

Racial Integration in American Higher Education (AHE): Exploring Literature on African American Subcultures

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Abstract: African Americans value education as their vehicle for a bright future. However, racial segregation continues to hurt equity, diversity, and inclusion in Higher Education in America (AHE). I opine that studying and understanding the post-racial African American subculture could be an integral move in realizing racial integration in AHE. This paper explored literature on African American culture to identify the characteristics that shape their behavior at AHE. It emerged that African Americans continue to be racially segregated in AHE since they could not be assimilated into American culture due to their hair and skin color, their internal culture that influenced how they think and differed from other immigrants, black scholars resistance to use western literary theories in analyzing African American literature due to their uniqueness. Further, African Americans continue to view Caucasians with mistrust for distorting their history undervaluing them and providing them with inadequate facilities. I argue that the knowledge that African Americans are unique from other communities and that they have their feelings, and that they are affected by racial segregation can be a first step towards realizing access and equity in AHE.

Keywords: AHE, African American, racial segregation, culture, racial integration, diversity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The majority of institutions of higher education in America (AHE) are geared towards multiculturalism and diversity as a step towards racial integration. Research has linked the challenges of multiculturalism in AHE to racial segregation. Lack of exposure to diverse cultures or other ethnic groups has seen White students experience minimal engagement with students of other ethnicities. For example, Orefield and Lee (2004) noted that the majority of White students had lived segregated lifestyles both in small and larger towns that have isolated them from other races. Chang, Astin, and Kim (2004) also observed that with the unique American society that embraces segregation, White university students will continue to experience minimal contact with other races.

There is a need to confront racism for AHE to experience racial integration. Racism can be viewed as a system based on one race enjoying better privileges over others (Wellman, 1993; Tatum, 2003). Deconstructing whiteness should be the first step towards understanding diversity in AHE. Other minority students must understand the dominance of White people's power to define the universal American culture

(Harper & Quaye, 2009). Stulberg and Weinberg (2011) opined that white supremacy culture is psychologically affected and continues to affect African-American people.

During the segregation era, African-American people had maintained an alternative culture of meaning "a hybrid of African retentions and counter-cultural interpretations of Christianity" (Stulberg & Weinberg, 2011, p. 217). Studying and understanding the post-racial African American subculture could be an integral move in realizing racial integration in AHE. Therefore, it is worth reviewing the literature to explore the components of African-American subculture(s) and the role, if any, it plays in realizing racial integration in AHE. This paper explores the African American culture to identify the characteristics that shape their behavior at AHE.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

American Cultural Values

Culture constitutes dominant values that are passed down from one generation to another through learning (Weaver, 2001). Weaver (2001) compared people's culture to an iceberg. People's behavior makes the smallest part of their culture and is influenced by the internal culture associated with how people think and perceive the world. He argued that for one to understand the behavior of Americans, it is paramount to understand their mainstream culture.

Weaver (2001) challenged the different perceptions that people have viewed American culture. He noted that different people from all over the globe brought and continues to bring their cultures to America (USA) and "throw them to the American pot. The mixture is stirred and heated until the various cultures melt together" (p. 3). Despite this long-held notion of America being a melting pot, America enjoyed a dominant culture and immigrants gave up their differences to fit in the mainstream culture. Some immigrants learned English and Christianity to fit in the dominant American culture. However, Weaver (2001) observed that American Indians, Mexican Americans and African Americans did not or chose not to fit the mold. It was difficult for them to change skin color or hair texture and were easily excluded from the dominant culture.

American religion, liberalism, and capitalism have also shaped American culture. The majority of immigrants from Europe who came to America in the 18th century were Calvinists who opposed the Roman Catholic Church (Weaver, 2001). Calvinism revolutionaries in Europe opposed the economic status quo in the 17th Century. It was founded on the assumption that change is good and was the responsibility of an individual to bring change. The European Calvinism values added to the American culture that encouraged individualism and self-reliance and a belief in laissez-faire capitalism. Speir (2017) identified Madison and Calvinist theology and political philosopher Witherspoon as that which defined the American government. Today, unlike other European countries, the U.S federal government has little support for health care, childcare, and the unemployed. Education is also more local than the federal government. The great emphasis placed on individualism puts those communities that value relationships and extended family heritage in an awkward position since when an individual fails it affects all those associated with the individual. Americans and Mexicans value acquaintances before getting down to business, a practice seen by the White Americans as time-wasting.

Cultural Characteristics of African Americans

Kennedy, Ard, Louis, Conish, Eugene, Levy, and Brantley (2007) identified family, religion, mistrust of Caucasians, preservation of ethnic identity, and education as characteristic of African American culture. Further, African Americans reported a feeling of being undervalued, lack of access, and inadequate facilities affect their effort to transition in lifestyle. Kennedy et al. (2007) observed that participants in their study viewed grandmother and mother in an extended family as key to their support both morally and economically. African Americans place education third after family and religion. Education is viewed as the "most promising vehicle for a lasting positive change" (Kennedy et al., 2007, p. 550).

However, African American participants cited integration to have dismantled the African American family. Before integration African Americans had a strong family heritage and they had a belief that raising a child was the responsibility of the village. They blame Caucasian for distorting African American history leading to mistrust. Kennedy et al (2007) observed also that African American people felt betrayed and discriminated against in the workplace. African Americans grew up in very poor family and their socio-economic status has denied the opportunity to take health insurance. In total, African Americans have a belief that the challenges they have faced throughout their history have endowed them with an explicit culture that differentiates them from other ethnic groups.

Black Culture

African-American culture has its roots in Africa. However, slavery restricted Americans of African origin to practice their cultural traditions. Nevertheless, several values, beliefs survived over time and were blended with other white

cultures. Brown (2013) identified art as another avenue, after slavery, that blacks in North America got united. African-American literature revolved around slave narratives in the nineteenth century to elucidate the role of "blacks within the larger American society, African-American culture, racism, slavery and equity" (Brown, 2013, p. 108). Some scholars like Henry Louis Gates Jr. resisted using western literary theories and advocated for leaving black tradition to speak for itself. The majority of black writers were inspired by the discrimination and racism subjected to African-Americans to refute the claims of the dominant culture. Brown (2013) went out to confirm this observation in his observation that in "American society, literary acceptance has traditionally been intimately tied in with the very power dynamics which perpetrated such evils as racial discrimination" (p. 109). Thus, in writing their literature, African Americans overcame the white intellectual filter and established their literary traditions.

Brown (2013) observed that during the slavery period some African- American culture was accentuated. Today a unique and dynamic African American culture continues to influence the mainstream American culture and the broader world. Challenges of racial segregation and the desire for African Americans to practice their traditions has influenced to a larger extent the black culture in America. African American culture has also had a pervasive transformative impact on mainstream American culture: language, music, religion, dance cuisine, and agriculture (Brown, 2013, p. 110).

III. CONCLUSION

African Americans continue to be racially segregated in AHE for several reasons. First, Weaver (2001) argued that due to African American skin color and hair they could not be assimilated into the American culture. Further, they could have chosen not to adapt to the American culture since their internal culture that influenced how they think differed from other immigrants. This standpoint is in line with Brown's (2013) observation that black scholars resisted the use of western literary theories in analyzing African American Literature due to its uniqueness. This could be viewed as a source of identity. African Americans associate themselves with African culture the honors extended families and acquittance that is different from the American culture. African Americans continue to view Caucasians with mistrust. Kennedy et al. (2017) opined that African Americans viewed Caucasians with mistrust for distorting their history, undervaluing them, and providing them with inadequate facilities.

Generally, African Americans remain focused and believe that the challenges they faced during racial segregation helped develop a unique identity. Further, they viewed education as their vehicle for their bright future. Consequently, AHE administrators should accommodate the African American family heritage as well as appreciating their contribution to American culture and education. The knowledge that African American's are unique from other communities and that they

have their feelings, and that they are affected by racial segregation can be a first step towards realizing access and equity in AHE.

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