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Understanding the African-American Student Experience in Higher Education Through a Relational Dialectics Perspective

Jake Simmons, Russell Lowery-Hart, Shawn T. Wahl & M. Chad McBride

In this study, we sought to understand African-American students’ higher-education experiences in predominantly White universities. We utilized Baxter’s relational dialectics theory to study components of focus-group discussions in order to understand the discourse and meaning-making process of participants. Our findings provide insight into the intercultural context of higher education in America and suggest strategies for maintaining the relationship between African-American students and the institutions in which they are enrolled.

Keywords: Relational Dialectics Theory; African-American Student Experience; Higher Education; Focus Groups; Intercultural Communication

African-American students’ educational opportunities have been affected by university administrators’ inability to recognize and address racial tension on campuses (Baber, 2012; Prime, 2001). Thus, higher education is experiencing a contemporary crisis, as predominantly White universities and colleges are unable to recruit and retain African-American students (Harmon, 2012; Jones & Jackson, 2003; Roach, 2001). In 1986, African-American students accounted for fewer than 9% of the college student population in the United States (Kemp, 1990; Richardson & Skinner, 1990). Over two decades later, the African-American college student population is experiencing little change (Baber, 2012; Harmon, 2012). Further,
Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) continue to experience challenges related to enrollment and graduation rates (Minorities in Higher Education, 2011).

Whereas university classrooms are diverse in a number of ways, it is well established that White, male, heterosexual perspectives dominate classroom landscapes in American educational institutions (Bishop, 2009; Borisoff & Chesebro, 2011; Carr & Lund, 2009; Donadey 2009; Jackson, Warren, Pitts, & Wilson, 2007; Kahn, 2009; Kim, 2009). Borisoff & Chesebro (2011) offered an excellent synthesis of germane scholarship that frames this reality in relation to educational environments. They noted, “All students are impacted when the norm is defined in a single way... when who they see foregrounded does not reflect their lived experiences or identity” (p. 138). Whereas a growing recognition for the inclusion of diverse perspectives has been the goal of a number of educators, strategies for inclusion are limited by a number of factors. If educators “resist augmenting what they know or are unwilling to move outside of their comfort zone, they also limit the borders of knowledge to which their students are exposed” (Borisoff & Chesebro, 2011, p. 138).

As a result of noninclusive pedagogies and ineffective college and university cultural programs, students continue to experience racism, insensitivity, and a lack of intercultural understanding and social support (Baber, 2012; Harmon, 2012; Lee, 1999; Tobolowsky, Outcalt, & McDonough, 2005; Wilson, 2000), sometimes resulting in a distrust of nonminority students and university officials. This relational distrust negatively influences African-American students’ motivation to achieve (Prime, 2001).

Because this lack of integration and acceptance is a major factor in the difficulties experienced by African-American students (Wilson, 2000), we undertook to investigate the relationship between Black students and their predominantly White universities. In this report, we offer an overview of relational dialectics theory as our guiding framework for analysis. We then report excerpts of focus-group discussions involving African-American students and provide a theoretical analysis of the relational dialectics present in the participants’ discussions.

Relational Dialectics Theory

According to Martin, Nakayama, and Flores (2002), dialectical theory has emerged as one of the most influential approaches to understanding the relational and contradictory nature of intercultural communication. Historically, a dialectical approach has been most influential in investigating relational maintenance of romantic and platonic relationships (Baxter, 2004; Baxter & Dindia, 1990; Baxter & Simon, 1993). However, scholars are now extending the dialectical perspective beyond the interpersonal dyad (e.g., Dannels, Housley Gaffney, & Martin, 2011; Driskill, Meyer, & Mirivel, 2012; Goins, 2011; Hopson & Orbe, 2007; Kramer, 2004; Martin, Nakayama, & Flores, 2002; Martinez, 2006) and using it to examine how people interact with each other and the mission of a university campus (Kirby et al., 2006). Recognizing the potential of this expansion, we used Baxter’s (2011) relational dialectics theory (RDT) to examine...
discourses in the experiences of African-American students at predominantly White universities.

Though there are various iterations of theories of dialectics, we focused on Baxter’s (2011) most recent explication of her theory: “RDT is a theory of relational meaning making—that is, how the meanings surrounding individual and relationship identities are constructed through language use” and how these meanings are constructed from “competing, often contradictory, discourses” (p. 2). Drawing from Russian philosopher Bakhtin as a foundation, she argues that all utterances, or speech acts within a larger discourse, are inherently relational. In other words, each utterance is part of a chain that responds to and is part of each utterance that came before it and in anticipation of possible future utterances. As part of this utterance chain, an utterance is part of four utterance links: proximal already-spoken, proximal not-yet-spoken, distal already-spoken, and distal not-yet-spoken. The related proximal utterances have to do with things that are near that moment in time, with already-spokens being an utterance that is present in the discourse (or conversation) that is happening at the time and not-yet-spokens being anticipated responses from others. The not-yet-spokens are situations where we often see discursive struggles of otherness, which could be especially appropriate for African-American students at predominately White universities. The related distal utterances are more distant, either in the past (already-spoken) or future (not-yet-spoken), and both represent larger cultural discourses. These future not-yet-spoken utterances often emerge as discursive struggles related to evaluation of the current discourse, experiences, and identity, which are also relevant to our study of the African-American student experience in higher education.

In this new explanation of RDT, Baxter (2011) further explains how the dialectical tensions that scholars have traditionally studied, and that we focused on in this project related to the African-American student experience, emerge from these utterances. While researchers have revealed a number of dialectical tensions, three fundamental dialectics are consistently acknowledged: Integration–Separation, Stability–Change, and Expression–Privacy (Baxter, 1990). Each of the three fundamental dialectics manifests both internally and externally. Integration–Separation captures the basic tension between social integration and social division, Stability–Change focuses on the opposition between continuity and discontinuity, and Expression–Privacy captures the oppositional tension between what is disclosed and what is not disclosed (Baxter, 1994). These theoretical concepts provided a useful framework for analyzing and interpreting the data obtained in this study focused on understanding the African-American student experience in predominantly White university settings.

The African-American Student Experience

Altman (1993) asserted that some dialectical tensions exist within individuals, which he termed intra-individual dialectical processes, and that other tensions involve
groups, or intergroup dialectical processes found in relationships with “parents and kin, friends, work associates, and the culture at large” (Altman, 1993, p. 28). While Baxter (2011) wrote of internal and external dialectics (those inside and outside of the relationship, respectively), Altman’s notion of intergroup dialectics takes into account a group’s subculture, in this case the African-American experience as part of the larger American culture. An analysis of intra-individual and intergroup dialectics experienced by African-American students may serve to clarify and extend the definitions of Baxter’s previously cited internal and external contradictions. We expect to find evidence of intra-individual and intergroup dialectics in the data-analysis process. Such an investigation may lead communication scholars to better understand how to minimize student problems, maximize African-American student retention, and improve relational satisfaction among African-American students in predominantly White institutions. To investigate this possibility, we posed the following research questions:

RQ1: How, if at all, do African-American students experience internal intra-individual dialectical tensions within the university setting?

RQ2: How, if at all, do African-American students experience external intergroup dialectical tensions within the university setting?

Method

Participants

After receiving IRB approval from each institution involved in the study, we conducted interviews with African-American students attending three universities in three different parts of the United States. We selected predominantly White, major research institutions, including the following: a major Midwestern public university located in a small, rural community (African-American student population = 4.5%); a major Midwestern private university located in a larger, metropolitan area (African-American student population = 8%); and a major Southwestern public university located in a small metropolitan city (African-American student population = 4.5%). Within the previous five years, each of these schools had experienced racial tension between White students and African-American students that resulted in African-American student protests (documentation is available from first author). At all three universities, the racial tensions concerned a perceived failure of university administration to effectively respond to racist demonstrations/performances by fraternities on college campuses. The presence of African-American faculty and administrators on all three campuses ranged between 1 and 2%. Further, all three campuses had diversity initiatives in place that focused on increasing the number African-American faculty and students.

We conducted six focus groups (made up 5 to 7 participants per group), two at each university, with a total of 39 African-American undergraduate student participants (19 males and 20 females). In addition, we conducted individual interviews with 28 African-American students (14 males and 14 females) from all classifications and a
variety of majors including General Studies, Liberal Arts, and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). Thus, a total of 67 participants were involved in this study.

Procedures

We obtained participants through the snowballing technique, which uses an available person as a source for identifying other persons who fit the criteria for the study in question (Lindlof, 1995). In their investigations of relational dialectics, several communication scholars have obtained similar sample sizes through the use of snowball techniques (Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990; Sabourin & Stamp, 1995). Lindlof (1995) suggested establishing two contact persons at each investigation site to ensure a representative sample. Thus, on each campus we established contact with an administrative person through the Office of Minority Student Affairs; this provided a starting point for identifying potential student participants. The two student contacts generated through this administrator on each campus (one male and one female) were all African Americans, and they initiated contact (e.g., text messages, phone calls, face-to-face communication) with additional persons who would ultimately be assigned to participate in a focus group. The students who were initially contacted also participated in the study.

Focus groups. Having obtained a sufficient sample of participants, we conducted six focus groups with a climate in which African-American students would openly and honestly discuss issues related to their experiences as minority students in higher education (Schwitzer et al., 1999). Participants were randomly assigned to groups that ranged from five to seven members each. In order to maintain similar conditions, all focus groups were led by the same investigator and used the same script of five questions to guide discussion at each university. The script of open-ended questions focused on information concerning specific events, stories, groups of people, or organizations related to African-American student experiences in predominantly White university settings (e.g., What is your quality of life as an African-American student? Is racism present at your university? If so, what experiences could you share? How do these instances, if present, affect you academically? What are your program needs from your university?).

The focus-group leader used the script to maintain the group structure, allowed participants to elaborate or complete their responses before shifting to the next question, and was permitted to ask participants clarifying questions (i.e., What do you mean?). The focus groups lasted from 55 to 81 minutes and were recorded for transcription purposes using digital video equipment. We conducted initial analyses of the recordings to seek information concerning events, stories, groups of people, or organizations that merited further and deeper investigation through personal interviews.

Individual interviews. Open-ended interviews allow participants to expound on the events that have influenced their experiences (Feldman, 1995). These narratives can
be beneficial for establishing a social reality, especially in personal and organizational cultures (Lindlof, 1995). After each focus group, participants were asked to list African-American students who might agree to be interviewed. Across all three campuses, a total of 37 African-American students were listed, and 28 agreed to participate in the individual interviews after being contacted by phone or email. In order to maintain similar conditions, all individual interviews were led by the same investigator and followed the same script of five open-ended questions that were used in the focus groups. The interviewer used the script to maintain individual interview structure, allowed participants to elaborate or complete their response before shifting to the next question, and was permitted to ask participants follow-up questions. The 28 individual interviews ranged from 39 to 74 minutes and were audio-recorded for transcription purposes.

After focus groups and individual interviews were completed on each campus, all interviews were transcribed by three investigators and formulated into inductive constructs. The validity of these constructs was established through the method of constant comparison (Silverman, 1995). We discussed any disagreements (e.g., patterns of dialectical tensions) until we came to consensus on the final themes. Finally, we examined the data within each theme to develop a clear label for each dialectical tension. This grounded theory method allowed for the invention of relevant categories during the data analysis of 273 pages of transcripts (Sabourin & Stamp, 1995). These categories were created through repeated listening to and reading of the transcripts. Through this process, we established a sense of themes and patterns illustrated in the Integration/Separation, Stability/Change, Expression/Privacy dialectical tensions. Specifically, we employed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four stages: (1) compare incidents applicable to each other; (2) integrate categories and their properties; (3) delimit the theory or construct; and (4) write the theory or construct. After the first three steps were completed and the emergent themes identified, step four took the form of results.

Results

Drawing from the transcripts of the focus groups and individual interviews, and using the constant comparative method of analysis, we identified three intra-individual dialectical tension categories and two intergroup dialectical tension categories that highlighted Black and White cultural identities. We now define and explain each of the dialectical tensions and offer representative excerpts to illustrate them through participants’ own words.

Intra-Individual Dialectical Tensions

From the focus group and interview transcripts, we derived three intra-individual dialectical tension categories that highlight the internal forces representing the inherent contradictions between one's personal identity and the social expectations the individual feels. Intra-individual dialectics focus on an African-American
student’s internal tension. Three main dialectics within the individual emerged from the data: Blackness–Whiteness, Talking–Silence, and Past–Future.

Blackness–whiteness. A specific struggle that emerged from the data was a battle within the African-American students between their Blackness and the perceived Whiteness of their university. This dialectical pull occurred within participants as they struggled to be proud of themselves and their Blackness while learning and adapting to the Whiteness of their schools. The following example from a female student illustrated the oppositional qualities of Blackness–Whiteness.

There is a war going on inside of me between my Blackness and your Whiteness. When I see myself in the mirror, I see a competent, talented Black woman. Then I go to class, look around, and realize that I need more. My Blackness seems too... um... Black, like I need to be more than who I am. I need what you [as a White person] have. I need an understanding of how things work, you know, politically. My Blackness, my personhood isn’t enough. I need to Whiten myself to succeed.

This student aptly expressed the dialectical tension between the Black or African-American world and the perceived White world. This comment provides an excellent example of the impact distal utterances have on current meanings of identity. Even though she did not report specific interactions that led her to this experience, she could feel and describe the tension based on distal already-spoken and/or not-yet-spoken pieces of larger discourse.

Several participants suggested that their own ways of thinking and communicating were in conflict with the ways of thinking and communicating in the dominant culture. The following statement, made by a first-generation, first-year student, pinpointed this tension:

I grew up in an all-Black neighborhood and school. I had never seen so many White people in a classroom before. Suddenly, I was the minority, and I did not feel comfortable speaking out in class. I had this idea that Blacks and Whites had two different languages.

The student’s fear that he spoke and even read differently from his White peers suggested that African-American students may see themselves as cultural visitors. Some participants felt they could not survive in the White world without altering their language or culture. They expressed disdain for the task of learning a new cultural language. From dress to classroom behavior to socializing, African-American students were torn between what they knew, their Blackness, and the uncertainty they were learning to manage, the Whiteness.

The Blackness–Whiteness dialectic indicates that some African-American students struggle to maintain pride in their Blackness, while at the same time, learning and adopting the White culture. This tension may force students to question their own abilities as they work to survive in a culture they fear they do not understand.

Talking–silence. Whether in an academic, social, or professional setting, African-American students struggled between talking with others, especially about their culture, or maintaining silence around others, especially concerning their culture.
One student epitomized this dialectical pull as he described a cathartic moment in an English class:

> We read a book by Toni Morrison. The professor discussed the importance of the book for African Americans. I wanted to stand up and talk about Morrison’s writing and how it really resonates within the African-American community. At the same time, I did not want to perpetuate stereotypes or draw attention to myself as a Black man trying to explain a Black writer to a White audience.

The dialectical tension in this student’s experience is important. He, like many African-American students, wanted to share his personal insights about issues central to the African-American experience. In doing so, however, he felt that communicating his position could be detrimental to himself and his culture. Again, this tension highlights the impact of larger cultural utterances, specifically in this case, the not-yet-spoken. As Baxter (2011) argued, proximal not-yet-spoken is the moment when a person acknowledges that there might be a difference (a Black student in a White classroom), and distal not-yet-spoken is concerned with the anticipation of others’ evaluative responses. This manifestation of a proximal not-yet-spoken utterance reflects the Talking–Silence dialectic and highlights differing and complex radiants (or intersections) of dialectical tensions. Though this student’s Talking–Silence tension is in the forefront, it is reminiscent of the Blackness–Whiteness tension expressed in the first theme.

Other comments from participants indicated that the tension between desiring to communicate and resisting it affected their ability to assimilate into the university. A first-year student described her thoughts about joining campus organizations:

> I’ve seen fliers on campus of organizations I would like to join, but I never go because I know I would be the only African American in the room. I will stick with the organizations that are African-American-originated. I can be me.

The realization that she, as an African American, might possibly have been the only representative from her culture in these organizations resulted in the termination of possible contact. In organizations that were predominantly African-American, students did not feel the same internal tension.

Some participants suggested that African Americans feel the tension of Talking–Silence because of a fear of ridicule. This humiliation heightened the dialectic and continually increased a fear of talking about Black culture, even if the desire was there to do so. Notably, the Talking–Silence tension was elevated when the topics of conversation were issues about African-American culture. One student said,

> The only time I am asked to speak is if an issue about slavery or the ghettos enters the realm of conversation. I wasn’t around for slavery. I don’t live in a ghetto. I have other thoughts, but they don’t seem important to anyone else. So why bother to talk at all?

Students were frustrated when they became solely responsible for educating the dominant culture about African-American issues. When African-American students were only asked to share their thoughts on issues surrounding African Americans,
they became offended and worried about the impact of including their voice or silencing it.

*Past–future.* A third dialectic emerged as some participants indicated they struggled with the dialectical pull between their past and their future. The past could be defined as the relationships students had with their families, friends, and communities before attending their universities. Loyalty to family, friends, and the community—*to one's roots*—is a strong part of African-American culture.

Many students felt tension between their past and the future they wanted. They envisioned the future in terms of goals of achievement and material possessions, which some of them did not enjoy before attending college. The Past–Future dialectic focuses attention on the documented fact that the African-American community has been embattled with issues of poverty, racism, and powerlessness (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1995). Unfortunately, many African-American students and their families have personally experienced these struggles.

The Past–Future dialectical tension arose within these individuals as they attended a predominantly White university. By seeking to escape the poverty and powerlessness of their experiences in the African-American culture, these participants indicated that they sometimes felt like traitors. They struggled between loyalty to their past and the individual relationships therein, and the idea that their future success may lead them to deny these same individuals.

Within the Past–Future dialectical tension lies a struggle between the familiar and the unknown. Of the 67 subjects involved in this study, 52 were first-generation college students. Consequently, their families did not have an understanding of the student’s experience with, and desire for, a college degree.

The more time I spend in college and the more successful I become, the more I yearn for the comforts and security of home. Here at school, it is all about risks. You put yourself on the line, and you are accepted based on your performance. At home, it is safe. They love you whether you have a 4.0 [grade point average] or not. I have a connection with myself, my people at home. Here, I am always going and doing, studying and producing. The person I am at home is not the same person I am here. In fact, they are opposites. At home, I am demure, I cook and clean, I listen. Here, I am talking, ordering, studying. My family wouldn’t understand this person before you [the moderator] now. If fact, they would be offended by her because she is so different from the sister, daughter, friend they know. Yet, I am so different from the person they know. I live two lives. I vacillate between them continually.

In order to honor those she loved, this student had to deny or hide important parts of herself. She had to hide her future goals. She loved her family and did not want to dishonor them. Yet, she was committed to an education her family did not understand or appreciate. In this situation, her past connections and her future goals were in opposition.

Because African-American students reside in two distinct cultures, they strive to maintain relationships with both. One student claimed,
We had a family reunion this summer, and I sat in the middle of these people who were connected to me through blood, and I just wanted to scream. I didn’t fit any longer. We share a family, but we share nothing else in life. I want to make it, have a job, things and they keep asking why I’m not married. I don’t even bother explaining the idea that I am preparing myself for law school.

Cultural expectations often conflicted with these African-American students’ personal goals. To maintain strong connections with her past, this same individual insisted she would have had to get married and have several children. However, she asserted that her future goals to attend and finish law school would require her to “continue my education and forgo marriage and children.” This student could not manage the striking difference between the direction her life was taking and the direction her childhood friends’ lives were taking.

Students viewed the Past–Future tension as a conflict between honoring one’s history and focusing on one’s self. In the attempt to honor both the past and the future, African-American students expressed confusion. At times, they were not sure if they were pursuing their educational goals for themselves or for their families. By working toward their educational goals, these participants had difficulty finding support from the very individuals they were trying so hard to please. Again, these examples highlight the complexity and radiants of these dialectics tensions—because of the Past–Future, these individuals are struggling with the Talking–Silence tension when deciding how to respond to others.

**Intergroup Dialectical Tensions**

Intergroup dialectical tensions highlight the external forces that represent the inherent contradictions between the social values of the dominant White university culture and those ideologies of smaller cocultures. Two main dialectics between the African-American student culture and the predominantly White university culture emerged from the data: Integration–Segregation and Revelation–Concealment.

**Integration–segregation.** As a group, African-American students were conflicted as to when and how to infuse themselves into the university culture. In this discourse, integration denotes the desire by African-American students for their cultural group to be accepted and included in the mainstream university culture as a viable, worthy, and important group. By contrast, segregation denotes the African-American students’ desire that their culture be seen as self-sustaining and separate from other cultures in the university setting. It is important to note that this segregation does not have the same meaning as segregation that was part of the Civil Rights fight against the “separate but equal” segregationist argument. The participants in this study felt tension between pressures to integrate in the university and to segregate from it. They felt a dialectical pull from the Integration–Segregation tension between acclimating to a majority White university and honoring their own culture. According to the following group of African-American students, the dialectic of Integration–Segregation is a constant.
Student 1 (female): As a group, we do not need the university to recognize us. We can make it on our own.
Student 2 (male): No, we don’t need them, but still, if we want an education, if we want financial aid, we can’t piss ’em off. We have to extend the hand.
Student 1 (female): But is it worth selling ourselves out in order to be a part of this university? We should be able to achieve it on our own.
Student 3 (female): Saying we should do it on our own is like you think everybody who belongs to a group or ethnicity shouldn’t give or receive help from anyone else. That’s the problem with our culture. We don’t know when to stand up and fight and when to join hands in unity.
Student 2 (male): It’s just hard to know when to “play the game” and when to assert yourselves.
Student 3 (female): It’s not about getting help, it is about being a part of the university, this community. Do we want to be or not?
Student 1 (female): Sure, we want to be recognized, to be a part. But how? Life is just easier when I’m just with my [African-American peers].

This conversation summarized the basic intergroup tension for African-American students. They recognized the need for integrating into the dominant culture. Through integration they received financial aid, experience, and potential employment. At the same time, the need to segregate was born out of a fear that the African-American culture would become less independent and more similar to the dominant culture. As a group, African-American students wanted to assimilate into their respective universities, but at the same time they expressed a need to maintain cultural independence by segregating from them.

The Integration–Segregation struggle within this group centered around their desire for inclusion as members of the university culture and their wish for autonomy as a separate culture. A focus group discussion addressed the issue of Integration–Segregation. The participants explained,

Student 1 (male): Yeah, I’d say we want to be a part of [our] university, but it costs you.
Student 2 (female): You want to be accepted, but when you try you get rejected.
Moderator: What do you mean?
Student 2 (female): A big issue on our campus is homecoming. Every year this school has homecoming. It’s supposed to be for the entire student body, but we think it should be called the White Homecoming. Every year we argue about whether we should build a float for the parade or not. But it’s crazy. Look at the event and tell me it’s not exclusionary. So we created a Black Homecoming. We decided we’d have our own celebration.
Student 3 (female): I was against it because it gives the impression that we are purposefully withdrawing from the university. In class, White students would make fun of it and go on about how we want equality but we want to be separate.
Student 4 (male): Think though, that was one of the best times our group has had. Who gives a shit what anyone else thinks? They have their own homecoming, let us have ours.
Student 1 (male): That was the cost I was talking about. If you separate yourselves and have a good time, they [the dominant culture] scream reverse racism and say we don’t try to be members of the community. What’s the use in trying if they don’t want you, either.
This discussion highlighted an important issue within the African-American student culture. They indicated a desire to integrate into the university but felt excluded from doing so. Their reaction was to segregate themselves and create their own university culture by celebrating Black Homecoming. This issue epitomized the African-American students’ struggle to become vital members of the university and protect their culture at the same time. Participants indicated a need to segregate themselves as a group. Through a self-imposed segregation, they found support from each other. Conversely, they indicated a need to integrate into the university culture. In doing so, they perceived themselves as having greater opportunities.

Revelation–concealment. Similar to the intra-individual dialectic of Talking–Silence, African-American students as a group experienced a dialectical tension of Revelation–Concealment. They wanted to educate university members about the African-American culture. Simultaneously, they wanted to protect their culture from others in the university.

One participant was a member of a Black student performance organization. The following comment illustrated the Revelation–Concealment dialectical tension as he explained one of the groups’ greatest dilemmas.

The first meeting we had this big argument over who our target audience was with the performances we were planning. At first, we thought that the performances should just be for our African-American peers because we wanted to give something to them and we knew they’d be supportive. On the other hand, we thought that these performances would be a great opportunity to share the merits of Black literature—that is ignored in English classes—with our White peers. We felt we could share our culture with them. It could serve instructional and inspirational purposes. But you are never sure if they would show up, and if they did, would they appreciate it?

The group realized the importance of promoting and maintaining unity in their own culture. They also realized that their performances could inform those outside the African American culture. The tension was built on a need to shield themselves, as African Americans, from the university culture and a need to open themselves to the same culture. It became an issue of safety and support versus education and uncertainty. African-American students had a strong need to educate others about their culture. In order to facilitate such education, these students chose to share their experiences through seminars, lectures, and film series.

Some participants indicated a desire that African-American students would educate those in the university. In doing so, they hoped to improve the relationship between their own community and the university. While education may have been a goal within their own community, African-American students also experienced fear of educational efforts. The next conversation addressed the reason for such fear.

Student (female): I fall into the group of African Americans who thinks enough is enough. No, I don’t want to educate White people about my experiences. They don’t really care. If they did, every time they were told about the injustices of Rosa Parks, they would have done something. Every time they saw the life of our brothers and sisters in the projects, they would have done something. Every time they saw the effects of drugs
on our people, they would have stopped selling them to us. White people haven’t
demonstrated a willingness to change. Education isn’t the answer.

Interviewer: Why did you agree to talk with me [a White person] if you don’t believe it
[willingness to change]? [laughing]
Student: [laughing] I guess because I’m not as radical as I hoped. I want things to be
different.

Interviewer: Do you think sharing with me will help?
Student: I don’t think people care how African Americans survive in college as long as
they can say every year that one percent of their students are Black.

The preceding example brought two issues to light. First, it asserted the belief that
revealing information to the university culture about their own experiences would do
little to improve the plight of African-American students. Second, the student
demonstrated the presence of the Revelation–Concealment dialectical tension. Even
though she preached against revealing information about her experiences, she chose
to engage in that very behavior by participating in this study.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand African-American students’ higher-
education experiences in predominantly White universities. Using the theoretical lens
of relational dialectics, we examined transcripts of focus group discussions and
individual interviews in order to identify the discourse and meaning-making
processes of participants. This allowed us to explore implications for understanding
dialectics as a concept and the intercultural context of higher education in America.

Blackness–Whiteness

The African-American student’s internal struggle is representative of two opposing
views on multiculturalism in general. This debate is central to the Blackness–
Whiteness dialectic. The first viewpoint centers around the need for cultural, and
more specifically, Black pride. According to this viewpoint, it is necessary to maintain
Black pride in order to maintain African-American cultural authenticity and
individual African-American accomplishments (Boxill, 1995; Dubois, 1971). The
second viewpoint posits that the melting-pot days in America have ended, and that
current society is fragmented into separate ethnic communities (Schlesinger, 1995).
According to this viewpoint, ethnicity exaggerates differences and intensifies
resentments between and among races (Steele, 1995). The resulting hypertension
around ethnicity contributes to “self-pity and self-ghettoization” (Schlesinger, 1995,
p. 226). According to this view, if African Americans want to enjoy success in higher
education, they must stop focusing so much on their ethnicity. The focus itself
promotes “Euro-phobia, separation, emotions of alienation, victimization, paranoia”

The two views represented in this debate are apparent in the dialectical tension
between Blackness and Whiteness. The results of this study indicate that our
participants recognized a need for both viewpoints. These African-American
students, amid their internal struggle, alternated between the oppositional poles of needing Black pride and needing a “melting-pot” ideology. The battle between White and Black negatively affected not only their interpersonal development, but also their academic performance (Griffin, 1991).

Talking–Silence and Revelation–Concealment

According to these data, whether in classrooms, student organizations, university committees, or peer interactions, African-American students want to initiate communication designed to reveal information about the Black culture. However, they sometimes terminate or avoid communication in hopes of concealing information about their culture. Highlighting these tensions, Lorde (1995) concluded that these struggles represent the desire to educate those in the dominant White culture, while simultaneously perceiving the uselessness of educating White people.

In traditional American society, it is the job of the oppressed to educate the oppressors about the oppression (Carnoy, 1984; Lorde, 1995). Unfortunately, many of the African-American participants in this study felt that their efforts to educate would fall on deaf ears and perpetuate stereotypes. In essence, the physical and emotional energy required to share oneself and one’s culture with others was perceived as costly compared to the benefits that could arise from such communication.

These African-American students recognized a need for educating others about their experiences as Black people in a White world. They indicated a realization that the racism and oppression they experience would not change unless they initiated communication about such atrocities. After repeatedly telling and educating others about the oppression of the African-American student, these same individuals began to question the necessity and effectiveness of such education efforts. Thus, they felt troubled about initiating communication because they did not perceive that Whites were willing to learn or understand their messages.

Past–Future

According to the data, the more these participants achieved, the less connection they felt to their heritage. The tension was established, then, as they entered college to pursue an education; but in doing so, they feared that those individuals from their past who were important to them would not understand this pursuit. Thus, these students perceived that they did not get the recognition and support from their families and communities that they needed to maximize their success in higher education.

Pivotal to this dialectic seemed to be the student’s family background and socioeconomic status. Although specific socioeconomic information was not collected, 52 of the 67 students interviewed in this study were first-generation college students. Careful analysis of the transcripts indicates that the Past–Future tension might have been greater for first-generation college students than for the others. These participants did not have parental experiences from which to learn, or
to create an expectation of college life, particularly as an African-American student. Thus, the pull between themselves as African Americans and the dominant university culture may have been heightened.

Integration–Segregation

The discursive tension between integration and segregation has been a social issue for centuries. With social change evolving at a slow pace and racial tension increasing in society, some voices within African-American communities are calling for segregation as a means of self-protection (Steele, 1995). Effectively summarizing the Integration–Segregation paradox, Boxill (1995) claimed, “On the one hand, we must overcome segregation because it denies the idea of human brotherhood; on the other hand, to overcome segregation we must self-segregate and therefore also deny the idea of human brotherhood” (pp. 235–236).

The effects of this self-imposed segregation may not be as harmful to the African-American student as the old segregationist attitudes of the previous century, but they may not be that helpful, either. Segregation negatively affects today’s African-American students personally, socially, and academically. According to Griffin (1991), Black students who are segregated from the university are likely to experience interpersonal and academic failure. At the same time, those seeking integration into the university culture face negative stereotypes from, and strained relationships with, the White majority in the university community. Hence, the dialectical pull between Integration and Segregation leaves African-American students frustrated personally and academically. Analysis of the data in this study has served to describe and explain these dialectical tensions as part of the larger cultural discourse in a raced society.

Conclusion

Programmatic and Pedagogical Implications

Several potential action steps emerge from the identification and analysis of these dialectical tensions. First, university leaders should make special efforts to include parents of first-generation college students. Some of the students in this study indicated that their parents had no understanding of universities and no desire to visit them. To combat this reality, universities may need to go to the communities instead of asking parents to come to the university.

Second, university leaders would benefit from acknowledging all these dialectical tensions, especially Blackness–Whiteness and Integration–Segregation, and create programs that give voice to both cultural perspectives. In addition to events that encourage the Blackness dialectical pull, such as Kwanzaa celebrations and performances featuring Black artists and writers, Student Activities staff should initiate jointly developed programs designed to reduce the lack of understanding between different ethnicities. Some universities’ current multicultural programs have left the African-American student community feeling confused and frustrated. They
may be perceived as the university’s attempts to ‘Whiten’ the Black culture (Lee, 1999), rather than fostering equal and open conversation.

Third, instructional training should be provided for professors and graduate teaching assistants on the need for, and inclusion of, diversity in their courses. Such training should illustrate to participants how to include ethnically diverse populations in the class, how to address racial tensions, and how to include more diverse literature and scholarship. This training should emphasize the necessity to seek African-American and other minority student opinions on a variety of issues, not just on issues of ethnicity. Ideally, these initiatives would reflect a sincere desire for intercultural understanding, rather than mere compliance with political correctness guidelines.

Strategies for a more inclusive pedagogy must be implemented at both classroom and administrative levels (Borisoff & Chesebro, 2011; Daffin & Anderson, 2009; Shields, 2009; Shockley & Frederick, 2009). Borisoff and Chesebro (2011) offer three such strategies that may productively alter how the teaching–learning process is experienced by educators and students:

Creating space for personal experience and emotion (i.e., Judy Helfand’s pedagogy of discomfort), rethinking notions of hierarchy and care (i.e., giving up traditional conceptions of power and authority in service of empowerment and collaborative learning), and challenging a legacy of categorical Either/Or thinking that sustains and refines Binary thought (i.e., reconsidering usage of categorical Western thinking that reinforces problematic constructs of identity). (pp. 139–41)

Following these directives will be challenging but may offer a balance of power in the classroom and engender a more diverse intellectual and cultural environment.

Finally, Shields (2009) calls for educational leaders to consider a transformative model as opposed to the standard reproductive model of education. In a reproductive model, education is treated as a homogenous structure devoid of political and power relations. In such a model, assimilation to predominantly White institutions becomes the only option for African-American students. To address this inequality, Shields calls upon educational leaders to adopt a transformative model that considers theories of power and politics to be central to the practices of educational leaders, moving education toward an informed climate of inclusion. Adopting the transformative model will not only benefit minority students, but majority students as well (Carr & Lund, 2009; Rodriguez, 2009).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

In this study, we examined the relationship between African-American students and their universities. The word relationship indicates a partnership. However, we focused on only one side of the relationship—the African-American perspective. Thus, the results are a reflection of African Americans’ perspectives about their relationship partners—the predominantly White university community. Although this perspective has been useful and provided insight into the relationship, the limited scope of the findings points to a constraint of the study.
To extend this line of inquiry, scholars should address the university as a relational partner (Rowser, 1990) to uncover the dialectics expressed by those making decisions. Such a perspective may reveal tensions experienced by the dominant culture of White students when developing and maintaining relationships with African-American students. Another avenue of research would be to study the dialectics experienced by African-American students attending historically Black universities or colleges. This will provide a different data source and enable comparison with the view of the participants in this study. Further, in this study we focused on undergraduate students only, but future research should include graduate students, as well, as they tend to be older and presumably more experienced in intercultural interaction.

Institutions of higher education face an important challenge. They must admit that their relationships with African-American students are in need of attention, and then they must honestly and heartily attempt to develop and maintain better relationships (Baber, 2012; Harmon, 2012). The struggle is real—both for African-American students and for their universities. Until that struggle is adequately and earnestly addressed, it is unlikely that the struggle will lead to progress.

References


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