Racism, African American College Students’ Mental Health, and the Efficacy of Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives: A Case Study

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Abstract

African American college students who attend predominantly White institutions of higher education (PWIs) regularly encounter subtle and explicit forms of racism on campus. These daily experiences of prejudice and discriminatory behaviors can have an adverse impact on their mental health. This study examines the intersections of racism and mental health, particularly within an environment where racism is socially unacceptable. More specifically, this study uses qualitative methods to explore how African American college students who attend a predominately White institution of higher education (PWI) make meaning of their experiences with racial discrimination and its impact on their mental health, as well as their perceptions of PWI’s efforts to redress the campus racial climate through diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Individual, in-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted with a convenience sample of African American college students (ages 18-24) at a PWI in the southeastern United States. Data were analyzed using a combination of analytical strategies including critical race methodology (CRM) and a modified approach to grounded theory (GT). Qualitative data analysis revealed students’ experiences with everyday racial discrimination that contributed to overall feelings of anger, loneliness, social isolation, and invisibility in participants’ narratives of their subjective sense of well-being. Students’ narratives also revealed how they perceived their university’s approach to diversity and inclusion to be superficial, which benefited White students while marginalizing the African American students.
The ways in which African American college students make sense of their experiences with racism on campus in relation to their mental health directs attention to the importance of expanding efforts to improve the racial campus climate at PWIs. Placing the perspective of African American students at the center of inquiry allows for the development of a more nuanced understanding of the enduring discrimination that African American students negotiate at PWIs. Such insight can lead to potential strategies not currently in place.