Exploring How Systemic Racism Affects African American Students' College Choice Decisions: A Comparative Case Study Analysis

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Abstract

A lot of attention has been given to the problem of institutionalized racism in academia lately. From a young age, the road to success in school has not always been an easy route for African American students. According to Bottiani, Bradshaw, and Mendelson (2016), students' perceptions of differential treatment, exclusion, and discrimination by teachers and adults in school appear to play a significant role in the poor outcomes among the youth of color. The climate change surrounding racial issues and U.S. economic downturn have had a significant impact on students of color as regards to their commitment to higher education (Karkouti, 2016). This paper attempts to answer the overarching research question such as: How does systemic racism play a role in African American students' college choice decisions? The results from this paper are displayed in critical race theory, as it is a crucial factor in the analysis of choice theory.

Keywords: College Choice Decisions, Systemic Racism, African American Students, Critical Race Theory, Predominantly White Institutions (PWI)

Introduction

In the context of our country's long history of social injustice, the issue of systemic racism in higher education has recently gained a lot of attention. Constantly, African American students have suffered injustice that has reach a tipping point. The call to action for combating systemic racism has sparked a cultural phenomenon that has made inroads in all walks of life. Consequently, this study seek ways to explore, compare, and contrast the factors or reasons linked to the systemic racism that influences African American students' decision-making when deciding to join an institution of higher education.

The African American students' experiences in the U.S. are unique. Most importantly, there are many factors that are beyond students' control that have shaped it, such as historical and economic issues. However, this is a top priority in respect to student's college choice. Historically, the academic journey from early school for African American students has not been straightforward. In schools, African American students are more likely to be labeled mentally challenged or learning disabled and overrepresented in special education programs. In addition, they are less likely to appear in talented or gifted programs such as Honors classes or Advanced Placement courses (Ngozwana, 2012). Furthermore, they are subjected to expulsions and suspensions and the retaining rate is alarming. One out of five African American students received an out-of-school suspension, and they are 3.5 times more likely than their Caucasian peers to be suspended or expelled (Brown, 2014). Consequently, many African American students lack adequate opportunities to develop positive classroom experiences. They are often berated for minor classroom behavioral issues that become magnified by teachers and administrators (Bell, 2015).

Over the years, researchers have identified three major problems that have emanated for African American men before they enter into higher education such as: lack of quality teachers in K-12 education, overrepresentation of African American male students in special education programs, and a lack of African American male students as well as other students of color in advanced placement (A.P.) courses at the secondary education level (Hilton & Ray, 2015). According to Bottiani, Bradshaw, and Mendelson (2016), students' perceptions of differential treatment, exclusion, and discrimination by teachers and other adults in school appear to play a significant role in the poor outcomes among youth of color. However, there are lot of barriers when it comes to admitting more Black students to the nation's selective universities. The climate change surrounding racial issues and the U.S. economic downturn have had a significant impact on the commitment of students of color in respect to higher education (Karkouti, 2016).

Historically, Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have played a significant role in expanding educational opportunities in the United States (Brown II, 2013; Fleming, 1984). This study attempts to answer the overarching research question: How does systemic racism play a role in African American students' college choice decisions and the factors affecting the decision?

Theoretical framework to lead this study

This study is grounded in Critical Race Theory and College Choice/decision theory. The conceptual framework for this study was provided by the Critical Race Theory (CRT). This is because CRT explores and analyzes the experiences of students of color, which can inform cross-cultural inclusivity practices in a number of ways. However, CRT was appropriate for this study because it presents practical techniques that can be used by academic advisors and other higher education administrators when working with students of color. CRT can also serve as a theoretical framework through which a person can understand various ways on advising interactions and practices with students of color in order to offer help or exert harm (Lee, 2018). This study applied CRT because it challenges the status quo and examines racial difrences in myriad contexts, such as the many ideologies and norms embedded in educational institutions (Robertson, 2017). Furthermore, CRT has been used to normalize and analyze racialized experiences in research and practice by challenging traditional paradigms, methods, texts, and discourses on race, gender, and class.

Based on the different models within each of the college choice and decision theories, there is an understanding on why African American students might choose to attend an HBCU or Predominantly White Institutions (PWI). Models by Iloh (2019), Glasser (1984), Hasen and Litten (1989), and Freeman (2005) provide an explanation of college selection and decision-making aspects within each example to support the study objectives.

Methodology

The present study is a non-experimental qualitative comparative case study analysis. This study will use qualitative research, which entails collecting and analyzing non-numerical secondary data, in order to understand concepts, opinions, experiences, and phenomena. The aim is to gain in-depth insights into the problem, answer the research question, or generate new ideas for future research. Qualitative researchers engage in naturalistic inquiry and explore real-world settings by inductively developing rich narrative descriptions of the cases they are investigating. Inductive analysis across case studies yield patterns and themes which is the fruit of

qualitative research (Austin & Sutton, 2014). The purpose of this study is to analyze data for insights within, across, and between cases (Yin, 2005; Creswell, 2013). Therefore, this comparative case study design involves comparing, contrasting, analyzing, and synthesizing the similarities, differences, and patterns across three selected case studies that share a common focus, goal, or phenomenon. This study also used secondary data sources from all three cases, which includes documentation, archival records, interviews, physical artifacts, direct observations, and participant observation. The researcher has collected and integrated data within the case study research, which is unique to other qualitative approaches. This has help in facilitating a holistic understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Data collection

This qualitative research is designed to reveal the meaning that informs the action, practices, or outcomes using rigorous and systematic transcribing, coding, comparing, analyzing, and interpreting the trends and themes with a focus on retaining the true meaning. However, such research is used to understand how people experience the world. Qualitative researchers often consider themselves "instruments" in research because all observations, interpretations, and analysis are filtered through their own personal lens (Bhandari, 2020). This case study analysis involves intensive analysis of the following three selected case studies to understand and gain an in-depth holistic view of the research problem.

   i. Mack Hah-neef (2020): Deciding while black: Perceptions of racial climate and the factors that influence African American students' college choice,
  ii. Mitchell Candis (2018): The Effects of Type of Institution (HBCU vs. PWI) and Acculturation Level on Minority Status Stress, Perceived Faculty Support, Persistent Attitudes, and Perception of the University Environment, and
 iii. Alexander Juan (2017): Key factors that influence first-generation college students to attend a historically black college and university.
      Consequently, these three research studies, conducted within ten years, were selected through extensive database searches using specific words. The titles and research questions from the selected case studies were extracted and compared using a color-coding method to show internal consistency.

Data analysis procedure

The researcher extracted the relevant data from the selected case studies and utilized this data for secondary data analysis. The selected case studies were semantically coded to assess their inter-relatedness, understand

the text data, label the emerging sections with codes, examine the codes for similarities, and then combine the codes into broad themes. To initiate the data analysis, the following preliminary themes were developed: Student, College, University, African American, Black, Racism, and Identity.

The selected studies were uploaded to ATLAS ti9 to arrange and code the major themes. A word cloud was assembled by ordering the importance of the phrases from all three case studies. Next, a hierarchical network was constructed where the coding revealed an emerging themes. Furthermore, the codes were arranged into themes or categories to create a database of topics that were widely discussed in the case studies (Creswell, 2008, p. 252). This process give room for the researcher to observe the density, comprehend in-depth understanding to answer the research questions, and ensure the credibility of the data analysis. Subsequently, themes were developed by utilizing the six-step processes suggested by Caulfield (2019).

Results
Findings on theme one: systemic racism in higher education

In analyzing the three case studies, the first theme that emerged was Systemic Racism in Higher Education. In Case Studies 1 and 2, the findings of these research studies displayed an acknowledgment of racism as a factor in African American students choosing to attend an HBCU or a PWI.

Findings on theme two: African American students decision making

In Case Studies 1 and 3, the process of choosing a college to attend was another theme that emerged. The decision-making factors of African American students are prominent themes in each case study. In this theme, three small sub-themes have been discovered: college choice and decision factors, reasons for choosing HBCUs, and reasons for choosing PWIs.

Findings on theme three: experiences of African American students in HBCUs and PWIs

In study 1, recent high school graduates from HBCU and PWI-bound have a high expectations of college life that are typical of experiences that will duplicate high school in a larger community. In study 2, the students at the historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) reported a better psychological and functional faculty support levels than their PWI counterparts.

Findings on theme four: minority students' stress and anxiety in HBCUs and PWIs

In case study 2, the report from African American students at PWIs were more stress related and exposure to racial discrimination are being underrepresented on these campuses. As codes emerged, the researcher could see linkages between the factors influencing college choice and the selected theoretical frameworks of college choice decision and critical race theory. In this study, CRT was used in analyzing how race and privilege play a major role in society and also how it plays a role in higher education specifically. In this study, college choice and decision theories were used. In addition, several college choice and decision theories were used to analyze how college students think and arrive at their decisions to attend a college or university.

However, the findings in case study 1 helped the researcher to connect the case findings to other cases utilized in this study. In case study 1, the theme of systemic racism in higher education was also discovered. This is connected to the findings and other themes from other case studies. In case 1, "African American students use racial climate and the significant presence of a diverse or same-race student body to validate their final selection" (Hahneef, 2020, p. 43).

In case study 2, there were discussions about how African American students have more positive perceptions at an HBCU and also how the experiences of black students at PWIs were negative. These findings have helped in discovering minority students' stress and anxiety at HBCUs and PWIs, as a key theme emerging from the analysis of case study 2. African American students on an HBCU campus would report lower minority status stress levels than their counterparts on a PWI campus. Collectively, the current analysis suggests that institutional racism affects African American students' college choices.

Conclusion

While answering the research question, the findings of this study have revealed that the role that systemic racism plays in college choice decisions of African American students is displayed in critical race theory. This is because it is a crucial factor in the analysis of choice theory. In the context of systemic racism, the critical race theoretical lens that affects the college choice decisions of African American students shows that race is an embedded factor in college choice decisions because of a deeply rooted and racist normalized traditions. The cross-analysis of the studies confirms that African American students use racial climate and the significant presence of a diverse or same-race student body to validate their final selection (Hahneef, 2020).

This research confirms that racism and many other factors play a crucial role in the college choice decisions of African American students in attending predominately white institutions of higher education. It is apparent from this study's findings to note that racism is an issue for African Americans in their college choice decisions.

Consequently, the students' decision-making for higher studies or deciding on their careers is a complex process. However, there is still much to learn about how African American students choose a college education for themselves. It is instructive to engage in a racial analysis of the access and choice processes to better understand the oppressive structures encountered by college-bound African American students. Contrarily, the college enrollment decision-making process for students can, on the surface, appear fair and inclusive across racial lines, although this is not the case (Comeaux, Chapman & Contreras, 2020).

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