RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL COPING STRATEGIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE UNIVERSITY
Researchers have grappled for years to find out what characteristics—be they social, cultural, psychological, or a combination of the three—have enabled African Americans to achieve in a society that has and continues to be hostile to their very survival. More importantly, how do African Americans manage to retain a level of sanity while their humanity is being constantly questioned and attacked? What, if any, role has the development of a positive racial identity played in the development of effective coping strategies of African Americans, particularly African American men?

African American men face many socio-cultural, academic, and negative dilemmas that generate stress experiences and identity conflicts specific to them as a group. These dilemmas include denigrations to their manhood, e.g., physical beatings, castration, police brutality, lynching, educational tracking, and high rates of prison incarceration. Unfortunately, the outcomes of these denigrations have been the creation of stressors that have prevented African American men from expressing their full potential as men and human beings. These stressors, in turn, may lead to psychological pressures which negatively affect relationships African American men have with other African Americans.

Veroff, Douvan, and Kalka (1981), offer an alternative picture of African American men. The picture these researchers paint depicts a description of African American men as human beings who have somehow managed to be psychologically resilient and healthy through their effective use of coping strategies when dealing with a hostile society. Even though they face tremendous stress, many African American men manage to live happy and fulfilling lives.

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact racial identity has on the development of psychological healthy coping strategies among African American males at a predominantly White university in the southeastern United States. In this study, “coping” is defined as the process whereby an individual attempts to manage, through cognitive and behavioral efforts, external or internal demands that are assessed as exceeding an individual’s resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The goal of the study was to derive implications that may be used to help young African American men at these institutions learn to more successfully navigate their educational experiences.

**African American Ethnic Identity**

African American ethnic identity has been discussed in social science literature using various terms. Black identity, “sense of people-hood,” and “sense of Blackness” are all terms that have been used by researchers (Ramsey, 1991). The most widely known model of African American ethnic identity is William Cross’s model of Nigrescence (1971). The Nigrescence model describes the profile of African Americans, in relation to the majority White culture and the various phrases of their ethnic identity development. Cross states in his book, Shades of Black (1991), that his stage theory is a resocialization experience that seeks to transform a preexisting identity (one that is non-Afrocentric) to one that is Afrocentric. The Nigrescence model has five stages of Black racial identity development: pre-encounter, in which an individual rejects their own culture and accepts the norms of White society; encounter, where events occur that open an individual’s eyes to their own culture and the way it has been oppressed; immersion-emersion, where individuals immerse themselves in African American culture and reject the dominant White culture; and internalization, where individuals accept their African heritage while also accepting the traditions, beliefs, and values of other cultures. The fifth stage, internalization-commitment, is characterized by positive self-esteem, ideological flexibility and openness to one’s Blackness just as in stage four. The difference is that in stage five individuals find activities and commitments to express their identity (Cross, 1971).

The revised model of Nigrescence includes substantial changes, particularly...
in the pre-encounter and internalization stages. The pre-encounter stage now includes three distinct identity clusters (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). The pre-encounter assimilation identity has a low salience for race but a strong orientation toward being an American. The pre-encounter mis-education identity internalizes negative stereotypes about being Black (i.e., being lazy or criminal). The pre-encounter self-hatred identity holds extremely negative views about African Americans and is anti-Black and self-hating (Cross & Vandiver, 2001).

The encounter stage still involves an encounter with discrimination or racism that causes a shift in a person’s perception of the world. However, because of its transitional nature, the encounter stage is difficult to measure.

The internationalization stage is now theorized as consisting of two identities. The internationalization intense Black involvement identity celebrates everything Black as good, and the internationalization anti-white identity views everything White as evil (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). Individuals in the internationalization stage immerse themselves in their Blackness. Instead of conceptualizing this stage as a single identity with two components (i.e., pro-Black and anti-White), Cross conceptualized it as two separate identities under the umbrella of immersion into Blackness (Cross & Vandiver, 2001).

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The acceptance of one’s Blackness does not guarantee a positive change in a Black person’s level of psychological functioning. The acceptance of Blackness does not instill African Americans from depression nor does it change fundamental personality characteristics (Cross, 1991, 1995).

**African American Men and Ethnic Identity**

The history of America and its relationship with African American males has been acrimonious, to say the least. African American men, in the past and presently, suffer from the chronic stress of living in a racist and oppressive society. This condition has historical roots which date back to their enslavement and deportation from Africa (Elligan & Utsey, 1999). Today, African American males are marginalized out of political, economic, and social arenas. This has shaped African American males’ ethnic identity in significant ways. As African American boys develop, they become aware of inequities that exist in American society. African American males see that European Americans, particularly European American males, are treated with reverence and respect while African American males are feared and have limited opportunities. The media and classroom textbooks project images of Eurocentric power and dominance (White & Parham, 1990). In the academic setting, African American males are placed in remedial and special education classes at a greater rate than European Americans or African American females (Irvine, 1990). Given the absence of positive feedback from school and the media, and the frequent encounters with violence, police harassment, and incarceration, African American males have tended to develop a sense of pessimism towards the future (Harris, 1995).

Phinney, Lockner, and Murphy (1990) suggest that African American males need to resolve two primary issues or conflicts that stem from their status as members of a marginalized group in American society. First, African American males must resolve prejudicial attitudes from society. Second, African American males have to adopt two differing sets of values: one from the dominant culture and one from their own culture. According to Phinney et al. (1990), African American males may actively explore resolution to these issues that result in an achieved ethnic identity or they may ignore them, resulting in identity diffusion. African American males must realize that prejudicial stereotypes will only affect their identity development if they accept and believe the stereotypes (Corbin & Pruitt, 1999). In fact, African American males have the power to reject these stereotypes and redefine themselves and the African American community in more positive terms (Tajfel, 1978).

The second issue appears to be more difficult to resolve. This issue is concerned with African American males’ feelings of exclusion from society. While African American males are American, the men say they are not accepted as American. This exclusion is a core issue, and in attempting to resolve or redefine their ethnic identity, they become individuals with two warring souls—African and American. This conflict is a core issue in the identity struggle of African American males and may promote feelings of anger and indignation (White, 1984). African American males must struggle with adopting two divergent value systems, one African American and the other European American (Corbin & Pruitt, 1999). Total rejection of either reality can restrict their choices, personal growth, social interactions, and economic opportunities (White & Parham, 1990). If African American males exclusively identify with Eurocentric values of individualism, competitiveness, emotional suppression, and dominance, they may achieve at the cost of being isolated from the African American community and alienated psychologically from who they are as persons of African descent (Corbin & Pruitt, 1999). While African American males must exist in an individualistic and competitive culture, they must continue to embrace the positive aspects of their African American culture. These include communalism, emotionality, shared power, and interdependence. Ultimately, through the incorporation of their Africanness and their New World experiences, they will develop the skills which are necessary to dismantle the global White supremacy power structure.

In order for African American males to resolve the ethnic identity issue, there are a number of possible outcomes that have been suggested: alienation, assimilation, withdrawal, and integration. These four outcomes are each affected by social...
factors such as discrimination, poverty, and education level (Phinney et al., 1990; Tajfel, 1978). Alienated individuals are those who accept the negative image that society presents and alienate themselves from the African American community and culture. According to Corbin & Pruitt (1999) these individuals accept the fact that they are inferior to European Americans. Assimilated individuals attempt to become part of the majority culture and do not remain connected with the African American community. They attempt to think and behave in ways that minimize, devalue, or deny their African American heritage. Withdrawn individuals become immersed in their own culture while withdrawing from contact with the dominant culture. In order to counterbalance the negative images they receive from the dominant society, they over-identify with African American culture to minimize any loss of self-esteem resulting from comparisons with the dominant group (Corbin & Pruitt, 1999).

Although some African American males may view these first three outcomes as healthy defense mechanisms, they are left unprepared to cope with the reality of racism when they are not within the boundaries of the African American community. Integrated individuals find a way of accepting their African American ethnic identity while integrating with the dominant culture. They feel secure in their African American identity while maintaining contact with European Americans (Corbin & Pruitt, 1999). While interaction with the mainstream White community may not be an easy task for some African American males, it is beneficial if they are to be both a viable part of American society and remain connected to the African American community.

Psychological Health
Defining psychological health is not an easy task. No theory or model of adult psychological health has achieved consensus among researchers or accumulated a convincing body of empirical evidence to give an exact definition of psychological health (Ramseur, 1991). While existing models of psychological health claim to be universal, meaning that they are applicable and explanatory for all humans, the existing models usually have very little to say about the unique social and cultural circumstances of African American males and the impact of these circumstances on the psychological health of the African American male.

“Universal” or western models of psychological health are varied. The standard model used in medicine was that psychological health is freedom from symptoms of illness (Ramseur, 1991). Another accepted definition was that psychological health was like the average, or “modal,” member of society, or being “adjusted” to one’s social and cultural surroundings. These definitions are rarely used today.

Maslow (1968) criticized these models because they did not include the human potentiality of creativity, growth, and self-actualization in psychological functioning. Writing from a humanistic perspective, Maslow described a healthy person as self-actualized, or moving towards fulfilling their unique human potential. According to Maslow (1968), we all have an inherent motivation towards growth or self-actualization, and humans would if society allowed our more primitive needs to be satisfied (e.g., hunger, safety). Maslow investigated the personality characteristics of people he thought were self-actualized by reviewing biographies of prominent figures and his friends. The characteristics Maslow (1968) discovered include the accurate perception of reality, the ability to be intimate with others, the capacity to have mystical experiences, and the capacity to be creative.

Jahoda (1958) proposes that there are six themes of positive mental health. Positive mental health refers to positive and realistic attitudes towards the self, growth, and self-actualization; integration or a balance of psychological forces and stress resistance; autonomy; accurate perception of reality; and environmental mastery—the ability to love, work, and play. Unfortunately, Jahoda did not specify how, or if, the six criteria are interrelated (Ramseur, 1991). Also, Jahoda’s model is not grounded in developmental of social/cultural psychological theory (Ramseur, 1991).

Erikson’s model (1968) is probably the most sophisticated example of a developmental/
come. This initiative develops when parents support their child’s new sense of purpose. The danger is that parents will demand too much self-control, which can lead to over-control and a sense of guilt for the child. Industry versus inferiority. This occurs from 6 to 11 years of age. In this stage children develop the capacity to work and cooperate with others. A sense of inferiority occurs when negative experiences at home, school, or with peers can lead to feelings of incompetence. Identity versus identity confusion, occurs during the teenage years. The adolescence tries to answer the questions, “Who am I?” and “What is my place in society?” The negative outcome is confusion about future adult roles. The sixth stage, intimacy versus isolation, occurs during young adulthood. In this stage young people work to establish intimate ties to others. Some individuals, because of earlier disappointments, cannot form close relationships and therefore remain isolated from others. The seventh stage, generativity versus stagnation, occurs during the middle-age years. This stage entails a sense of accomplishment, the passing on of wisdom to the next generation through child rearing, caring for other people, or productive work. The person who fails in these ways feels an absence of meaningful accomplishment. The last stage, integrity versus despair, occurs during the older years. In this stage Erikson maintains that individuals reflect on the kind of person they have been. Integrity results from feeling that life was worth living as it happened. Older individuals who are dissatisfied with their lives fear death. Erikson states that the outcome of each of these stages is a dynamic balance with health representing the process of continued growth and development. This balance is contingent on the coping strategies that an individual uses when faced with stress. The model that Jahoda (1958) proposed, along with Erikson’s development model, seem to be useful in understanding the psychological health of African American males. Jahoda’s model specifies that psychological health has a number of definable dimensions that may be related but can also be independent of one another. Implicit in this model is the idea that the dimensions are measurable and can be empirically investigated. Unfortunately, the model is not grounded in theory, does not have a developmental or social/cultural perspective, and does not consider gender differences (Ramsey, 1991). Erikson’s model is developmental and addresses issues across the lifespan. Erikson’s theory points to the importance of the interplay between society and culture on the individual and forges links to theory. He points out that psychological health is a matter of a dynamic balance, or a favorable ratio of positive-to-negative psychological aspects. Unfortunately, little empirical research has been concluded in relation to Erikson’s model. Erikson’s stress/adaptation model has a number of strengths. It considers the cultural environment in which a person exists.

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Erikson’s model examines different points in the life cycle, it is empirically researchable, and is grounded in social and psychological theory. The shortcoming of Erikson’s model is that it is focused at the group level of analysis rather than the individual. Therefore, applying findings to assess or describe a psychological healthy person is often difficult (Ramsey, 1991).

According to Azibo (1996), Western psychology, which lacks a priori model of psychological health, infers that sanity is the absence of sanity. Azibo (1996) goes further, defining mental health Africentrically as the state at which mental processes are self-preserving, Wàde Nobles (1986) gives a holistic definition of mental health as the behavioral representation of ordered thought that is consistent with one’s spirit. Welsing (1991) defines African American mental health as patterns of perception, logic, thought, speech, action, and emotional response, whether consciously or unconsciously determined. Welsing (1991) believes that African American mental health reflects personal and extended self-respect and extended self-affirmation. Thus, African-centered mental health providers tend to define mental health not only for the individual, but the relationships that the individual has with the extended community.

African American males must live and adapt to a unique social and cultural environment. This environment, and the necessity that African American males adapt to it, has implications for any model that claims to define and understand the psychological health of African American males (Ramsey, 1991). Certain issues seem important in characterizing the aspects of the environment that are relevant to the psychological health of African American males, such as racism, the need to adapt to white institutions and culture, remaining situated in the African American community, and coping with limited social and political power (Ramsey, 1991).

Most African American males remain connected to the African American community and its culture while also adapting to white American culture and institutions. While most African American males live, have families and friends, and attend churches in the African American community, they must adjust to White-run institutions, workplaces, and military settings. This adaptation many times requires African American males to juggle different values, behavioral styles, and aspirations. This situation has led many social scientists to state that African American males have to be bicultural to function in both cultures (Ramsey, 1991).

Coping Strategies
There is a sizable amount of literature examining the stress/adaptation model proposed by Erikson (1968) and the links between stress, coping strategies, and the level of subjective well-being or distress experienced by an individual (Ramsey, 1991). There has been a recent growth of research dealing with coping strategies. This research has provided a large amount of evidence that helps to explain the strategies by which people cope with stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stress has been associated with many diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, and substance abuse. African American men are more susceptible than other populations to these disorders.
Stress has also been associated with homicide and suicide, which occur at high rates in African American communities (Plummer & Slane, 1996). While stress has been defined in many ways, all of the definitions involve an environmental demand to which the person must react and where stress is perceived of as at least potentially exceeding the person's ability or resources to meet the challenges (Ramseur, 1991).

According to Ramseur (1991), coping refers to an effort to master environmental demands when a previous response is unavailable or ineffective. This is similar to the definition that is proposed by Utsey and Ponteototto (2000). Stress and coping responses are linked by cognitive appraisal of the stressor and the internal/external resources of the person (Ramseur, 1991). Cognitive appraisal refers to the significance and meaning attached to a stressor. Internal resources refer to individual factors; personality traits, racial identification, social class, and cultural beliefs. External resources refer to family or social ties, work relationships and church affiliations (Ramseur, 1991). The model then is one where stressor(s), an appraisal of the stressor(s), and the person's internal/external resources in turn produce a coping response that leads to an adaptive or distressful outcome (Ramseur, 1991).

Researchers generally agree that there are two major types of coping strategies. Problem-focused coping strategies function to change a troubled person-environment relationship by directly acting on the environment or the individual. In contrast, emotion-focused coping strategies attempt to change either commitment patterns (e.g., one avoids thinking about a threat) or the meaning or interpretation of what is happening, which may mitigate the stress, although the actual reality of the relationship is not changed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Examples of problem-focused coping are planning strategies or suppression of competing activities whereas receiving emotional social support and religious activities are examples of emotion-focused coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Along with emotions and problem focused coping strategies, the use of certain coping styles and strategies appears to depend on personal characteristics and the ways they appraise the nature of an event and situational factors are appraised (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, particular types of coping strategies are more or less effective, according to the type of stress encountered (Dempsey, 2002). Plummer and Slane (1996) pointed out that some coping strategies that may be viewed as maladaptive (e.g., avoidance or distancing) or adaptive under some circumstances and some coping strategies that are viewed as adaptive may be maladaptive under other circumstances.

### Racism, Coping and African American Males

There is limited research examining coping strategies used by African American males. More problematic, there is limited research dealing with the destructive effects of racism as a stressor on the psychological health of African American men (Elligian & Utsey, 1999). A few researchers have noted a relationship between chronic exposure to racism and poorer psychological and somatic health among African American men (Utsey & Payne, 2000).

Racism has been implicated in the onset of several stress-related diseases, including hypertension, coronary heart disease, cancer, and cirrhosis of the liver. Chronic exposure to racism has been associated with increased levels of depression, lowered life satisfaction and self-esteem, feelings of trauma, loss, and helplessness (Utsey & Payne, 2000). Given the insidious nature of racism and its deleterious effects on the psychological health of African American men, more research is needed that examines the impact of racism as a stressor in the lives of African American men.

Racial discrimination permeates many aspects of African American life. According to Jones (1997), the experience of racism is multidimensional and can be classified using a tripartite typology. The first type of racism posited by Jones (1997) is individual racism. With individual racism, African Americans experience racial discrimination on a personal level. An example of individual racism is when a security guard targets an African American and follows that individual while they shop at a store. The second type of racism suggested by Jones (1997) is institutional racism. Institutional racism is experienced by African Americans as a result of social and institutional policies that exclude African Americans from full participation in American society. Examples of institutional racism are the criminal laws related to the possession of illegal drugs. Federal drugs laws require stiffer penalties for possession of crack cocaine, a drug more accessible to African Americans than for powdered cocaine, the drug of choice for white Americans. The last type of racism suggested by Jones (1997) is cultural racism that occurs when the cultural practices of the “dominant” group are generally regarded by society and its institutions as being superior to the culture of a “subordinate” group. Cultural racism can be observed in the manner by which the contributions of African Americans have been largely ignored in the annals of American history.

Given that racism in all its forms is a powerful stressor in the lives of many African Americans, particularly African American males. Research aimed at delineating those coping behaviors that effectively ameliorate its potential harmful psychological and somatic consequences is warranted.

In previous studies on racial discrimination as a source of stress, researchers have conceptualized the coping behaviors of African Americans from the theoretical framework of Lazarus and Folkman (1984). According to their theory, stress is a particular relationship between individuals and their environment that is appraised by them as taxing or as exceeding their resources and endangering their well-being. Lazarus and Folkman's theory also states that individuals can become overwhelmed as stressors occur, depending on one's view of the impending threat and the resources at their disposal to handle the threat. At this point, individuals risk becoming vulnerable to the onset of physical and psychological disorders. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as the process whereby individuals attempt to manage, through cognitive and behavioral efforts, external or internal demands that are assessed as exceeding their resources. This cognitive and behavioral efforts can be described as positive or negative (Berman, Kurtines, Silverman & Serafini, 1996). Negative coping strategies—distraction, withdrawal, self-criticism, aggression, blaming others, wishful thinking, and resignation—consists of asocial or antisocial avoidant behaviors that are focused on the stressor itself. Positive coping strategies—problem-solving efforts, seeking information, and social support—include prosocial approach behaviors which are focused on self-care or on changing the problem situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In general, it has been shown that positive, problem-focused strategies have been related to better outcomes, whereas negative, avoidant strategies have been as-
associated with greater difficulties (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Plummer and Slane (1996) conducted an empirical study using the Lazarus and Folkman theoretical framework of coping to examine the coping behavior of African Americans. Plummer and Slane (1996) found that African Americans engaged in less active coping efforts in racially stressful situations, that racially stressful situations generally demanded confrontational coping strategies, and racially stressful situations tended to restrict the coping options available to African Americans. Overall, in comparing the coping behaviors of African Americans with those of Whites, Plummer and Slane (1996) found that African Americans used significantly more emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies than did Whites.

A qualitative study was conducted by Feagin (1991) in which African Americans were interviewed regarding their experiences with racism. The study's findings suggested that the response to racism that African Americans used was influenced by the context in which it occurred. For example, racial hostility encountered in the street was most likely to be met with withdrawal, resigned acceptance, or verbal retort. In situations in which African Americans experienced racism in public accommodations, the response was generally a verbal counterattack or resigned acceptance. Feagin (1991) found that in many of these situations, acquiescence or withdrawal was the more preferred response because confrontation was viewed as being too costly in time and energy. Moreover, due to the often subtle nature of racism, many African Americans activated their response to racist events with a careful evaluation of the situation (Feagin, 1991). Feagin (1991) also noted the advantages of middle-class African Americans in terms of their access to resources (both psychological and material) to enhance their coping efficacy. Despite these middle-class advantages, however, the individual cost of chronic strain associated with racism is great and has a cumulative effect over the life span of most African Americans.

For this qualitative study, while there is no consensus among researchers on a conceptual definition for ethnicity, Cross's (1971) definition that African American ethnic identity is related to a "sense of Blackness" is used. The definition used to describe psychological health is the definition proposed by Welsing (1991) that states that psychological health are those patterns of perception, logic, thought, speech, action, and emotional response, whether consciously or unconsciously determined, which reflect personal and extended self-respect and extended self-affirmation. Lastly, for this study, racism is defined as those activities and behaviors practiced by persons who classify themselves as White that are used to suppress, oppress and maintain global power in nine areas of people activities: education, entertainment, economics, labor, law, politics, religion, sex, and war (Welsing, 1991).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine African American ethnic identity development and psychological coping strategies of African American males at a predominantly White university. The major issue to be examined was whether or not ethnic identity identification influences the psychological coping strategies of African American males as they deal with racial stress. The research of Cross (1971) in the area of African American ethnic identity development has demonstrated that the emergence of an African American identity is complex, multifaceted, and contingent on the context and historical spaces individuals find themselves.

Focus group interviews, conducted from a phenomenological approach, were used to examine the relationship of African American males' ethnic identity and their psychological coping strategies. The use of focus group interviews was an attempt to understand the participants' everyday experiences from their perspectives. Before the interviews were conducted, each participant was assigned a pseudonym that was to be used throughout the study. Three focus group interviews were conducted and each interview session was video-taped. Field notes were also taken during the three interviews.

Assessment Measures

In light of the development of his theory of psychological nigrèsence, Cross developed the Cross Racial Identity Scale (CRIS) with Worrell and Vandiver (2000). The CRIS consists of 40 items that gauge attitudes correlated to the four stages of African American development described in Cross's revised model of psychological nigrèsence. Internal consistency ranges for pre-encounter assimilation, miseducation, and self-hatred are .85, .79, and .89 respectively; .90 for immersion-emersion; .83 for internalization afrocentricity and .82 for multiculturalist inclusive. The range of scores on the subscales are from 5 to 35. Reliability estimates for the CRIS, based on Cronbach's (1951) alpha, range from .78 to .90. Exploratory factor analysis for the CRIS was investigated using a sample of 279 students (Vandiver, Cross, Worrell, et al., 2000). Subscale intercorrelations based on this sample ranged from an absolute value of .40 to an absolute value of .42, with a median absolute value of .16. Confirmatory factor analysis intercorrelations ranged from absolute value of .06 to an absolute value of .46, with a median of absolute value of .16.

Convergent validity was tested by examining the relationship between subscales of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI) (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998) and the CRIS using bivariate and canonical correlations. Like the CRIS, the MIBI is a measure of African American ethnic identity. Several MIBI subscales measure content related to those measured by the CRIS. These subscales on the MIBI are: assimilation, centrality, humanist, nationalist, oppressed minority, private regard, and public regard (Sellers et al., 1998).

Description of the Context and Participants

The study takes place in a mid-sized college city. The city is the home of the state's flagship institution, a nationally renowned center of learning. The total number of students attending the university in 2003 was 31,384. African Americans comprised 5.56% of this total population, which placed the number of African Americans at 1,774. African American males were 1.9% of this population at 596. Students undertook a highly charged campaign during the 2002-2003 academic school year to address the low percentage of African American males at the university.

Historically, the university has been viewed by African Americans in the states as a welcoming place. The university was integrated in the early 1960s by two African American students. A year later, an African American woman enrolled as a graduate student. Their matriculation was followed closely by the African American community and the media. They were constantly...
harassed and taunted by many of the White students. However, all three managed to graduate. Since then, the number of African Americans attending the university has increased even though it has remained comparatively low.

The Participants
All of the participants attended the university. Four were graduate students and two were undergraduate students. All of the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Pierre
Pierre was 31 years old at the time of the study. Pierre is married and has two daughters. Originally from Chicago, he attended a historically Black college for his undergraduate degree. At the time of the study, Pierre was a third-year graduate student in counseling psychology. Pierre’s CRIS score placed him in the Internalized Nationalist phase of African American ethnic identity development.

Dallas
Dallas was 34 years old at the time of the study. He is from Washington, DC and was completing his PhD in pharmaceutical sciences. Dallas’ CRIS score placed him in the Internalized Multiculturalist Inclusive phase of African American ethnic identity development.

Highjohn
Highjohn was 28 years old at the time of this study. He and his wife had one son and he has another son from a previous relationship. Highjohn completed his master’s degree in educational psychology and enrolled in the educational psychology PhD program. Highjohn’s wife is completing her PhD in adult education. Highjohn is from a predominantly White and rural area in Georgia. Highjohn’s CRIS score placed him in the Internalized Multiculturalist Inclusive phase of African American ethnic identity development.

Xavier
Xavier was also 28 years old and a fourth-year PhD student in educational psychology at the time of this study. He self-identifies as gay and was born and raised in South Carolina. Xavier’s CRIS score placed him in the Internalized Multiculturalist Inclusive phase of African American ethnic identity development.

Sampson
Sampson was 25 years old at the time of this study and played NCAA college football. He opted not to play his last year of college football to dedicate time to his academic studies. He is from south Georgia and describes the community where he was raised as rural and mostly White. Sampson CRIS score placed him in the Internalized Multiculturalist Inclusive phase of African American ethnic identity development.

Stokely
Stokely was 22 years old at the time of the study. He is from North Carolina and also played college football. He plans to continue his education by pursuing a master’s degree. Stokely’s CRIS score placed him in the Internalized Multiculturalist Inclusive phase of African American ethnic identity development.

The Interviews
The three focus group interviews were held off campus in a private home. The interviews were held during the second and third weeks of July 2003. The first interview was a discussion of the issues that the participants deemed important to them and that they thought warranted in-depth discussion. The issues they felt should be included in the interviews along with the discussion of stressful experiences at the university were:

• Did they view the university as a welcoming place?
• What does it mean to be a Black man?
The University as a Welcoming Place
The university where this study was conducted has grappled with the issue of boosting retention of African American males. Given the context in which African American males find themselves, college administrators need to understand how and why African American males behave and react to societal conditions, particularly to racism. Few non-Black college personnel understand how African American males move between cultures, how they adjust to a society whose dominant culture is often alien and disrespectful of their home culture, and how African American males are affected by the stereotypes that others have of Black males. African American males face these issues in the microcosm of the university.

In terms of the university being a welcoming place for African American males, several participants thought that the university saw African American males as athletic commodities. To them, this plays into the stereotype of African American males as athleticism gifted but intellectually lazy. Stokely, the former undergraduate football player stated:

It’s kind of hard, I don’t think they really welcome the students per say, or like you said, people already have a preconceived notion that you’re Black on this campus. You’re automatically an athlete and with that comes the stereotypes of not being smart or lazy amongst other things and at the same time they want you to play, but they don’t want to look past you being an athlete either. They don’t want to get to know you as a student and they’re not really doing anything to know the person either. So it’s kind of hard or whatever, it’s a constant battle or whatever. You want to show, you kind of try harder to show that you can be, that you can thrive in this environment or whatever, but there’s really no programs.

This stereotype of the African American male being only an athlete while disregarding their intellectual needs was also shared by Sampson, the other undergraduate student and former football player:

I’m done with football and my fifth year I decided not to try to play professional football. So from my fourth year to the fifth year it was a big difference. It went from phone calls making sure that you go to class, study hall or have you seen your tutor, have you registered for class, why were you late to class? Until now I have registered myself for class. I have to know when I need a certain class or what I need to graduate to if I don’t get out of bed. They don’t call and say, Why didn’t you get out of bed?” and basically they don’t care if you graduate. That’s good because it’s helping their percentages to say, “We’re graduating African American males,” but when you get to your fifth year it’s basically about what you have inside of you to say alright they got all of the stuff that they are going to get out of me, I need to do what I can to get something out of them. And that’s the only reason why I’m getting my degree because it’s something inside of me not so much of what they’re doing.

Stressful Experiences at the University
The second topic discussed concerned how the participants handled stressful racial situations. Franklin (2000) uses the concept of invisibility syndrome to describe the
reaction of African American men to the constant psychic assaults resulting from their daily encounters with various forms of racism. According to Franklin (2000), there are seven elements that characterize the intrapsychic apparatus of invisibility experienced by African American men during everyday interracial interactions. These include: a) lack of recognition or acknowledgement, b) lack of satisfaction or gratification, c) feelings of self-doubt (i.e., do I belong here?), d) experiences are not validated, e) absent of mutual respect, f) dignity is often compromised, and g) basic identity is challenged. Not only does racism serve as a constant reminder of African American males’ despoiled social status, it can potentially result in feelings of anger, depression, anxiety, lowered levels of life satisfaction, and increased emotional distress (Utsey & Payne, 2001). For African American men, racism in one form or another is an everyday experience that has a cumulative impact on their psychological well-being. Although African American men experience both overt and covert racism, the most insidious form of racism is the subtle, often difficult to identify racism embedded in the cultural fabric of American society (Jones, 1997).

Pierce (1988) characterized the psychic assaults of the subtle racism that African Americans experience daily as microaggressions. According to Pierce (1988), microaggressions are forms of offense mechanisms that intrude upon the space, time, energy, and mobility of African American men. Microaggressions can be verbal, nonverbal, or kinetic (Pierce, 1988). The resulting sense of degradation, erosion of self-confidence, and negative self-image that can potentially occur as a result of the psychic violence levied by these race-related microaggressions, has a cumulative psychological impact across the developmental life span of African American men. Furthermore, Pierce (1988) hypothesized that African Americans are often confused around the dynamics associated with interracial encounters with White Americans. The source of confusion for African Americans, according to Pierce, is related to the following: a) whether the individual is being accepted or just tolerated, b) the supportive nature of individual Whites versus the malevolence of the collective White society, and c) determining when to confront racism and when to accommodate it. The cognitive energy associated with negotiating the complexities of racism in everyday life is potentially detrimental to the psychological health of African American men (Utsey & Payne, 2001).

The participants were asked to describe a stressful experience during their enrollment at the university. The participants also shared how the stressful situation developed and how they coped. Dallas shared a stressful experience which occurred to him in the downtown area where the university is located:

Being downtown, yeah start right there, I forgot the name of what the bar was. It was either (name of bar) or (another potential name), whatever, and I’m sitting there with a White friend of mine from my department and an older White guy comes up to me and says, huffing to me, “I need to be blasting, need to tell you something. We need to talk, Black man to White man. I need to tell you what’s going on.” He proceeds to tell me about, you know, the Confederate Nation and how his forefathers and ancestors were just great men of great valiance and why would any Black man have a problem with all of this? He was pretty drunk or whatever. He couldn’t get around to finally shutting up, so I could answer his questions. Before I had a chance to answer his question and stuff starting off with, those were the same people who had all of my people enslaved and a hundred years of Jim Crow and so forth. He got taken up out of there by security and I didn’t really get a chance to find him and that stayed with me for about a month and a half. I’m looking around for this dude (and asking) where he is and stuff so I can talk to him.

Dallas thought that even though the White man was acting irrationally, it was important that he remain in control of his emotions. Another racial experience also occurred off campus at a local bank to Stokely:

I got a scenario. You know (name of bank) is located downtown probably 60 feet from the (school symbol). I’m going in there I just got my check; it’s like a thousand dollars or whatever and I’m going to the bank. I realize I don’t have my license. I’m out of state, but it’s cool because I have my school ID. So, I get up to the counter, and I was like, “I need to get some money out to pay my rent but I want to deposit the rest,” and the lady told me my account balance was too low to even deposit my check. I’m like, “Hold up now, you know what I’m saying?” I just noticed the person before me. She (the teller) made the issue that I didn’t have a license, I had my school ID, and that was a problem; that wasn’t the policy. But I noticed that the person before me, it was a White guy, he was probably younger than me and he didn’t have his license, he had his university ID, too. So, I called her (the teller) out on it and she was like that didn’t happen. I didn’t make it a racial issue, I was like I needed my money. I was like, “Ma’am can I see your boss?” and it was a Black guy. I actually knew him and he came out there and he corrected the whole issue. She was trying to say that I didn’t want to take this check because it might bounce. I told her the town would burn to Hell before this check bounces, but she went on and cashed it. The gentleman pulled me aside and said they had some complaints about this lady by a lot of Black people coming in and complaining and this made me upset. I mean, I’m coming in here trying to do business with the people and whatever, but I can’t get any service.

This description by Stokely demonstrates Feagin’s (2003) notion that the response of an African American to racism is influenced by the context in which it occurs. For example, racial hostility encountered in the street is most likely met with withdrawal, resigned acceptance, or verbal retort. In situations in which African Americans experience discrimination in public places, as in this instance, the response is generally verbal counterattack or resigned acceptance. In many situations where African Americans experience discrimination, acquiescence or withdrawal is the preferred response because confrontation is seen as being too costly in time and energy. Moreover, due to the often subtle nature of racism, many African Americans begin their response to racist events with a
“The chronic nature of racial discrimination is a major quality of life issue for African Americans living in contemporary society.”

careful evaluation of the situation (Feagin, 2003). Stokely demonstrates this in his assessment of this particular situation. I asked Stokely if he thought this was a racial incident:

I think how I dealt with the situation in the bank was the correct way. I didn't want to deal with her about, you know what I'm saying, no race card or nothing like that. I wanted to talk to the manager because I felt like that was the thing to do. But what she failed to realize was that I knew the manager. I think it was a race issue and a class issue 'cause I mean, a Black guy coming in here first of all, is it stolen, the check? I don't work, you know what I am saying, or I sell dope, they don't pay drug dealers with a check.

Stokely reflects on the way African American males are portrayed by the school and local newspaper as criminals and rapists:

You get one crime committed by a Black person—wherever—it's blasted all over the paper, front page.

The media often portrays African American males as criminals. This has repercussions on the perceptions of Whites who may view any African American male as a potential criminal threat. At the same time, this places African American males in a precarious situation—they are singled out by Whites, especially the police, who may think they have committed crimes that they did not. This is stressful for African American males because they must always guard against appearing threatening to Whites.

**Coping Strategies at the University**

A number of researchers have examined the relationship between the strategies used by African Americans to cope with the stressors of everyday racism that they experience and their psychological and somatic health (Utsey & Payne, 2001). The consensus among researchers is that the repertoire of coping behaviors employed by African Americans in response to their encounters with racism directly impacts their physical and psychological health as well as their relationships.

**Coping strategies that buffer African American males from the stressful effects of chronic exposure to racism are essential to healthy psychological functioning** (Utsey & Payne, 2000). Effective coping strategies were found to incorporate cognitive flexibility in response to racist encounters. Inversely, maladaptive coping strategies generally result in poorer psychological and physical health coping strategies—excessive drinking, sexual promiscuity, anger, domestic violence, substance abuse, and suicide. Racism’s impact on the psychological functioning of African American males is complex and begs the question as to why some individuals experience the full force of racism’s harmful effects and why others are relatively untouched by their personal encounters with this societal problem.

The participants in this study used various techniques in coping with the stress of being an African American male on a predominantly White campus. One of the most common coping strategies was distancing themselves from Whites. In their seminal work, *Black Rage*, Grier and Cobbs (1968) maintain that it is necessary for an African American man in America to develop a profound distrust of his White counterparts and of America itself. The participants in this study found it difficult to physically distance themselves from Whites because Whites make up over 80% of the student population. As a result, the participants psychologically distanced themselves from Whites. Pierre expresses this sentiment throughout the interview:

Yeah, I think I’ve changed from being here, but I think that when I started moving into distancing myself and kind of keeping up a little bit of wall between me and some of the White folks, anticipating that there was going to be a problem at some point with the down the line because you just feel like at some point they are going to say something stupid or do something that’s going to be a misunderstanding or something. I think in a way it’s coping and in a way it’s keeping me free of what I think is inevitable, like I just feel like at some point White folks are going to do something that either they deliberately do or more like just out of ignorance. I don’t want to put myself in a situation where I have to deal with it again because I don’t feel like I should always have to be clarifying some statement that they’ve made or addressing them about something or anything that will take me out of the direction that I think I should be going—like dealing with school work and taking care of my family. I don’t want to have to deal with somebody else’s ignorance about something.

One coping strategy that helps African American males have an easier tenue at the university is having a strong sense of identity and knowing the history of what African Americans experienced to matriculate. Gurin and Epps (1975) conducted a series of studies at several historically Black colleges from 1964 to 1970 to study Black students’ level of Black consciousness, Black identity, and achievement. A number of students discussed the pride they felt in being part of an ethnic group that has the ability to overcome obstacles and of having a history of survival in the face of overwhelming hardships. In this study, the students talked about strength of character, specific historical events, landmarks of progress and accomplishment, and figures who have stood for determination, courage, and revolution. Dallas expresses this same sentiment when he stated:

The first Black graduate to graduate from the department came to speak to us and what he went through and stuff and—man—there’s no way I could not do everything in my power to get through all the rest of the obstacles here and overcome them. The responsibility of
the people who came here before me makes it easier for me to deal.

The chronic nature of racial discrimination is a major quality-of-life issue for African Americans living in contemporary society (Feagin, 2003; Hacker, 1992). When African American males have to deal with the insidiousness of racism as a regular occurrence in their life, life satisfaction is influenced because of it.

Throughout the focus group discussions the participants described several behavioral and attitudinal responses they used to deal with racism in their roles as students at predominantly White university. Withdrawal and assertion were primarily used by the participants, along with the added attitudinal behavior of psychological distancing. Psychological distancing was especially used by Pierre, who uses the term to describe the way he relates to Whites.

Conclusions
There are several implications that can be made from this study. As Ford (1996) states, African American males need and seek greater self-awareness, self-understanding, and appreciation. Ford (1996) also asserts that African American males seek stronger relationships with their peers and the African American community. Self-awareness includes an understanding of who one is as an individual African American and an understanding of the history of African Americans, both at the university and in the larger American society.

In conjunction, African American males should also seek opportunities to express their emotions and feelings in productive ways. The African American males in this study used what Laruzus and Folkman (1982) termed as problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies to deal with stress caused by racism. Examples of problem-focused coping strategies were demonstrated by Dallas when he was confronted by the White man in the downtown bar, Stokely and the bank teller who would not give him service, and Pierre and his ability to psychologically distance himself from Whites when needed.

Limitations
Since this was a qualitative study, readers should not generalize these findings to all African American males at this university or any other university. The study used a focus group, which typically uses small numbers of participants. This focus group had six African American males, most who were graduate students, and because of this, one should be cautious in generalizing the findings from this study.

Demographically, all but one of the participants were from the south, and future studies should incorporate regional diversity. All of the participants scored in the internalization stage of the Cross Racial Identity Scale. Future studies should include participants in other stages of Cross’s (1991) model.

In conclusion, partaking in this study has reminded me of the diversity and complexity of my fellow African American brothers, and I hope that readers will have a greater understanding and appreciation of African American males and their spirits. The participants of this study provided inspiration for me with their dedication to excellence and their courageous spirits. To them and future African American males who attend college I leave them with the words of Marcus Garvey, “Up you mighty race; you will accomplish what you will.”

References


