gonna put in my ear to hold open the space? Well you got to go get your earrings first and then, you know, we have to sterilize it put the needle through and what not and you

have the earrings ready. So I went shopping in town got myself a __gold and turn pierced my ears and I never got any infection or anything like that. They were really careful and iced the ears down and everything like that whatever. Some even transcended the cultural barriers and developed romantic relationships with White students as one participant explained:

I dated a Caucasian man for several years and never once felt that I had to filter out my Blackness for because I had this relationship with this person. And then I remember one of my dearest friends now we talk frequently. She said to me, I never thought you would date a white guy because you are not so like the black girls that white guys like.

Detachment and Disengagement

Students learnt to detach their feelings from the racism they experienced and even rationalized it was indeed a good preparation for the real world as shared by one participant: “but I’m thankful for all the notes [graffiti], the racist statements because it prepared me to actually go out in the real world where I have to fight not only for myself but for....” This feeling was reinforced by a sentiment expressed by yet another participant who said:

I think the racism and this is my humble opinion, ah, the racism we encountered, the sexism we encountered. I wouldn’t have it any other way. Because what would be the sense of being an ideal campus and you leave an ideal campus into a non ideal world?

The campus community mirrored the world in which the students would eventually seek employment, hence the feeling that the campus had done well to prepare them as shared by another participant:

So, you going to [down town] and they are yelling, calling you name out the widow, you learn to brush that stuff because if you allow to infiltrate your being, you will always allow the “n” word from going where you want to go and it wasn’t going to happen to me. It wasn’t gonna happen!

Isolationism/ militancy

Students sometimes chose to be isolated in some activities especially when they realized their White counterparts ignored them as one participant said “they ignored us in a sense”:

I definitely don’t have to like you; you don’t have to like me. Um, you know, and of course you know, I’m not going to demand respect from you because you have that as a choice, um, don’t cross your boundaries and just respect me overtly.

Students retaliated by becoming militant and rejecting friendships with their White counterparts as expressed by another participant:

I became like a little militant after that, you know, maybe just a little. I didn’t (laughter) you know, I wasn’t like, ah, you know, the grace in white folks (laughter)---- at all after that so I mean, you know, people handled things a little differently, you know, M-----they all had White friends, I didn’t have any White

friends, not one my whole time here after my freshman year. I was like (sighs) thank you!

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings in this study show that the students of color who completed their programs successfully constantly engaged active coping strategies to deal with the race-related stressors. They highlighted their resilience and self sufficiency as an important coping strategy. They also indicated the supportive social network as being instrumental to their success in addition to selected isolation and detachment. These findings are consistent with the literature on coping strategies in general, but particularly for students of color in predominantly White colleges. The use of a variety of coping strategies is consistent with Danoff-Burg et al's (2004) argument that students who are successful in life "use active (i.e. approach-oriented rather than avoidance-oriented) coping strategies when confronting race-related stress" (p.211).

Nangendo et al (2006) reminds us that "social networks engender social support. The type and amount of social support network available to a person plays a critical role in their ability to cope with a problem" (p.88). Students in this study increased and boosted their ability to succeed in their program by developing social network of friends, professors and members of staff. It is clear they actively sought the supports they needed whether academic or social support. Once they identified the supports they needed, they used them to their own advantage.

Gayles (2005) describes the notion of 'academic resiliency' as "when such achievement is rare for those facing similar circumstances or within a similar socio-cultural context" (p.250). The students in this study referred to resiliency as the one thing that made them successful. This description concurs with Gayles' (2005) argument that resilient African American high school boys attached their academic achievement to a utilitarian value. The students were confident that having a hard time in the moment is worthwhile so long as it promised a brighter future as summarized by a participant who said: "So, I just went on my way and say, you know what you can say whatever you want to say. I've got a free education and I ain't gonna let it go. I'm not going to mess it up because I'm upset with you". This level of resiliency was echoed earlier in Kea et al (2003) study where a participant reported an increased higher expectation from within:

I think it pushed me to work harder to complete the program. It may have been my own paranoia or my own negative thinking. I just kind of felt like I had to prove that African Americans could achieve in graduate programs no matter where they were. (p.281)

Watkins et al (2007) uses the term 'stoicism' as a high-effort coping strategy among Black college men. This predisposition can be applied minimally to the level of detachment, disengagement and self imposed isolation sometimes used by the students in this study to cope with race-related stressors. Kea et al (2003) found students who did not find it important to have a sense of inclusion or belonging so long as there was no barrier towards getting their degree: "I just need my degree so whether they accepted me or not, as long as I could get my degree and they didn't mess with my grades, I had no problem with them accepting me" (p.279). Some students even push further as expressed by another participant:

That just really, you know, just caused me to just want to be mean, and just be hurtful, get in all my Black [attire] and walk around with that build and just eye people, you know. It just made me think that they don't want me to be here so why don't I just turn that around [and say], "You don't want me to be here" – that's going to make me push harder to excel at what I got to do.

While this coping strategy did not have negative outcomes in the ability to complete the program, it has the potential to cause psychological distress and ultimately, affect physical health (Danoff-Burg et al, 2004). As Watkins et al (2007) found, being consistently stressed out has significant implication on mental health issues as explained by one participant:

People can have a complex about themselves and they can think that that's just how they are supposed to be because that's all they've known themselves to be...you might not know it because your whole life you've been having mental health problems but all you knew was your mental health problem... (p.13)

As with much research that utilizes alumni data, caution must be taken especially when students have been out of campus for more than five years since their memories may have faded. It is also possible for individuals to have selective memory in reporting the bad things that may have happened as a way of increasing the value of their perceived success. It is also important to remember that this was a convenience sampling and so, cannot be generalized.

All participants have a relation with their alma mater; they are successful in their personal and professional lives and self-selected to participate in the focus group discussion. A larger study would have utilized triangulation as a way of ensuring validity as well as involving data from students who dropped out of college or were less enthusiastic about their alma mater. While these factors may have just represented a certain perspective, we believe they have not significantly altered the conclusions. By the same token, the study cannot be generalized to all predominantly White institutions. Our study differed with previous studies in the methodology and research context. It is a study that has provided our institution with valuable information on strategies we can use to provide a positive experience for students of color. To support broader claims, more data would need to be collected from current students of color, students who transferred or dropped out, service providers, faculty and administrator.

But even with such limitations, it is evident that students of color in predominantly White colleges consistently deal with race-related stressors. Even though the students developed active coping strategies, this study has significant implications to the institution especially in the area of retention and satisfaction. The institution should make a deliberate effort to provide student access to a network of supportive relationships, or at the very least, enhance the existing ones. There should be no assumption that just because resources are there that students will utilize them. Neither should it be assumed that resources available are appropriate to all students. Careful analysis of students needs should be an on-going activity and access to a supportive social academic network should be put in place.

Faculty and staff members should be encouraged to seek professional development in the area of cross-cultural communication. Students in this study reported being singled-out in the classroom especially when there was no other student of color in the classroom. And as echoed earlier in Kea et al (2003) study where a student reported:

“I felt I was being psychoanalyzed by most of my instructors...were waiting for me to say something profound, as a minority” (p.28). Well meaning professors in an effort to be inclusive put the students of color on the spot, once again being put into the service of educating their White counter parts. Perpetuating the idea that there is always the “exotic” other to explain life circumstances to them and they have no need to put any effort to self-educate.

Mentoring from peers and other significant people in students’ life should be explored as an important institutional strategy. Students in this study reported the importance of the mentors in the way they coped with the race-related stress.

And finally, stoicism, though a highly effective coping strategy produces undesirable results. Psychological and mental health services are areas in which students who exude this predisposition should be directed to. It is the institutional challenge and responsibility to put these programs in place. At the very least, they owe a positive climate to all students and that includes the students of color!

Conclusion

This study has expanded our understanding of the race-related stressors that affect students of color in a predominantly White college. Some participants reported being singled out in the curriculum or professors having low expectations of their academic performance. Others provided narratives of racism and racial conflicts, including some that involved police and the local community. However, even with all these negative experiences and stressful events, the students in this study successfully completed their degree programs and are currently productive in their personal and professional careers.

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