'I Hate Myself': A Look Into Internalized Racism Among Black College Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of internalized racism. This concept has a plethora of effects on the Black community and other communities of color. Despite this, internalized racism is misunderstood and understudied due to difficulty in understanding the subject matter. As a college student, the author discusses the influence of internalized racism on Black college students' mental health and academic achievements. As a result, the author details the extensive psychological and emotional effects of internalized racism on Black students at the college level. Also, potential solutions like the implementation of SAFE-CO is provided as means to oppose internalized racism.

Keywords: Internalized Racism, College, Black Students, African-American, SAFE-CO

Introduction

Racism is an ideology of racial superiority which has affected minority groups for centuries and has effects that are seemingly limitless. Racism has been identified as a traumatic and a psychologically damaging experience for people of color. This form of oppression has been supported by the actions of individuals, cultural norms, values, institutional structures and practices of society. However, the most psychologically harmful consequence of racism is the type of racism that is internalized within the very communities that it oppresses. The pressure of racial inequality in society can lead to members of communities of color "to internalize negative, and racist, ideology regarding one's racial group and identity" (Brown, Rosnick, & Segrist, 2017, p.359). This concept, known as internalized racism is defined as the acceptance of racially oppressive beliefs that cast one's own racial community as "subhuman, inferior, incapable, or a burden on society" (Padilla, 2001, p.65) while at the same time, rejecting positive African and African American cultural heritage (Bailey, Chung, Williams, Terrel & Singh., 2011).

When it comes to this issue, no one is immune to its potential influence especially African-American college students. The media portrayal of members of their community and the fact that they themselves lived in disadvantaged communities can create the belief that there are

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no suitable role models within their racial group. These feelings, if not managed appropriately, can develop into internalized racism. The student's views regarding their self-worth can cause them to be ashamed of their Blackness and can increase an individual's willingness to believe in the media-sponsored racial–ethnic inferiority (Padilla, 2011). This internalization of the racial oppression that exists can affect the self-efficacy, perceived control, and outcome expectations of Black college students. (Brown, Rosnick, & Segrist, 2017).

Racism alongside different experiences of racial inequality contributes to the development of emotional distress among African American students because it diminishes their capacity to develop strong self-confidence, efficacy, and resiliency (Brown, 2003). The internalization of racial oppression is detrimental to the academic achievement of African American students because it disrupts the confidence needed to excel, and it limits their overall ability to persist in other areas of life. But internalized racism's most dangerous effect on African American college students is that it spreads to those closest to them. It has been claimed that negative attitudes regarding a person's own racial/ethnic group are conveyed to and absorbed by children at a young age (Parmer, Arnold, Natt, & Janson, 2004). Thus, the generational impact of racial oppression that leads to internalized racism is long-term and can have dire consequences for generations of people for hundreds of years and continues to evolve. It's with this in mind that the author argues that African American college students experience a decline in their psychological health and academic achievement because of internalized racism.

Despite having these effects on African American students and people of color overall, internalized racism is "one of the most common and least studied features of racism (Pyke, 2010. P. 552)." But it is vital to gain an understanding of how oppression is internalized and then reproduced in society in order to combat it. Fields (1990) in *Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the*

Unites States sought to dispel lingering misconceptions surrounding internalized racism in her discussion on "absurd assumptions, accepted implicitly by most Americans" (Fields 97). The researcher found assumptions that indicate race was accurate on a biological basis and race and slavery developed simultaneously (Fields, 1990). Further, disciplines like sociology and psychology are largely silent on the topic due to "factors contributing to a misunderstanding of internalized racism" (Pyke, 2010, p. 559). Internalized racism cannot be treated as simply a psychological phenomenon, but instead as a tool to really understand how damaging racism of any form can be to oppressed groups.

Internalized Racism

To properly acknowledge the damage internalized racism has caused Black college students, an understanding of what it is and its historical roots in the United States. Internalized racism has various subcategories of operation, such as colorism that allows it to survive into the present day. Colorism can be traced back to the days of slavery in the United States and is broadly defined as the appreciation and acceptance of persons with lighter tone skin over darker skin toned individuals within and across racial and ethnic groups (Hunter, 2005). A common practice by slave owners was to designate Africans as house or field slaves based on the pigmentation of their skin. People with dark complexions worked in the fields, and house slave had lighter skin complexions. During this time, the foundation of racial ideologies purported that Blackness was associated with savagery and ugliness and Whiteness was presumed civilized and beautiful (Hall, 2010; Wade, 1996). This led to a system of preferential treatment wherein light skinned people were assigned to work indoors, given opportunities to learn to read, and had more contact with white their slave masters (Davis, 1991; Keith and Herring, 1991; Russell, Wilson, &

Hall, 1992). Even though it was a false narrative, the ideology was carried forward and maintained by later generations of both Blacks and Whites, and the preferential bias created a desire for light skin (i.e., whiteness) among the minds of some Blacks in the US and has persisted 100s of years since the abolishment of slavery.

After the Emancipation, "light skin blacks became the Black Elite and, in many cases, were responsible for reinforcing colorism in the African American community" (Landor, 2012, p.15). They formed exclusionary social clubs, like The Links and Blue Vein Society, which would exclude darker skin blacks. Scholars have noted that during this period lighter skin blacks began to internalize the belief that they were superior to darker skin blacks due to their partial white heritage (Gullickson, 2005). As a result, there was a greater value to a black person's relative proximity to whiteness. They saw their blackness as insignificant but believed their partial whiteness was a sign of superiority. This sentiment can be considered as the essence of internalized racism, since one's value of their Blackness is rejected for white cultural norms and values. This assisted the perception that being Black is inferior to being white, a mindset that still exist today.

What's especially dangerous and problematic about internalized racism is that it's a "force that causes the marginalized group to turn upon itself without realizing this behavior" (Bailey, 2008, p.6). Communities of color experiencing internalized racial oppression replicate the same oppressive beliefs and behaviors, towards people who are of the same racial classification (Bailey et al., 2006). A major component of internalized racial oppression is the devaluation of the African worldview and African motifs. This internal conflict was examined by W.E.B DuBois in his auto-ethnographic work, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Coining the term "double consciousness," DuBois referred to the inner turmoil experienced by subordinated

groups in oppressive societies. This issue arises as African-Americans struggle with the internal

duality between what is "African" and what is "American" (Allen, 2003; DuBois 1989). In other

words, Black individuals must retain their identity while living in a dominant White society that

pressures them to assimilate (Dickens, 2014). The pressure to assimilate impacts Black students'

"understanding of their race, class, and gender identities, all of which they navigate in the

process of assimilation or resistance" (Dickens, 2014, p.20).

   Internalized racism is linked to the dominant group in society and the oppression they

reinforce in everyday life. The internalization of oppression reinforces the daily

institutionalization and normalization of racial mistreatment (Blakesley, 2016). Racism as a

system of oppression has targeted racial groups who have relatively little social power in the

United States. This is similar to what occurred in the colonial period. Colonizers imposed the

concept of "woman" unto the countries they colonized. Having placed females into the

categories of "woman" on top of being placed outside the domain of Society makes them easier

to control (Patel & Moore, 2017). By taking away the culture of the other racial cultures and

making theirs normative, they are imposing their ideas on us. This will make them more

susceptible to accepting their beliefs as oppose to utilizing brute force to control them. The white

dominant group has been able to do because they brutally took control of the land, tools,

knowledge, and the sense of self of racial oppressive groups (Werlhof, 1988). Due to this,

internalized racism manifests due to members from communities of color accepts "the dominant

group's values, norms, and ideas" (Speight, 2007, p.130), just because their own is seen as

inferior and unfavorable. Internalized racism is a tool that directly benefits white supremacy

because it eliminates the dominant group's need to explicitly disempower or oppress the

subordinate group (Bailey, 2008). In society, the dominant group's hegemony allows them to

"denigrates, ignores, discounts, misrepresents, or eradicates the target group's culture, language, and history" (Speight, 2007, p.130). This leaves the culture of the dominant group being perceived as "normal," "real," and "correct." This will cause the marginalized groups to accept the views and perceptions of the dominant because they "[know] and possess nothing" (Werlholf, 1988, p.3). By believing in the dominant group's idea of reality, Black college students may not even realize that they "think, feel, and act in ways that demonstrate the devaluation of their group and of themselves as members of that group" (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997, p.21).

The students are aware of the 'social costs' that comes with their racial identity which include mistreatment, discrimination, and much more. Bearing this costs "means either being overwhelmed by them, [or] being destroyed by them (Werlhof, 1988, p.3). As a result, students seek ways to mitigate these social costs (Werlhof, 1988) and one way this is done is through the popularization of the "myth of meritocracy". According to Pyke, it's the "belief that individual advancement and opportunity is obtained solely on the basis of achievement and skill (2003). Members of marginalized racial groups face grave psychological consequences as a result. This then causes them to look at the society to define themselves based on what they have done. They are given colonized, inferior images of themselves presented as reality (Speight, 2007 which they in turn accept.

Why Internalized Racism is inadequately studied?

In studying internalized racism as "one of the most neglected and misunderstood components of racism" (Pyke, 2010, p.551), there is a fear among researchers that their work on this issue will be perceived as victim-blaming. The failure to sustain an extensive study of

internalized oppression is a defensive response to the concern that the research "will be misinterpreted as reflecting some weakness of the oppressed" (Pyke, 2010, p.559). In other words, victim-blaming, which places the task on the oppressed to solve this issue. This would suggest that the problem is of their own making. This refers to the perception that people of color "will be held responsible for re-inscribing White supremacist thinking" (Pyke, 2010, p.559). Further study of internalized racism has been shied away from due to the "tendency to misconstrue internalized oppression as reflecting some problem of the oppressed" (Pyke, 2010, p.553).

The fear of blaming the victim as an outcome of research, is very dangerous because this impacts our understanding of racial inequality and its impact on Black college students. It serves to "subvert attention away from the very racist institutions and dominant structures that produce such an ideology" (Blakesley, 2016, p.1). The fear to look into internalized racism because of possible negative responses leaves racial marginally groups in society to combat this issue which already is fully understood. The limited comprehension of this phenomenon has hindered psychology's understanding of how this affects the mental health and wellbeing of not only Black people but other racially oppressed groups as well (Bailey et al, 2011). As a result, the damaging effects of internalized oppression will go unchecked and will increase among demographics like Black college students.

Despite the perception that exists for internalized racism, it is neither the consequence of any weakness, ignorance, inferiority, or other shortcoming of the oppressed. Internalized racism is not a consequence of racism but, a reaction to racism that has a life of its own. This issue is the reality of people of color internalizing negative beliefs about themselves that are constantly perpetuated and reinforced within institutions in the US. Unfortunately, America has a system

that "actively discourages and undermines the power of people and communities of color…

[While] individuals, institutions and communities of color are often unconsciously and habitually

rewarded for supporting white privilege" (Bivens, 2005, p.44). This system of oppression has

caused young Black students to have internalized the stereotypes and other negative ideas that

are spread about their racial group.

Physiological Impact

Internalized racism plays a part in the psychological distress that Black college students

deal with which manifest as lower satisfaction with life and lower personal and collective self-

esteem (Bailey, 2008). This occurs because these students cannot rely on positive views which

acts as a buffer against discrimination (Carter, 2007). The physiological impact of internalized

racism can contribute to various self-destructive behaviors like substance abuse and drug

addiction. These behaviors are viewed as "expressions of the hurt, anger, and anxiety associated

with internalized oppression" (Bailey, 2008, p.8). Destructive behaviors such as physical assaults

and sexual violence "are aspects of learned behaviors from the oppressive majority committed

against the internalized group" (Bailey, 2008, p.9) which are associated with the outward

expression of this form of oppression.

Internalized racism resides in the psyche of its victims leading to numerous psychological

consequences (Speight, 2007) that negatively impact an individual's behavior. Once an

individual believes in notions of inferiority regarding their own racial group they identify with

the oppressor and lose the ability to define their own life experiences (Brown et al, 2016).

Studies show that once racially oppressive views of self are internalized, it will result in

psychological distress and substance use (Taylor, Henderson, & Jackson, 1991). Thomas,

Witherspoon, and Speight (2004) conducted a study where they found that the increased endorsement of stereotypic images may cause a decrease in one's self-esteem.

A major component of internalized racial oppression is "the notion of actual or desired alterations of physical appearance by Black people" (Bailey, 2008, p.10). Individuals dealing with internalized racism have the wish to have their physical appearance resembling the white dominant group. The desire for a more Eurocentric appearance can occur at both the conscious or unconscious level (Bailey, 2008). For Black college students this desire may manifest in different ways. This can be seen through their potential desire for altered physical appearances, lighter skin, and romantic partners that have more European features so offspring will fit into the desired perceptions of beauty (Bailey, 2008).

This issue fosters negative interactions toward other individuals of African descent (Bailey et al., 2011). This stems from accepting negative stereotypes that are being perpetuated by different aspects of society. Internalized racism creates a difficulty in sustaining healthy relationships with other African-American students in the higher educational setting. When internalized racism happens, it affects relationships with other people of color in a myriad of ways, "including projecting one's own sense of inferiority and inadequacy onto those of the same race" (Bivens, 2005, p.47). This result hinders the possibility of Black leadership among the minority student body since there would be "a lack of confidence in our ability or acceptance and support of each other's leadership" (Bivens, 2005, p.47). The lack of trust could lead to a lack of Black leaders in student government decreasing Black representation in the decision-making processes that directly affect the students at the universities.

Academic Impact

Higher educational pursuits for African-Americans students suffer greatly when they internalize feelings of racial oppression. This occurs when Black students accepts a racial hierarchy where Black Americans are considered intellectually inferior" (Bailey et al., 2011). When this racial hierarchy is accepted by African-American college students their academics decline. Rosnick & Segrist sought to verify this assessment by conducting a student survey. Ultimately, the results revealed that "greater internalized racial oppression correlated with a lower valuing of higher education" (Brown et al., 2016, p.358). A study done by Brown and Segrist in 2015, explores the relationship between aspects of internalized racial oppression and the career aspirations of African-Americans adults. The results showed that the individuals who self-reported that they had higher levels of internalized racial oppression were less likely to strive for achievement (Brown et al., 2016).

A significant component of internalized racism involves Black Americans internalizing the belief that they are naturally intellectually inferior. As a result, Black American students may experience lower levels of self-efficacy which contributes to lower academic achievements. (Alicino, 2017). Self-efficacy is described as "peoples' perception of their own capabilities" that is said to be a factor affecting performance and behavioral patterns (Bandura, 1977). In the realm of academics, self-efficacy is extremely important as it affects academic scores among students of diverse ages and backgrounds (Bandura et al., 1999). Internalized racism will "significantly and negatively influence academic achievement which can be seen through college GPA because it will cause Black college students to have a low self-efficacy when it comes to their education which can be measured through their GPA. Researches such as Alicinio's study reveal that "higher levels of internalized racism, as measured by the IROS, were expected to predict lower cumulative college GPAs" (p.8)

Developing a sense of belongingness in college is beneficial to all students. The concept of school belongingness is defined as the sense of community, support and acceptance within an academic setting (Osterman, 2000). Research has shown that students with greater feelings of identification for their school had more success in school-related goals (Alicino, 2017). Studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between student performance and their sense of belongingness (Alicino, 2017). Internalized racism causes not just Black students, but entire communities of color, to view themselves as victims. By seeing themselves as victims, they deny one's power to actively fight against oppression (Bivens, 2005). Internalized racism can contribute to students developing a lessen sense of belongingness which can spiral into lower academic engagement. This would have a harmful effect on the mental, emotional, educational, and behavioral activities (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006) that students engage in at the higher education level.

One of the gravest impacts that internalized racial oppression can have academically is that it lowers the value Black college students placed on higher education. Studies reveal that "greater internalized racial oppression correlated with a lower valuing of higher education" (Brown et al., 2017, p.358). Having negative beliefs about one's racial identity can cause a counterproductive approach to education to develop. Recognizing the harsh realities of racial oppression at times hinders the aspirations of African American students because they see more societal barriers and less rewards in completing higher education (Ford, Moore, & Trotman-Scott, 2011). According to Ford and his colleagues (2011), African-American students understand how higher education can lead to future career endeavors. While view is challenged by societies' racially biased perceptions of them which the students are fully aware of (Ford, Moore, & Trotman-Scott, 2011). Research suggests that there is a negative relationship between

internalized racial oppression and career aspirations (Brown, Rosnick, & Segrist, 2017). By internalizing negative perceptions of their racial group, Black students call into question their groups ability to gain high level jobs as a collective (Brown & Segrist, 2016). The value of the education is decreased when education is the ultimate tool in achieving greater career opportunities (Blackmon & Thomas, 2013).

SAFE-CO

The issue of internalized racism among Black college students is a complex problem that needs further examination. Studies show that "internalized racism causes long term behavioral and psychological effects on Black [students]" (Blakesley, 2016, p.42). A problem can't be solved unless the problem is properly understood. As a result, developing solutions for internalized racism will help counter the ramifications it can have on people. This matter is of great importance because internalized racism holds serious and at times lethal individual and systemic psychological impacts on every community of color. Tatum stated that, "An understanding of internalized oppression can help students of color recognize the ways in which they may have unknowingly participated in their own victimization, or the victimization of others" (Tatum, 1992, p.410). This shifts students from a place of victimization to empowerment, and share their learning with others (Tatum, 1992) which can create a domino effect where internalized racism can be successfully opposed.

While internalized racism can negatively impact students, there are several factors that protect against the internalization of harmful messages. There needs to be more research into effective means of actively resisting internalized racism. A potential avenue is the implementation of SAFE-CO a model that students of color/willing institutions can utilize to

actively resist internalized racism. SAFE-CO are six main behaviors that are meant to help them to reduce or reject internalized racism within the students' own lives. These behaviors include: (1) Self-acceptance/Self-Care; (2) Affirming Black identity; (3) Finances; (4) Education; (5) Community Building; and (6) Open Dialogue. These methods can be an effective tool in coping with and resisting internalized racism. The implementation of these behaviors can assist students in gaining "the power of self-definition over themselves and the meaning of their Blackness" (Blakesley, 2016, p.52). Promoting these six main ongoing behaviors can help Black students in higher education reject internalized racism since it embraces Black pride. Examples include practicing self-acceptance, challenging beauty standards, activism/commitment to Black communities, awareness, finding role models, and building connections with other Black students (Blakesley, 2016).

Universities can enlist the aid of student-run organizations to promote SAFE-CO through their status venues for Black identity expression/development. These student organizations aim to uplift the African American community of their respective universities through the events and programs they generate. Harper and Quaye conducted interviews with African American male student leaders at six predominantly White universities which revealed that "student organizations [are] platforms for racial uplift and the advocacy of racial/ethnic minority student interests (p.127)." An in-depth look into these organizations can reveal the way college students can assist other college students in this struggle. Earlier, it was discussed how internalized negative perceptions can contribute to self-destructive behaviors among communities of color. Black-run student organizations are platforms for racial uplift and the representation of Black interests (Harper & Quaye, 2007). The same way oppressive views can be internalized and expressed outwardly, the positive behaviors are also the "primary ways through which

Internalization attitudes were expressed behaviorally" (Harper & Quaye, 2007, p.140). Black student organizations are the center of Black identity development since "dispelling stereotypes, breaking down barriers, and opening new doors for other African American students on campus" (Harper & Quaye, 2007, p.135). The aim of SAFE-CO is to oppose internalized racism and these groups do this by creating an inner comfort with one's Blackness which dispels internalized racism.

Another implementation strategy regarding SAFE-CO involves a Freshman Orientation Course that will focus on actively promoting the six behaviors discussed. Dr. Mary Millikin from Rogers State University conducted a study regarding these kinds of courses that showed that courses "designed to address specific barriers common to first-time freshmen can be highly beneficial (2011, p.1)." These courses will provide Black college students with "coping strategies required to effectively navigate the learning and social environments in higher education" (*WWC Intervention Report*, 2016, p.1). Since SAFE-CO is based on behavioral and thought patterns, the course is best led by individuals employed by the university's counseling services. The counselors understand that the stress students of color are dealing with "are compounded by the burden of race-related stress, stereotype threat, and the imposter phenomenon" ("Students of Color"). Their years of studying allows them to understand psychological health which is negatively impacted by race-related stress according to University of Houston, Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Services/Counseling and Psychological Services. Race-related stress can lead to intense emotional reaction like self-blame and ineffective coping like substance abuse ("Students of Color"). These courses will provide students with proper coping strategies to use when internalized oppression begins to materialize. Also it will serve as this resource will encourage love for one's racial identity.

Conclusion

Internalized Racism has negative impacts on Black college students' mental health and achievements in their academics. The mental effects of internalized racism ranges from self-destructive behaviors to feelings of shame regarding one's own Blackness. As stated several times earlier in this paper, inadequate research has impeded intellectual discipline's ability to completely understand internalized racism. This comes from the perception that studying internalized racism can lead to victim-blaming for the communities that are being affected. The limited understanding of internalized racial oppression calls for more research that will "increase our knowledge and competency levels when working with Black people and other people of Color experiencing this phenomenon" (Bailey, 2008, p.13). To combat internalized racism in Black college students, willing institutions should implement the six behaviors known as SAFE-CO in order increase Black identity expression/development. These actions will directly oppose internalized racism as Black students will begin the journey of appreciating their racial identity more and more. Internalized racism is an inadequately studied concept that causes not just Black college students but other racially marginalized groups to believe the oppressive beliefs that are perpetuated by society. Actively resisting this issue will assist in helping students of color in higher education reject the negative perceptions of their racial identity and develop pride instead.

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