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**Insurmountable Barrier or Navigable Obstacle?
Gender Differences in the Construal of Academia**

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by

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Abstract

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Psychologists have begun to examine factors that influence the achievement gap between African American and White students. This is a pressing issue especially for African American students (Steele, 1997; Shelton & Sellers, 2000; Cokley, 2001). To better understand the effects of race and gender on perceived discrimination and academic disengagement, 81 African American students at the University of Texas at Austin were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. Participants either listed ten instances of discrimination they have experienced, five academic successes and five academic failures, or made no lists. The impact of these manipulations on responses to the Disengagement Scale (Major & Schmader, 1998) and the Everyday Discrimination Scale (Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997) were assessed. Results suggest that gender plays an important role in African American students' academic function. More

specifically, African American males perceive more discrimination in academia than African American females, which is related to higher levels of disengagement. Researchers suggest this difference is related to African American males' socialization to see discrimination as an insurmountable barrier rather than a navigable obstacle.

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Gender Differences in the Construal of Academia

In 2006, African American females' enrollment in higher education outnumbered that of African American males by a ratio of two to one (NCES, 2008). Moreover, among those students enrolled, African American females outperform their male counterparts. What accounts for these disparities? Because little research has addressed sex differences in achievement among African American students, relatively little is known about the causes of these differences. One possible factor is differences in the ways African American males and African American females conceptualize academia. The primary purpose of the present study was to test the hypothesis that sex differences in the experience of racial discrimination leads African American men and women to develop different academic expectations and coping behaviors.

Gender Differences in the Experience of Racial Discrimination

Considerable evidence supports the notion that there are gender differences in perceptions of racial discrimination (Neville et al., 2004). By administering a variety of self-report measures to varying populations of African American youth, Seaton and colleagues (2008) examined whether perceptions of discrimination among African American youth varied based on ethnicity, gender, and age. Results showed that African American males perceived more discrimination than their female counterparts. The higher rates of *perception* of discrimination among African American males than females may be the result of gender differences in *experiences* with racial bias. Research suggests that African American males actually experience more discrimination than African American females. African American males are viewed by mainstream society as more prototypical of "African Americans" than are African American females (Sidanius &

Veniegas, 2000) and thus other racial group members may be more threatened by African American males than African American females. Feelings of threat may cause White individuals to discriminate against African American males more often than African American females.

The sheer amount of discrimination African American males face can convince them that their efforts to overcome discrimination will meet with failure. When they confront academic challenges, African American males may strive to preserve their self-concept by disengaging from -- instead of interacting with -- their academic environment. In contrast, because African American females have historically been targeted with less prejudice, they may experience lower perceptions of discrimination than their male counterparts and, as a consequence, may conclude that success is possible in academic settings. As a result, when African American females encounter academic challenges, they may remain engaged and go on to outperform African American males.

Given that there is empirical support for the idea that African American males perceive more discrimination than African American females (Inman & Baron, 1996; Seaton et al., 2008), the next step would be to investigate the impact of this gender difference in an academic setting. The fact that African American males experience more discrimination than African American females may lead African American males to have elevated perceptions of the likelihood that they will be discriminated against within academic settings. Additionally, their previous experiences of discrimination may convince African American males that efforts to overcome discrimination will meet with failure. On the other hand, insofar as African American females experience less discrimination than African American males, they may think differently about success in academic settings. Specifically, it seems possible that when faced with perceptions of

discrimination, African American males may view academic success as impossible, whereas African American females may view academic success as a possibility.

Reactions to the Academic Environment

Researchers have begun to examine the ways in which African American students reconcile the discrepancy between their academic effort and achievement. The extent to which students derive their self-esteem from academic success is related to their levels of academic motivation. A student who disengages from the environment will not derive self-esteem from academic success. Thus, the student will have lower motivation to succeed in academia (Osborne, 1997; Osborne & Rausch, 2001). These findings beg the question of why a student would choose to disengage from the academic setting if such behavior results in lowered academic success.

The literature suggests that an individual's engagement and achievement in school may be linked to one's beliefs about its value, purpose, and meaning. When individuals believe school is not relevant or useful, they are more likely to develop negative achievement beliefs. African American students are also more likely to devalue and discount academia when they endorse the belief that racial discrimination is pervasive (Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2001). Other research has demonstrated that males may disengage from school to preserve their self-esteem (Midgley et al., 1996). Major and Schmader (1998), for example, showed that when given negative feedback within situations in which stereotypes and expectations of poor performance are primed, African American students were more likely to disengage their self-esteem from feedback on intellectual performance than white students. Additional research has taken a preliminary look at the gender differences within African American students' disengagement. In their study, Cokley and Moore (2007) used the Devaluing Academic Success scale to measure

the extent to which individuals value academic success as a part of their self-concept. They found that when racial identity is not central to their self-concept, males and females do not differ in academic success. However, when racial identity was central, African American males disengaged more often than African American females.

The Present Study

As reviewed above, African American males show lower levels of academic success than African American females. It is possible that this gender difference is related to perceptions of racial discrimination. Specifically, African American males perceive greater levels of racial discrimination than African American females. As a consequence, African American males may strive to preserve their sense of self by disengaging from, instead of interacting with, their academic environment. African American females, in contrast, may conclude that success is possible in academic settings and, as a result, they may remain engaged in academic pursuits.

To test these hypotheses, I conducted a priming study in which African American participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. Participants were either: (a) primed with discrimination experiences by listing ten memories of their experiences with discrimination (*discrimination condition*), (b) primed with academic experiences by listing five of their academic successes and five of their academic failures (*academic condition*), or (c) did not receive a prime (*control condition*). After the priming task, all participants completed measures of disengagement and perceived discrimination.

Consistent with the idea that African American males perceive discrimination in academia, I expected African American males in the academia and discrimination prime conditions to score similarly on the everyday discrimination and devaluing academic success scales. African American males in the two primed conditions

were also expected to score higher on the everyday discrimination and devaluing academic success scales than those in the control condition. Consistent with the idea that African American females do not perceive academia as a discriminatory setting, women's scores on the perceived everyday discrimination scale were not expected to differ in the academic and control conditions. In line with the idea that African American females perceive discrimination less than African American males, I expected African American females to be less likely than African American males to perceive discrimination.

METHOD

Participants

African American students ($N = 83$; 51 female, 32 males) between the ages of 18 and 25 at the University of Texas at Austin (51 females and 31 males) participated in the study. One participant was excluded due to an incomplete measure. Participants were recruited from the Introductory Psychology subject pool, announcements made in classes, and various cultural clubs on campus. Psychology students received class credit for their participation. Non-psychology students were not compensated for their participation.

Procedure

Participants signed up for small group sessions of up to five participants. These small groups were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (described below). After filling out an informed consent form, participants were given an envelope marked with a participant number. Upon completion of the tasks specific to each condition, participants filled out the Everyday Discrimination Scale and the Disengagement Scale. Once all participants had sealed their assigned envelopes, the entire group was debriefed. Participants were then provided with a list of mental health services provided by the university and then thanked for their participation.

Treatment Conditions

Discrimination. Participants were asked to write down 10 instances of racial discrimination experienced or observed in the past prior to completing the dependent measures.

Academic. Participants were asked to write down 5 past academic successes and 5 past academic failures prior to completing the dependent measures.

Control. Participants were given no prime and instead immediately completed the dependent measures.

Measures

Perceptions of Discrimination. Participants completed the Everyday Discrimination Scale (Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997). This 13 item scale measures individuals' perceptions of the frequency with which they encounter racial discrimination using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (almost every day). Example items include "You receive poorer service than others at restaurants or stores," and "People act as if they are afraid of you". The scale was reliable ($\alpha = .89$).

Academic Disengagement. Participants completed the Disengagement Scale (Major & Schmader, 1998). This 12 item scale measures the extent to which students separate academia from their self concept using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Example items include "How I do intellectually has little relation to who I really am," and "Academic success is not very valuable to me." The scale was reliable ($\alpha = .64$).

RESULTS

Overview

Three sets of analyses were conducted. The first set of analyses focused on the relationship between perceptions of discrimination and academic disengagement. Differences in the correlations were also examined within black males and black females. In the second set, I used ANOVAs to test the hypothesis that condition would affect African American males' (but not females') perceptions of the frequency with which they encountered discrimination. In the third set, I used ANOVAs to test the hypothesis that condition would affect the extent to which African American males disengaged from academia.

Relations between Variables

To test the hypothesis that perceived discrimination is an influential factor in African American students' academic disengagement, an overall correlation was computed between perceived discrimination and disengagement across gender and condition. Due to the nature of the scale, a higher score on the Disengagement Scale is related to more disengagement. As expected, there was a strong correlation between the dependent variables, $r(80) = .47$, $p < .01$. Those students who reported more experiences with discrimination showed higher levels of disengagement from academia. To further examine this relationship, separate correlations were conducted for African American males and females.

African American males. Consistent with the overall correlation, there was a strong correlation between the dependent variables, $r(29) = .68$, $p < .01$. Those African American males who reported more experiences with discrimination showed higher levels of disengagement from academia.

African American females. Similar to African American males, perceived discrimination and disengagement were related. Those African American females who reported more experiences with discrimination showed higher levels of disengagement from academia. This relation was, however, much weaker, $r(49) = .28, p < .05$, than that found among males.

Perceptions of Discrimination

To test the hypothesis that African American males (but not females) would perceive discrimination in the academic and discrimination than control condition, a 2 (gender: male, female) x 3 (condition: discrimination prime, academia prime, control) analysis of variance was conducted on reported perceived discrimination. Although there were no main effects for gender, $F(1,82) = 2.43, ns$, nor condition, $F(2,82) = .392, ns$, there was a significant interaction between gender and condition, $F(2,82) = 4.22, p < .05$. To decompose this interaction, separate one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) for African American males and females were conducted.

African American males' perceived discrimination. As expected, there was a difference in African American males' reported perceived discrimination across conditions, although this difference merely approached statistical significance, ($F(2,31) = 2.80, p < 0.08$). A priori contrasts indicated that perceived discrimination did not differ in the discrimination ($M = 43.50, SD = 3.58$) and academia conditions ($M = 36.40, SD = 2.61$), $t(30) = 1.60, ns$. Also, as predicted, the primed conditions reported significantly greater perceived discrimination than the control condition ($M = 32.20, SD = 3.12$) $t(30) = 1.99, p < .05$.

African American females' perceived discrimination. There were no significant differences in perceived discrimination across the conditions $F(2,51) = 1.46$, *ns*, for African American females.

Academic Disengagement

To test the hypothesis that African American males (but not females) would report greater disengagement in academic and discrimination condition than the control condition, a 2 (gender: male, female) x 3 (condition: discrimination prime, academia prime, control) analysis of variance was conducted. Although there was no main effect for prime on perceived discrimination, $F(2,82) = 1.55$, *ns*, there was a marginally significant effect for gender $F(1,82) = .095$, *ns*, and a marginally significant interaction between gender and prime on perceived discrimination, $F(2,82) = 2.37$, $p = .10$). To decompose this interaction, separate one-way ANOVA's for African American males and females were conducted.

African American males' reported disengagement. A one way ANOVA yielded a non-significant difference in African American males' reported disengagement across the conditions $F(2,31) = .71$, *ns*. Recall that I expected no difference in disengagement between African American males in the academia and discrimination prime conditions. However, I expected African American males to report greater disengagement in the two primed conditions than control condition. A priori tests of mean differences partially supported my predictions. Consistent with expectations, African American males in the discrimination ($M = 52.13$, $SD = 3.68$) and academia prime ($M = 57.53$, $SD = 2.69$) conditions were not significantly different $t(30) = 1.19$, *ns*. Unexpectedly, African American males in the control condition ($M = 55.60$, $SD = 3.23$)

did not significantly differ from African American males in the primed conditions $t(30) = -.19, ns$.

African American females' reported disengagement. Results indicated a significant effect of condition, $F(2,51) = 4.23, p < .05$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons of the three groups indicate that females in the discrimination prime condition ($M = 59.63, 95\% \text{ CI } [54.91, 64.34]$) reported significantly higher disengagement than those in the control condition ($M = 50.24, 95\% \text{ CI } [46.21, 54.26]$), $p < .05$. Comparisons between African American females in the academia prime ($M = 57.50, 95\% \text{ CI } [52.29, 62.71]$) and African American females control ($M = 50.24, 95\% \text{ CI } [46.21, 54.26]$), $p < .07$, yielded a marginally significant effect.

DISCUSSION

The primary goal of this study was to test the hypothesis that African American females and African American males construe and react differently to academic settings. Specifically, I hypothesized that African American men perceive academia as a setting in which discrimination is common. Consistent with this notion, results indicated that African American males perceive just as much discrimination when primed with memories of their academic environment as when primed with memories of their discrimination in their everyday lives. Furthermore, African American males were more likely to perceive discrimination when either the academic environment or memories of discrimination were primed as compared to a baseline control condition. These findings are consistent with the idea that African American males generalize from their past experiences of pervasive discrimination to perceive discrimination in the academic setting.

In contrast to African American males, African American females demonstrated no significant differences in perceived discrimination across the prime conditions. This finding supported my hypothesis that females do not perceive discrimination to be a pervasive characteristic of academia settings. African American women's unique socialization experiences may be responsible for their views. Some theorists have argued that African American women receive "the best of both worlds" because they are encouraged by both European American and African American cultures to pursue success (Scott, 1993). It seems possible that this dual socialization is instrumental in the construal of many social environments, including academia.

Prior research suggests that African American males are more likely to disengage from academia based on their negative construal of the setting than African American females (Cokley & Moore, 2007). Although I did not find a statistically significant difference in African American males reported levels of disengagement in the academic prime versus discrimination prime conditions, the pattern of means was consistent with my expectations. Future research might useful attempt to replicate this study using stronger primes or more sensitive measures of disengagement.

Perhaps the most intriguing findings of this study were those illustrating the nature of disengagement in African American females. Our results demonstrated that African American females in the discrimination prime reported higher levels of disengagement than those in the control condition. Similarly, African American females in the academia prime condition reported higher levels of disengagement than those in the control condition. Although non-significant, the trend in the means showed higher levels of disengagement for African American females in the discrimination prime condition than in the academia prime condition. In contrast, because African American females have historically been targeted with less prejudice, they may develop lower

perceptions of discrimination than their male counterparts. For this reason, they may conclude that success is possible in academic settings. As a result, when African American females encounter academic challenges, they may remain engaged and go on to outperform African American males.

It is important to note, however, African American women showed higher levels of disengagement in the discrimination prime than other two conditions. One possibility is that, although African American females report less perceived discrimination than males, it does not obliterate their experiences of discrimination altogether. In fact, the rarity of their experience with discrimination may amplify their sensitivity to discrimination when they do confront it. The spike in disengagement in the discrimination prime condition may reflect an intense reaction to a relatively unusual but nevertheless highly upsetting set of experiences. Thus, making discrimination extremely salient may taint even women's perceptions of the academic setting. Future work should explore other mechanisms that may be involved in producing sex differences in African American students coping with academic threat. It is possible, for example, that sex differences in "compartmentalization"—the process by which one organizes positive and negative self knowledge into separate categories (Showers, 1992)—may also play a role in the differential success of men and women in coping with threats of discrimination within academic.

Although this study provides clues concerning the mechanisms that help African American succeed in academia, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. One limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size (less than 20 participants per cell). In light of the small African American population on the University of Texas at Austin campus, it was difficult to recruit participants, especially African American males. As a result, some of the statistical tests used here were not powerful enough to detect

small difference across conditions. Another limitation was the lack of power in the primes. On average, both primes were too weak to distinguish results consistently from the control. Future work should make use of alternative methods to prime individuals' conceptions of academia.

In summary, there is much work to be done to understand African American females' and males' experiences in academia. If psychologists can understand how African American females are successfully relating to academia, we may be a step close to a solution for their male counterparts.

Appendix

Figure 1 Mean Differences on Disengagement Scale

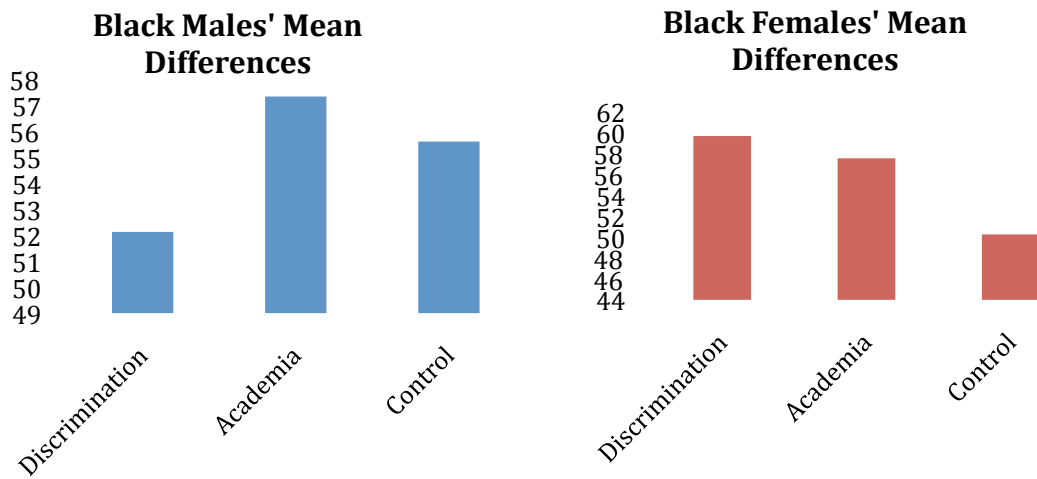
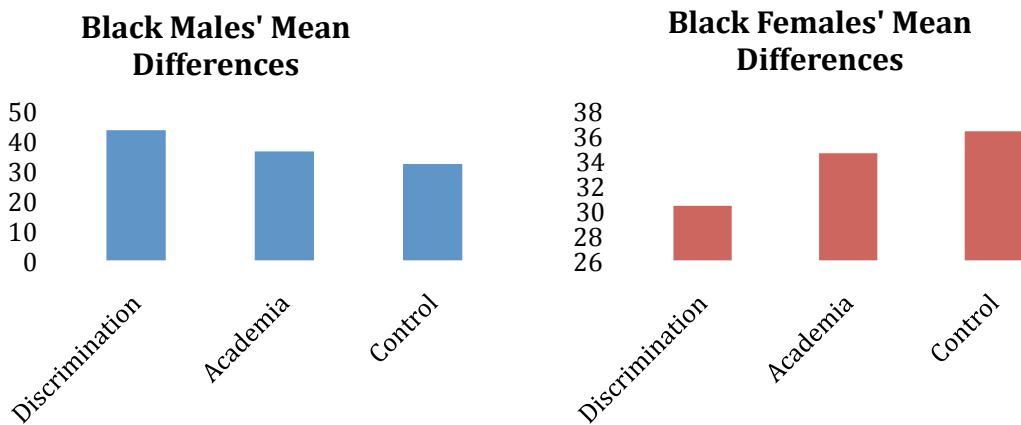


Figure 2 Mean Differences on Everyday Discrimination Scale



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Vita

Sadé Margie Jones was born in Brooklyn, New York. During a year after an early graduation from The Renaissance Charter School, she gained experience in early childhood education. In May 2008, she completed her Bachelor's of Arts in Psychology with honors at William Smith College in Geneva, New York. In August 2008, she entered the Graduate School at The University of Texas at Austin. Following graduation, Sadé M. Jones gained employment at The Settlement Home for Children in Austin, Texas.

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