

Apprehension to engagement in the classroom: perceptions of Black males in the community college

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This study presents selected findings drawn from a larger investigation of Black male students in the community college. In the larger study, qualitative interviews were conducted with 28 Black males attending a public two-year college in the southwestern United States. The focus of the larger study was on identifying factors which, from the perspectives of students, affected their academic success. Academic success referred primarily to students' grade point averages or achievement and secondarily to continuation towards students' self-proclaimed collegiate goals. A large portion of Black male participants in this study indicated that academic disengagement served to negatively affect their achievement in the community college. Students discussed academic disengagement as a reluctance to fully engage as active agents in their own academic development through necessary interactions.

Keywords: Black; males; community college

Administrators and teachers alike are seemingly content to speak about Black males, at Black males, or for Black males, but rarely are [they] inclined to speak with Black males about their education. (M. Quigley, personal communication, April 11, 2011)

This quote from Michael Quigley addresses the importance of having conversations with Black¹ males about their educational experiences. While these comments were directed towards schooling experiences in K-12, this notion may be extended to higher education as well; where more insight is needed to better understand the lived educational realities of Black male students (Wood & Turner, 2011; Wood & Hilton, 2012a). These insights provide a unique lens into the educational perceptions, experiences, challenges, and triumphs of Black males. Sadly, when Black males' insight is attained, researchers and practitioners may find that sociocultural forces have served to foster negative (e.g. degrading, negating) experiences for these students (Bush & Bush, 2010; Wood & Hilton, 2012b). Such is the case for the study discussed in this manuscript which reports on the perspectives of Black male students in the community college.²

This study presents selected findings drawn from a larger investigation of Black male students. In the larger study, qualitative data (e.g., interviews, focus group, observations, concept mapping) were gathered from 28 Black males attending a

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public two-year college in the southwestern United States (see Wood & Essien-Wood, 2012). The focus of the larger study was on identifying factors which, from the perspectives of students, affected their academic success. Academic success referred primarily to students' grade point averages (GPAs) or achievement and secondarily to continuation towards students' self-proclaimed collegiate goals (e.g., persistence, achievement, attainment, transfer). This definition is in line with previous investigations of Black male academic success in the community college (Beckles, 2008; Faison, 1993; Mosby, 2009; Perrakis, 2008). The larger study identified 17 factors which participants described as affecting their success (e.g. collegian support, study habits, motivation, family support, transportation, academic service usage). These factors were grouped into four interrelated constructs: institutional factors, personal factors, academic factors, and psychological factors (Wood, 2010).

In the psychological construct, student interviews revealed the importance of motivation, focus, and academic disengagement. The focus of this article is on findings from this construct. With this in mind, the purpose of this study was to examine how Black male students in the community college discussed academic disengagement as a factor affecting their academic success. This research is part of a growing body of literature on men's behaviors and outcomes in college (Harris III, 2008). This study is significant as it lends additional insight into the experiences of Black males at community colleges. There is a reason to believe that the lives of Black males within this institutional type are unique. Flowers' (2006) work illustrated that scholars should be cautious to assume that Black males in two- and four-year colleges share similar educational experiences. His study compared students in these groups and found that Black males at two-year institutions had lower levels of academic and social integration than their four-year counterparts. Moreover, Wood (2013) examined differences between Black male students in two- and four-year colleges. Using data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, he found that Black males in community colleges had greater odds of being older, having dependants, being married, being independent, and delaying their enrollment into postsecondary education. Further, he found that these men (in comparison to their four-year counterparts) tended to have lower degree expectations and more limited preparation in foreign language, mathematics, and science. As such, Wood stated that these findings indicated that Black men in two-year colleges and four-year colleges were not homogenous populations. Thus, he concluded that new theories, models, and research were needed to address the unique experiences of Black men in community colleges.

Similarly, recent work from scholars of the Black experience calls for investigations of intersectionalities in order to avoid monolithic treatments of African-American boys/men (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2004, 2005, 2006; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). Avoidance of monolithic treatment should acknowledge the differential experiences of Black males in community colleges. For example, all students in the larger study did not address academic disengagement as a factor affecting their academic success. However, the students who did describe this concept noted that it was integral to their lack of achievement in college. In general, this manuscript will: (a) address the nature of student disengagement; (b) discuss possible factors contributing to disengagement; and (c) explore implications for practice which centers academic disengagement as an institutional dilemma as opposed to a student quandary.

Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo (2006) operationalized academic engagement as a student's degree of participation in class activities, including their contribution

to course discussions and posing questions in class. Similarly, this study defines academic disengagement as the antithesis of these actions, reflecting *some* students' unwillingness to fully participate or engage in the classroom as learners through necessary academic interactions. As with prior research on this topic, this study was attuned to the relationship between students' behaviors and perceptions of the institution as manifested in classroom settings (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). As noted by Harris III (2008), though the concept of engagement is sometimes presented in binary (engaged vs. disengaged), the term is much more nuanced, representing varying degrees of engagement. Moreover, McMillian (2003) stated that devaluing is often used as a synonym for disengagement, since students who become disengaged may begin to devalue educational pursuits. While this study will discuss instances where students illustrated disengaged behavior, these behaviors weren't necessary devaluations of education but an apprehension to being perceived as academically inferior. Thus, a more nuanced view of academic disengagement, in some instances, will be referred to as apprehension to engagement. This will further clarify the particular manifestation of disengagement described in this study. The next section will examine previous research relevant to this examination of academic disengagement and academic success.

Relevant literature

There is a dearth of literature on Black males in community colleges (Bush, 2004; Bush & Bush, 2010). The vast majority of literature that does exist on this population is unpublished, mostly in the form of doctoral dissertations (see Wood & Hilton, 2012c). Thus, what is known about Black male experiences and perceptions in public two-year colleges is derived primarily from these unpublished works (Wood & Turner, 2011). Given that the majority of Black males begin their postsecondary educational pursuits at two-year institutions (Bush & Bush, 2005), their lack of treatment in the scholarly literature as compared to literature on four-year collegians is concerning (Wood, 2010).

What is known about the Black male experience in two-year colleges, especially as it relates to achievement and engagement, is limited. As noted by Wood (2010), the literature on Black males in the community college has a predominant focus on persistence (continuation in college), while studies on academic success and student engagement are fewer in number. However, while persistence and achievement are interrelated in that they affect one another with greater levels of achievement leading to higher rates of persistence (Deberard, Speilmans, & Julka, 2004; Mason, 1994, 1998; Wang, 2009), they are not one and the same. A student can persist in college without demonstrating the level of academic success needed to meet certificate and degree requirements or to transfer to a four-year institution of their choosing.

There is an extant body of literature which examines experiences and factors relevant to achievement among students of color in the community college (e.g. Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001–2002; Makuakane-Drechsel & Hagedorn, 2000; Mason, 1998; Melguizo, 2009). Studies which examine the role of engagement in relationship to student outcomes indicate that engagement is an indicator of academic success (Kuh, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). These studies are particularly beneficial for colleges, as they address:

aspects of student behavior and institutional performances that colleges and universities can do something about ... whereas many other factors such as precollege characteris-

tics are typically beyond the direct control of the student or the college or university. (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006, p. 8)

This includes factors such as peer involvement, faculty–student interactions, academic support, as well as teaching and learning approaches (Kuh et al., 2006).

With respect to Black male engagement, Harper's (2009) research suggests that these students experience lower levels of academic and social engagement than their female counterparts. He negated the perception that low levels of engagement among Black male collegians are attributable to *their* lack of investment as active agents in their educational endeavors. He challenges this deficit thinking, situating the blame for low engagement as an institutional problem. In this vein, he noted that low engagement is a result of institutional neglect, a failure of colleges and universities to create collegiate environments that facilitate positive student engagement.

Findings from Bush (2004) complement those of Harper (2009). Bush (2004) noted that African-American male students were reluctant to meet with faculty inside and outside of the classroom. He stated that students described low levels of engagement in class activities which negatively impacted student performance, specifically persistence. Bush also places the responsibility for these interactions at the institutional level. He uses the metaphor of the fruit borne by a fig tree. This metaphor suggests that if a tree produces bad fruit, the blame for the fruit should be on the tree (or institution) that generated the fruit as opposed to the fruit (or students) themselves. Therefore, student reluctance to interact with faculty and poor attainment are a result of a college's culture, operations, and dispositions which foster perceived views of inferiority.

Bush and Bush's (2010) research has also suggested that racism results in stereotypes, and negative in-class experiences with White faculty, staff, and students. This in turn can lead to lower levels of collegiate engagement. This disengagement is connected to poor overall performance and achievement rates among Black males. They noted that lower engagement is particularly troubling given that Black males are among those most in need of faculty–student interactions, collegiate services, and programming. Unfortunately, they also stated that Black males are less likely to engage these services due to campus environments rife with subtle and direct discrimination.

Similarly, Foster's (2008) interviews and focus groups with Black males may provide additional light to this topic. Foster found that negative institutional climates led to students' apprehension towards classroom engagement. His work illustrated that most Black males did not pose questions to faculty during class. While some students noted they may approach faculty about questions after class, most never asked for help from faculty, and all participants noted that they never attended office hours. While Foster highlighted many positive faculty–student interactions, he also noted that some students experienced very negative exchanges which discouraged their participation in class. As such, Foster extended that classroom validation was important for overcoming academic disengagement among Black male collegians.

Possible causes of disengagement

Given the effect of engagement on student success, and the lack of engagement among Black men, it is important to discuss several potential causes for disengagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). One rationale has been

proffered by Stevens (2006). Stevens conducted a qualitative study focusing on Black males' experiences in the community college. As with other scholars, Stevens indicated that Black males were hesitant "to speak out in class [due to] fear of making some mistake that would reflect unfavorably on their race" (p. 153). In Stevens' study, students noted that their hesitancy was a result of stereotypical perceptions of Black students as having lower intelligence and academic ability. In her study, faculty participants recognized that they perceived and treated Black males differently and that these students were unwilling to participate in class discussions or come to office hours. Stevens stated that faculty members were aggravated by Black males who refused to seek out help, even when needed.

Stevens (2006) attributed this behavior to disidentification as a result of stereotype threat. Steele (1997, 1999) noted that stereotype threat is a by-product of students' perceptions of negative stereotypes of their group. When stereotypes are evident, students exhibit lower levels of performance, persistence, and a positive academic self-concept. Stereotype threat has been found to lead to decreased levels of self-efficacy and to the development of identities which conflict with educational pursuits (Chavous, Harris, Rivas, Helaire, & Green, 2004). This results in what is referred to as disidentification, a psychological disengagement from academic matters, achievement pursuits, and lowered self-esteem in order to cope with stereotypes in academic settings (Aronson, Blanton, & Cooper, 1995; Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2001; Osbourne, 1995).

Another potential cause of disengagement deals with the masculine identity of men of color. Harris III and Harper (2008) discussed the effect of masculine identity on male community college student success. Using the lens of male gender role conflict, they identified several potential barriers to men's success in college. They note that as boys, males receive messages from their family and friends that shape their perception of the role men should have in school contexts. In general, men are socialized by male figures (particularly fathers) to be aggressive, competition focused, and tough. They noted that men are socialized to perceive school as a feminine domain. As such, when men engage and succeed in school, they often do so in counter to their identity as a male. However, core to this current study is the notion of help-seeking. They note that men (in general) and men of color (in particular) avoid help-seeking behaviors. Thus, men may have difficulty asking for assistance or support from faculty or staff, as seeking help can be emasculating, presenting them as weak or inferior. Though not specific to Black males, research on Latino men in the community college has also addressed masculine help-seeking concerns. Sáenz, Bukoski, Lu, and Rodriguez (2013) conducted focus groups with 130 Latino males in seven Texas community colleges. They found that Latino males were avoidant of seeking help, even when they were in jeopardy of "failure." Many participants described their avoidance of help-seeking as related to their identities as men, citing their pride/machismo as a contributing factor. Similarly, Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, Martin, and Castro (2010) conducted focus groups with 87 men of color. They noted the men described help-seeking behaviors as being in direct conflict with their gender identity. Men commented that they avoided help-seeking because men are supposed to be independent and self-reliant. In all, these notions of avoidance of help-seeking in conjunction with the concept of disidentification served as a conceptual guide for the findings presented in this study. The next section of this manuscript will examine the methods employed in this investigation of academic disengagement.

Methods

Data from this study were derived (primarily) from in-depth interviews with 28 Black male students attending a community college located in the southwestern United States. Supplemental data were also collected via unstructured concept mapping, a focus group, and on-campus observations. A qualitative research approach was selected given the researcher's intent to portray the voices of Black males on factors which they perceived to affect their academic success in college. As qualitative research provides a platform to investigate the unique and lived sociocultural realities of marginalized populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), it was well-suited to address the goal of this study.

Participants and research site

To participate in the study, students were required to be at least 18 years old and have been currently or formerly (within two years) enrolled as a student at the research site. Participants were diverse in many respects. While the average age of participants was 24.5, student ages ranged from 18 to 58. Students were also representative of numerous majors, such as criminology, culinary arts, biology, psychology, architecture, nursing, political science, computer science, philosophy, music and business. Of these majors, business was the most predominant with nine students in all. Participants' total number of semesters of attendance ranged from 1 to 10, with the average approximately 4 semesters, though not necessarily indicative of consecutive attendance.

All participants were interviewed at Star Valley Community College (SVCC)³. SVCC had a campus population of nearly 13,000 students with a racial/ethnic breakdown as follows: 39%, White; 1%, Native American; 4%, Asian American; 8%, African American; 16%, Other; and 32%, Hispanic. Given the large percentage of students of color (45%), SVCC is recognized as a Minority Serving Institution (MSI). MSI is a federal designation for institutions enrolling high proportions of students of color (O'Brien & Zudak, 1998). In particular, the large Hispanic student population served at SVCC defines it as a Hispanic Serving Institution (Gasman, Baez, & Turner, 2008). While there were over 1000 Black students enrolled on this campus, only 148 of these students were male. Black males were severely underrepresented at this campus. As such, interviews conducted with the 28 participants represented perceptions of approximately 19% of the total Black male population at SVCC.

Data collection

The interviews from which this manuscript is based were semi-structured in nature, lasting approximately an hour. Semi-structured interviews employ a set of pre-defined interview questions. This interview approach also allows for lines of questioning to emerge which are not pre-determined, based upon the interview dialogue (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Interviews used pre-planned probes as follow-up questions on the interview protocol (Brenner, 2006). Pre-planned probes provide for a greater level of comparability among data collected. Further, these probes also minimize the influence of the researcher on the research process (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Participants in this study engaged in unstructured

concept-mapping. This approach provides participants with a central concept and asks them to depict factors influencing or associated with the concept (Zanting, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2003). In this case, participants depicted factors they perceived as affecting their achievement in college. Prior to each interview, participants were provided with blank sheets of paper where they were allowed to portray factors that they perceived as affecting their achievement. Concept maps represented a wide variety of writing forms, including diagrams, drawings, narratives, and poetry. Concept maps were employed to allow students to better conceptualize the phenomena in question, aid in structuring each interview, and as supplemental data to aid in validating the final analysis. In addition to interviews, data were collected through observations on-campus in the quad and during men of color organizational meetings. Post-analysis data were also collected via a focus group (described in the data analysis section).

Study participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling is a technique which allows the researcher to maximize their own social network by acquiring participants that are the most easily obtained (Gay, 1996). Primarily, this form of sampling was used through direct contact with students on campus where participants were approached and asked to participate in the study. To increase the validity of this approach, the researcher used a campus map and divided the campus into quadrants and rotated direct contact efforts throughout each quadrant throughout the duration of data collection. With respect to snowball sampling, participants were asked to provide names and contact information for potential participants. These potential participants were contacted and recruited to interview for the study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). All participant names reported in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were coded for themes and analyzed using the systematic data analysis technique outlined by Miles and Huberman (see Huberman & Miles, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This approach requires the researcher to develop questions, identify a theoretical framework or create a conceptual lens, pre-hypothesize codes, and determine the method of analysis prior to data collection. Throughout data collection, observation notes, contact summary forms, and document summary forms were used. These items aid in refining concepts, collating data, and data reduction. Coding was completed in two primary stages, first using basic codes and then creating more advanced codes as a result of additional interpretation of emergent patterns. Memoing was used to note how each section of data on document and transcript data related to the primary phenomena of study (e.g. academic success). After preliminary codes were generated, the researcher engaged in a data-reduction process where codes were compared with graphical displays through a cyclical hypothesis-posing and conclusion-forming process.

The primary method used to ensure reliability of findings was member checks. Member checks is a process whereby study participants provide input on the study's analyses in order to verify, challenge, and expand upon findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After the initial interviews were conducted, the researcher created a graphical depiction of factors affecting academic success along with basic descriptions of these factors. Participant perceptions of the preliminary findings were gauged in a

post-interview focus group. In particular, findings presented in this manuscript were elaborated upon by study participants, providing additional insight into the nature of disengagement and students' perceptions on how disengagement affects their academic success. The next section will present findings from this study derived from the methods discussed in this section.

Findings

A large portion of Black male participants in this study indicated that academic disengagement served to negatively affect their achievement in the community college. To address the intricacies of engagement apprehension, the subsequent section: (a) provides a general overview of academic disengagement; (b) describes student reactions to disengagement; and (c) examines the role of initial faculty–student interactions in amplifying the negative effects of disengagement. In general, students discussed academic disengagement as a reluctance to fully engage as active agents in their own academic development through necessary interactions. These actions were not necessarily indicative of complete disengagement; rather, they were an apprehensiveness to participate in- and out-of-class. For many, this reluctance was initiated by participants' perceptions that others viewed them as academically inferior. This meta-level theme is highlighted throughout the results presented where words and phrases indicating how others perceived them as academically inferior (e.g., *stupid, ignorant, dumb*) are italicized.

Towards an understanding of disengagement

In general, academic disengagement was evidenced by a disinclination to engage in the classroom with faculty or fellow students or outside of the classroom with campus academic paraprofessionals (e.g. tutors). More specifically, academic disengagement was typified by students' refusal to make first contact with teachers, ask questions in class, provide answers during class discussions, participate in class small groups, and visit teachers during office hours. Some students noted that their apprehension to engage made them avoidant of using campus tutoring services. When asked the reasoning for their refusals to engage in these ways, some students stated that they were unsure of why they acted in this manner. Even when probed further, some were unable to articulate the origin or rationale of their apprehensive actions.

When students did provide a rationale for apprehensive actions, they were strikingly similar. Participant comments illustrated that faculty members and other students perceived them as academically inferior. This notion is substantiated by comments from multiple participants who noted their apprehension to engage in class in fear of being perceived as “*dumb,*” “*ignorant*” and “*stupid.*” Unfortunately, students' perceptions that others perceive them as inferior, in many instances, may be true. For example, John spoke of several instances where he tried to participate in classroom discussions and felt dismissed by faculty and other students. He discussed one experience when he tried offering comments on a classroom discussion. After contributing comments, he said that others (e.g., faculty, students) reacted negatively to him:

Not only that, it's like I look around, and I feel like people were looking at me, and saying why is this guy here? What the f**k! Why are you here? Why? Is this a joke? I

needed the most help on my writing, and the teachers was lookin at me like ... hhhhh [exhale], here we go. You know, we got a retarded kid in class now. (italics added)

John noted that this treatment came during a time when he was struggling in the class. He discussed an essay assignment where several White students informed him that they had written the paper the night before. John stated that he had worked on his essay for over two weeks and received a “D” while those who professed to have spent less time on their assignments received “A”s. He noted that performance grades coupled with in-class perceptions of being disregarded made him feel as though others were right, that he did not belong in college. As a result, he noted that he became apprehensive to engage in course discussions. Whether John perceived these instances correctly is not necessarily important; rather, his interpretation of these events served to shape his academic reality. Many participants also noted that they did so for fear of being perceived as academically inadequate.

Malik spoke about his apprehension to engage, noting that he would only speak in class if he was directly called on by a faculty member; he stated:

I mean if the teacher asks me to say something or asks me a question or something like that, then I’ll answer it ... but I’m not like gonna just raise my hand, like thinking I know the answer and stuff. I’m not a person like that. I’m not shy or anything. It’s just I don’t wanna *embarrass* myself. (italics added)

When asked to elaborate on what he meant by embarrassing himself, Malik stated that on many occasions the answer to a question posed in class wasn’t necessarily right or wrong, but an opinion. He noted that he wasn’t as much worried about being right as he was about having a good answer. He remarked that he feared he would answer a question with his opinion and other students would think he was “ignorant.” In essence, it appeared that he was concerned that his answer would be perceived by others as not being good enough. He said, “I just don’t wanna be that person. I just don’t wanna be that person.”

Joshua also discussed his ambivalence and fear of engaging in class discussions. He noted throughout his interview that he avoided raising his hand in class to ask questions. He stated that faculty members would:

constantly ask “do you have any questions” after we learn something, they constantly ask “do you have questions” and then it’s up to you *if you’re brave enough* to raise your hand and say yeah, and get your question answered. (italics added)

In a very similar manner, Calvin echoed Joshua’s comments but for an alternative rationale. In attributing these actions to shyness, which he referred to as a barrier to his academic performance, Calvin stated the following: “[if] the teacher is like, ‘If anybody has any questions, raise your hand’, I have a question, but I’m so shy, I don’t want to; I’m too scared to raise my hand up and let the teacher know.” When probed as to what prompts his shyness, Calvin provided the following example:

You know, maybe, there’s a class and be like, “Hold on teacher, can you slow down, I didn’t get that part. Can you say it again?” You know, just shy, because you’re thinking of that mentality, oh everybody’s going to be looking at me. *I’m the dumb one in the class*, and that’s why, a lot of classes, you know, I could just ask for more help and stuff like that, but don’t. (italics added)

What is challenging about this behavior is that many students noted their desire to exhibit agency in their academic development. They described times where they wanted to ask questions in class, or knew they had the right answer to a question

posed, or felt that they needed to get additional help during office hours or from campus tutoring services. However, these desires to participate or attain support were overcome by their apprehension to engage. Students noted that their apprehensive actions had grave consequences on their academic performance as it resulted in lower course grades and subsequently, lower overall GPAs.

Student reactions to classroom apprehension

Student reactions to their apprehension to engage in the classroom manifested themselves in different ways. Some students recognized that they needed help and found assistance from student support services (e.g., tutors, advisors) as well as from colleagues (fellow students) on campus. John noted that he was apprehensive to seek out help until he became cognizant that “the harsh reality that wasn’t reality.” John stated that he came to a realization that he could not allow the actions of his peers and faculty to control his academic future. He stated that while he could not receive adequate help from faculty (given that they disregarded him), instead, he sought out support from campus support services (e.g., tutoring, advising). John commented:

you need to know where your resource is, that you need to talk to somebody that’s not a teacher, ‘cause teachers just like, hey, they’re not your tutor. They’re not your after-school tutor. They’re your teacher, and they only gonna help you so much, and yeah... So, you need to get out there and find out if there’s free tutoring for writing, brush up on your skills, do all that stuff.

Similarly, Joshua also noted that he preferred receiving academic support from sources other than faculty members. He stated that students can find ways to “move around” their faculty “to learn more” by participating in study groups with fellow classmates. Apparently, Joshua felt more comfortable seeking help in these settings. These individuals perceived seeking out help from faculty as a barrier to their success and instead carved engagement paths with other campus personnel they perceived as being more supportive of their success. John’s and Joshua’s motivation to receive academic aid from campus support services and from other students is not, in and of itself, negative. In fact, these interactions are often encouraged by researchers and practitioners alike who see their importance in facilitating achievement (Freeman, 2003; Glenn, 2003–2004). What is troubling is that the efforts of students to seek out supplemental support from others, as articulated by students in this study, are motivated by feelings of marginalization in the classroom and perceptions that others perceive them as inferior.

Students’ confidence in using resources (e.g., campus support services, study groups) outside of the class was not uniformly shared. While some students sought help from student support services and other students, others simply avoided seeking out help altogether. With regard to the latter, Herb stated when asked what affected his academic success, “I usually don’t ask for help ... I will seriously sit there in math lab all day and click, you know, instructions 17 times ‘til I get it. I won’t run back and ask the teacher. And that’s one of the things that affects me.”

Similarly, Charles noted that some students have a reluctance to receive out-of-class support for fear of being perceived as academically inferior. He noted that:

some guys might be, see it is *stupid* if they go to the tutor or something, they, they think it’s *dumb*, they think if they go get help from somebody, they *stupid*. They always want to find out on they own ... so like if they get caught in the library or tutor, they [others are] like oh, that’s – he’s *stupid*. (italics added)

Charles's comments were echoed by Calvin who noted that there were multiple campus resources, programs, and services designed to support student success but that Black males "just don't go and use these tools." He also noted that this ambivalence was a result of some students' fear that they would be perceived as dumb.

Apprehension and faculty–student interactions

Many students indicated that the initial interaction with faculty shaped their engagement experiences in the classroom. Predominantly, students had to initiate initial interactions with faculty, though this was not always the case. For instance, Aries, Terrence, Matt, and William all discussed how teachers tested students' motivation by waiting for them to show their dedication to the class before dedicating time to the student. As noted by these participants, some faculty clearly viewed students' apprehension to engage as an apathetic attitude towards their studies. In this light, certain faculty exhibited an "approach me first" and "prove yourself first" stance, where the student had to prove their interest, commitment, and engagement in the course (usually by approaching their faculty to establish a connection) before the faculty member would reciprocate interest in the student. In this regard, Terrence stated, "but here, if you show interest, and you show dedication, and you show that you really want to try and succeed in their class, you know, they'll [the faculty will] help you." Terrence also noted that students who did not illustrate these dispositions were often overlooked for faculty–student interactions with more actively engaged students.

Matt stated that this approach to teacher–student interaction required him to "humble" himself and show teachers that he was dedicated to becoming a better student. Teacher–student interactions described by a number of students in this study created a "perfect storm," where the confluence of student apprehension to engage for fear of being perceived as academically inferior coupled with faculty members' "approach me first" and "prove yourself first" stance served to further complicate apprehensive actions in the classroom. This placed the responsibility for student success solely on the student, despite numerous messages received from others (e.g., faculty, student) that suggested the futility of their engagement.

Fortunately, some students described a different interaction. While many students in this study noted ambivalence to participating in class and interacting with faculty, some students described faculty members who were cognizant of these behaviors and worked arduously to counteract them. A few students described instances where teachers were attuned enough to their apprehension to take the lead in pulling them aside to provide them with personal attention. For example, Ken stated:

Like my English teacher, he's really nice. He takes time, like, to talk to you. Like he'll set up a conference, even if you feel like in some situations, like students are *afraid to tell the teacher they need help*. And if he feels like you need help but you're not going to come to him, he'll come at you in a way that you don't feel offended that he's asking you to have a conference with him, you know what I mean? (italics added)

While fewer students described faculty who initiated interactions with students, the importance of teachers being proactive in establishing communication and rapport with students cannot be understated. Ken noted that these actions allowed him to feel more comfortable interacting with the faculty and *somewhat* more confident in participating in large class discussions. This speaks to the need for faculty members

to create a welcoming and affirming classroom environment where students are empowered by faculty interventions.

Discussion

While this study has illustrated Black male collegians' angst about being engaged as active agents in their academic endeavors, the root cause of this angst could be attributed to a number of tenable factors. Possibly, students displayed an apprehension to engage in order to avoid faculty knowing that they were not paying attention in class; this explanation is possible, as a few students in the larger study did discuss a lack of focus in the classroom as a deterrent to achievement. Another plausible rationale for participants' apprehension is that some students were simply introverts and felt uncomfortable having excessive focus on them during class. Given that some students noted that they were "shy," this assertion is conceivable.

Disengagement may also be a natural result of reasonable apprehension felt by many students regardless of racial/ethnic and gender affiliation. The collegiate environment represents a greater level of expectations than those set forth in secondary education. Many students in the larger study attested to this fact, noting that course content was more difficult, assignments were more demanding, and deadlines more concrete than those in high school.

While all three arguments (e.g., lack of focus, shyness, heightened expectations) present viable explanations for apprehensive actions, none of these explanations fully address students' recurrent uses of words such as "stupid," "ignorant," "dumb," or "retarded" to depict how they believed others perceived them. Moreover, these arguments do not account for classroom encounters described by students where they felt disregarded and marginalized. Further, they do not explain students' overwhelming apprehension to receive support from faculty. As noted in this study, if these students needed help, they either sought outside means (e.g. friends, tutors) rather than their course faculty or sought no support at all.

Even if apprehension is typical of the collegiate experience, it may be greater for Black males. The researcher sees some merit in this assertion as apprehension may be a protective mechanism resulting from perceived and actual messages of inferiority communicated in prior and current academic settings (Fischer, 2009; Major & Schmader, 1998; Steele, 1997). Possibly, apprehension to engage was a result of stereotypical views of Black men as big, dumb, brutes, and other big Black buck perceptions (Hall, 2001; Hutchinson, 1997; Jackson, 2006). Extant research has illustrated that discriminatory perceptions of Blacks are rampant in wider society and evident in educational settings (Green, 2001; Martin & Harris III, 2006; Moore III, 2001; Steele, 1999). As noted by Bush (2004), Bush and Bush (2010), Foster (2008) and Stevens (2006), some Black males experienced a lack of engagement in the community college classroom. They noted that these experiences were due to student concerns about faculty members' negative perceptions and stereotypes of them and their abilities.

In a very similar fashion, this study has found that students avoid classroom engagement for fear of being perceived by faculty (as well as by other students) as academically inferior. Stereotypical portrayals of Black males as non-cognitive beings, or outright as intellectually inferior, could serve to exacerbate apprehensive behavior. In fact, though there is insufficient evidence to fully support this warrant, the academic disengagement discussed in this study may very well be evidence of

disidentification. As noted earlier, in order to cope with stereotypes in academic environments, students can disidentify with academics, thereby disengaging from academic enterprises (Aronson et al., 2001). Disidentification would explain why many students were reluctant to receive help, participate, or interact with faculty when needed due to their fear of being perceived as academically inadequate. While findings seem to suggest that disidentification was at work, this study is limited in that data were collected primarily through interviews. Therefore, classroom observations and other forms of data would have been necessary to validate this supposition.

Certainly, another confluent factor exacerbating stereotypical perceptions of Black men and disidentification is male avoidance of help-seeking behaviors. As noted by Harris III and Harper (2008), men (particularly men of color) avoid engaging in help-seeking behavior. This avoidance is attributable to men's desire to maintain their pride (Sáenz et al., 2013) as well as to maintain their independence and self-reliance (Gardenhire-Crooks et al., 2010). Given that many men in this study avoided engaging behaviors, including seeking help from faculty, it is likely that engagement apprehension sits at the nexus of masculine and racial stereotypes. Thus, while avoidance of help-seeking may be a male problem, this problem may be heightened for Black men due to stereotypical perceptions of them. Indeed, prior research from Harris III, Palmer, and Struve (2011) has indicated that masculinity is intensified for Black male collegians in environments where they perceive and experience stereotypes and racism. They noted that Black men display heightened masculinity in contexts where they feel they are perceived as marginalized or inferior as a way "to maintain or re-claim some dignity and respect as men" (p. 57). With this notion in mind, the next section discusses implications for practice.

Implications for practice

Participants noted that academic disengagement was an impediment to their achievement in the community college. Thus, educators have a professional responsibility as purveyors of knowledge and power in the classroom to disrupt, deconstruct, and negate messages which may serve to prevent student success (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Reynolds, Sneva, & Beehler, 2010; Smith & Hung, 2008). Steps can be taken by faculty members that may reduce academic disengagement. Research has been done on stereotypes that have connected their existence in the classroom to lower levels of student performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Black males' academic self-concept is negatively affected when students believe that stereotype expectations are evident (Chavous et al., 2004). Further, research has also been conducted on the role of racial microaggressions in leading to feelings of self-doubt and isolation among Black collegians. As noted by Sue et al. (2007), racial micro-aggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (p. 271). Often, they are unknowingly communicated to students of color through subtle messages (Constantine & Sue, 2007; Harwood, Hunt, & Mendenhall, 2009; Nadal, 2008). These messages can come from faculty as well as from other students. Stereotypes and microaggressive behaviors must be dealt with head on. Students must be informed through repeated and authentic actions with campus personnel that they are capable of academic success. Faculty must work proactively to encourage students and

reassure them of their abilities (Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Palmer & Young, 2009). With this in mind, faculty should use their classrooms as opportunities to regularly debunk stereotypes and to recognize when subtle slights against students of color occur (Bensimon, Rueda, Dowd, & Harris III, 2007). This requires faculty to be aware of both their own behavior as well as the behaviors of students in their classroom.

Moreover, as with the English teacher mentioned by Ken, faculty must seek out connections with Black males and provide them with academic support, even in situations where the students do not ask for help. This necessitates that faculty be attuned to their classroom environments, surveying the landscape to gauge disparate levels of engagement. If apprehension is identified, faculty must address it promptly, preferably by initiating one-on-one interactions with students. As such, faculty must eliminate the approach me first and prove yourself first stance reported in this study. This stance can only serve to heighten students' feelings of isolation, alienation, and inferiority. Rather, faculty members must be proactive agents in supporting students' academic pursuits. As noted by Wood and Turner (2011), this can be accomplished in the following ways: (a) illustrating an ethic of care from the onset and working to create a welcoming and affirming classroom climate; (b) proactively addressing potential concerns by reminding students of course assignments, regularly checking on students' progress in the course, and proactively engaging students in conversations; (c) listening to concerns brought forth by students; and (d) continually encouraging students to meet their academic potential.

Tinto (1993) stated that faculty–student interactions in the classroom impact student performance and perceptions of the academic institution as a whole. These verbal and non-verbal interactions set the stage for additional interactions which occur outside of the classroom setting. Given this, it is all the more important for faculty to be cognizant of their interactions (or lack thereof) with students. As evidenced in this study, academic disengagement among Black male students in the community college was perceived to negatively affect students' achievement. Findings from this study seem to indicate that disidentification *may* be among the by-products of students' apprehensive behavior. This alone underscores the importance of faculty proactively engaging students in their classrooms.

In general, future research is needed which examines the Black male experience in the community college. Based upon findings from this study, specific lines of research are needed to better understand the relationship between engagement and achievement among Black males in two-year college settings. Studies which can investigate the linkage (if any) between disengagement and achievement can serve to provide better context to the role of stereotypes, interactions, and perceptions in shaping student success. This may necessitate the use of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Such studies should be attuned to the diversity of Black males, investigating whether disengagement varies by background characteristics (e.g. class, age, dependency status, sexuality).

Notes

1. This study uses the terms Black and African American interchangeably.
2. The terms community college and public two-year institutions are used interchangeably.
3. A pseudonym.

Notes on contributor

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