

Perceived Influence of Racialized Societal Dissonance on the Academic Success of African American Males in a Predominantly White Institution of Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Societal dissonance is the inconsistency in attitudes based on the psychological construct of cognitive dissonance (tension emerging from awareness of two inconsistent thoughts or cognitions; Festinger, 1957) but applied at a societal level. This article is derived from a study (Brown, 2008) that was focused on the deficit perception of African American males in higher education. In the case of African American males, societal dissonance influences the way in which they are perceived. Racialized societal dissonance concerning Black males occurs when society cannot differentiate between stereotypical representations of Black males (which are generally negative) and the characteristics of individual Black males encountered in the real world.

Introduction

Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance deals with discrepancy between cognitions. Festinger (1957) defined these cognitions as "any knowledge, opinion, or belief about the environment, about oneself, or about one's behavior" (p. 62). The related concept of *societal dissonance* is based on the foundations of cognitive dissonance theory. Thus, societal cognitions are based on the beliefs and perceptions held by people (society) instead of the beliefs held by the individual concerning displayed behavior. According to cognitive dissonance theory, people have a tendency to seek consistency among their cognitions (i.e., beliefs, opinions); the same holds true for societal dissonance. When society perceives an inconsistency between attitudes or behaviors (dissonance), something must change to eliminate that dissonance. In the case of a discrepancy between attitudes and behavior, society most likely changes its attitude to accommodate the behavior.

Festinger (1957) identified two factors that affect the strength of dissonance: the number of dissonant beliefs and the importance attached to each belief. These factors apply to cognitive and societal dissonance alike. Festinger suggested three ways to eliminate dissonance: (a) reduce

the importance of the dissonant beliefs, (b) add consonant beliefs that outweigh the dissonant beliefs, and (c) change the dissonant beliefs so that they are no longer inconsistent.

Based on Festinger's theory (1957), dissonance occurs most often in situations in which society must choose between two incompatible beliefs or actions. In the case of African American males, societal dissonance influences the way in which they are perceived. As with other subgroups, African American males can be praised or vilified; as stated throughout the study (Brown, 2008); they are often viewed from a deficit perspective. Societal dissonance is the inability to reconcile conflicting beliefs about a group with actions carried out by individuals from that group. Dissonance occurs when society cannot differentiate between stereotypical representations of Black males (which are generally negative) and the characteristics of individual Black males encountered in the real world.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to determine the perceived influence of racialized societal dissonance, on the academic success of seven academically successful African American male undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution of higher education. This was done by examining students' self-efficacy, support structure, and academic background, guided by the four research questions, one of which focused specifically on *Societal Dissonance*.

Through the experiences of the participants, the study provides insight into issues of societal perception, persistence, support, and access through the perspective of African American males. This study was developed to provide a contextual understanding of African American males in higher education and provide those who work with the African American male populations in higher education, as well as in K-12 settings, insight to Black males from their perspective. The findings may be used to assist institutions of higher education in the recruitment and retention of African American males by providing strategies and recommendations.

Research Question One

Research question one: *What is the perceived influence of societal dissonance on the African American male's academic success?*

The seven young men interviewed for this study had encountered many obstacles, in the form of low expectations, negative stereotypes, and unrealistic pressures to represent the entire Black race; yet, they had been successful in continuing their journey into and through higher education. Society sends out inconsistent and sometimes unjustified messages about perceptions and attitudes toward African American males. These young men, like many others, challenged societal stereotypes and social dissonance to achieve their academic success. A selection of their interview responses summarizes these challenges to the stereotypes and their solutions for societal dissonance.

Andrew recognized the general social stereotypes of the Black community, particularly young Black males. He saw it as his obligation to challenge that stereotype through his personal behavior.

I think the Black community and a lot of the Black males here are perceived to being lazy. And to an extent we are. I think it ties back to the stereotypes of Black males and the Black community in general, that it's so much easier to sell drugs or to rap or to play basketball and be successful than to put your face in a book and work hard for 4 years in order to achieve that same goal. . . . I have always tried to be a noble person and tried to have some sense of integrity. You can't really *break* a stereotype, but you can be an *exception* to a stereotype.

Andrew recognized that, whether or not by choice, he was a representative of his race in everyday situations.

I don't want the Black community to continue to be perceived as being lazy, which motivates me on a daily basis to make sure that I am noble and do not need to achieve for my personal success but for the success of the Black community. It is easy to stereotype a race, especially the Black race. When you are in the class and you are the only Black student there, when you say something in class, you are a representative of the Black race. For a lot of people, you are the only Black person that they interact with or may see. So if you say something out of turn or you act a certain way, you behave in a certain way, it only reinforces what they see on TV.

Damian pointed out that he was not the only representative of his race on the campus. He was sometimes reluctant to be identified with some peers, and sometimes he was embarrassed or at least uncomfortable about the way some other African American males represented his race.

I think it would have an influence on anyone. Whether negatively or positively, if someone does not believe in you or has a negative perception of you, it can have an influence on how you perform in school. You hear about that kind of stuff all the time on TV and in the news, about how some guy killed his mother and father because he was abused as a kid. The abuse doesn't always have to be physical for it to affect a person. I think it's the same for Black males in college. The teachers don't think you are smart, the students don't think you are smart, it's hard but you have to get over it.

When you see someone acting out, wearing baggie pants or just clowning, which you see too often on this campus, it's like, "There goes *my* reputation. That's how *I'm* going to be viewed." You hear someone coming down the sidewalk and talking really loud, and you turn around and it's a Black guy. Do you know how that is? It's embarrassing. . . . I'm not the only Black person on a predominantly White campus, it's [already] a lot of pressure to fight those stereotypes. And then it's frustrating when you have peers who don't care

Jesse framed the social dissonance experienced by African American males on the campus of an institution of higher education in terms of competition with students of other races.

I spend so much time in the library trying to compete with the other cultures because I know that they are doing the same amount of work that I am doing, and that they are trying to compete with me for the same jobs . . . later on in life.

I think it [societal dissonance] plays a major part on how we interact with the other students and then, how it affects us in class. I often find myself taking time out to think about what I want to say in class. Instead of just speaking my mind, or blurting something out, I take time to think about it. So I guess it's good and bad. Good because I don't talk much, but when I do, it is usually of quality. The bad would be, no one should have to be that scared to share their thoughts. I think negative stereotypes and looking down on people plays a huge role in one's college experience, actually in life.

[In one class] instead of being the team leader (which I should have been) and instead of speaking my mind and my opinions, I was actually in the background. I was actually at the bottom of the totem pole, maybe because the people around me were so intelligent. I felt maybe ashamed to speak my mind. We had to present a project to our class, but working with this group, I felt [they were] smarter than I was. A little bit smarter than me. Can you feel sometimes when a person is smarter or has that intelligence level? It's kind of above you, sometimes by the way they present themselves.

Once I was placed in that group among the other smart business majors, I had to keep that image intact; but at the same time, it kind of defeated me. It is kind of hard to look upon that situation. Let's say we are both going in for the interview for the same job; the employer can't look on both of us and say, "Alright, I'm going to pick him because . . . or I can't X you out because you weren't raised in the same environment."

Saviour presented one constructive solution to challenge negative stereotypes about the African American male held by people on the higher education campus in particular and in society in general. He saw his role as an "educator" of society regarding the image of the African American male. Inferred in his description is his assumption of role model as well as educator.

My job is a job, but it's not a job. We put on programs . . . that promote awareness and spread information, because a lot of people come here, especially White people, and they don't know anything about other cultures. They say things like, "What's life like being Black?" or "I've never seen a Black person before." It's like all they see is what they see on TV, so when they walk across the street, they don't know any other dimension. So we try to let them see another side. In that aspect I'm a leader because, when people see me and they see what I am all about, they see something different, something they've never seen before. So I try to teach them. It's just in small ways, I'm not going to go down my résumé or anything, it's just small things like that.

I don't like to make excuses for anybody or make excuses for why I have not done well on a test, or something like that. But truthfully, I think being negatively stereotyped or perceived as bad hurts. I always try to treat everyone with the same amount of respect and teach people whenever I have an opportunity, but when you walk in to class and you

have already been judged, it is pretty hard to act normal. When you are constantly looked upon as bad or not able to do the work, sometimes you can't help but start to believe it. That is when you have to be strong and not let that stop you from being successful.

Without saying so directly, Wayne implied that African American males on campus may not be as different in their social roles as some have presumed. He described them as being categorized in much the same way as other males on campus.

I would say Black males in this campus are divided into three categories: athletes, Greeks and regular folks. If you are not an athlete, you are nothing; if you are not a Greek, you are nothing; and then you fall into that category of "just so and so." That's the way we talk about each other here You [are defined] by a title or a role and you get lumped into one of the three.

Analysis for Research Question One

Although the participants in this study all alluded to the fact that the negative stereotypes and perceptions of Black males on campus and in society *could* have a negative influence on their academic performance, the general consensus seemed to be that this particular group of young men used this deficit perception of Black males to their advantage. Jesse, Damian, and Saviour all stated directly that the negative pressures and stereotypes of societal dissonance would affect a Black male's academic matriculation into college in an adverse way. When asked whether he thought that dissonance on a societal level had an influence on a Black male's academic success, Jesse responded, "I think it plays a major part on how we interact with the other students and then, how it affects us in class." This clearly shows that the deficit perspective unjustly given to Black males at times has the potential to affect Black males, not only in life but in the classroom as well. This group of young men addressed the issue of negative stereotypes, feelings of isolation, and low academic expectations by performing well in the classroom. Saviour went a step further, stating that it was his "job to act as an educator," to teach others when confronted with issues of a deficit perception of Black males. He also said, "I don't like to make excuses for anybody or make excuses for why I have not done well on a test, or something like that. But truthfully, I think being negatively stereotype or perceived as bad hurts." Andrew took it upon himself to address this obstacle by ensuring that his personal behavior did not match that of the stereotypical young Black male.

While the findings related to this question showed evidence of the participants doing exceedingly well academically despite obvious feelings of isolation and low expectations held by others, one participant expressed feelings of societal pressures affecting his academic performance.

It was surprising to hear from Saviour that in 2007 students of the African American race were still receiving questions asking "what is it like to be Black." As stated earlier, these young men, like many others before them, have challenged societal stereotypes and social dissonance to achieve academic success. Andrew summarized the ultimate response to this research question best: "I have always tried to be a noble person and tried to have some sense of integrity. You can't really *break* a stereotype, but you can be an *exception* to a stereotype."

From this, one can assume a direct relationship between societal dissonance and African American male's academic performance, and successful matriculation into college. It is not the intention of the researcher to prove that negative stereotyping is exclusive to African American males nor to excuse the poor academic performance of Black males in college. In agreement with Damian, it is the opinion of this researcher that negative stereotyping has the *possibility* of adversely affecting anyone. These data are offered for consideration.

The findings seem to be consistent with research reported by Steele and Aronson (1995), who postulated that, when a person's social identity is attached to a negative stereotype, that person will tend to underperform in a manner consistent with the stereotype. Steele and Aronson attributed the underperformance to a person's anxiety that he or she will conform to the negative stereotype. The anxiety manifests itself in various ways, including distraction and increased body temperature, all of which diminish performance level.

Research Question One: Findings

Research question one: *What is the perceived influence of societal dissonance on the African American male's academic success?*

1. There was a direct relationship between societal dissonance and these African American males' academic performance and successful matriculation into college.
2. This group of young men addressed the issue of negative stereotypes, feelings of isolation, and low academic expectations by performing well in the classroom.
3. Although these Black males were aware of the deficit perception of them they combated the negativity by doing well in the classroom, several stated that the negative perceptions affect them and hurts them emotionally.
4. These Black males addressed deficit stereotyping by ensuring that their personal behavior did not match that of the stereotypical young Black male.
5. These findings are consistent with research reported by Steele and Aronson (1995) postulating that, when a person's social identity is attached to a negative stereotype, that person will tend to underperform in a manner consistent with the stereotype.

The findings from this study are consistent with the findings reported in the reviewed literature (Brown, 2008). According to the participants in the present study, perception of African American males is usually discussed from a deficit perspective. Many African American males with varied backgrounds, including doctors, lawyers, social workers, teachers, janitors, and construction workers, are confronted with stereotypes every day. Bill Cosby once stated, "If a White man falls off a chair drunk, it's just a drunk. If a Negro does, it's the whole damn Negro race." While some may find this statement a little farfetched, many African American males would agree wholeheartedly, as validated by the participants in this study.

Concluding Remarks

Myriad issues emerged from this study. The participants all expressed feelings of isolation and negative stereotypes in both the classroom and in life. Faculty members at institutions of higher education can challenge the deficit perspective and stereotypes of Black males in their classrooms, thus helping to address the issue of societal dissonance concerning Black males. Festinger (1957) identified three ways to eliminate dissonance: (a) reduce the importance of the dissonant beliefs, (b) add consonant beliefs that outweigh the dissonant beliefs, and (c) change dissonant beliefs so they are no longer inconsistent. These goals can be achieved by integrating minority and racism-related content into the curriculum; for example, rather than concentrating on “African American month,” the faculty could integrate into the curriculum an ongoing program that identifies the contributions, feelings, and lifestyles of minorities.

Aronson (1968) offered strategies for reducing dissonance on an individual level. Given the similarities between rectifying individual and societal misconceptions and inconsistencies, these strategies apply to societal dissonance as well: (a) changing behavior to match one’s attitude, (b) changing attitude to match one’s behavior, and (c) cognitively minimizing the degree of inconsistency or its importance. Participants in this study reported that non-Black students saw the Black students as intellectually inferior. Faculty can address this issue by interacting with all students at the same level, by treating all students the same way, and by holding all students to the same standards. Such practices acknowledge Black students as equals while at the same time not spotlighting anyone or openly showing emotion that could be misconstrued as favoritism. The first two strategies mentioned will not only acknowledge the contributions of other cultures but will relieve pressures that many of the participants described related to having to prove how smart they are in order to be accepted.

The faculty member who senses tension or isolation within the classroom can give those on the receiving end an opportunity to express their feelings and views. The opportunity may be in the form of forums, workshops, or general information sessions. Many of the participants in this study stated that, if an opportunity were presented, they would use it to educate those who are not familiar with other cultures.

Aronson (1968) suggested that reducing dissonance might occur by acquiring new information that is consistent with attitudes or actions that seem inconsistent at first. Faculty can challenge stereotyped perceptions of the Black male through their interactions in the classroom. Instructors can minimize the importance of a negative attitude or behavior. This can be done by focusing on the positive aspects of African American culture instead of targeting negative aspects. Festinger (1957) stated that minimizing the emphasis on differences or acknowledging the differences from a positive aspect can reduce dissonant beliefs.

Demonstrations of racism are deeply rooted in the societal perceptions of African American males and the generalized stereotype of them being intellectually incompetent. This perception affects Black males not only internally but also externally through today’s policies in higher education.

While America has made progress in rectifying the devastating impact of discriminative practices both socially and politically, which were at one time not only common but accepted and viewed as norms, society has a long way before claiming meaningless victories of temporary change. The nation has not moved away from a discriminative mentality. Although laws have been reviewed and changed and some restrictions have been lifted, according to some of the

findings about how Black males perceive themselves and their place in society and how they think others perceive them have not changed.

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Formatted by Dr. Mary Alice Kritsonis, National Research and Manuscript Preparation Editor, National FORUM Journals, Houston, Texas www.nationalforum.com