

Study correlates black college students' racial identity and well-being



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A new study by researchers at the University of Illinois indicates African American college students who have internalized a positive racial identity – yet feel connected to other social groups – report higher levels of psychological well-being than their peers. The principal investigator on the study was Valene A. Whittaker (right), a doctoral student in educational psychology, who co-wrote it with Helen A. Neville, a professor of African American studies and of educational psychology.

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CHAMPAIGN, Ill. – African American college students who have internalized a positive racial identity – yet feel connected to other social groups – report higher levels of psychological well-being than peers who have externalized or conflicted racial identities and spurn cultural inclusivity, according to a new study by researchers at the University of Illinois.

The study explored associations between positive black racial identity and mental health among students at a predominantly white Midwestern university and at a historically black mid-Atlantic university. Graduate and undergraduate students who identified as black were recruited from the two universities, and 317 students participated in the study.

The principal investigator on the study was Valene A. Whittaker, a doctoral student in [educational psychology](#) in the [College of Education](#), who co-wrote it with Helen A. Neville, a professor of [African American studies](#) and of educational psychology. The study, “Examining the Relation Between Racial Identity Attitude Clusters and Psychological Health Outcomes in African American College Students,” appears in the November issue of the *Journal of Black Psychology*.

The study builds upon work by prominent psychology researcher William A. Cross, whose Nigrescence Theory, developed in 1971, conceptualized black identity as a five-stage process, which Cross later revised and expanded to nine stages in 2001.

Studies by Cross and other scholars have indicated that black Americans with positive racial identities – an internal definition of what it means to be black, a connection to other black people and an openness to additional identities such as gender in their self concepts – have better psychological health outcomes, higher self-esteem and higher levels of self-actualization than blacks who internalize negative or stereotypical beliefs about their racial group and devalue their ethnic group or culture. Likewise, blacks who immerse themselves in black culture, hold hostile views

toward whites and have conflicted or more externalized racial identities have more outward expressions of anger, higher levels of depressive symptoms and more race-related stress.

Although there have been a number of studies on racial identity attitudes, researchers have explored links to only a limited number of psychological outcomes, and multiple measures are needed to support the role of racial identity as a component of strength-based approaches to mental health issues, Whittaker and Neville wrote.

Students' attitudes and beliefs about their racial identity were assessed using the Cross Racial Identity Scale, an instrument that measures six of the nine Nigrescence Theory attitudes.

The participants then were clustered into five groups – low race salience, multiculturalists, self-hatred, immersion and Afrocentric – based upon their standardized subscale scores. For the purpose of their study, Whittaker and Neville renamed the assimilationist cluster from Cross' model "self-hatred" because that group had elevated scores on the self-hatred subscale.

Participants' psychological health or distress over the prior four-week period, their subjective well-being and their life satisfaction were assessed using separate instruments, including the widely used 18-item Mental Health Inventory – which reflects anxiety, depression, positive affect and other emotional indicators – and the Satisfaction With Life Scale co-developed by Ed Diener, a professor emeritus of [psychology](#) at the U. of I.

Additionally, Whittaker and Neville assessed students' hardiness – as a measure of resilience – using the 18-item Personal Views Survey. The survey measures three characteristics – challenge, commitment and control – that reflect participants' sense of control over their lives and their abilities to transform stressors.

"There appears to be some similarity between challenge, commitment and control, the central characteristics of hardiness, and those characteristics that indicate the internalization of a positive racial identity attitude," Whittaker and Neville wrote.

For the most part, the results were consistent with the expanded Nigrescence Theory and empirical research conducted by other scholars.

Students with a multiculturalist profile – those who have a positive connection to other blacks, are interested in incorporating multiculturalism into their racial identities and are most amenable to cross-cultural interaction – reported the highest levels of psychological well-being on all the psychological health outcome measures. They had strong, positive black identities and scored lowest of all the groups on the self-hatred and the miseducation indicators, signifying that they had internalized positive beliefs about their racial identity and racial group and rejected negative beliefs and stereotypes.

Interestingly, however, the multiculturalist cluster slightly endorsed pre-encounter assimilation attitudes, indicating that their identities as Americans were also salient, Whittaker said.

"(Multiculturalist) students valued other aspects of their identity in addition to their blackness and valued partnership with people from other ethnic groups and backgrounds," Whittaker said. "So, they may have endorsed attitudes that it's valuable to have friends or work with people from other racial or ethnic groups or different sexual orientations."

"... Although race may still be salient for this group, being an American and partnering with other cultural groups in the U.S. may be valuable as well," Whittaker and Neville wrote.

By contrast, students in the immersion cluster, the smallest cluster in the study, reported the lowest level of psychological well being among the five clusters. Their racial identities were based largely on anti-white attitudes, self-hatred and miseducation, and they had lower levels of appreciation for and openness to cultural inclusivity. Students in the immersion cluster scored highest of all the groups on indicators of psychological distress.

"This cluster of individuals endorsed attitudes that were reflective of a certain degree of turmoil in their racial identity, and this may translate into lower feelings of overall well-being, less satisfaction with life, and a decreased sense of empowerment when it comes to dealing with life stressors," Neville and Whittaker wrote. "Namely, the conflict and lack of internalization that these individuals experience with regards to their racial identities are connected to poor adjustment, and more generally, negative health outcomes."

Although students in the immersion cluster viewed their race as important, their expressions of it were transitory. "Their racial identity is very surface and externally defined – perhaps expressed mostly in their appearance and attire - and is less a part of who they are," Whittaker said.

Accordingly, students in the immersion cluster may be reacting to societal expectations that dictate that a black person should dress or behave in particular ways, Neville said.

Whittaker added: "They could endorse this internalized sense of their blackness and feel really comfortable with being black but may still have some beliefs that look pre-encounter," marked by self-hatred and pro-white/anti-black attitudes. "They may still have some stereotypic beliefs about being black or they may have some attitudes that reflect a need to externally define their blackness."

The study found no association between students' feelings of psychological health, racial identity and whether they attended the historically black or the predominantly white university.

The study's findings indicate that promoting the adoption of a positive, internalized racial identity and an openness to multiculturalism among black students in college counseling environments could help students contend with racial self-hatred and mental health concerns. The researchers suggested that college counseling centers' implementation and evaluation of support groups for African American students – which support their exploration of their black identities along with their other social identities, such as gender and sexuality – could help students foster an integrated sense of their racial identity.