African American Cultural Assimilation through Negotiated Identity

Chemaria Washington

Queens University of Charlotte

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Abstract

For African American students attending predominantly white institutions, it may be difficult to adjust to this environment. This study will research whether or not African American students will negotiate or alter their identity to culturally assimilate into predominantly white institutions. The study conducts interviews with African American seniors at three predominantly white institutions, Queens University of Charlotte, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and North Carolina State University. The project could be used to create an increase of cultural diversity awareness and education at predominately white institutions. Furthermore, a communication plan could be created for African American students to implement in order to successfully adapt to a predominately white institution without having to alter their cultural identity, should data reveal African American students are indeed altering their identity.

African American Cultural Assimilation through Negotiated Identity

College is often referred to as the best four years of a person's life. Many things can affect a person's perspective in college and whether it is truly worthwhile, however one of the most important criteria is for a student to feel valued and more than "just a number" (Pompper, 2006). If you are a minority attending a predominately white institution, it may be difficult to feel valued if you first do not feel you fit into the "mainstream" of the institution (Bakari, 1997). Mainstreaming is burdened with cultural and racial challenges, including developing ethnic and racial identity, interacting with the dominant culture, and developing cultural awareness and appreciation (Bakari, 1997). For African American students at predominately white institutions, this feeling of lacking integration may lead to feelings of alienation, isolation, and racial hostility (Bakari, 1997). Additionally, with this feeling of lacking integration, African American students adjust poorly to predominantly white institutions (Chavous, 2002). My research question is whether or not African American students will negotiate or alter their identity to culturally assimilate into predominately white institutions.

This paper aims to explore whether or not there is a negotiation or altering of African American students' identity and cultural assimilation into predominately white institutions. Research has indicated the "conflict between African American students' cultural and social values and the values and philosophies associated with the PWI [predominantly white institution] environment" have attributed to the differences in achievement between white and African American students (Chavous, 2002, p. 142). I have conducted a qualitative study through interviews. The students who completed the interviews are senior African Americans at three different predominately white institutions including the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolina State University, and Queens University of Charlotte. The interviews

collected data on students' perspectives and feelings entering into a predominately white culture,

and gauging whether or not they feel they have had to alter their identity throughout their years

in college.

Literature Review

This review of the literature begins with a brief background of African American culture, it

expands into African American historical education. To bring together the importance of African

American culture and education in predominately white institutions, Cultural Identity Theory

will be explored and the negotiation of culture within the theory.

African American Culture

According to Cole, "When a people share a learned set of values/ attitudes and behavior

patterns which are distinctive to them, they possess a culture" (1970, p. 52). Culture cannot be

confined to a single person, but instead in the combination of traits that are distinctive of a given

people (Cole, 1970). There are things that are unique in each culture, and African American

culture is no different. Two consistently unique themes to African American culture is soul and

style (Cole, 1970). As narrated by Cole, "the way blacks get happy (possessed) in sanctified

churches, that's soul; the movement of a black woman's hips when she dances, that's soul; the

way a brother bops into a room, especially when he is clean (that is, dressed sharply), that's

style; the way a black woman will speak of going to the beauty parlor to get her 'kitchen touched

up,' that's in order to style; the way a young black man says, 'I got to go take care of business,'

that's soul and style" (1970, p. 53).

However, African American culture extends beyond this rhythm trance and is also one

rooted deeply in tradition and family (McCoy, 2011). Throughout the African American

community, much of the ancestral African history has been passed down for generations through

oral tradition (A New African American Culture, 2018). Also vital to this history, are family

reunions which are important rituals that "have long contributed to the survival, health, and

endurance of African American families, helping to maintain cultural heritage even in uncertain

and turbulent times" (McCoy, 2011, para. 1). These familial events generate much power from

the elders, who are able to tell their history and truths throughout the years — in essence, they

are the "keepers of African American legacy" (McCoy, 2011, para. 1). The family has been the

solid foundation of African American culture, and it is from this structural foundation of family

enabled survival from slavery and endurance through the days of racial segregation (McCoy,

2011).

African American culture, as portrayed to others, is often far from African American

culture as experienced – these assumptions about black identity and culture are often used by

marketers, fashion brands and music labels to make money (Simien, 2014). These

representations however are false, as African American culture is a combination of what was

brought to America by African slaves, what was passed through the generations of African

Americans through the tumultuous racial discord, and the culmination of community, and the

"coolness and swagger" of African American people (Borgman, 2018).

African American Education

Throughout history, the distinctive characteristics of African American culture have not

been appreciated by all, and there have even been attempts to erase this culture, particularly by

European settlers through slavery (Eakins & Eakins, 2017). Even after slavery was abolished in

1865, it was not until 1868 that African Americans were recognized as citizens (Eakins &

Eakins, 2017). There were strict rules regulating slave literacy, however African Americans

learned many elements of the English language out of necessity (A New African-American Culture, 2018). This inequality continued into access to education.

In 1961, James Meredith, an African American man, applied to the University of Mississippi which was an all-white institution (James Meredith Biography, 2016). Initially, Meredith was accepted into the university, until his race was discovered by the registrar (James Meredith Biography, 2016). By this time, the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* ordered that all schools be desegregated, which was the first steps in the journey for equality of all students. Based on this ruling, Meredith filed a suit alleging discrimination. State courts ruled against him; however the case made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ultimately ruled in his favor (James Meredith Biography, 2016). Although Meredith had the right to attend the university, when he arrived at the university to register for classes, he found the entrance blocked. Riots erupted soon after, and Attorney General Robert Kennedy sent 500 U.S. Marshals to the scene. Additionally, President John F. Kennedy sent military police, troops from the Mississippi National Guard, and officials from the U.S. Border Patrol to maintain peace. On October 1, 1962, James Meredith became the first African American student to attend the University of Mississippi (James Meredith Biography, 2016). Although Meredith was able to attend the university, it did not come without feelings of alienation, and overt or veiled hostility from white American classmates, faculty, and administrators; this was a reality that many other African American college students faced at predominantly white institutions (Williamson, 1999).

Much progress has been made since that landmark decision and Meredith's entrance into a white institution. According to Ryan & Bauman, 87 percent of African American students are high school graduates, only 6 percent behind their white counterparts (2016). That percentage significantly drops when looking into higher education. In pursuing a bachelor's degree, nearly

23 percent African Americans attain their degree compared to 36 percent of white Americans (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). Some would argue that the gap in attained degrees stems from inadequate academic preparedness, and the primary reason for low academic achievement (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2015). However, research shows that when viewing controlled variables such as SAT scores, minority students' academic performance was still below that of white students when looking at the level predicted by their SAT scores (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2015). Conversely, there is research that shows that there is something beyond academic preparedness that is holding African American students back.

Of the 87 percent of African American undergraduate students who decide to attend a predominately white institution, the nationwide college graduation rate for African American students is at a shockingly low rate of 40 percent, 20 points below the 60 percent rate for white American students (Smallwood, 2015). Statistical research has shown that African American students find it difficult to transition into their predominately white institution (Smallwood, 2015), which could lead to such low student success. With statistical data showing that African American students have difficulty transitioning into predominately white institutions, one has to wonder what makes the transition so hard. One perhaps glaring reason is because of racism and negative stereotypes (Glenn & Johnson, 2012). With such volatile situations arising that favor being a white American over an African American, such as the Charlottesville riot and shooting of unarmed African Americans, there is a fear that a students' blackness could yield harm. As history shows, using Meredith as an example, African Americans have not always been welcomed into predominately white institutions (James Meredith Biography). Furthermore, even in present times, the perception of how a white American views an African American can be very disheartening. As a student from a previous study disclosed his perception of how white

Americans view him, he states, "You don't respect me as a person. I am just another nigger

basically…I am not just an individual to y'all" (Glenn & Johnson, 2012). Such viewpoints show

why transitioning into a new culture can be difficult, but also shows why the desire to assimilate

could be something to desire. If an African American is able to successfully assimilate, they can

gain acceptance of members of white culture at the predominately white institution they attend

(Glenn & Johnson, 2012). This acceptance can lead to a more comfortable feeling in a new

culture and environment, however this forces an African American student to forgo important

aspects of their identity.

Cultural Identity Theory

Cultural Identity Theory was developed in the late 1980s by Mary Jane Collier and her

colleagues to describe "the communicative processes used by individuals to construct and

negotiate cultural group identities and relationships across contexts" (Littlejohn et al., 2017, p.

80). Individuals' identities consist of different and multiple cultural identities including race,

ethnicity, gender, and sexuality; however, an individual's identification within a cultural group

differs in prominence and importance across various contexts as well (Littlejohn et al., 2017). In

an example given by Littlejohn et al., "an African American identity may be less important than

gender in a group of African Americans, but it might become extremely important if you are the

only black person in a class or in an organization" (2017, p. 78).

Cultural identity theory also "deals with who constructs the social identities of cultural

groups and the ways in which those identities are communicated" (Littlejohn et al., 2017, p. 78).

Avowal and ascription are two processes described by Collier, the former is used to differentiate

between how one describes one's own identity, while the latter pertains to how one refers to the

identities of others (Littlejohn et al., 2017). As described by Littlejohn et al., "personal avowals

are often responses to ongoing ascriptions, which are often stereotypic presentations of cultural

groups" (2017, p. 78). Because of this, every person engages in a constant process of identity

negotiation due to the interplay between how we view our own cultural group and the ways it is

seen by others (Littlejohn et al., 2017).

Now, if the student is very comfortable in their own culture with a strong sense of self,

they will be able to understand the culture of whiteness, and accept the differences. But in this

sense, they will not feel the need to assimilate; instead, they will find strength within their own

culture to gain the benefits that are apparent with assimilating into white American culture.

Ideally, someone would reach "intercultural competence," including the three components of

identity knowledge, mindfulness, and negotiation skill (Littlejohn et al., 2017, p. 80). If they

achieve these three components they will be able to switch from one cultural context to another,

being a cultural transformer, easily and mindfully without conforming (Littlejohn et al., 2017).

Again, this would have to be someone who has a strong sense of identity and their culture; if not,

it could be possible that after passing for so long you start to develop insecurities within your

own culture. In passing, African American students possess "the ability to be perceived as a

native member of a particular community, which results in the accomplishment of particular

social goals of the speakers, such as their social integration in contexts where ethnicity becomes

critical" (Skapoulli, 2004, p. 246). In this case, African American students would try to pass as

white in order to feel a part of their white environment.

Intent

The intended audience for this project are predominately white institutions. I chose this

audience because although student affairs professionals at predominately white institutions strive

to effectively serve new and all students, traditional methods and theories of classical student

development do not serve their direct population; instead, the theories have been generalized from samples that were predominately white, male, and middle class (Bakari, 1997). As Bakari states, "for African American students, racial and cultural identity are an integral part of student development" (1997, p. 19). A positive racial identity developed by an African American student helps create a positive attitude as well as confidence in one's ability (Bakari, 1997). Therefore, for academic success and personal development, it is crucial for an African American student to have fostered a positive racial identity. Retention is more likely when a student has a positive racial identity and knowledge of self (Bakari, 1997). Noting Bakari's findings, predominately white institutions can be aware of how an African American's negotiation of identity can be detrimental to the student, and take the necessary steps to help prevent this if they find their students are negotiating their identity.

Furthermore, with predominately white institutions as the audience, the hope is this will lead to an increase of cultural diversity education. As Smallwood has pointed out, "Other cultures have been saturated with stereotypical images of what African Americans are and how they act and no matter how wrong it is, some white students have a strong misconception of this minority group (2015, p. 7). For example, at some predominantly white institutions, "African American men are often described by their white counterparts using terms such as dangerous, endangered, uneducable, and lazy, which generally reinforce negative stereotypes to which some non-black peer, teachers, and faculty subscribe" (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 502). With this research paper, predominantly white institutions can take steps to ensure they have a diversity policy in place to protect and educate others on their African American students. The research collected will answer the question whether or not African American students will negotiate or alter their identity to culturally assimilate into predominately white institutions.

Other African American students could benefit from this study as well, as it will provide insight from current African American college students at predominately white institutions. The information gathered highlights their experiences and processes implemented to navigate their predominately white spaces. The study conducted underlines certain skills, such as code switching, that proved beneficial for the participants that could be implemented by other African American students as well. This information, should a student start to feel the need to negotiate their identity or assimilate to their predominately white culture, could be used to provide a better experience for the student during their college years.

Method

Interviews were conducted with 13 students on the students' perspectives and feelings on entering into a predominately white culture, and gauging whether or not they felt they have had to alter their identity throughout their years in college. Each student that agreed to the interview was provided with an informed consent statement about the study (questions included in Appendix A). The questions were transcribed and then coded for frequency of terms that displayed feelings of African American students who attend predominately white institutions. The information gathered could be used to create an increase of cultural diversity awareness and education at predominately white institutions. The information gathered could also be used to create a communication plan for African American students to implement in order to successfully adapt to a predominately white institution without having to alter their cultural identity if they feel they need to.

Challenges and limitations included the number of responses given. As not all African American students from the selected predominately white institutions responded, the information collected only represented the thoughts of those who did. Another challenge was getting enough

students to respond; it was not the entire African American population, but a sample of enough

to accurately determine whether or not their identity and culture may be altered to assimilate into

the predominate culture.

Data Collection

Data was collected from 13 students, four from Queens University of Charlotte, four

from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and five from North Carolina State

University. Nine African American females and four African American males participated in the

study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews that was previously approved by

both the project advisor as well as the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The interview began

with a read consent form, then followed up with 13 questions (see Appendix A) asking

participants about their experiences as a black person at a predominately white institution.

Interviews with study participants were recorded either over phone or using the application

Skype. Each recording is safely stored in a secure file by the interviewer.

Data Analysis

A pseudonym was used for each of the participants recorded to protect the identity of

individuals. Using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory framework, transcripts from the

interviews were analyzed and coded, beginning with open coding to understand, label,

categorize, and describe the narrative trends within the data. These narratives are essential

experiences from the study participants about experiences navigating predominately white spaces

at their institution. Each of these experiences was analyzed through the lens of cultural identity

theory to determine the level of intercultural competence is reached. The qualitative data

collected was also evaluated in order to help develop safe spaces for African American students

at predominately white institutions.

Results

Overall Themes

There was a presence of overarching themes that revealed themselves through the data: attendance of transition programs, code switching, and support systems.

Transition Programs

Transition programs can be a variety of things, ranging from programs that provide beginning courses, to programs that simply orient students to campus. Each of the universities the participants attend provide some type of transition program.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill provides Summer Bridge. Summer Bridge is a six-week transition program that helps incoming first-year students adjust to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill by providing academic enrichment, community building, and co-curricular and experiential learning activities. The program is designed to ease participants' personal and academic transition from high school to the university. Students enroll in two academic courses, which usually represent a combination of English composition and quantitative skills. They also participate in activities designed to supplement their summer experience by engaging in high-impact learning experiences often facilitated by units such as the UNC Learning and Writing Centers, University Career Services, and Student Life and Leadership. Additionally, cultural and recreational activities are significant components of the program, as students are introduced to the University and the array of opportunities and resources available (Summer Bridge, n.d).

North Carolina State University provides the Symposium for Multicultural Scholars. The Symposium for Multicultural Scholars is a summer education and transitional experience for students from traditionally underserved populations. Its purpose is to foster a sense of

community for incoming undergraduate first year and transfer students and provide them with

information about campus support, personnel and resources as a basis for helping ensure their

academic, social and emotional success at North Carolina State University (Symposium for

Multicultural Scholars, n.d.).

Lastly Queens University of Charlotte provides Thrive. Thrive is a program through the

Center for Student Success at Queens University of Charlotte that serves first generation,

underrepresented students. Similarly to both Summer Bridge and the Symposium for

Multicultural Scholars, Thrive is a bridge program that helps students transition into their new

university.

In addition, Queens also provides L.E.A.D. A mentorship program, L.E.A.D. matches

minority, first generation or first year students with a mentor who is an upperclass student.

L.E.A.D. is an acronym that emphasizes a focus on four main pillars including learn, empower,

act, and diversify. The program was designed to provide activities via events, workshops, and

one-on-one mentoring to keep students engaged not only for the first year, but retains their

enrollment until graduation.

Eight of the 13 participants (62%) attended a transition program or participated in a

mentorship program. Of the 8 participants, 6 participants (75%) chose their program with

intention in order to prepare attending a predominately white institution. The participants hoped

that in attending a transition program into their university, that they would be better prepared to

cope with the culture shock of being one of few African American students on campus. Although

there is no clear definition of culture shock, Kalervo Oberg (1960) coined the term and described

several aspects of culture shock: strain due to the effort required to make necessary

psychological adaptions; a sense of loss and feelings of deprivation in regard to friends, status,

profession, and possessions; being rejected by, or rejecting, members of the new culture;

confusion in role, role expectations, values; surprise, anxiety, even disgust and indignation after

becoming aware of cultural differences, feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with

the new environment (As cited in Furnham, 2004).

Code Switching

Code switching is defined as "the practice of selecting or altering linguistic elements so

as to contextualize talk in interaction" (Nilep, 2006, p. 1). Code switching primarily refers to the

switching of languages; in the case of the participants, there was a switch between African

American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Stand American English (SAE). There can be

confusion in AAVE being considered slang or a badly spoken version of SAE; however, AAVE

is a language with its own grammar and pronunciation (Pullum, 1999). It is a language spoken

mostly by African Americans, and is rooted in the African American culture (Pullum, 1999).

Eleven out of 13 participants (85%) indicated they code switch from AAVE to SAE to

communicate with their peers.

Code switching can extend beyond language as well. The modifying of one's behavior,

appearance, and the like in order to adapt to different sociocultural norms is also considered a

form of code switching (Intranet, n.d.). Of the 11 participants that acknowledged they code

switch, 8 of them were women. All 8 women noted that they not only switch their language, but

their appearance as well. One hundred percent of the women who noted they had to code switch

their appearance gave examples of straightening their hair in order to fit into the new cultural

norm at their predominately white institution. Fifty percent also noted that they dressed more

conservatively, toning down their expressiveness in order to make their peers feel more

comfortable.

Support Systems

A social support network helps to mitigate stressors, lessen culture shock, and facilitate intercultural adjustment (Winkelman, 1994 as cited in Lin, 2006). Social support systems can come in many forms, but one support system that was particularly highlighted by the participants was their clubs and organizations. Twelve of the 13 participants (92%) noted that they participated in some form of university club or organization that was centered around African American students. Some organizations included the entire African American population, such as the Black Student Movement at Queens University of Charlotte or the Black Student Union at the University of North Carolina at Chapel. Others were focused on African American students with certain majors such as the National Society of Black Engineers or the Black Business Students Association at North Carolina State University. In addition, 38% of the participants are a part of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC). The NPHC is a collaborative organization of nine historically black international Greek lettered fraternities and sororities, each promoting community awareness and action. Each of the participants who are a part of the NPHC mentioned how their sisterhood or brotherhood kept them rooted in their identity through camaraderie and the uplifting of those not only in their organization but the African American communities they serve as well.

The one participant who did not join a black centered club or organization through the university, still found a support system that was rooted in African American identity which was his church. In total, 69% of the participants attended either their family church or a local African American church. African American churches, which can range vastly but include such denominations as Baptist, Methodist, or Pentecostal, are central to the black community (Black churches, 2005). Furthermore, African American churches hold a strong concern for social and

political justice, possessing profound feelings against the oppression of minority groups and a

center of strength and power for the African American community (Black church, 2009).

Discussion

Major findings from the study describe (1) the manner in which African American

students communicate their identity, (2) the roles organizations and communities play in cultural

identity, and (3) best practices for supporting African American students at predominately white

institutions.

Communicating African-American Identity as a Student

When asked about what culture or race they identified with, 100% of the participants in

the study aligned with the black culture. When asked *why* they associated with that culture, 7 of

the 13 students (54%) mentioned it was because of how they were raised, while the other 6

students noted it was because of the way society saw them. In regards to how society saw them,

those 6 participants noted that even if they did not consider themselves black, society would tell

them they were — whether that be by the color of their skin, the way they spoke, or in the way

they carried themselves. All participants noted that their skin color was an important distinctive

factor in their identity, as it was something they were not able to disguise.

Avowal and Ascription

Avowal and ascription deal with what constructs or produces the cultural identity and the

ways in which these identities are communicated. Avowal is how one articulates or expresses

his/her views about group identity; it is how one presents oneself to another. Ascription is how

others perceive an individual; it is how one refers to others, which may include stereotypes.

Ascription describes why 6 of the participants described themselves as black based on how

society sees them, because even if they did not readily identify as being black, society would

make that choice for them. Our identity is constructed as a result of how others view us and how we view ourselves.

Jeffrey, a student from North Carolina State University described himself as "showing up as himself" at all times to his peers whether black or white. By showing up as himself, Jeffrey refers to not having to change his mannerisms or speech when interacting with his peers. Jeffrey spoke about his pride as an African American student, and how he expresses that pride when engaging with others. When it came to adapting to others, Jeffery noted that he never felt he had to because he displayed his true self at all times:

I mean people outside of the black community, I feel like everyone knew what I stood for and what I was all about in regards to who I was. I was actually very involved with National Society for Black Engineers and I wore that proudly. Even when I was interacting with students that weren't black and things of that nature I never felt like I had to put on a front and change who I was in order to be in the mix with those people.

Additional students mentioned the importance of how others see them as well including Emory, another student from North Carolina State University. Emory notes that because she is aware that her interactions with white people may be their only interaction with a black person, she is very careful in the words that she chooses or the topics she discusses. She states: "there're certain things that I may not say just because 1) people probably wouldn't understand anyways just because some of it just may be a black cultural thing and maybe there're certain things that I purposefully, intentionally don't say as well just because I don't want to feed into any stereotypes that other cultures may have of us."

Ascription is yet reaffirmed by another North Carolina State University Student, Tia, who expresses how being the only African American student in a classroom can add a certain type of

assumption by others: "let's say I'm in class and I'm the only black person in the class, or the only black woman in the class; I do feel like people expect that you represent the culture, or your race, or what have you, and if you act a certain way you'll be fitting into a stereotype instead of that just being who you are."

Being an African American student can feel like you're in a constant fishbowl; incessantly being watched by others from the outside. Knowing the importance of how others view African American students, some students choose to "plant their feet" in their cultural identity while others choose to adapt their speaking in order to better associate with their white counterparts.

Code-Switching

Code-switching (CS) refers to the mixing, by bilinguals (or multilinguals), of two or more languages in discourse, often with no change of interlocutor or topic (Poplack, 2001). Code-switching for an African American student does not only have to include the switch from African American Vernacular English to Standard English, but also in topic choices and dress code.

Asia, a student from Queens University of Charlotte felt that she needed to code-switch in order to successfully communicate with her white peers. Otherwise, messages that she was trying to send would get lost in translation. She stated: "I might change how I deliver certain sentences, or I might choose my words differently so they can understand what I'm talking about because *they're not* going to understand what I'm talking about. They're just not going to understand what I'm trying to portray or give off."

Another Queens University of Charlotte student, Alyssa, noted how although speaking in African American Vernacular English was what was comfortable to her, she recognized that it could affect the ways others who are not people of color viewed her:

I think even when it comes to slang, like just the way that I talk I have to alter that based on who I'm around because I catch myself, but not a lot and I think it's because I have more black friends now; but I'm more comfortable that way so I use that slang or vernacular that we're comfortable with because it's part of the culture but then I have to change that around other people because 'oh you're not talking properly' or 'oh you're not doing this'; but, it's like I know how to say things the way I need to say them.

The cons of not adhering to code-switching in certain situations could lend an African American student as being seen as "too black." Mikael is a Queens University of Charlotte student who explained how being at a predominately white institution has made him recognize how easily is he profiled as just a "black male" and the negative connotation that comes along with that. Before he transferred to Queens University of Charlotte, Mikael described an incident at his first predominately white institution before he knew the importance of code-switching. As Mikael was walking to a nearby gas station minutes from campus, he was stopped by police for looking as a "suspicious" individual. Mikael was asked to surrender his book bag he had at the time, and was subjected to a series of questions of his previous whereabouts and why he was so close to campus. Knowing that the black population was so small on campus and given recent events that happened in the news, Mikael realized he was being stopped because he did not "fit-in" with his surroundings. In that moment Mikael said he acknowledged the importance of knowing the proper time to code-switch so that he could be better perceived by other peers on campus.

Roles of Organizations and Communities

According to Stella Ting-Toomey (2015), individuals mostly acquired their composite

identity through socio-cultural conditioning process, individual lived experiences, and the

repeated intergroup and interpersonal interaction experiences. According to social identity

theory, s*ocial (or socio-cultural) identities* can include ethnic membership identity, social class

identity, to family role issues, and *personal identities* can include any unique attributes that we

associate with our individuated self in comparison to those of others. Thus, each individual's

composite identity has group membership, relational role, and individual self-reflexive

implications. In relation to the composite identity of group membership and the relational role,

the qualitative data reveals that African American students who are a part of organizations or

have communities that represent themselves in likeness and culture provide comfort and

empowerment.

Jenna, a student from North Carolina State University, explained that seeing people like

her and having an African American Cultural Center that was dedicated to African American

students was wildly beneficial. In addition, Jenna noted that having organizations like the

National Society of Black Engineers provided a space where as a student she could be more

receptive to the information. Having people who not only looked like her but also identified the

same as her helped her to feel she was truly supported. She stated: "because it was people who

looked like me were telling me, you know, here are the tools you need to be successful versus

someone else who may not have related or may not have tried to care because I mean I may not

have mattered as much."

Carmen, a student from Queens University of Charlotte, explained how mentorship

programs helped to keep her rooted in her identity as well. Having a group of people that helped

her However, in staying within her mentor group, Carmen denied herself the opportunity to

really get to know her white counterparts. As a result, although Carmen never felt she had to

assimilate (similarly to Jeffrey), she also felt that she never her institution a place she could call

home. Both Carmen and Jeffrey noted feeling part of the outer circle when it came to being

involved in the mainstream, white groups. However, based on the strong relational ties they had

with their organizations, they were able to thrive socially within their social groups, allowing

them not to feel alone.

Successful Support Systems

Support systems looked different for each of the participants in the study, but one

common theme that resonated with them all was 1) having someone that would actively listen, 2)

having a group that could be there mentally and emotionally. Among all 13 participants, a *social*

support system was what was valued most. A social support system is defined as a network of

people – friends, family, and peers – that we can turn to for emotional and practical support

(University of Buffalo, 2019). There are several benefits to having a social support system,

including higher resiliency in times of stress, setback, or loss, being provided with information,

advice, guidance and tangible support, and being bolstered emotionally when there is feeling of

being overwhelmed or down (Mayo Clinic, 2010).

Having this social support system helped many of the participants not only navigate their

environment, but also helped them to stay grounded in their cultural identity as well. Ashton, a

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill student, stated:

I think one thing was I found my niche in college pretty early since I attended a

precollege program. I found a lot of people that were from the same background as me

because that's who the program targeted, so I knew about 60 people who kind of went

through some of the same experiences as me, so it was like I found my group; I felt I

found my place and I didn't have to change anything as I continued to navigated my

environment.

Ashton was one of the participants who attended the Summer Bridge program. Summer

Bridge allowed Ashton to develop a support system that not only lasted him throughout his

collegiate years, but also provided him with security within his identity as he had peers to relate

with. Having individuals who identified like him encouraged Ashton to continue his journey,

something Ashton says he otherwise would have lacked if he did not people who could relate

with him.

Project Uplift is another program that introduces interested minorities together before

they arrive on campus at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This "pre-meeting" is

where a lot of students are able to meet each other and build fundamental bonds. Avi, a student at

the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, recounts how beneficial meeting her friends at

Project Uplift was for her:

> I literally made my black friends at Project Uplift. Then the friends I came in with
>
> brought their black friends that they met, and we just sort of created our own group. It
>
> wasn't as if we completely separated ourselves from the rest of the white students. But
>
> sometimes we needed space for just us because no one really understands *us* like *us*.
>
> Honestly, if it wasn't for my friends I don't know how I would've made it. They kept me
>
> grounded and helped me to push through in ways that my white counterparts couldn't.
>
> They saw my struggle through my lens and I think that's what made the difference. They
>
> just got it.

A strong social support system that resembles the student furthermore fortifies the student's sense of identity. In an environment where there are not many who identify or can relate to your background, it seems that students will naturally gravitate to those they have the most likeness with. Tami, a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill student, accounts how being at a predominately white institution makes it considerably evident that there is a difference in not only the number of white students compared to African American, but also the cultural differences as well. She states: "It's been the distinction between how I look and the groups that I associate with, with the majority group and as a result of those race relations you come to cling to what's familiar and cling to how you identify and what's important to you so it's not only that, you know my race is clearly evident but also that I pull a lot of pride and a lot of strength and joy from my culture."

Lastly, there is a sense of pride that comes when persons of the same group can come together to celebrate the beauty of their culture. Naomi, a student from North Carolina State University, shared how her involvements with groups that identified the same as her showcased how truly unique the black culture is:

> I think I'm just very proud to be black in general. I think that black people have come such a long way and just culturally black people are popping. Just the influence that black people have is just amazing. It's so cool to see how culture changes based on what black people do. I think it's really cool. Like everyone wants to be black until it's time to be black, but I always want to be black.

Conclusion

Based upon the data, it seems that most African American students will reach a level of intercultural competency where they will not have to fully assimilate to their predominately

white institutions. However, in not fully assimilating it was crucial that these students found a

viable support system, most of which revolved around having an organization, community, or

people in place that resembled them not only physically but identified with the African American

culture. Providing opportunities for students to connect with other students before college even

begins is tremendously beneficial and also serves as a support mechanism. Having individuals

who aligned with their identity helped the African American students in this study be more

receptive of information and supported while not having to give up any part of their identity.

Code-switching became an integral tool in helping the students to navigate their predominately

white spaces as well, as it again gave way for the students to be able to "switch" into the other

culture versus completely losing their African American identity.

These results are crucial because it reflects the African American student's perspective of

attending a predominately white institution. From the data, it is shown that although all students

may not feel the need to assimilate, the need to connect with peers or others who identify the

same was a vital component. Having individuals on campus who they could relate with was an

important stepping stone in their success at their university. Without it, many participants noted

their collegiate experience would be vastly different. This shows the importance of

predominately white institutions providing resources for their African American students to feel

connected to their identity, whether that is through transition programs or clubs/organizations.

These results are also important because it reinforces the importance of learning to code

switch. Eighty-five percent of the participants indicated they felt the need to code switch, which

suggests it is a vital skill to possess in order to integrate into their white institution. Without it,

African American students may not feel as closely connected with their university or "at home."

This information solidifies the need to create a communication plan for African American

students as they enter predominately white institutions as a resource in communicating

successfully with their white peers.

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Appendix A

1. What made you choose this university?

2. What culture/race do you identify as?

3. Do you feel your strongly rooted in your culture?

4. How rooted did you feel in your culture when first entered college?

5. How rooted do you feel now?

6. Do you feel like you've had to change who you are to fit in over the years? Why or why

   not?

7. How have you had to change over the years to fit in?

8. Do you feel you've had to alter your identity in order to assimilate?

9. What did you expect your support system to be like?

10. What have you found it to be like?

11. How do you feel supported?

12. What would your ideal support system look like?

13. If you had this system, how do you feel it would affect your college experience?

Appendix B

QUEENS
UNIVERSITY
of
CHARLOTTE

To: Chemaria Washington

From: Queens Institutional Review Board (IRB #00011168)

Date: November 30, 2018

Re: Research Protocol Approval, File #11-18-KSOC-487

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your research application titled "African American Cultural Assimilation through Negotiated Identity." Based on the research protocol detailed in your application, the IRB has determined that your project satisfies the federal regulatory criteria for exemption from further IRB review under 45 CFR 46.101(b).

Please note that only the research protocol outlined in your application is exempt. Any changes to your research plans need to be reported to the IRB for review prior to implementation. Further, please notify the IRB immediately if any issues involving risks to subjects or others occur during your study. The Adverse Event Report Form can be found at our portal site: https://my.queens.edu/irb.

Please let me know if you have any questions, and I wish you much success with your project.

Sincerely,

Jeremiah B. Wills, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Sociology
Chair, Queens IRB