

CONSTRUCTING “MULTIPLE” CONCEPTIONS OF BLACKNESS: A CASE STUDY OF HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS CONTEST IDENTITY AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE IN THE UNITED STATES

Diana ARIZA*

Len BERKEY**

Abstract

This article uses qualitative methods and a longitudinal time frame to examine the process of racial identity formation among African American students at a selective liberal arts college. It examines theories of racial identity development and performance, fictive kinship and racial authenticity, and the intersectionality of race and gender. The results demonstrate that students' performances of blackness are dynamic and context-specific, but that they primarily reflect the struggle to resist stereotypes and to maintain racial authenticity. It is also evident that racial identity development is inextricably tied to gender identity, and that black male and female college experiences diverge sharply.

Key Words: Black identity, fictive kinship, race relations

INTRODUCTION

While there is now broad consensus among social scientists that racial identity is socially and historically constructed and not something that is biologically determined (American Anthropological Association, 1998; American Sociological Association, 2003; Graves, 2004) the actual process of racial identity formation can be oppressively real and even definitive for many people. These identities may be fiercely contested, (Omi and Winant, 1986; Rasmussen, et al. 2001; Higgintotham and Anderson, 2006) and they may also substantially determine access to power and opportunity within American society. There is also considerable evidence that these racial identity conflicts can be particularly intense among adolescents and college-aged young people who are, on the one hand, preparing themselves to become successful adults and, on the other hand, trying to construct a self that is authentic and whole (Doane and Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Carter, 2005; Mckinney, 2005).

While there is some excellent work on black student adaptation and academic performance at large and prestigious universities, (Allen 1991; Feagin, 1996; Massey, 2003, Willie, 2003), there is much less scholarship on racial identity development at liberal arts colleges (Person, and Christensen, 1996; Smith and Moore, 2000). This article explores how African American students, who represent only a tiny minority of the student body at most selective liberal arts colleges, cope with life on these campuses and struggle to construct their sense of self. We have referred to the construction of “multiple” conceptions of blackness in our title because we think that this concept captures the core concern of most of the students in our study. These black students continue to grapple with the question of what it means to be black. As Carter explains it, authenticity for African American adolescents involves the use of black cultural capital to signal that one is a “real” black person (Carter, 2005). This may involve particular speech patterns, styles of dress, music preferences, and specific rituals to establish racial or ethnic boundaries between one's group and others in order to “acquire status, monopolize resources, or ward off threat” (Carter, 2005: 56). In essence, for some students to be authentically black, they must always “keep it real” by signaling their group identity. For others, blackness means more than just race.

This study is sociologically significant in several ways. First, it augments the limited scholarship on racial identity development among black students at liberal arts colleges. Second, it examines the complexity of black identity among African American college students by exploring the interconnections between gender

* Assistant Professor of Ethnic Studies, Albion College, Michigan

** Professor of Sociology, Albion College, Michigan.

and race in the lives of these students. Third, this study differs from earlier research because it uses qualitative and ethnographic methodology to generate detailed insight into the lives of undergraduate students at a selective liberal arts college. The research was also longitudinal and followed students over a three year period from 2003-2006 which allowed for a deeper and more critical analysis of their everyday experiences as they transition from one year to the next at Midwest College. Finally, this study provides critical insights to educators and policy makers who wish to be more effective in recruiting and retaining black students in higher education by demonstrating the heterogeneous ways in which black students contest their identity at white liberal arts institutions.

The paper is organized as follows: Section one summarizes our **Theoretical Orientation** which focuses on three interrelated concepts: racial identity performance, fictive kinship/authenticity, and the intersectionality of race and gender. Section two explains the **Research Design**, followed by an analysis of the empirical data collected through participant observation and interviews of African American students. Finally, section three offers a **Summary** of the paper and discusses its **Implications** for better understanding the complexity of African American students' racial identity development and their adaptation to predominantly white liberal arts colleges.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

This paper examines the current generation of African American college students who are in the process of racial identity construction in their everyday college experience. We have drawn primarily upon three theoretical constructs in our analysis to illustrate the implications of racial identity development among black students at predominantly white colleges: first, the notion that racial identity is part of the construction of the self that emerges in interaction with others and is not fixed, natural or intractable (Goffman, 1959; Perry, 2002; Willie, 2003, Twine 1997; Carter 2005) second, the arguments that *fictive kinship* among African Americans is a source of resistance to oppression, but also an arbiter of *authenticity* (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Fordham 1996) and third, the contention that racial identity always *intersects* in complex and profound ways with an individual's gender and social class (Collins, 1990; 2005).

We began with the assumption, as noted above, that racial and ethnic identities are socially constructed, and that they will always be "dynamic and context-specific" (Brander et al., 2001). For this paper, we found the empirical studies by Carter, 2005; Willie, 2003; Twine, 1997; and Steele, 1992; 1997 most useful in analyzing the multiple conceptions of blackness among African American students. These scholars all agree that even in the face of phenotypical constraints, one's racial identity is not rigid or natural but responsive to different factors in one's environment. They also contend that young African Americans find different ways to acculturate to the larger environment by balancing the tension around their cultural identities with their individual achievement and personal fulfillment.

For example, Carter (2005) examined the cultural styles and adaptations of African American and Latino youngsters in Yonkers, New York during the late 1990's and described how those choices shaped their educational and career aspirations. What she discovered was that these African American and Latino youngsters adopted different types of racial and ethnic ideologies in order to navigate the tensions between their cultural identities and their individual achievement and fulfillment. She found that the "cultural straddlers" "negotiated schooling in a way that enables them not only to hold on to their native cultural styles but also to embrace dominant cultural codes and resources" (Carter 2005:27), and were the most socially and academically successful among the group.

How students speak and what they say to their parents, for example, often has little resonance to what they say to their peers or to their professors. This understanding of the malleability of racial identity is reflected in other recent work as well. Twine (1997), for example, analyzed "brown-skinned white girls" who, as biracial youngsters with one African American parent, had grown up in predominantly white suburbs and had functioned as "white" girls before arriving at Berkeley in 1990. This experience was wrenching for many of those young women as they were forced by their peers to choose group affiliations or they suffered from stereotyping by counselors and teachers. These African-descent women who claimed a white identity

“saw themselves as culturally and politically neutral and not targeted as members of a racial group until they were placed in an environment with a significant number of politicized people of color” (1997:223). These “brown-skinned white girls” responded to group pressures at Berkeley in myriad and often unpredictable ways. For our study, we were particularly interested in whether having exposure to significant numbers of whites and to white identity as adolescents actually helped African American students adjust to attending a predominantly white liberal arts institution such as Midwest College more easily than students who had been raised in a predominantly black environment.

Finally, since we were interested in African American racial identity development in a very specific environment, a predominantly white liberal arts college, it was also necessary for us to think about black students *performing* race in a potentially hostile environment where negative stereotypes of blacks were already well established. We found Willie (2003) and Steele’s work (1992; 1997) to be the most relevant to our study since they both focused on the experiences of black students and their understanding of racial identity at a predominantly white college.

Willie (2003) discovered in her research on black university graduates from the late 1960s to the late 1980s that those individuals had understood the relevance of race and its representation in politics, on television, and in textbooks to be critical for them in achieving a positive sense of self and a more accurate understanding of the world. They also described ways, however, in which they consciously acted white in certain settings and acted black in others. Although they saw themselves as unquestionably black, that did not mean they understood blackness as something that was obvious.

Steele’s theory of *stereotype threat* (1992, 1997) was especially helpful in analyzing students’ attitudes toward academic achievement; and the “dis-identification” of some, particularly African American males, from academic competition as a measure of self-esteem (Massey and Fisher, 2005). In many cases, we believe, this process of negotiating stereotypes militates against a student’s ability to form an emotional attachment to the institution itself – to become a “Midwest College student” rather than merely a “student who attends Midwest College.”

In a related framework, anthropologists Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986; Fordham, 1988, 1993, 1996) developed the concept of *fictive kinship* among African Americans to explain the turmoil that young blacks face as they navigate educational opportunities (See Horvat 2006 for an informative critique of this argument). Their contention was that, given America’s racist history and the persistent threat of humiliation from whites, young African Americans are told by their parents and others that it is important for them to maintain a sense of solidarity with their own people and not sell their souls for materialistic success. It is not only arrogant, from this perspective, but downright dangerous for young blacks to put their personal desires for achievement above those of the group. But is this idea relevant to contemporary black college students?

Our goal in this study was to understand how African American students at Midwest College negotiate these competing claims in their day-to-day lives, and how their choices in turn shape their racial selves. Based upon anecdotal evidence from previous conversations with black students at Midwest, we knew that their construction of black identity was often difficult and sometimes painful due to competing pressures from family, environment, gender and social class. Consequently, this work on fictive kinship was crucial to our study for understanding how many African Americans construct black identity as a source of resistance to oppression and as an expression of *authenticity*. We were also particularly interested in whether these students’ views changed the longer they remained at Midwest College.

Some scholars argue that an intersectional position should always be adopted when studying racial identity development among African Americans. For Collins (1990, 1994, 2005), gender is, in fact, another marker of difference that does not exist independently of race, ethnicity, or class, but is enmeshed in each of those. Yet a literature

search on the gender experiences of African American college and university students turns up very little. It is clear that race continues to be the point of reference for understanding black identity on campus. While we continue to wrestle with moving beyond a race analysis of the black community, even less is known about

gender issues at the college level. Some studies [Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2007; Edwards and Kan, 2005] have addressed the college enrollment gap between black male and female students and the fact that black women continue to outpace black men in college completion; yet even less research (Bonner, 2001; Allen, et al., 1989; Brown-Collins, 2002) has emerged that examines gender inequity, discrimination and lack of support for black women at the professional level.

In one study, Allen, Epps and Haniff (1989:178), focused solely on black female students at HBCU's. They found that black females "felt more anxiety in competition than their black male counterparts and that these women felt less competent and tended to be less assertive compared to their male peers." For them, issues of racism and sexism were confounded. For example, many black women were hesitant to be labeled "a feminist" because to be one meant that one had to fight for gender equity and set aside the struggle against racism, thus selling out their community and their men.

Brown-Collins (2002), who is a social psychologist and Director for Black Campus Ministry in Inter-Varsity's New England Region, offered some insights into the psychological trauma that many black college women experience at predominantly white campuses. She claimed that many black women students are Christian and single, and they struggle with anxiety over feelings of isolation, absence of fathers, a lack of community, and will remain unmarried long-term. Perhaps most alarmingly, Brown-Collins found that many of these women set lower academic goals for themselves than did Black men and they expressed less satisfaction with their education. Those who asserted themselves and spoke their minds also risked isolation.

However, as mentioned earlier there are empirical limitations with these studies because they generally emphasize male or female identity, instead of representing all students as both gendered and raced. To fill the gap, our study is different in that we focused on black male and female perspectives simultaneously, and we interviewed and observed students in different settings and over an extended period of time to see how their perspectives changed.

RESEARCH DESIGN

As Fordham (1996) has argued, accurate *representation* of people's lived experiences is difficult to achieve under the best of circumstances, and the scholarly literature has not been sympathetic in its representations of African Americans. The danger is always that in describing various segments of black students' lives at particular points in time, researchers wind up creating "one more construction of the traditional Other" (1996:17) that contributes to existing stereotypes. That was on our minds from the beginning of this project. Building trust and openness with the students whom we were researching was also particularly important to our data collection, in contrast to most other extant studies of black college students. We chose a qualitative approach, in particular, because we wanted to get as close to the reality of students' lives as possible, and we wanted to give these students opportunities to describe in detail their experiences and perspectives in their own terms.

In developing our research design, we were also influenced by feminist methodology (See Reinharz, 1992). From the beginning of this project, we were interested in empowering these students by giving them voice to tell their story, and in fostering change on campus by enabling others to learn from their experiences. We also sought to establish more open, long term trusting relationships with our respondents since half of the students who participated in this project already knew us informally through athletic events, student organizational meetings, campus committees, or the classroom.

For this study, we identified a private, predominantly white liberal arts college that we have labeled *Midwest College*. At this institution, there are approximately 1,900 undergraduate students (55% women, 45% men), 3% of whom are African American. We chose this location because at this particular college: 1) we had access to a diverse black student population that came from different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds; and 2) students expressed a willingness to participate in this project in order to educate administrators and faculty about the nature of black student life on campus.

The research was divided into two phases. During the initial phase over the 2003-04 academic year, we conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with twenty African American students (some students had multiple interviews), ranging from first-year students to seniors but heavily weighted to juniors and seniors. In the second phase of the study during the 2004-05 and 2005-06 academic years, we focused solely on twenty- one, first-year African American students and followed their progress through their sophomore year so that we could observe how they changed over time.

At all interviews, both researchers were present. This provided more comfort for the respondents because they knew at least one of the researchers, and so interviews were conducted more like conversations than structured interviews. Also, having two researchers provided more opportunities to multi-task. While one researcher wrote fieldnotes, the other led the interview. This technique became quite useful with the focus groups because there were times that two or three students were speaking at once, and we were able to supplement the audiotape recordings with descriptions of body language and context.

We did find at times, particularly in the focus groups, that students were sensitive to our gender. In one instance, black male students made more eye contact with and directed their answers to the male researcher. The black women students, on the other hand, seemed to be comfortable responding to both researchers. While most male and female students preferred to discuss gender issues separately from one another, they were willing to discuss their struggles and concerns with the researchers.

Researcher's Role

Given the long history of neglect and mistreatment of the black community from scholars in this country, African Americans have valid reasons for distrusting academic research. As a white male and a Latina researcher, we knew there might be some hesitation from black students to participate in this study. However, as noted above, we had already established a credible and trusting relationship with some members of the black student body before the study began. Students who did not know us personally heard through word of mouth about the study from other black students and became interested in the project. Overall, students understood that our efforts in this project were genuine and that we had their best interests in mind.

In addition to being researchers, we were connected to some of our respondents as teachers and administrators (one of us had been Director of Intercultural Affairs prior to joining the faculty), so we knew more about them in some cases than what they shared in interviews from other conversations that we had had with them or from comments that they made about one another. We also knew some of them because they had taken classes with us, or were members of student organizations that we advised, or had served on committees with us for various reasons. These connections allowed us to question or confirm data from other sources through participant observation in the students' lives, but this raised ethical questions as well. We resolved these issues with our campus Institutional Review Board by agreeing to regularly inform our respondents that we were conducting research on African American student identity development; and by limiting these observations to public settings like the cafeteria, student meetings, athletic events, or programs such as Black History Month events.

Though we were concerned about whether African American students would trust us enough to be honest and open about their identity struggles, given that we were white and Latina (See Anderson, 1993; Dunier, 2004; Perry, 2002), we actually found that these students were generally less preoccupied with how they negotiated their everyday existence with white faculty and students than with how they related to their black peers. They could hardly have been more generous with us in describing their experiences, though many admitted that sharing their stories was at times painful and frustrating, if also *therapeutic* (their characterization).

Data Collection

Before the data collection began, we received approval from the College's Institutional Review Board. All students who had checked African American or black on their admissions application were contacted through the Office of Intercultural Affairs at Midwest College in order to maximize the sample size. Letters were sent to each of these students, explaining the project and inviting them to participate. If they agreed, we followed up with a confirmation letter and explained that their identity would remain confidential at all times during and after the project. We were cognizant of the fact that we were working with a small sample of Midwest College students to begin with, so we tried as many avenues as possible to identify black students who might want to participate in order to represent the internal diversity of the group. We relied principally upon mailings, e-mails, and visits to student organizations such as the Black Student Alliance to publicize the project. Using snowball sampling proved to be most effective in identifying potential participants. We began with students that we already knew and asked them to encourage other students who were new to the campus or were unfamiliar with the Office of Intercultural Affairs to participate in the study. Approximately half of the participants that we eventually interviewed were students that we had already known. A small number of students chose not to participate, and most of those individuals had no previous contact with the Office of Intercultural Affairs, no involvement with a black student organization, or no previous contact with the researchers. Because the respondents were chosen through non-probability sampling techniques, findings from this study cannot be generalized to all liberal arts colleges in the United States. However, the richness of the data and the exploratory nature of the study should prove useful to future larger and perhaps comparative studies of African American college students.

Out of the seventy-seven students who were contacted, twenty respondents were interviewed during the initial phase of the study and twenty-one respondents agreed to participate during the second phase. Each student was given a consent form to sign, with the understanding that their names would be kept confidential. All interviews were tape recorded, though we asked for their permission to record at every session, even when we were conducting a second or third interview with a student. We continuously stressed our commitment to both confidentiality and anonymity for participants, given the reality of life on small campuses and how easily confidential information can become public knowledge. Before the interviews began, we stressed that at any time during the process they could withdraw without any negative consequence. After the project began, there were several students who came to us and asked if they could be involved and we invited them to be part of the group interviews. As researchers, we understood that these students had time constraints and that we needed to be careful not to overextend them. At the same time, we were cognizant of the fact that we were working with a small sample of Midwest College students to begin with, so we included as many black students as possible who wished to participate in order to represent the internal diversity of the group.

During the initial phase of the research, the interviews concentrated on issues that had arisen in informal conversations we had had earlier with many African American students, including their experiences inside and outside of the classroom, on campus and at home, their dating experiences, reasons why they chose to attend Midwest College in the first place, and what they hoped to do when they graduated. Most of the focus in these sessions was on their racial identity and how they negotiated situations with other white students and the rest of campus, including faculty and administrators. These themes provided a loose structure to the interaction, but we always encouraged interviewees to shift topics or to elaborate if they felt it was important. Though our initial focus was on the experiences of black students attending predominantly white colleges, we discovered from the beginning that black students had as much to say, both positively and negatively, about their relationships with other black students as they did about attending a predominantly white college (See Smith and Moore, 2000). We also realized early in the study that black students had a lot to say about gender and dating relationships.

During phase two of the study, students were interviewed in both their first and second semesters. This cohort was significantly different in some ways from the earlier group we had interviewed since they were more diverse in background. Some had grown up in predominantly black communities; others had grown up in mostly white communities and had attended predominantly white high schools. Nearly half had been recruited from Connecticut, Ohio, and Illinois, whereas most of the earlier group had grown up in

Michigan. Moreover, this second group of African American students had much more diverse academic and social interests than the first group that we interviewed, many of whom had been recruited at least in part because they were athletes. We also organized four focus groups during this phase of the research to observe group dynamics and to examine individual attitudes and behavior in greater detail. As Macnaghten and Myers (2004: 65) noted, “a group can provide prompts to talk, correcting or responding to others, and a plausible audience for that talk that is not just the researcher. So focus groups work best for topics people could talk about to each other in their everyday lives.”

While most of the students involved in these focus groups were part of the second cohort, we invited upper class students as well because of their influence on younger students. We also targeted students who normally spent time together, such as members of the Black Student Alliance student organization, in order to create a comfortable and safe environment in which to discuss controversial topics. Three of the focus groups included only male students, divided by shared interests -- e.g., athletics or other extracurricular involvements. One larger and more eclectic group included only women students. We considered organizing a mixed-gender focus group, but we encountered resistance from male students who feared that such discussions would inevitably lead to male bashing.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

This section of the paper summarizes the data from our interviews, observations, and focus groups in terms of three major themes that emerged over the course of the project: Racial Identity/Performance, Fictive Kinship/Authenticity, and the Intersectionality of Race and Gender. Pseudonyms are used in place of real names to protect the identities and confidentiality of the respondents.

We began our data analysis after transcribing audio-taped conversations from both individual and group interviews. Broad themes were developed based upon the conversations that we had with third and fourth year African American students about how they understood their everyday experiences at Midwest College. These included their reasons for attending a predominantly white college, their incorporation in and adaptation to the College, and their ambitions after graduation. During phase two of the study, when we were focused on a group of first-year students, there was more attention in the interviews on adolescent identity and experiences, the transition from high school to college, and their adaptation to college. After transcribing all of the interviews, we followed the same process of coding and analysis. Because this second group was more diverse in terms of the students' geographic origin and their parents' socio-economic and educational backgrounds, racial identity and marginalization were not as salient in explaining the students' everyday experiences. This group, unlike the first one, more readily questioned stereotyped assumptions from both whites and blacks that African Americans were socially, culturally, and economically homogeneous, and that intra-racial relations are close and without conflict (Smith and Moore, 2000). Surprisingly, gender construction among black college students became a more salient theme as we continued the project.

Racial Identity/Performance

In order to begin to understand how African American students construct their racial and ethnic identities at a predominantly white liberal arts college, we began our interviews by asking students why they had chosen to attend that type of institution in the first place. Over half of the students mentioned generous financial aid packages and/or opportunities to play sports at a smaller school as important reasons why they chose to attend Midwest College. A majority of them also indicated that their parents had played a major role in their college selection process, and this often included an ideological rationale. Students said that their parents wanted them to go to a white college so that they “would be better prepared for life.” Malina noted: “you can't get nowhere like that, hanging around only blacks.” Other students indicated that they would have preferred to attend a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), but their parents had insisted that they accept scholarships from Midwest College for a variety of reasons, from keeping them closer to home to preparing them to be successful in a mixed race society. Most of the students that we interviewed, however,

mentioned that when they actually arrived on campus it looked a lot different, in terms of student diversity, than the brochures they had received from recruiters who had visited their high schools.

These comments indicate that the negotiation of black identity for these students had started much earlier in conversations with their parents and friends over how they should live their lives and how they might achieve meaningful success as adults. Overall, we found that regardless of gender, family upbringing, or home and school environment, black students at Midwest College felt frustration at times that made living on a predominantly white campus seem more like boot camp for life than the enriching experience they had been promised. Still most persevered, trusting that the eventual rewards would be worth it.

We also investigated, as Willie (2003) had done earlier with black university graduates, whether the way in which African American students thought about their *racial* identity had been altered by their experiences at a predominantly white college the longer they were there. Our longitudinal focus allowed us to follow up with students in their second year to see if their attitudes about choosing Midwest College had changed. While nearly all of the students that we studied referred to a period of "culture shock" when they first arrived on campus, their experiences varied greatly and for different reasons. Students who had had some exposure to whites as children, however, either as schoolmates or as fellow team members, had a much easier time adapting to campus than those who had not had such experiences. Even half of the students who reported having subsequently attended predominantly black high schools said that they "had established a comfort level with whites" as children and thus had a relatively easy time adjusting to campus. Mick mentioned that he did have some awkward moments during his first semester at Midwest, but he blamed this on "individual ignorance rather than white people being evil or prejudiced." Those African American students who had had significant exposure to whites prior to college, who had lived in predominantly white neighborhoods, or who had graduated from affluent secondary schools, were also generally more involved in "non-traditional" (for blacks) student organizations or extracurricular activities such as student government, the Honors Club, sports like swimming or soccer, or debate; and they had less stressful experiences, socially and academically, in adapting to the College. Students with such backgrounds were more likely to study abroad, become involved in undergraduate research programs, and join student organizations led by majority whites or a white sorority rather than to socialize primarily at predominantly black events or in black organizations.

There were exceptions. Lonnie said that he had not realized he was "a minority" until he came to Midwest College. He said that he had had white friends in high school, and that even his grandmother was white, but that white students on campus "seemed to be scared of me, or they just ignored me." Though this complicated his initial adaptation to college and had caused him to become more cautious in his relations with whites, he concluded that "you still have to learn how whites think to make it." This attitude reflects Carter's concept of the "cultural straddler" (2005), as outlined above, where individuals have each foot in a different world, though Lonnie's experience indicates how difficult it can be for students to simultaneously embrace racial/ethnic authenticity and the dominant cultural codes as they negotiate their campuses.

In one of the focus groups that we conducted with twelve African American women students, the conversation revolved around feelings of *isolation*, and their sense that they were *living in a bubble*. They felt that they had to *endure* the situation by focusing on future career opportunities rather than on their current happiness. The following comments are representative of that conversation:

We were extremely diverse at my high school, so I was never taught to see color. But it's been interesting here; it was a reality check. It was hard to take at first, just because I've never been around so many people that have not been around a diverse group of people. I never felt like rejected by my society until I came here. And that, that was horrible. That felt really bad, feeling like people were afraid of me before they knew me. That was bad. Like my roommate, she was afraid of me. She didn't know but she feared me. She was always on eggshells.

When they look at me, they know she's different. Something is different about her. They know like I am not white. They know something is different. So, I feel like they just label me like just black.

This pattern was also reflected in Sarah Willie's interviews with black university alums from a generation ago:

Alumni focused on the trade-offs made to pursue a degree with unequivocal prestige to those made with the hope of enjoying four years undistracted by explicit racism (2003:1).

The consensus among our respondents seemed to be, even among those students who expressed a greater comfort level interacting with large numbers of whites, that there were periods when they felt isolated and/or marginal on campus and that there was little that they could do about this but endure. John commented: "that's why we all eat together in the cafeteria. It's the closest thing to family that we can find here."

Another form of marginalization that many of these students experienced involved stereotype threat. As Massey and Fischer (2005) recently demonstrated, based upon earlier work by Claude Steele and his colleagues (1992, 1997), African American students sometimes under-perform academically at predominantly white institutions "because of unconscious fears of living up to negative group stereotypes" that are held by others. Black males in particular may go so far as to *dis-identify* with the institution and with academic competition altogether as a way of dealing with this threat to their self-esteem (Massey and Fisher, 2005:45).

We explored this issue in depth in our interviews. Nearly all the African American students that we interviewed mentioned instances where they had been singled out in class to discuss "black people." They described an awful sense of embarrassment when professors made comments about race and everyone turned to look at them for their reaction. Another common experience for them was being in situations where professors asked a class to divide into groups and other students tried to avoid working with them. They felt that these other students were questioning their ability and were worried about getting lower lab/project grades if they partnered with black students.

The women's focus group (mentioned above) complained that they were constantly dealing with stereotypes and the need to prove themselves to others. Kendra explained: "most students think that you are a smart black girl, not just a smart girl." Sometimes, even when the instructor was a person of color, the same classroom dynamics were evident.

In this class, there were three of us total. And the teacher was African American and he was heavily into the African culture and stuff and would ask us questions and everybody would just look to us, what are you going to say? He would make a joke, "is it okay to laugh?" OH, MAN. That was a problem. I don't like that. I don't like that at all.

Fay complained:

In Bio class it was difficult to reach out because it seemed a lot of students knew each other before they got to class. I didn't have a group of people or a study partner that I could study with. This semester, I have been trying to find someone but it's really hard. There is this one girl that I asked to study to prepare for the next test. And so it was okay with her, but not her group. So I just gave up on that. I am not sure, but the impression that I got from my other classes is that they don't want to work with me until they know me and I can help them with something as well. I am not sure if they think they are going to need to spend extra time with me or whatever...you know what I am saying. That they need to lend that extra hand and they don't want to. Because in my other classes we had group projects, I was always the last person to get picked for the group. But I got the impression that they didn't know if I was paying attention to class. I preferred classes where the teacher selected the groups.

There was also the issue of affirmative action in college admissions. Although Midwest College is a private institution and thus has more flexibility in its admissions process than do state colleges and universities, the College has in

fact never had an affirmative action policy, though it claims to have a commitment to building a diverse student body and faculty. The College had accepted many white students in recent years who claimed that

they were attending Midwest "because they had been rejected at another university due to its affirmative action process." A number of those students

remained bitter about their admissions experience, and that had poisoned race relations to some degree on campus. In addition, most students, we found, had little if any real knowledge about the history or purpose of affirmative action policies in the United States, and were confused by the stories of others who claimed to have been victimized.

This following experience, reported by Molly, was typical.

I had a conversation with a girl in class about affirmative action, and she asked me if the reason why I was here was because of affirmative action? That I got into this college because I am black. And that set something off and I was angry. I was really angry. I felt like in that class, a sociology class, that I had to defend myself extremely, like all the way through. Everyone was like, "what is she going to say, what is she going to do?"

It seems likely that the recent passage of Proposition 2 in Michigan dismantling affirmative action policies in university admissions, and the widespread publicity over the efforts by universities to adjust their admission practices, will alleviate this pressure on black students in the future. Though to what degree this backlash against affirmative action in the public sphere will also complicate the ability of colleges like Midwest to attract students of color remains to be seen.

Overall, then, the students in this study felt that they were being evaluated differently from other non-black students at Midwest College. Regardless of their adolescent experiences -- i.e., home environment, community, school, or previous contact with whites -- prior to coming to Midwest College, black students recognized the significance of race in their identity constructions as well as the challenges they might face at a white liberal arts college, regardless of the academic benefits. Still, most of the students that we interviewed were surprised at how "fiercely" their identities

were contested sometimes by white students over issues of race. While a majority of our respondents said that their first and second years were difficult, these students eventually found ways to cope as they transitioned into their junior and senior years.

Fictive Kinship/Authenticity

We also found that for black students, trying to navigate their racial identity with other African Americans was challenging too. As we noted above, black students worry about being true to their roots or about "keepin' it real" (Carter, 2005) as they try to adapt to predominantly white campuses. Nearly half of our respondents reported in our interviews that they have been called "sell outs" by friends from home for attending a white college, or that they have been questioned about "why we think we are better than them" by family and neighbors that they had grown up around. Those concerns are evident in the following comments.

I chose to come here to school because I didn't want to be around so many black people anymore; I wanted to move out into the world. But white students have a lot of stereotypes about blacks, and that makes it difficult to relate to them. When they want to go out, for example, they never invite me. They talk to you in class, but they ignore you outside of class. I really only feel completely comfortable here when I'm in my room. When people heard that I was coming here to college, they said, "you think you smart here, but you not going to be so smart when you get there with those white people." That was my neighbors, not my family, who supported my decision.

For many of the black students in our study, the crux of the matter was this: how do they navigate among the forces that compete for their attention and loyalty -- black friends and white friends, family and professors, sports teams and identity-based organizations -- while remaining authentic to themselves, and still prepare to succeed in their future? This pressure to choose whether to be "pro-black," as Willie describes it, or to risk being perceived as "not black enough" (Willie, 2003:50) takes many forms at Midwest College. It is especially evident with respect to

membership in the black student organization, where one sits in the cafeteria, and one's choice of close friends. The black student organization, under one label or another, has represented black student interests on campus since the 1970s, and currently manages the house where African American students meet and socialize. All black students who enter Midwest College are encouraged to join the organization, and in most years there are a number of non-black members as well. Many black students view the House as a "safe place" where they can truly relax and be themselves, and vent when they need to. Also, since most African American students do not join fraternities or sororities on campus, the House offers a comfortable venue for socializing removed from the "white gaze." But while some students claimed that being in the black student organization provided a sense of "home" away from home and kept them grounded with other black people, other African American students felt differently. Not all African American students struggle with this question of whether to join the black student organization in the same way or come to the same conclusion. The following comments illustrate the wide diversity among our respondents. Misha commented:

Although initially I was a member of black student organization, I don't know, they kinda scare me sometimes. There's just a difference in the way things are planned. But I am not sure what their goals are. It's not how they said things so much, but they felt like a separated entity from the college. It didn't seem like they wanted to be integrated or that they experienced everything this place has to offer. I thought they would include other clubs to get their message out.

Robert described an even more complicated experience.

My high school was very diverse and segregated, and I realized my junior year that I wanted to become a regular person rather than just a black person. I dated some white girls, and this set black girls off. ... When I came to college, I got very involved in BSA, Umbrella, and President's Advisory Committee on Multicultural Affairs, but my grades suffered, and I never got much support from other black students. Though I got elected as President of black student organization my sophomore year, they voted me out the second semester because I wasn't black enough.

But there were stories like Michael's also.

I have felt discriminated at the College. My academic advisor always treated me like a dumb jock. Told me "that's an easy class; you should take it." It was horrible being around white kids my freshman year who had never interacted with blacks. They would look afraid, and lock their doors and stuff. One of the RA's called me a "nigger" at a bar when he was drunk.

Most of the students that we interviewed also gravitated to the back of the cafeteria during mealtime to sit at one of the "black tables" and catch up. They saw this area as comfortable space where they could speak the way that they wanted, and didn't have to play any roles. Several commented that "it's like my family away from home." Some students ate with black friends most of the time, but occasionally sat with white friends or teammates as well, particularly as they became more comfortable at the college. But here, again, there were dissenters. Angie commented:

Before coming here, I visited the cafeteria. The Baldwin situation was kinda weird. The concentration on who eats where is weird. It divides racially, by gender and some sororities, some of the sports teams all eat at different places. I ate a couple of times with the black students, but I really don't want to be stuck with the same kind of people.

Philip stated:

I never eat at the black tables. I went to an integrated high school and middle school, and I had lots of white friends in both. Most of my friends here are white. I haven't always had such great experiences with African Americans. I have been accused of "trying to be white" and of "not being ghetto enough."

I listen to a wide variety of music too and people don't get that.

Both of these students attended high schools where there was considerable racial and ethnic diversity but where white students were in the majority, and they were struggling with a new set of cultural rules on a campus that was predominantly white. The first comment, of course, reflects the familiar "why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" (Tatum, 1997), but this time with a twist. This student's desire to be seen as a unique individual who chooses her own friends and group affiliations is challenged by a racial etiquette over which she has little control. The second student, while being clear that he saw himself as a proud black male, was unable to bond with the local black fictive kin and seemed destined to be marginalized from the black mainstream on campus. For a significant minority, this conflict over where they belonged in the cafeteria endured and often signaled a larger question of whether they should stay at the College or transfer to another institution.

A few of the students that we interviewed claimed that race didn't matter much to them at all, or that if it did the pressure on them to act certain ways came from other black people rather than from whites. These comments suggested the "brown-skinned white girls" phenomenon that Twine (1997) described at Berkeley where biracial girls who had grown up in predominantly white suburbs were forced to confront racial identity questions for the first time when they arrived at Berkeley and were challenged by other black students to make a choice. These students did not feel any need to construct an oppositional identity to mainstream society in order to be successful at the college. Molly noted:

I did have a multicultural experience while growing up and it did make it easier to adjust to the College. My best friend in 5th and 6th grade was white. I never had a talk with my parents about race and racism. I never experienced racism from other races, but I did from my own. When I interacted with people in high school, race was never an issue. I can't remember a time before college when I felt that someone was treating me different because of my race or gender. But sometimes I get uncomfortable, particularly in sociology on race and ethnicity. Do I want to be the first one to answer this question? I haven't felt too uncomfortable though. Besides me, there is only one more black person in class. What can I say?

To summarize, while our study did not focus on socio-economic class and its impact on racial identity development among black students, we did find that students who had grown up with racial and economic diversity in their communities and schools did not feel the need to always be surrounded with black students at Midwest College (Smith and Moore, 2000). It may also simply be that the egalitarian ethos that is embodied in the notion of black fictive kinship has been weakened over the last thirty years by greater economic opportunities and social mobility for a substantial segment of the black population (Wilson, 1990, 1997; Pattillo-McCoy, 2000). and that the current crop of black college students is destined to renegotiate multiple conceptions of what "authentically black" will mean for this generation.

Intersectionality of Race and Gender

While gender was not the primary focus of our study, we found that gender conflict or misunderstanding was a critical issue in most of our interviews. Thus, as Patricia Hills Collins (1990, 1994, 2005) has insisted in her construction of black feminist theory, it is necessary to adopt an *intersectional* theoretical position when examining identity development among African Americans. Gender is, in fact, another marker of difference that does not act independently of race, ethnicity or class. Black women and men must be seen as multifaceted people who are affected not merely by either their race or their gender, but by both their race and their gender. However, as mentioned above, there were no studies that incorporated gender as a significant marker when examining racial identity development among black students at white liberal arts institutions.

The dominant gender-related themes in our interviews were, first, that African American women students were typically far more serious about their academic work than were males. Malina commented that "black women come here to go to school. Black men come here to play ball and go to school." Jennica added that "black guys are idolized by white students for the way they dress, their music, and athletics. But no white student is going to ask them 'what do you think about the war?'" A second theme was that black

male students were more socially accepted by white students, and they were able to date outside of their race in a way that was unavailable to black women. Both black males and females agreed that this was true, but they differed as to its significance. Over half of the males indicated that cross-dating was just about sex, and they had no intention of marrying white women. Ben explained, for example, that his father had told him it was “okay to play in the snow. Just don’t bring it in the house.” Some women said that they leave campus to socialize because they can’t relax and have fun in mixed environments. We heard comments like: “I wouldn’t feel safe drinking with whites.” Indeed, Mick, an outstanding athlete, noted that in his experience “all white males are just two drinks away from asking you how big your dick is.”

In our study, black women students emphasized their struggles with social isolation (Brown-Collins, 2002) on campus, and described various strategies they had adopted to cope with loneliness. Malina and Jennica reported the following:

Caucasian men don’t talk to me, except the ones back home. African American men talk to me cause I am a familiar face. I have a black girl face so they talk to me. I think it’s a problem too because I am not single so I don’t reach out to the males on campus. African American males irritate me because they don’t get involved in anything. Like with the things that we’re doing, BSA (Black Student Organization), they won’t help with it. Regardless, that’s your racial group, you can’t help that. You can help it or ignore. Many choose to just ignore it, just by not helping out in the activities. Like they will say that they’re in BSA, but they’ll never come to a meeting or they’ve never helped with anything.

I don’t want to think that they (black males) are like that just to blend in and not be singled out as African American. I don’t know why they choose not to get involved. I don’t think they care. Well...that’s what it looks like. They’ll come to the events some times, but they won’t help. It could be laziness. I’m very curious. But I see them at parties and see them joining fraternities. In high school, they tried to get romantic with you. But that was just a sex thing.

Most black women students who were in steady relationships were dating guys from home or guys who attended other colleges and universities. Partly this reflected the lack of interest from men on campus; but even more importantly, many declared, was the fact that romantic relationships between African Americans on such a small campus meant that “there was always someone in your business.” Many students simply left campus on weekends to conduct their social lives somewhere else.

Another prominent strategy that black women students at Midwest College have used in recent years to cope with their sense of isolation has been the establishment on campus of a chapter of one of the historically black national sororities (See Ross, 2001). Black sororities were founded originally to foster economic self-sufficiency among black women and to contribute to the improvement of the black community as a whole through various types of community service (Berkowitz and Padavic, 2003). On predominantly white campuses, black sororities are a way for some black women to find a place where they can feel welcome, where they can establish a comfortable identity and adapt to their new environment. Cole (2007:10) found that this black sorority at Midwest College provided its members with a sense of sisterhood and belonging, and gave them a way to navigate the College while staying connected to their cultural roots. Though many African American students “feel they have to assimilate in order to be part of the culture ... being part of a black sorority allowed its members to stay true to who they really are.” For other students, joining a black sorority gave them a foundation in an historically black community.

This doesn’t mean that black males on campus were problem free. In one of our male-only focus groups, participants acknowledged feeling isolated at times; they described incidents of racial profiling, both on and off campus, that they had suffered; and they asserted that they had experienced overt discrimination from their white peers. There seemed to be mutual feelings of kinship and solidarity around issues of race, and many felt the need to come out to black events and other social gatherings. However, they insisted that for males it was difficult to attend black student organization meetings because so many of them were involved in sports and their practice time often conflicted with the organization’s meeting times. They all agreed that the cafeteria was the central social outlet for most black students. Yet when asked how they viewed their solidarity with black women, many expressed discomfort. All felt that the black women on

campus took things too personally and had too many cliques and jealousies among them. We asked if they would consider meeting again with the black women to talk about gender issues since several of the women had expressed an interest in doing that, but they unanimously declined. They felt that such meetings would inevitably turn into male bashing.

When black male retention became a more serious issue for the institution, one of the residence hall directors, who was himself an African American male, reached out to black male students to see if he could help improve their performance. He created an informal Barbershop in his apartment that became a weekly social event on Thursday nights where black male students came to get their hair cut, and to catch up on the latest news of what was happening around campus. Some of these students subsequently became interested in organizing more structured dialogues around issues of black history, masculinity, and racial identity. Black women students noticed this change and were impressed, though some expressed jealousy and complained that they needed something similar to bring them together. Some hoped that men and women could start meeting informally to discuss common concerns, but this didn't happen because the majority of black male students did not feel comfortable sharing their discussions at Barbershop or the Monday night dialogues with women students.

Overall, black women students felt little support from their black male counterparts, and black male students suggested that it was the women's fault for being so sensitive and demanding. The women were interested in changing this situation, but the men were satisfied with the way things were. With this in mind, the Office of Intercultural Affairs attempted a variety of outreach services to improve the social and academic climate for black students on campus, such as partnering with faculty and staff in Women and Gender Studies, but there were insufficient funds and resources to address these concerns adequately and consistently.

SUMMARY

Given the limits of this case study, our results may only be applicable to the experiences of African American students at similar predominantly white liberal arts colleges. Nonetheless, we believe that this paper contributes to the literature on African American college students and on racial identity formation in four significant ways. First, methodologically, by using qualitative and ethnographic techniques to generate detailed insight into the lives of African American undergraduate students, over an extended period of time and in an array of settings, we achieved a greater level of access to and trust from those students. Consequently, we were able to triangulate our findings from interviews and participant observations to obtain a deeper and more reliable level of analysis.

Second, the black students in our study arrived on campus with hope and determination to be successful, but they frequently encountered suspicion and isolation from other students and began to feel vulnerable. Despite the many academic benefits that Midwest College offered them, a majority of these students were surprised at how fiercely their racial identities were contested by white students. Black students needed support and encouragement from the institution to become attached to the college and to reach their potential, yet they felt that they were often viewed as victims of some sort by college representatives who stereotyped them as being poorly prepared academically, lacking in intelligence or motivation, or as children of parents with low income and limited education. Our approach offered black students a chance to tell their own story, unfiltered by such stereotypes.

Third, theoretically central to this project was the recognition that black identity is not monolithic, as some still believe. While our study did not focus on social class and its impact on racial identity development among African American college students, we did find that black students who had grown up in racially and ethnically diverse communities and had attended similarly diverse schools were more comfortable interacting with white students at Midwest. They also, however, occasionally suffered from racial labeling. Many of our interviewees contended that the fundamental choice black students face on predominantly white campuses is either to "be real" as an authentic black person, or to "act white" and lose your true identity. But while race remains central to these students' identities, it is not always performed in the same way (Smith and Moore, 2000; Willie, 2003). People who identify as black or African American do not always agree on what

that means. Students in our study did not want to speak in their classrooms on behalf of "the black community," nor did they feel the need to hang out at the Black Student Alliance house if they didn't want to. We found that students were active agents who chose how they wanted to perform and negotiate racial meanings and expectations. How they chose to adapt to campus was not fixed or uniform, but multi-dimensional.

Finally, we also discovered that while students understood the pain and struggle that came with being black, there were other crucial areas of conflict and/or misunderstanding that also shaped their lives. Gender issues, for example, were down-played in the students' constructions of blackness (Betsch-Cole and Guy Sheftall, 2003; Bonner, 2001; Brown-Collins, 2002). In general, black women students felt little support from their black male counterparts, and black males indicated that this was the black women's fault for being so sensitive and demanding.

As one black woman student noted in her senior research paper:

Black identity is difficult to navigate at Midwest College, but being a black female is even worse. As a female student I have felt the need to work harder so that I could show that I am just as capable as my male counterparts: however, as a black student I also feel the need to work harder so that I show that I am just as capable as my white counterparts. Being a double minority is difficult, and because there is little attention on the issue, it often goes unnoticed (Cole, 2007).

Whether these students had grown up in cities, suburbs, or small towns; whether their parents were professionals or working class; or whether they had had an opportunity to attend private schools at some point in their lives, all had profound implications for their attitudes toward, adaptation and attachment to a predominantly white institution, and those different experiences often animated both the intra- and inter-group conflicts that we have outlined above.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Since many of the struggles that African American students face at Midwest College and other similar college environments have to do with the experience of marginalization and isolation that come with being part of an institutionally-defined or self-defined *minority* group, it is difficult to imagine any effective resolution to these problems that would not involve increasing the numbers of black students and faculty on campus. Yet while many colleges and universities have made gains in their recruitment of African American students and faculty, their responsibility does not end there. There are further implications for educational policy as it relates to the socialization and institutional attachment of black students. While our interviewees regularly mentioned close ties that they had developed with faculty members and expressed appreciation for faculty attention and guidance, for example, they emphasized their need for social outlets to balance stressful academic experiences. Despite gender conflict and other cultural or value differences that they might have, our respondents also increasingly looked to one another as a form of family away from home and this was crucial to their ability to survive on campus. One student commented:

I know I am supposed to be at Midwest College. There are too many great opportunities for me to leave. There are too many things that I see in my future that the school can help me in the long run. That's why I am not going to leave. I don't quit. I never quit anything. I would be giving up if I leave. It's almost like I let people push me out because I don't feel accepted. But you got to get used to it. That's how I feel. I am staying.

It is certainly true that all students must make adjustments to be successful in a college environment, and that many students wrestle from time to time with isolation. We believe, however, that the students in this study are not the only ones responsible for their maladjustment. These problems of attachment, from our perspective, run both ways. If institutions want to successfully create multicultural campuses, they must focus on meeting the needs of students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. They must work diligently to assure a successful academic and social transition for these students, and they must create a community that is welcoming, caring, and respectful of all people. Colleges should not assume homogeneity

in the values, attitudes, and experiences among African American students on their campuses (Smith and Moore, 2000).

While this study is bound to a particular time, space and population, we believe that our findings may well be applicable on other campuses and even to other racial and ethnic groups. The challenge for higher education going forward is to build a racially and ethnically diverse community and institutional structure that encourages its members to develop authentic selves without forcing them into an uncomfortable box. That will only be possible if we listen closely to people's stories and adapt.

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