

9-9-2021

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Recommended Citation

Turner, Franklin Dickerson (2021) "The Multicultural Distress, Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Levels of Black Undergraduate Students as Compared to Asian, Latinx, and White Undergraduate Students," *Journal of Research Initiatives*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri/vol5/iss3/8>

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The Multicultural Distress, Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Levels of Black Undergraduate Students as Compared to Asian, Latinx, and White Undergraduate Students

Keywords

Multicultural Distress, Depression, Anxiety, Stress, Race, diversity, equity



THE MULTICULTURAL DISTRESS, DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, AND STRESS LEVELS OF BLACK UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AS COMPARED TO ASIAN, LATIN, AND WHITE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

Franklin Dickerson Turner, Kean University

Abstract

College students who experienced poor academic performance, depression, and anxiety reported having higher levels of stress than those students who were more successful academically (Andrews & Wilding, 2004; Bennett, 2003). It is also known that marginalized students have a higher tendency to experience stress. This study took a systematic look at levels of Multicultural distress, stress, depression, and anxiety as reported by Asian, Black, Latin, and White students at a major urban university. The findings indicated no significant differences in the general stress, depression, and anxiety levels based on a students' race. However, Asian, Black, and Latin students had a significantly higher level of Multicultural distress than White Students. In addition, Black students reported experiencing the highest level of Multicultural distress.

Introduction

Do students have different levels of stress, depression, and anxiety based on race at an urban public university? Are there different levels of Multicultural distress related to a student's race? The academic performance among Black males and Latin students is lower when compared to Black female, White, and Asian students. The difference in the level of academic performance of students based on their race has been at the heart of social commentary, debates, and research for decades (Harper, 2006; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Miller, 2007). The difference in academic performance amongst students in college is a pressing issue in higher education and throughout educational systems in the United States. Currently, more Black undergraduates are enrolled in college now than at any time before; however, Black male students' graduation rates compared to Black female and White students continues to be overwhelming low (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2007).

Many factors influence the graduation rates of Black students, especially Black male students. Racism or issues related to race are major factors marginalized students must cope with while attending college. Students who perceive racism on campus often feel depression, isolation, anger, anxiety, and disengagement from their college communities.

Research pointing out that college students are susceptible to mental health problems has increased public concern in the western hemisphere (Stanley & Manthorpe, 2001). Prior scholarly investigations have found high rates of psychological morbidity, particularly in the levels of depression and anxiety, among college students (Stewart-Brown, Evans, Patterson, Petersen, Doll, Balding, & Regis 2000; Voelker, 2003). Psychological morbidity (distress) among college students is an overlooked public health problem, significantly impacting students, campus health services, and mental health policymaking (Stewart-Brown et al., 2000). Ouimette, White, Colder, and Farrow (2011) found that 66% of first-year college students had experienced some form of trauma in their lives before attending college. Previous exposure to stress can elevate stress in the college setting if a similar situation is recalled. Students who have

experienced traumatic incidents thus may suffer from elevated stress levels. When a student has experienced prior stress, the effects of additional stressors can be magnified.

The college experience can be challenging for all students. It is an experience involving many firsts: first time living away from home, living by yourself or with strangers, and having a job to support oneself. For many students, this period of growth could prove demanding, significantly when stressors influence one's ability to adjust effectively to new and unfamiliar situations. Typical moments such as those mentioned above could lead to emotional distress. However, if these stressful occurrences stay at a manageable level, a person should be able to accomplish their goals without much impact on their performance in college. Emotional distress is an unpleasant response (such as anguish, humiliation, or fury) that, over time, can produce depression, anxiety, mood swings, and compulsive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). When considering race, ethnicity, and cultural practices, these factors are instrumental in how emotional distress can present itself differently in individuals when using quantifiable outcomes (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014). This study aimed to explore how the relationship between race and emotional wellness can impact college students, especially Black students.

There are not as many negative stigmas for the majority population (White people) for marginalized groups such as Black and Latin people of African descent. How race is perceived could have an impact on interactions across institutions. This awareness pertains to not just their viewer's race, but these observations apply to other's race as well. In addition, the stress experienced while a marginalized student attends college comes with its unique stressors (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014). Previous research found the association between academic stress and emotional wellness amongst college students without investigating the possibility that race can impact academic performance. Studying the cultural stressors an undergraduate student of color may endure while attending a predominantly White institution (PWI) could benefit students' well-being and successful college matriculation (Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, & Chessman, 2019). Attending a PWI could make the adjustment to college life more challenging for some marginalized college students. Turner and Smith (2015) reported that Asian, Black, and Latin undergraduate students experienced the same general stress level as White undergraduate students. Past and current research reveals the disparity of successful academic outcomes due to college students' racial, ethnic, and low socioeconomic status (Turner & Smith, 2015; Spenner, Buchmann, & Landerman, 2005).

Stress has a significant impact on the pursuit of academic success (Ganesan, Talwar, Fauzan, & Oon, 2018; Oliver, Datta, & Baldwin, 2017; Turner & Smith, 2015). Academic stress is experienced similarly across all racial backgrounds, but the gap in the academic performance between White students and students of color is primarily influenced by Multicultural distress (Turner, 2021a; Turner, 2021b; Turner & Antunes, 2020). Multicultural stressors account for the emotional distress experienced by a person of color when they are exposed to majority cultures, and that individual must adjust to their environment by significantly altering a sense of their identity to fit in (Turner, 2021a; Turner, 2021b; Turner & Antunes, 2020).

Research has focused on general stress experienced by the college student population without considering cultural differences that impact gaps in stress levels across races. The primary focus was on general anxiety among college students, not considering other possible factors such as gender, whether a student was leaving their home versus commuting, and their perception of family support (Lafreniere, Ledgerwood, & Docherty (1997), race, and sexual orientation. Valerio and Sexton (2016) focused on the association of stress, general health, and

alcohol use with poor sleep quality as a cause of lower academic performance across college students.

The American Psychological Association (APA) (2017) reported, “people with low incomes and racial/ethnic minority populations experience greater levels of stress than their more affluent, White counterparts, which can lead to significant disparities in both mental and physical health that ultimately affect life expectancy.” The overall wellness of college students can significantly depend on how that college student uses coping strategies to alleviate stress. Oliver II, Datta, and Baldwin (2017) researched the aspects of physical and emotional well-being as a function of race in college students. Oliver et al. suggested that White and Black students cope with stressors in different ways. Families of low SES seem to be at a disadvantage considering their limited access to quality and stable housing, healthcare, educational programs, after-school programs, and other essentials.

A person from a marginalized group will be exposed to and must cope with various types and levels of stress. Many people are oblivious that some of the stress they experience is related to their culture. In the United States, there are numerous cultures associated with a person's race, gender identity, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation, which most likely have their own unique culture. Most Americans encounter culturalism daily, especially if they are not a member of the dominant culture. Marginalized people in the United States contend with the burden of culturalism, all three levels of racism (institutional, personally mediated, and internalized) in every facet of their lives.

Culturalism is a system of supremacy, oppression, and privilege in which people from one culture maintains dominance over people from other cultures through institutional power. Members of the dominant culture create and accept their privilege in society by preserving structures, ideology, values, a set of attitudes, and behaviors that have the intent or effect of keeping marginalized cultural groups comparatively excluded from power, esteem, status, benefits, security, privileges, and equal access to societal resources. Culturally related stress comprises culturally related interaction between individuals or groups and their environments that occurs from the dynamics of culturalism by taxing or surpassing existing individual and collective resources or threaten well-being. White Heterosexual Christian Male Culture is and has been the dominant culture in the United States for centuries.

White heterosexual Christian male culture is the learned behavior passed down through generations to men belonging to this culture. This behavior encompasses accumulating knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, roles, spatial relations, material objects, and possessions these men acquire. White Heterosexual Christian Male culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior obtained and transmitted by symbols. People who are not a member of White Heterosexual Christian Male Culture most likely experience Multicultural distress daily. This constant exposure to stress can lead to physical and emotional health distress.

We use Turner's Multicultural distress Model to explain how culturalism impacts cognitive performance. Multicultural distress proposes that when marginalized people are exposed to dominant cultures, they will suffer from culturalism since their culture does not allow them to access dominant cultures. Multicultural distress (figure 1.) outlines how a marginalized person may experience psychological and physiological distress when exposed to discord, disharmony, confusion, or conflict due to a different cultural environment. A person from a marginalized culture can be exposed to culturalism associated with White Heterosexual Christian

Male Culture in professional, educational and social settings. The cumulative effects of these harmful exposures take a significant emotional and physical toll on a person. Being a person from a marginalized background can place an emotional and physical strain on an individual, especially if they are not part of a majority culture. Research on stress suggests that being a member of a marginalized group, e.g., racial, gender, social class, sexual orientation, and culture, can significantly affect stress levels. There are several forms of stress, but there is very little research on Multicultural distress and its impact.

There is little to no research on the types of stress students of color who attend PWI face on campus related to their culture. Researchers have found no statistical difference in the stress level students experiences with race. However, the researchers only used general stress scales (Ganesan, Talwar, Fauzan, & Oon, 2018; Oliver, Datta, & Baldwin, 2017; Turner & Smith, 2015) that do not pick up on racial differences.

Turner and Smith (2015) reported no differences among racially diverse college students on reported levels of student-related stress. Studies conducted after Turner and Smith's research found similar findings that there appear to be no differences in the levels of stress experienced by undergraduate students based on race (Ganesan, Talwar, Fauzan & Oon, 2018; Oliver, Datta & Baldwin, 2017). It must be mentioned the bulk of the previously cited studies used the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) to assess stress. The PSS is a general measure of stress. The author of this paper believes that previous research on the emotional well-being of undergraduate students, especially ones attending a PWI who did not look at scales measuring campus climate related to race, racism, bias, and prejudice, conducted research that did not paint the entire picture as it relates to students of color in particular Black students.

This study focused on an urban public university with a long history of racial diversity among its student population and serving many first-generation college students, mostly from low-socioeconomic status families. Given that the students at this urban university have similar backgrounds in terms of being first-generation students and from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, the question arises as to whether they bring different levels of stress, depression, anxiety, and Multicultural distress to the college environment. Thus, the following two research questions guided this study:

1. Are there significant differences in undergraduate students' stress, depression, and anxiety levels based on race/ethnicity at an urban public university, as reported from the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS)?
2. Are there significant differences in the Multicultural distress levels of Black, White, Asian, and Latin undergraduate students as reported from the Multicultural Distress Scale-Race (MDS-Race)?

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 569 undergraduate students enrolled at a state university in the New York City Metropolitan area. In this study, female students accounted for 264 participants, with male students consisting of 146. In terms of ethnicity of the undergraduates who participated, 44 were Asian, 159 were Black, 168 were Latin, 149 were White, and 49 were Other. The participants' ages ranged from 18-44, with a mean age of 21.8. The participants were freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior undergraduate students from a variety of majors. The university's overall undergraduate enrollment by race/ethnicity was 6% Asian, 19% Black, 24%

Latin, and 39% White. Female students accounted for 59% of the student population, with male students consisting of 41%.

The study took place during the fall 2018 semester after receiving university IRB approval. The undergraduate students who took part in this study were enrolled in classes with a research participant requirement. Therefore, the data was collected online from students that gave their consent virtually. Students who chose to volunteer to participate completed the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale- Stress Sub-Scale, Multicultural distress Scale, and demographic questions.

Instruments

The Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS; Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995b) is a 21-item self-report measure, consisting of three 7-item scales measuring depression, anxiety, and stress “over the past week.” Each statement has four possible responses ranging from 0 (‘Did not apply to me at all’) to 3 (‘Applied to me very much, or most of the time’). A higher score on a sub-scale reflects a greater level of depression, anxiety, or stress, with each sub-scale having a maximum score of 21. The DASS has shown exceptional internal consistency and solid construct validity in clinical and non-clinical populations (Brown et al., 1997; Crawford and Henry, 2003; Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995a; Page et al., 2007).

The Multicultural Distress Scale-Race (MDS) is a self-report scale designed to measure the negative emotional state associated with majority culture in professional, educational, and social settings a person of a disadvantaged culture can experience. The MDS-Race contains 12-items asking about one’s experiences with majority cultures. Assessment takers use a 5-point Strongly Disagree/Strongly Agree scale to rate the extent to which they have experienced Multicultural distress. The MDS-Race has demonstrated excellent internal consistency and sound construct validity. The MDS-Race was found to be highly reliable (12 items: $\alpha = .91$). The scale has shown evidence of being valid.

Procedures

The undergraduate students in this study were enrolled in a Psychology class during the fall 2018 semester that had a research participation requirement. IRB approval was obtained before being this research. Students were recruited via a university research website. Students who chose to volunteer to participate gave consent via the research website and answered the MDS-Race and DASS statements via online survey software.

Results

A MANOVA was run for all four emotional distress measures. The multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to assess racial differences on the four negative emotional states: Multicultural distress, stress, depression, and anxiety. A non-significant Box’s M test ($p = .000$) indicates homogeneity of covariance matrices of the dependent variables across the races.

The multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed an $F(16,1714.521) = 3.685$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. Univariate tests showed that there were significant differences across the race on Multicultural distress, $F(4,564) = 9.186$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$, depression, $F(4,564) = 2.90$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$, but not on anxiety, $F(4,564) = 1.457$, $p > .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$, or stress, $F(4,564) = 2.128$, $p > .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$ (see Table 1-4).

Tukey HSD tests showed Asian students ($M = 19.00$, $SD = 12.268$), Black students ($M = 17.29$, $SD = 10.371$), and Latin students ($M = 14.55$, $SD = 10.063$) had a higher level of Multicultural distress than White students ($M = 11.29$, $SD = 10.211$). Also, a Tukey HSD tests showed Asian students ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 4.386$) a higher level of depression than Black students ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 3.616$).

I expected Multicultural distress levels to be positively correlated with depression, anxiety, and stress. My hypothesis was confirmed. When collapsed across race, depression was positively correlated with stress ($r = 0.270$, $p < 0.001$), anxiety was positively correlated with stress ($r = 0.229$, $p < 0.001$), and stress ($r = 0.214$, $p < 0.001$).

Post hoc linear regression analyses were run on the significant findings. Being Asian significantly predicted Multicultural distress, $\beta = 10.47$, $F(3,43) = 7.948$, $p = .000$. Being Asian also explained a medium proportion of variance in the Multicultural distress scores, $R^2 = .373$. Being Black significantly predicted Multicultural distress, $\beta = 13.54$, $F(3,158) = 8.011$, $p = .000$. Being Black also explained a medium proportion of variance in the Multicultural distress scores, $R^2 = .13$. Being Latin significantly predicted Multicultural distress, $\beta = 10.38$, $F(3,167) = 6.01$, $p = .000$. Being Latin also explained a medium proportion of variance in the Multicultural distress scores, $R^2 = .11$.

Discussion

The differences among the four ethnic groups studied at the urban university indicated no differences in stress and anxiety, with Asian, Black and Latin students reporting significantly more Multicultural distress than White Students. Also, Asian students had a higher level of depression than Black students. Many participants reported high levels of stress, but when a correlation of stress related to a student's race was considered, there was a significant difference. With college populations becoming more diverse, especially Black college students, more attention needs to be given to emotional distress, especially Multicultural distress, hindering their retention and graduation.

Chavez and French (2007) discovered that discrimination, stereotype confirmation, and conformity in a student's subgroup are stressors that college students have acknowledged in the context of their race or ethnicity. In addition, undergraduates' perception of discrimination, specifically from faculty, staff, and administrators directed towards students of color, can be a significant stress trigger for marginalized and underrepresented college students (Hwang & Goto, 2008). Although this study had limitations, the overall findings suggest that severe levels of Multicultural distress existed among students of color.

Asian and Latin students consist of several different racial, ethnic, and country of origin subgroups. Socio-demographic uniqueness and diverse levels of acculturation for the members of each subgroup have specific issues and hurdles to overcome (e.g., a Latin student that racially identifies as Black compared to a Latin student that identifies as White). I recommend universities develop or enhance their prevention and intervention programs to account for the diverse characteristics of these cultural differences (Makimoto, 1998). Many cultural subgroups exist within the Asian, Black, and Latin racial/ethnic groups. Asian, Black, and Latin students are not homogeneous racially and ethnically. Their language, national origin, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds can be very diverse within their subset. The level of marginalization and length of time living in the U.S. could affect SES and health status for each subgroup. SES may impact the psychological-emotional health of an undergraduate student (Makimoto, 1998;

Reeves and Bennett, 2004). Additionally, the amount of racism they must cope with can be different based on distinctive skin complexion, surname, and country of origin.

The findings from this study showed a significant number of undergraduate students who reported high levels of stress. This study found no significant differences in the overall stress levels based on race but significant differences in Multicultural distress. Universities and colleges with racially diverse student populations, including a large percentage of low-socio-economic and first-generation college students, need to look closely at these groups of students to ensure these institutions create programs and interventions for the students to be successful. Previous research (Finkelstein, Kubzansky, Capitman, & Goodman, 2007; Goodman, McEwen, Dolan, Schafer-Kalkhoff, & Adler, 2005) looked at the racial and socioeconomic differences of stress on adolescents, found higher levels of stress among Black students, adolescents from lower SES families, and students with lower perceived socioeconomic status. Goodman, McEwen, Dolan, Schafer-Kalkhoff, and Adler (2005) found that socially disadvantaged adolescents had increased stress levels, irrespective of whether the disadvantage was associated with the adolescents' race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. The authors found that being Black with parents with low education levels was directly related to increased stress during adolescence.

As related to Multicultural distress, this study suggests that a commitment to having a diverse student body is essential, but much more needs to be done to support students of color. Creating a cultural climate within colleges/universities institutions that affirms and supports all students is a significant component of this pressing issue. Many universities claim to have a diverse student population. However, most universities do not have a faculty or administrator population that reflects the racial diversity of their student population. Multicultural distress needs to be alleviated among students of color for the improvement of their successful matriculation. PWI's must be more mindful that their students of color are exposed to institutional and personally mediated racism on and off-campus. A diverse student body can help students of color focus on academics, but the emotional well-being of students of color is still negatively impacted.

In this study, students of color reported higher levels of multicultural distress than White students. It should be noted that the DASS is a measure of general stress, depression, and anxiety and does not include stressful events associated with racism, bias, or assimilation into the majority culture. White students will not experience any of the three levels of racism (institutional, personal, and internal), especially institutionalized and internalized, because only White people in the United States are in the position of power to perpetuate racism. However, Asian, Black, and Latin students are exposed to all three levels of racism and overall oppression, which could add stress to their lives on campus and explain their higher score in Multicultural distress. At the same time, students may experience prejudice while on campus. Since the Multicultural distress scale includes possible stressful events related to racism, bias, or assimilation to the majority culture, it seems to be sensitive enough to measure Asian, Black, and Latin students Multicultural distress levels. These students of color are attending a racially diverse university, but the student population, but White still made up the largest racial group. Further research should be conducted to understand how racism and assimilation into the majority culture contribute to students of color's emotional distress.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for the Multicultural Distress Scale-Race

Race/Ethnicity	Means	Standard Deviation	n
Asian	19.00*	12.268	44
Black	17.29*	10.371	159
Latin	14.55*	10.063	168
White	11.29	9.011	149
Other	15.39	10.211	49

* Significant at alpha .05

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for the DASS-Stress

Race/Ethnicity	Means	Standard Deviation	n
Asian	6.45	5.505	44
Black	4.84	4.644	159
Latin	5.11	4.154	168
White	5.83	4.463	149
Other	6.20	4.277	49

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for the DASS-Depression

Race/Ethnicity	Means	Standard Deviation	n
Asian	5.20*	4.386	44
Black	3.20	3.616	159
Latin	3.55	3.704	168
White	3.93	4.401	149
Other	4.53	4.052	49

* Significant at alpha .05

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for the DASS-Anxiety

Race/Ethnicity	Means	Standard Deviation	n
Asian	4.61	2.982	44
Black	3.48	3.301	159
Latin	4.06	3.542	168
White	4.22	3.777	149
Other	4.18	2.913	49

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables

Variable	n	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Multicultural Distress	574	14.8	10.20	—			
2. Depression	577	3.76	3.98	.27**	—		
3. Anxiety	577	3.99	3.46	.23**	.66**	—	
4. Stress	576	5.39	4.51	.21**	.66**	.69**	—

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Figure 1.

Multicultural Distress Model

