

Psychosocial Experiences of Black Male Students in Public and Social Spaces on and around a Historically White South African Campus

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Abstract : Widening of participation in higher education globally has increased diversity of student populations. However, widening participation is more than mere access. Central to the debate about widening participation are social justice issues of authentic inclusion and appropriate support for success for all students in higher education (HE). Given the recent global campaign for 'Black Lives Matter' as well as the worldwide advocacy for justice in the George Floyd case, the importance of the experiences of Black men, were again poignantly foregrounded. The literature abounds with the negative experiences of Black male students in higher education. Much of this literature emanates from the Global North, with little systematic research on black male students' university experiences originating from the Global South. This research, therefore, explores the psychosocial experiences of Black male students at a historically white South African university. Not only are these students' educational or academic adjustment important, but so is their psychosocial adjustment to the institution. The psychosocial adjustment might include emotional well-being, motivation, as well as the student's perception of how well he fits in or is made to feel welcome at the institution. The study draws on strands of critical race theory (CRT), co-cultural theory (CCT) as well as defining properties of micro-aggression theory (MAT). In the study, CRT, therefore, served as an overarching theory at the macro level, and it comments on the structural dynamics while MAT and CCT rather focussed on the impact of structural arrangements like racialization, at an individual and micro-level. These theories furthermore provided a coherent analytic framework for this study. Using a case study design, this qualitative study, employing focus groups and individual interviews, drew on the psychosocial experiences of twenty Black male students to explore how they navigate this specific historically white campus. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis that provided a systematic procedure for generating codes and themes from the qualitative data. The study found that the combination of race and gender-based micro-aggressions experienced by students included negative stereotyping, criminalization as well as racial profiling and that these experiences impede participants' ability to thrive at the institution. However, participants also shared positive perspectives about the institution. Some of the positive traits of the institution that the participants mentioned were well-aligned administration, good quality of education, as well as various funding opportunities. This study implies that if any HE institution values transformation, it necessitates the exploration and interrogation of potential aspects that are subtly hidden in the institutional culture and environment that might serve as barriers to the transformation process. This positioning is based on a social justice stance and believes that all students are equal and have the right to racially and culturally equitable and appropriate education and support.

Keywords : critical race theory, higher education transformation, micro-aggression, student experience

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