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Title: Understanding Social Identity: In-group Versus Out-group Affinity within the Black Campus Community

About the Author:
I am a senior honors student studying Political Science and Communication. In my tenure at the University of Illinois, I have been involved with predominately mixed racial and ethnic identity groups; however, I have also had some experience, while short, with predominately Black groups. All of my leadership experience has developed in groups in which Black was not the dominant culture of the group except being secretary of the Busey Evans Black Student Union for a semester and being the president of a Christian prayer group that had all Black members. I have maintained several leadership positions within groups that focus primarily on multiculturalism and overall diversity. On campus, I have spent relatively small amounts of time at predominantly Black events or the African American Cultural Center. In my primary major, Political Science, I have had mixed race classes, but most are classes predominantly made up of White students which inevitably changes the dynamic of my small group and study group relationships. Thus my educational background in Communication, in which there are considerably more minority students, is more relevant to my own group formulation abilities in the classroom setting. In my time here, I have received many challenges from other Black students for my political views, personal and social expectations, and my personal views about promoting a multicultural society. Throughout my whole educational experience, including the time before college, I have been criticized on my ability to relate to and interact with members of the Black culture, but in my
opinion, this was because I did not (and do not) uphold dominant stereotypical qualities held by members of the Black community for what is considered “Black.” In this statement, I mean that the dominant ideology that is assumed for African Americans including political identification, proper attire, vernacular and other dominant ideas that are widespread among the culture. However, this has become much more subtly as education levels have increased and thus changed in both severity and relevance in the university setting. Each of these aspects contributes to how I perceive my question and other Blacks on campus.

**Keywords:** Identity, social groups, in-group, out-group

**Abstract:**

This study investigates the implications of involvement on identity development of African American Students. The researcher attended predominantly Black events in order to observe informal group formations in order to understand the importance of comfort among Blacks in group selection. Eight interviews were also conducted outside of these observations. The participants of this study were between the ages of 20 and 22 years of age. Five students were graduating seniors, and three students were juniors. Five of the students were female, and three students were male. Among those interviewed, six were from Chicago suburbs, two were from Chicago city, and zero were from down state or rural areas. The results indicate that students are able to work cohesively in mixed race groups and that they are between the third and fourth stage of Helms identity stages which indicates that they have the ability to interact with people from other races while still maintaining a
commitment to African American culture.

Initial Exercises:

Assignment number one:

Home is Where the Heart Is

I knew the University of Illinois was the school I wanted to attend after the very first time I stepped foot on the university’s soil. People often inquire if love at first sight is real, and the bond I made with U of I can surely be considered love at first sight. My senior year of high school became the limbo before I got to attend the school that I had always wished for, but did not know by name. As a freshman, I developed my initial thoughts of the University. I used to walk down the quad and think; this really is the land of opportunity with something for everyone no matter who they are, where they are from, or where they are going. I used to think that the University was my launching pad for going to law school and that it would design the perfect path for me. I thought, for my own success I have to be disciplined, so this meant, no parties, no drinking and definitely no dating. I knew I had to work hard to succeed, and for some reason, the University always comforted me in my disciplined lifestyle. I secretly imagined that it would tell me that if I did this, it would make sure I got into my dream schools, received the best education, made the best contacts, had most of my education paid for, acquired increased support from my family and close friends, and made me a person to be respected with a voice and passion. It did not, however, tell me that it would challenge my dreams; test my friendships; push me almost to breaking point
only to latch on to me, dust me off and push me again; take away my sleep; have me lead major organizations that would consume my time; or have my family continue their lives without me.

When I consider the University, I still have love for it. I take it with the good and the bad. I understand the immense growth I have had here emotionally, intellectually, and socially. What I learned is that everyone does not fit at this university, a thought I never would have considered before. While the school has many resources for success, it is a large school, which means it takes work to navigate and find your niche. I’ve learned there are problems. When I came from home, a culturally mixed and tolerant town, I never expected to see people who were not open to other cultures or groups that did not like including others that were different from themselves. Another problem that I now realize exists is the money crises at the University. That without an increase in funding, buildings would go unfixed, classes would keep increasing in size, students would not get the individual attention they sometimes need, sought after professors would decide to take the pay raise and leave the university, and disputes would arise over how money should be allocated and where. I now know that there is a space and money crises.

What I have come to think of the University of Illinois is that like most homes, there are problems that are deeper than the surface that can sometimes bubble up. For instance, Lincoln Hall could have its ceiling fall down before it ever gets fixed (a bit extreme) or the chief incident could cause a rash of forums and hateful comments, resistance and widespread anger and division. However, home truly is where your heart is, and I know, what I knew about four and half years ago, that this
would be my home. No, it is not my launching pad for law school nor is it completely perfect and yes, I often feel like I have to work twice as hard to prove myself and defy expectations based on commonly held stereotypes, but this is home. This is the place I’m proud to have in my repertoire of experiences. This is where my heart is.

**Assignment Number Two:**

Dinner Exercise: Final Draft (Excerpts) Lhea Randle and Samantha Ritchie

Dinner Time!: The Dynamic of Roommates Cooking a Meal Together

Roommate situations, like most relationships, can be characterized by many dynamic interactions. How one roommate reacts to a mess on the floor, or how another deals with privacy, are just some of the issues that arise in roommate-to-roommate interaction. There are obvious benefits from having another person to take on part of the financial burden of living in an apartment, but one also receives social and intellectual stimulation from a roommate. In time, comfort builds, and an understanding strikes between the living mates about allowed social interactions, private versus public spaces, necessary distances, and sharable items. The focus of our study is on roommate interactions in the setting of the kitchen, and specifically, while collectively cooking a meal.

As we began viewing our subjects, we started by observing and then mapping out the space that the subjects spent their time
in. The apartment had elements that made it appear to have been lived in for a longer length of time than the three ladies actually occupied the apartment. They had structures on the wall, and home decorations and the place seemed to have a healthy amount of disarray which reinforced the warmth of the area. Ultimately, as the focuses narrowed solely to the kitchen, we found that there was a rather small space in which the subjects worked, so we assumed that there would be large amounts of overlap as meal preparation began.

The two apartment's residents that did the cooking, Sarah and Jane, had previously begun preparing some of the dishes by the time we arrived. The chicken had already been placed on the tray, and there were pots, ready and waiting on the stove. Jane began working on seasoning the chicken while Sarah worked hard at preparing the spaghetti with meat sauce that the roommates and their guests would be sharing. As they began preparation, there was more conversation. Jane commented on Sarah's clumsiness in an attempt to even engage us in conversation, which ultimately fell into an inquiry about where we lived.

The relationship between Sarah and Jane can easily be characterized as comfortable. Their major interactions were not based on cooking together, rather based on the developed relationship in which the two displayed signs that they were quite accustomed to being around one another on a regular basis. For instance, when Jane was in the fridge and Sarah walked by, Sarah poked Jane and the two laughed. Also, Sarah often made playful jokes towards her roommate, yet Jane never appeared to take offense or get upset.

Although Sarah, in particular, liked to talk and sing, there were
also times where both parties were silently going about their work. And, although the ladies were making a meal together, they were each working on their own part which removed the possibility for some of the cooperation that could have occurred. The routine of cooking became an activity of simultaneity instead of cooperation. Jane stayed at the counter beside the sink for most of her time in the kitchen; beginning with seasoning chicken and after the chicken was finished, putting them in sauce. Her movements were limited to the counter space, then the stove, and back to the living room area. Sarah, who required more cooperation than Jane but not much, moved about many of the areas of the kitchen working on the several requirements of making spaghetti which took her to the sink (across from the stove) several times, to cabinet space beside the sink, and space next to the stove. While she had a greater range of movements, there were still few instances in which she called for outside assistance from Jane (although she was very clear to ask Jane for assistance when she needed it).

Jane and Sarah's relationship reinforced this idea of a comfortable relationship when considering the role of leadership and dominance one would expect to see in a living situation. As we observed, neither Jane, nor Sarah required taking a dominant position during the meal preparation process, although there was some leadership from Sarah at one point when Jane needed help finding a pot. Although Sarah took lead in the situation, there was no sense of dominance on her part.

What we noticed about the dynamic of the two roommates was the ability to work on individual projects, but still help each other where necessary. An example comes near the close of the preparation process with the spaghetti sauce. Sarah tastes her spaghetti sauce and comments, "It's pretty good" then beckons
her roommate over to taste it. Just as she does so however, her phone rings with a popular song as the ring tone and Sarah goes over to check it. In the meantime, Jane has made her way over to the oven to check on her chicken where she exclaims, "ouch" because it was hot. Then Sarah asks, "taste the tomato sauce and see if you like it? It may be too sweet. I like it sweet." Jane does so and tells her roommate, "No, it's good."

The relationship, more identifiable by the good spirited fun and jokes between the two, did not represent the need for dominance. Through meal preparation, the comfort of the relationship was evident, just as the comfort of their living spaces was as we walked through the door. All the reds, the orderly disarray, the sly jokes, and the occasional assistance gave us, as observers, a glimpse into the lives that Sarah and Jane live on a regular basis.

**Assignment Number Three:**

In Class

**Assignment Number Four:**

Now and Then: Volunteer Illini Projects
For the last two years, I have been involved with one of the largest campus volunteer groups in the Midwest. For me, it has defined the nature of service, dedication, and commitment to filling the needs of others outside of myself. I began where I was passionate, working with underprivileged groups and those who don’t always make the healthiest social choices. I did this so that I could be an influence and friend to people that do not always have good role models and supporters. As much as I considered the organization to which I am now the president of, I did not consider it in light of its rich and expansive past. Yeah, I gloss over the history of project start dates during a speech I give twice a year, and it’s planted strategically at the beginning of our brochures, but outside of that, I do not take the time to understand the magnitude of the fact that in 1963 an organization began with members who were also dedicated to service and committed to showing compassion to members of the Champaign-Urbana community.

This October, that all changed for me. I requested to look at the Universities archives of Volunteer Illini Projects, more commonly referred to as VIP. As I looked through 2 of 6 boxes of archived information, brochures, t-shirts, and other items, what I do on campus began to mean even more to me. One of the jobs I hated taking on was creating a 36 page annual report of what occurred over the last year, but when I saw annual reports for the last 10 years, the opportunity to continue this warmed my heart. What was a chore became a privilege.

As I read about their means of communication, I began to analyze the differences. See, in the 1970’s and 80’s, they didn’t just send out a quick email to a 4,000-member listserv, they sent newsletters through the mail. Someone sat down for hours first creating a newsletter, then putting stamps and addresses
and then sending it to members. I thought, we think we have all the answers with all this technology, but I do see changes. They received 60,000 hours of service in the middle decades of VIP. We struggled to have 20,000 this year. What I assume is a great factor in this besides the technology boom was two things. One, I figured there were not as many options to do service, so VIP had a leg up. Second, I figured that the time people have is split between so many things to be involved with that dedication at the levels seen in earlier VIP times is next to impossible. As a third thought, after leaving the archives, I thought, hmm surely they don’t archive the people that did not work as hard. I can think of several directors I would highlight in the archives, and several I wouldn’t even let close to being filed.

There were things that I could see we improved due to technology. With our own graphic designer, our publications are lively and full of color and imagery. I thought about how the colors were pale and single toned. I thought, how boring some things looked compared to ours. Similarly, we have expanded to sixteen projects that appeal to different interests and passions. What I began looking at was information that only dealt with the first project VIP started; Tutoring. Now, we give a variety options not seen in earlier versions of VIP.

One thing that was striking that I could not connect with was the differences in referring to people. My eyes were aglow when I saw the phrase, “the little negro girl that couldn’t read ...” I know that my directors are much more soft in their references to peoples abilities to understand information. Of course, the term “negro girl,” gave me a jump too. How different things were at that time. What would they think of me being president of the club they started? An interesting thought process for me.
After leaving the archives, bursting with new thoughts and the understanding that I am continuing a tradition that has been around for much longer than I have, made me a bomb ready to explode. I finally exploded when I got with the new executive board set to take office this January. I told them of the treasures I found, the information buried away in the archives that have so much information. I felt inspired and a sense of pride in what I am involved with. I am involved with something much bigger than myself - something that will even continue after me with similar traditions.

I could only smile during an alumni event that occurred with the homecoming celebrations when an alumni turned to me and said, I was so glad to see you all took part in that [sunshine jubilee an event in which celebrate our volunteers] event still. She continued, “Things have different names, yet they are still very much the same.” Visiting the archives I realized that too, things were of course different, but the spirit of VIP is still very much the same.

**Assignment Number Five:**

**Bruce d. Nesbitt African American Cultural Center – Letter from Director**

One click and you arrive at the letter from the director of the African American Cultural Center webpage. Your eyes, in quite the logical way, are immediately drawn to an attractive picture of the acting director of the center. What is noticeable about this is that relative to the text, this picture is the large focus. The picture is professional and striking, whereas the text is uncharacteristically small for a website. What this represents to
me is that visual imagery is a large instrument used to get people interested in the information on the page. What it makes me wonder, however, is with the size of the font, how much of the focus is really on educating about the topic and getting constituents to read the font instead of picture reading or solely focusing on visual stimuli.

As my eyes continue down the page, I realize that I must adjust for the army of small words that I am convinced most do not fully read. As I begin, I read that in 1968 the, “most historic event on the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus,” began. This proclamation sent my mind into a rash of questions and thoughts about what I believed the most historic event was. As I continued reading, I realized that what was being referred to was the start of Project 500, an undoubtedly historic event. However, the strength of the statement that it was the most historic made me wish to evaluate the claim. Discounting the historic events outside of African American university history, I considered other important historic events. I consulted the university archives and found that her assumption meant that Project 500 trumped the first Black student (1887), first to graduate (1900), first Black woman to graduate (1906) and the first Black to receive a Ph.D. (1939).[i] The existential assumption left me with several questions on how she evaluated her claim.

Continuing, I noticed that promoting the Black Alumni Reunion became the focus for quite a large portion of the letter. 384 words, or approximately 30% of the letter, were focused on highlighting the event. Due to the large presence within this letter, I wondered if the letter was primarily written to alumni instead of the students on campus. This idea would fall in line with the subject of the letter. The letter does not welcome
students into the center, or discuss initiatives of the center; instead, it complements the former director and discusses the alumni event. This was a curious move, because I would imagine that the focus of the director would be to welcome students.

Something that strikes me is the limited focus on all campus initiatives on promoting diversity in this letter. What is said is, “Mr. Banks called upon the University to make a commitment to diversity and over the past three years this program has proved that university focus on support is essential to the success of African American students on our campus.” What this statement seems to purport is that African American students’ success is intrinsically tied to the center either because Banks, the former director of the center, called for it or because programs initiated by Banks. What is not seen is an acknowledgement of campus initiatives except the words at the very bottom that say that it is a “Unit of the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs,” a fact that represents a multifaceted approach to diversity (being a part of student affairs).

The ending salutation provides that final assumption of the director. “Hotep Brothers and Sisters.” What is most interesting here is the use of solely African American jargon, “brothers and sisters.” It makes me wonder about the implicit belief that only Blacks are going to read her note, and on a greater scale, I wonder could there be a small assumption that only Blacks are dedicated to seeing Blacks succeed, and to them she says, “hotep” or peace. Separately, it could just be a way of promoting identity, but instead of multiculturalism, it seems to promote singularly a Black identity.
Assignment Number Six:

Representation Thrust

Increase Representation Thrust: designed to increase representation of students, faculty, academic professionals and staff from underrepresented groups in terms of recruitment, retention, graduation/promotion, decision-making committees/councils, and upper administration, and proportional sharing of resources, awards, endowed chairs and recognition on campus.

The Provost Office here at the University has stated several focuses in their latest Diversity Initiatives Planning Committee Report concerning key issues that promote diversity and understanding on campus. One initiative in particular, the Increase of Representation Thrust really resonated with me. This initiative encourages diversity at both the student and the faculty level. The idea is that there should be a focus on increasing diversity in all areas from recruitment and retention strategies to how they give out resources and awards.

This focus is important to me, but particularly because of the benefits for students. I believe that students will get the greatest amount of benefit both from seeing a diverse group of faculty...
and other students. With faculty, seeing a successful professor of color can aid students of color by promoting feelings of support, and pushing academic success. It can also help the students to feel at home at a predominantly White institution. With White students, seeing successful people of color can work to counter hegemonic rooted stereotypes. Students working in diverse groups can benefit from interactions and insights of others.

The initiative is one that I find particularly important; however, with my experience on campus, I believe that it is a great goal that we have not yet achieved. There are many departments that have higher concentrations of underrepresented groups; however, as a general problem it seems to me that there are places in which underrepresented groups are missing. As a double major, my communication major boasts of being one of the most diverse undergraduate majors on campus, but my political science major has much less diversity. It was not unusual in my lower level classes for both my peers and my professors to look to me when the policy of Affirmative Action arises. Similarly, for females in engineering, I have heard stories of professors using all male inclusive jokes in classes. With an increase in diversity in these areas, there would be more understanding for everyone. Also, some groups, like Native Americans, another admittedly missing group in the initiatives cannot educate on their cultures or ideas about major campus issues, including our former mascot. The few that are here can easily feel intimidated and outnumbered which can make their environments hostile.

Without achieving this goal, the atmosphere can be uncomfortable for groups of people. The goal is a good one, but it must be aggressively pursued so that the situation changes. I like that the university makes this a focus and it aligns directly
with my goals and motivations, but I also see that we have much to do in order to fix the silent issues resultant of a lack of diversity among certain groups and within certain areas.

**Question:**

What are the implications for the principal social group memberships that Black students have engaged in throughout their time at the University, and how do these groups inform their perception of their own social identity and the identity of other Blacks on campus?

**Plan:**

Interview Questions

Demographic Questions: Name: Gender: Major: Year in school: Hometown: How diverse was your high school? How diverse was your neighborhood?

Interview Questions:

1. What are your favorite things to do on campus?
2. What organizations are you actively involved in?
3. What kinds of groups are you most comfortable in when you’re just hanging out?
4. How did the groups you were involved with make U of I feel more like home for you?
5. Were you involved in similar groups in high school?
6. Why are you in the groups that you’re in?
7. Do you think you changes as a result of being involved with those groups?
8. What are the racial dynamics of the groups you’re involved with?
9. Do you believe you have to have a particular skill, trait or talent to be involved with that group?
10. What is your function in the group?
11. Are you involved with groups that are made up predominately of females (males)? Blacks (Whites)?
Underclassmen (upperclassmen)?
12. How do feel when you are in-group that is made up primarily of (opposite condition)?
13. Who are your five closest friends? What is their gender? Major? Race?
14. What do you think of Blacks on campus that join groups of (x) condition?
15. Do you think it is really important to have spaces on campus in which you can just hang out with friends? Where is that place for you?
16. Where do you think most women hang out [study, party, eat] on campus? How about Blacks?
17. What are the deciding factors that push you to join or not join a group?

In order to understand this topic, I plan to attend meetings of both largely mixed group as well as mostly Black group memberships on a variety of topics. Also, I plan to attend all Black events, which due to the time of the project will be focused on African American homecoming events, and will be participating in several non race and ethnic group specified homecoming activities. I will interview members of the Black community that are involved in both types of organizations on campus and attempt to form new relationships with members who spend the bulk of their time either at the Union, a place with a variety of racial groups and public space, or the African American Cultural Center, a place in which the core group is
Black students.

Assumptions:

There are many assumptions that I have concerning my project. One of my personal assumptions is that people that only feel comfortable in homogeneous groups are still growing and developing and are less mature than those that can successfully work in diverse groups. I do assume there is a distinction between those that cannot work in diverse groups and those that just prefer cognate groups. I also am assuming that a major reason for wanting to be in all Black groups is due to the fact that it allows them to feel a sense of empowerment after spending time in classes in which they are in predominantly White settings. I assume finally, that people feel more comfortable around people that are like them, and race is one way in which people are alike, and that becomes the preferred method, but they also prefer to be around other Blacks that think like them, not just all Black groups. So, Blacks that do not have similar ideas are probably not in the main groups that they are involved with, but they may be in secondary groups or groups that require less time, effort or energy.

Data:

Interviews have been very difficult to setup for my project. I had four interviews setup between Sunday night and Tuesday night, but I have successfully had only one interview and had to reschedule three. It seems like people setup times that they could not attend for two of them. From the successful interview, there were some interesting pieces of information. For instance, one thing said was, “Black organizations are just terrible ... last minute. Want to get something done stay in the mainstream.”
Yet when I asked about involvement, she did highlight that she was involved in mostly Black activities. She seemed to reflect two of my general assumptions. First, she seemed to be able to work well in what she called “mainstream” organizations and understand that there does need to be some level of social competence in order to do that. The second was the idea that you want to be with people that are similar to yourself. Overall, I cannot judge my question based on one interview, but it seems to be in line with the assumptions that I developed. I will be rescheduling the interviews that were missed, but I don’t really know how to make people show up. For my last interview, I drove all the way out to their apartment and then they told me they weren’t there. The other just told me she had too much work to do that she’d need to reschedule. I’m working on getting more people to agree, but after the three reschedules, I will have four complete.

Discuss:

“Be objective ... be objective Lhea,” I whispered to myself before I walked into my first ever African American homecoming event. It was not only my first Black centered homecoming event, but it was one of only a few predominantly Black events that I had taken part in on campus. I had an internal debate telling myself “no don’t be object, just be an observer.” I had to figure out what it meant to not look with objective eyes but instead to focus on what I was seeing, thinking, feeling ... experiencing. As an observer, I realized that people interacted with me, not as a newcomer into cultural displays like this one, but as a fellow community member. While inside, I felt like an outsider, someone who spent most of their time external to these events only hearing about them later, it seemed that to them, I was
Black and that automatically gave me membership into the club. I remember laughing with some neighbors about how this event was on, “CP time,” or colored-people’s time which explained why the event started over a half-hour late. I remember a group of people behind me engaging me in a conversation about what in my head I thought of as - the greatness of Obama - with the expectation that we were all die-hard liberals. I giggled later as I was truly on the fence concerning voting and wasn’t a die-hard anything.

As I look at my field notes, scribbled on the program (I didn’t carry a notebook into the event for fear that I’d be marked as an outsider), it reminds me of the differences I observed while being there. People were comfortable, the kind of comfortable that said, “I am around family.” There was a buzz of loud conversations (quite loud, as if people were screaming over the already loud music) and some dancing while sitting in seats. One of the notes that I wrote was there was a, “strange familiarity,” among the Black students. I admit that after my interviews, I no longer look at the event as strange, but really an event that displayed something similar to coming into the house after being out in the cold. You peel off the layers you had protecting you from the outside elements, loosen your body that had been stiffened to keep the little internal warmth that you had, and adjust to your normal routine without fear that what was outside would harm you. It was fun as even I began to peel off my own layers. One example of this was when a group of my friends entered; I stood up, ran over and hugged them. We made screeching noises, that I’m sure at other events would have characterized us as disturbances and surely have turned heads. In this atmosphere though, it went relatively unnoticed and with the loud background, it probably went unheard as well.

This event opened the door to my study. The focus of my study attempts to understand how African American students make
decisions about what groups they will participate in. Particularly, do African Americans join homogenous groups, groups made up primarily of other Black students, or heterogeneous groups, groups made up primarily of mixed or multiple racial groups? Group memberships, like the homecoming event, give students the opportunity to be expressive, build social relationships, understand their own personal preferences, explore increasing levels of comfort, and determine the standards for judging other students on campus. My particular question is: what are the implications of social group memberships that African American students engage in? In order to address this question, I look at three measure questions. The first is how do students choose their group affiliations? This question helps me to understand if decisions about which groups to join lend itself to the preference of homogeneous groups. The second question is how do these groups inform students’ perception of their own social identity? This will help me understand the implications of group memberships on students’ identities and other extraneous effects of group membership. There is a final question that attempts to find if students’ group memberships shape how they judge other Black students on campus. That question is how does group affiliation inform the perception of other Black students’ social identities?

Review of Literature

African American students have an additional burden not fully shared by most other ethnic groups on campus. With the unique history of race relations in this country, African Americans have had to strive particularly hard to get access to opportunities more easily afforded to other groups, especially White Americans. This transfers itself well to the university setting. Black students in the 1960s and 1970s made demands, coordinated protest, and struggled for reform. These tactics forced change at their institutions (Williamson, 34) and opened
the door for the modern university that holds cultural diversity as a stated value. However, there must be some emphasis placed on the word “stated.” There is an inconsistency between universities saying they are promoting the understanding of cultures outside of one’s own and minorities feeling misunderstood on campus.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, this was exemplified in the 2007 Chancellor’s Senior Survey on the Undergraduate Experience at UIUC. When asked if the classroom environment was free from racist behavior, White students had a mean response of 4.3 out of 5 which spelled out high satisfaction and belief in the statement. The problem is that African American students paint a very different picture of their undergraduate experience. On the same question, Black respondents had a mean of 2.7 out of 5 which shows that they were much less satisfied. When the question was asked about the entire campus, White students gave a mean of 3.6 out of 5. While they believed that the campus overall was less free from racism than the classroom, they gave it a mid to high satisfaction rating. Conversely, Black students ranked the same question with a 1.8 out of 5, a response that was definitively lower than White students.

So what is happening here? According to Solorzano, at elite undergraduate institutions in which the educational conditions seem to be equal, he contends that inequality and discrimination still subsist on college campuses in more subtle and hidden forms (71). While typically understated, this discrimination can be detrimental to the ability of students to build relationships with students from different cultures. While often it is unconscious racism, it impacts the lives and the feelings of African American students. These feelings can also lead to Black students feeling misunderstood, lonely or disliked.

It is this subtle racism that permeates the university and
prepares a recipe for Black students to have feelings that are inconsistent with the campus diversity values. Among these feelings include resentment, anxiety, and isolation, which can cause Black students to leave the university (Guiffrida, 305). During an interview with a Black student, Levine found support for this supposition. The student was quoted saying, “I feel like an unwelcome guest at a party rather than a member of the family” (Levine, 73). What the student was referring to was this feeling of isolation that is common for African American students. Much of these feelings stem from outside racial groups unconsciously buying into negative stereotypes associated with African Americans that cause the discrimination discussed by Solorzano. The university, a student’s new home, does not make them feel the same sense of belonging that other students are readily offered which makes for a harder transition for some Black students.

Although feelings of isolation can cause students to feel uncomfortable and apart, students have begun to seek solace outside of the classroom. According to the ethnographic study done in 2006 at the University of Illinois, the classroom provides inadequate ability for students to garner a sense of community, so they must look outside of the classroom (Files, 30). While the researcher effectively insists that it is the use of cultural centers that enables this sense of community, I will expand upon this research to understand how student organizations accomplish this for Black students. The ability to get involved with a wide variety of organizations that fit the varied interests of Black students will, I assert, allow them to feel at home at the university and help develop this sense of community.

Students’ ability to connect socially is related and influenced by involvement in student organizations (Guiffrida, 305). Though discussing one organization in particular, the Central Black Student Union, an ethnographic researcher, also at the
University of Illinois, found that involvement in this organization gave black students the opportunity to, “discuss issues such as perceived racial injustices, opportunities to participate in and plan socio-cultural activities such as talent and fashion shows and they are able to connect with other Black students in an atmosphere where one is not simply ‘branded’ as the other in a setting, such as the classroom, which is largely dominated by whiteness.” To unpack this, the central argument here is that this student organization provided Black students the ability to become socially integrated in the University of Illinois campus in several meaningful ways outside of the classroom. Harper and Quaye upheld the essence of this argument by looking at African American male leaders. They found that student organizations gave a platform to vocalize concerns, advocate for support and resources, and offer their missing voice on a host of campus issues (140).

Students have the ability and opportunity to use student organizations for many social purposes including those mentioned above. However, student organizations have another critical purpose. Organizations allow students to develop and gain a better understanding of themselves and who they are. This is certainly the case for Black students. In the Harper and Quaye study, they found that membership in student organizations enhanced the development of Black identities regardless of if the organization was predominately Black or mixed (139-140). Organizations prepare students for what is often referred to by college students as, “the real world.” Sutton finds that organizations prepare students for the, “realities of civil, political and social life upon graduation” (30).

Social identity research has been established that reasons that identity development occurs in four stages for people of color. Those four stages are conformity, dissonance, internalization and finally integrative awareness (Helms, 85). For this study, I will
define and focus on the final three stages in an attempt to understand how student organizations allow students to develop and effectively advance and progress through the stages. In stage two there is an idealization of one’s own racial group and a negative reaction to White culture (Helms, 85). Stage three is characterized by a commitment to one’s particular racial group, while recognizing that minority culture has both positives and negatives (Helms, 85). The final stage is when there is effective ability to interact with people from other races and a commitment to one’s own racial group (Helms, 85). I argue that as students move through these stages, student’s responses will be congruent with the characterizations of each of the stages.

The prior research reveals a definable pattern of the process that African American students encounter as they first join the campus community. Students join the campus, analyze the campus climate, join organizations, and use organizations to develop and understand themselves. What my particular research will attempt to find is the direct social implications of being involved with student organizations and how the choice of organizations develop student.

**Methodology**

In the fall of 2008, I had the opportunity to commit to an ethnographic study of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. As I began this research, I decided that there would be two central methods for gathering data for the study. Both methods, I determined, would provide useful insight into understanding African American students on campus. While the first method gave an understanding of how African Americans interacted in informal groups and Black centered events, it is important to note that in order to begin to comprehend the question of identity, it was essential to have one-on-one contact.
Observation research

In order to understand campus group formation, I wanted to understand the relationships that African American students have with one another when in groups. I selected informal groups to observe, and friendship groups. Periodically, I had the opportunity to watch both homogenous and heterogeneous friendship groups. I did this to increase my understanding of mechanisms used to cope with adverse campus climate. As this was simply observation research, I also selected an isolated weekend to attend an all Black event. At the University, I selected a ritual weekend; the University of Illinois 2008 Homecoming. I attended an event comprised mostly of African American students. At the event, I saw one White American student helping coordinate the event and one student in the audience. For the purposes of this study, I will consider this a Black event because there were not a high enough percentage of non-Blacks to consider this a mixed event. The event, from start to finish, was run by Black students and was heavily focused on bringing Black students into the university ritual. The event had a minimum of 150 attendees, though I could not garner the most accurate count of attendees.

One-on-one research

The dominant portion of my research and the focus of my analysis will primarily come from the one-on-one contact that I had with eight actively involved students at the University. Active students were chosen because I wanted to test the impact of student involvement; it is only through university participation that I can properly analyze organizations influence on students. This study focused solely on African American students. The participants of this study were between the ages of 20 and 22 years of age. Five students were graduating seniors, and three students were juniors. Five of the students were female, and three students were male. Among those interviewed, six were
from Chicago suburbs, two were from Chicago city, and zero were from down state or rural areas. Interviews were conducted at various locations. Two interviews were done at my apartment, two were done at the residence of the participants, two were done at the Illinois Student Union, and two were done at off campus venues. There was a certain degree of conversation before the actual interviews started and often after. I will not include the information garnered before the actual interview unless the participant gave explicit permission to use that information. I will include information after the interview because it typically was a continuation of the thoughts from the interview without the structure of formal questions. Generally, participants spent 25 to 30 minutes answering standard questions. With the outside discussions, interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours with a dominant portion lasting slightly over an hour. During the interviews, I took handwritten notes that were typed post interview. I did not use any information after the date of the interviews unless given explicit permission. Pseudonyms are substituted for each name to conceal the identity of participants and ensure confidentiality as students are actively involved and can thus be more easily identified. Similarly, as they are all Black leaders on campus, particular names of organizations will not be disclosed and instead imprecise descriptions of the organizations may be used throughout the study.

A Note on the Participants

Due to the high involvement of myself as well as the participants and the nature of recruitment, I knew seven of the participants personally. This can have two main effects. First, it can serve to make participants more comfortable and thus allow participants to elucidate more information during the study. Second, it can serve to bias how I understand their answers. I do not believe this second fact will be a problem as research will always have
some type of researcher bias included. A second note on the participants is that after interviewing each candidate, I discovered that to varying degrees, each respondent identified with a religious faith. This can serve to be important because the answers from non-religious African Americans may be irrefutably different. While this may present a limitation, I do not believe it is a large limitation as Christianity is arguably an ingrained facet in African American culture.

Choosing the Right Fit: Selecting Groups

Comfort is Key

Walking down the quad, I heard some mildly loud screaming and laughing. As the quad is usually my place to get submerged in thought, I was slightly vexed by noise, but it pulled me out of my slight trance and made the group the focal point of my walk down the quad. The group, comprised of 3 Black men and two Black women, made me think about racial dynamics at the University of Illinois (which in this study I will refer to by our branded name: Illinois). If different cultures were going to mix, there would need to be an increase in comfort around people of other cultures. While looking at the group, I saw two of the members softly pushing each other. One would push, and then the other and they would burst into laughter. It almost reminded me of a game of tag, the way they went back and forth. They were comfortable enough to play around with each other.

What this sparked in my mind was the need to understand what makes Black students comfortable. In order to understand this, I asked each person what kind of groups made them most comfortable when hanging out? The answers to the question surprised me. I thought that more students would prefer to hang out in racially homogenous groups. What I found was that there was less overall interest with solely hanging out in all Black groups. There was, however, a focus on being comfortable. What
makes people most comfortable is being around people like them. When asked, Elis said she prefers to be around people that really know her. As if she knew that I wondered about her preferences on race she said, “Some Black people just don’t get me, I want to be in groups that appreciate me just for being me.” I smiled because I truly found myself in that statement. Elis and I came from the same town in which the focus as we were growing up seemed to be much less about race and much more about developing as people. Among all responses, I found a much higher correlation with gender than with race. I was quite satisfied with this, although this fact was not all inclusive, two people really preferred to be in same race groups.

While most people outside of those two were comfortable in groups outside of their race, two interviews really stood out to me. There were two participants that listed people outside of their racial group when I asked who their five closest friends were there. These two seem to reaffirm this in the question about hanging out. Emilie, one of my interviewees emphasized that she prefers, “small diverse groups.” She followed that statement with the fact that those groups are hard to find at the university. When I asked Darién this same question, he answered that he was comfortable with Blacks, Whites, and somewhat comfortable with Asians. As I found the answer very introspective, I decided to ask for him to further clarify. He said, “sometimes Asians only want to stay in their groups, which makes it harder, but I don’t mind being around Blacks or Whites and most of the time Asians.”

There is an importance in the ability for Black students to find comfort in the group memberships. Despite what group memberships, in order for identity to develop, I maintain that students must feel that they are a part of something they can relate to. While a student may hang out in mixed or predominantly Black groups, the organizations can reveal a
different pattern.

Organization Selection

I was particularly interested in understanding how students select their organizations. In order to understand this question, I asked several questions including, why are you in the groups you’re in? Were you involved with similar groups in high school? What are the deciding factors that push you to join a group? When I asked about student involvement in high school, I noticed that most students seem to change their focuses with organization selection. Elise said that in high school she dedicated most of her time to diversity, leadership, academic organizations whereas now she focuses more on cultural organizations. Juliette mentioned that she went into dance because she was not able to do it in high school and she wanted to reenter that part of her life. Overall, what I noticed with each of my interviews was that they were moving into new areas of their lives and being involved with different organizations. This factor is important for understanding identity development through organizations. Students made active choices about what to join.

One of the particular methods for organization selection deals with the costs versus benefits of organizations. The interviews revealed that understanding how much time the organization would take was an important value for them. If the organizations did not present to much of a cost (time) then they were more likely to be involved because they could see the benefits of the involved. The largest benefit that people mentioned was the overall fact that a need could be fulfilled by being involved. Each of the people I interviewed articulated that they want to be a part of organizations that will fulfill a personal need. For instance, Alexis said, she selects organizations based on their ability to add to her life. She further clarified that she looks to see that it adds mentally, physically, or spiritually to her life.
Emilie reinforced this idea when she said, “I look to see how I will benefit from being in the group and how it aligns with my future goals. I need to see how it can serve me so that I can serve others.” Abel mentioned that groups must amplify where he was lacking. Darién, an engineering student at the university, said that he was in the groups that he was in for a host of reasons including, career advancement, networking, additional knowledge about industry, helping him to find jobs later, meeting others and getting a more diverse atmosphere. While the answers that the organizations suite the particular interest confirm my assumptions, one student, Fabien, had a slightly answer to the question. He responded that he joined because he cared about people. He explained that from age six until graduation, he was trained to be a civic minded leader, so he was just doing what he was taught to do.

Everyone Looks the Same

What is important for African American students is the racial composition of the groups. One of the assumptions that I personally held was that people feel more comfortable around people that are like them, and race is one way in which people are alike, and that becomes the preferred method, but they also prefer to be around other Blacks that think like them, not just all Black groups. This has been confirmed by the idea that they want to hang out around people that are likeminded. I have reason to believe that it holds up in organizations as well. When I asked about joining groups with other Blacks, Darién said that he joined those groups to feel like being here was not a fluke. He looked to those who had graduated to hear stories of times they had done poorly and found strength in that fact that those like him had made it. He noted that it reminded him that he was smart enough to be here. Juliette found that being in Black groups allowed her to feel blended in, and that she knew she could turn to them for support. A response from Emilie, a racially
mixed student, revealed why these groups were so important for students. She explained why she chose African American groups. She said, “I chose predominantly Black groups because of the climate at the U of I. It pushes racially segregated groups.” When I asked further, she said that she doesn’t know of many integrated in a real way and that this was one reason she did not get involved early on. She said she did not want to choose between Black and White.

When looking just at the involvement of those interviewed, I found that all eight of the students were involved with one or more predominantly African American group. What this revealed was that there was a value in being with people that were like you. However, I did find that most members were still involved with racially mixed groups. Overall, students were involved with and often preferred racially homogenous groups, but they were able to be involved with a variety of groups. I had assumed before I started my research that those who were not able to possess this skill was still developing, based on my interviews, I do consider the students that I interviewed as able to manage social preferences and group involvement with members outside of their race. In considering Helms’s research on identity, I would find that each of the students that I interviewed falls at least between stage three and stage four because they are able to work in both mixed and homogenous groups.

**The Art of Being Different**

Me, Myself and I

Just the very act of being involved allows students to gain in many ways that they recognized, but there is an additional benefit of organizations helping them to understand themselves. This ability to use personal involvement is important for understanding one’s self. What surfaced through interviews was that being involved with groups taught students to learn to be
with others. As I considered my own involvement, I realized that this was not an underestimated value. Another fact that I saw was that being involved allowed them to understand their personal needs. Fabien noted that before getting involved, he used to be hyperactive and involved despite the costs. After getting involved, he found that organizations taught him how to be an adult and take care of himself. He also confirmed the value of learning about others personalities and interacting with others. What I gathered from the interviews was that each student developed a clearer sense of self and clarified ideas about who they were. One thing that Elis said was that being involved allowed her to understand her identity in terms of being Black. As she had not been involved in this manner before, she was able to develop solely by being involved in organizations focused on being Black.

One factor that is important is understanding the effect of one’s past. I noticed that those who came from diverse neighborhoods were less likely to feel like they stand out and used key words such as, “blended in,” and “comfortable around everyone.” One of the comments by Juliette was that she, “never really felt the stigma of being the only Black girl.” She noted that she was able to hold a conversation and that she did not mind. Alexis explicitly stated that she did not feel too uncomfortable in groups made up primarily of Whites because of her high school experience. On the other hand, Abel, who came from an all Black high school noted that he did feel like he stands out. He said that he felt like a, “double agent,” in which Whites did not realize he was smart until he opened his mouth. Even considering myself, I find that my high school and neighborhood environment has lent itself to my ability to work in all types of groups, and has afforded me the preference of mixed groups.

How the Other Blacks Live

There was a focus during my research in finding if being involved
helped students to understand others identities. What I found was an overall sense that it was okay to be in heterogeneous groups. One particular factor that resonated in the interviews was that Blacks must stay grounded in their own culture, but that they should explore other cultures as well. A comment by Abel highlighted this fact. He said of those that only join all Black groups that they are, “missing out. Part of the point of college is to network. Race gives you certain resources, but you get a greater number of resources when you step out of your own.” This point was found in Darién’s comments as well. He said that he understood that some Blacks had poor encounters with people of other cultures, but college was a time to expose self to other ideas and experiences that they may never get another chance to explore.

**Putting it All Together**

Actively involved African American students on the University of Illinois campus have a strong sense of identity. While it is not completely clear if they are in the third or fourth stage of identity development, I was able to find that they did show a commitment to Black culture while still holding being around other cultures as important. It is important to understand that students use these groups to develop a deeper understanding of themselves. Based on the interviews, students revealed that organizations allowed them to develop a better sense of dealing with others, for being confident and for taking care of themselves. An important factor is the ability to feel a sense of comfort which organizations promote by building a sense of community. Overall, I would assert that it is organizational involvement that exposes students to ideas about who they are and how to deal with others which is critically important for identity.
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