

Fragmented Exchanges: The Impact of Cultural Mistrust on Student Faculty Interaction in a Predominantly White University

by

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Abstract

This study sought to investigate whether there was a relationship between Black American undergraduate student's level of cultural mistrust and their perceptions of interactions with faculty at a predominantly white institution. Hence, Black American students completed online surveys regarding their feelings of cultural mistrust in the areas of education and training and interpersonal relationships and measures of student-faculty interaction as assessed by connection, approachability, and caring attitude. Analysis revealed that higher levels of cultural mistrust were significantly correlated with decreased perceptions of total interaction with professors in reference to caring attitude and approachability. Additionally, having a positive relationship with a Black American professor did not moderate the relationship between cultural mistrust and student faculty interaction. These results suggest that cultural mistrust is a latent construct that may indirectly impact Black American student's success at predominantly white institutions.

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Educational differences between Black and White Americans have been among the most widely researched topics for decades (Whaley & Noël, 2012). Researchers have focused on a host of factors including access to financial resources (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2004), community and environmental influences (Hill, Castellino, Lansford, Nowlin, Dodge, Bates, & Pettie, 2004; Jeynes, 2003), familial patterns, and even the racial diversification of educational environments (Bohrnstedt, Kitmitto, Ogut, Sherman, & Chan, 2015).

Each area of research has produced or supported several theories to account for the discrepancies in educational outcomes. A common theme is the potential social and psychological impact on Black American students and their position in relation to a perceived educational caste system. Plausibly, the academic differences noted between Black and White Americans is best explained from a social-psychological perspective, or an examination of deeply ingrained psychological constructs that influence how students interact and perceive themselves in the school setting. One such construct is mistrust for the individuals and institutions that have been historically restricted and seen as part of an oppressing culture. This mistrust, observed among Black Americans and rooted in a uniquely characteristic psycho-historical experience of Blackness in America, is known as cultural mistrust.

Cultural Mistrust

Cultural mistrust was originally conceptualized as a general mistrust by Black Americans for White Americans and institutions (Terrell & Terrell, 1981). This mistrust developed from an American history of traumatic events – waged on an individual and systemic level – through centuries of state-sponsored enslavement, verbal and mental persecution, psychological degradation, legally affirmed racial discrimination, and physical maltreatment of people of African descent (Bennet, 1966; Eyerman, 2001; Meriham, 1970; Grier & Cobbs, 1968). These large-scale and long-term distressing experiences have had reverberating effects among Black Americans, some who may now exhibit characteristics of “cultural trauma” as a result (Alexander, 2004; Eyerman, 2001). The impact of cultural trauma and mistrust may become evident in settings and situations in which Black Americans are confronted with white privilege, or whiteness. For example, research has shown that individuals with increased levels of cultural mistrust are less likely to seek aid from law enforcement or continue with mental health services (Whaley, 2001), both institutions that have been historically associated with white privilege and whiteness.

Perhaps, however, the most profound consequences are when cultural mistrust impedes academic progress and educational outcomes for Black American students. For example, Terrell & Terrell, (1983) established that for some Black American students, higher levels of mistrust are associated with underperformance on standardized and intelligence tests when compared to Black American students with low levels of cultural mistrust. That work highlighted that Black American students may be suspicious of the intentions and implications of such tests (Terrell & Terrell, 1983). Furthermore, high levels of cultural mistrust have been negatively correlated with expected benefits of academic achievement, educational value, and motivation in both high school and undergraduate populations (Caldwell & Obasi, 2010; Irving & Hudley, 2005; 2008). Accordingly, Irving and Hudley (2008) and Caldwell and Obasi (2010) have demonstrated an inverse relationship between cultural mistrust and GPA among Black American undergraduate students.

It can be extrapolated that there are negative academic and educational outcomes associated with increased mistrust for whiteness. There very well maybe an underlying and unconscious process that occurs for Black American students who have higher levels of cultural mistrust. Therefore, it is imperative to identify and understand factors that feed that psychological process as well as those that can remedy, or diminish the effect of mistrust when linked to negative outcomes. The setting in which education takes place may be one of those factors (that feeds the psychological process related to cultural mistrust and breeds less than optimal consequences).

From a social-psychological perspective, when considering the potential influence of cultural mistrust on educational outcomes for Black American students, it is necessary to examine the educational setting as a potential mediating factor. Research has demonstrated that Black American students at Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs), display higher levels of cultural mistrust than those at Predominantly White Colleges or Universities (PWCUs: Caldwell & Obasi, 2010). However, interestingly, Black American students at HBCUs exhibit greater intrinsic motivation, academic self-concept, and increased positive perceptions of student-professor interactions, all variables linked to academic achievement, than those at PWCUs (Cokley, 2002). This suggests that Black American student's motivation, beliefs about their own academic abilities, as well as his or her perceptions of interactions may differ depending on the academic environment. Further, cultural mistrust may not have a negative impact on academic variables in some educational settings. One plausible explanation for this difference is that the psychological confrontation that occurs in Black American student's psyche at HBCUs and PWCUs is uniquely different. Black American students at PWCUs may be more confronted with unconscious cognitive processes such as imposter syndrome, or the notion that they will be exposed as a fraud and not truly capable as others perceive them to be, or a fear that they will be subject to implicit bias whereby professor's judgment is influenced by non-academic related qualities. Mistrust for White privilege and Whiteness may more so influence the interactions that students have with their professors on an unconscious level, at a PWCU.

Student-Faculty Interaction

Unique to the setting of a college or university is not only the culture, inclusive of expectations and the ambience, but also the individuals with whom students interact. Student-faculty interaction at the collegiate level, refers to the interchanges that occur not only in the classroom, but outside as well (Chickering, 1969). The interaction between students and faculty was initially examined in an effort to understand college student persistence and dropout prevention (Pascaraella & Terenzini, 1977; Spady, 1970; 1971; Tinto, 1975), but has since been identified as an integral part of college student success (Pascaraella & Terenzini, 2005). Research shows that student-faculty interaction is associated with positive outcomes in persistence, satisfaction, achievement, and intellectual and social development, among other academic and social variables, with greater contact having more favorable outcomes for students (Lamport, 1993; Lau, 2003; Pascaraella & Terenzini, 2005; Strauss & Terenzini, 2007).

The role of racial and ethnic differences in interactions between student and faculty has also been examined. Across all groups, student-faculty interaction yields positive results on a range of academic, social, and personal variables (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). Although positive benefits have been noted for all students, regardless of color, when considering interaction with faculty, the literature hints at the existence of a latent factor that influences Black American student's perceptions of these interactions. Researchers previously have found that, in comparison to their White peers, Black students are less likely to disclose personal information related to academic struggles with their professors, unless they are of a similar ethnic background (Noel & Smith, 1996). Thus, although interacting with faculty can aid in personal development, for Black American students, there is a latent factor that hinders them from sharing academic struggles and difficulties. In support, Kim and Sax (2009) reported that when compared to other racial groups, Black American students at a PWCU interacted with faculty more in regards to class and course related matters opposed to informal matters. Such studies allude to the level of comfort and trust Black American students have in this setting. Notably in Kim and Sax's (2009) study, with data collected at a PWCU, student-faculty interaction was linked to higher GPA and degree aspirations for Black American students, more than other ethnic groups. These findings partially contradict those of Cokley (2002), who found that, when compared to Black American students at a HBCU, those at PWI reported being less encouraged to continue their studies by faculty members as well as endorsed less positive student-faculty relationships. These differences may be attributed to the region in which data was collected as well as the university's campus culture. The setting and environment may play a critical role in the interactions between Black American students and faculty. Further, there may be an underlying construct that impacts perceptions of faculty interaction for Black American students in PWCU. For example, in a previous examination some Black American students endorsed having experienced verbal harassment by their professors (D'Augelli & Hersberger, 1993). This harassment, and other overt and covert microaggressions can not only influence Black American student's comfort and attitudes toward their placehood in institutions of higher education, but importantly, perceptions of their interactions with and trust for faculty. The university thereby inadvertently becomes an institution that perpetuates a cycle of mistrust.

When considering the direct impact of cultural mistrust on academic outcomes, or a distrust for whiteness and systems that historically were associated with whiteness, it is important to examine the effect that it has on the interactions Black American students have within this setting. Because social interactions and relationships in the academic environment prove to have a strong impact on academic outcomes, it is one that needs to be nourished. And given that cultural mistrust can negatively influence interactions in interpersonal relationships, it is important to consider this in the context of student professor interaction in higher education settings, especially those dominated by the presence of individuals incongruent to student's ethnic background.. This research investigated whether there is a relationship between levels of cultural mistrust and Black American student's perceptions of their interactions with faculty members at a PWCU. Secondly, it sought to answer does having a positive relationship with a Black American Professor lessen the impact of cultural mistrust on interactions with faculty.

The sample consisted of 132 Black American undergraduate students enrolled at a predominantly White university in the southwestern region of the United States. Most (70%) of the participants were female. The mean age of participants was 20.5 years (SD = 1.4, range = 17.0–28.0 years). The majority of participants (62%) were upperclassmen and 40% of the sample reported having experienced a salient confrontation with racism or discrimination. Students completed a basic demographic form to capture information on their racial identification, grade point average, gender, age, perceived socio-economic status, classification (year in school), as well as the education levels of their parent(s)/guardian(s).

The Cultural Mistrust Inventory

The Cultural Mistrust Inventory (CMI) is a 48-item self-report measure used to assess levels of mistrust toward White American society by Black Americans (Terrell & Terrell, 1981). The CMI assesses mistrust in the areas of education and training, interpersonal relations, business and work, and politics and law. The scale was correlated with the Social Desirability Scale (Jackson, 1970) and Racial Discrimination Index (Terrell & Miller, 1979) and details of psychometric properties and established validity are supported in Terrell and Terrell (1981). The CMI has previously demonstrated adequate internal consistency among adult populations, with Nickerson, Helms, and Terrell (1994) reporting alpha levels of .89, and Bell and Tracey (2006) reporting alpha levels of .94. Likewise, Caldwell and Obasi (2010) used the CMI in the assessment of college students and achieved alpha levels of .79. In the current study, only the Interpersonal Relations and Education and Training subscales of the CMI were used, as they were most relevant. Cronbach's alpha in the present study was .83. Each item of the Cultural Mistrust Inventory is on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). A sample item included "White teachers teach subjects so that it favors Whites". Higher scores indicate a tendency for individuals to be more mistrustful towards White Americans and institutions. A total mistrust score was generated by calculating the mean score for both subscales.

Student-Professor Interaction

Student-Professor interaction was assessed by using the Approachability, Caring Attitude, and Connectedness subscales from the Student-Professor interaction scale (Cokley, Rosales, Komarraju, Shan, Pickett, & Patel, 2006). Each subscale consists of four items on a 7 point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). A sample item from the Approachability subscale is "I feel comfortable approaching professors to discuss my grades and class work." This subscale has yielded an internal consistency coefficient range of $\alpha = .82$ to $.86$ in undergraduate populations (Cokley et al., 2006; Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010).

Cronbach's alpha for this study is .88. Cokley, et al., 2006 and Komarraju, et al., 2010 also reported good internal consistency among undergraduate students when using the Caring Attitude subscale, with a Cronbach's alpha range of .85 to .87. A sample item includes: "I feel that teachers generally care about me." Cronbach's alpha for the current study is .92. Lastly, the Connectedness subscale contained items such as: "I have faculty that I identify with on this campus." Cronbach's alpha ranged from .83 to .85 as reported by Cokley et al., 2006 and Komarraju, et al., 2010, for this subscale. Cronbach's alpha for this study is .84. A total student-professor interaction score was obtained by calculating the mean score for all three subscales combined. Cronbach's alpha for this investigation is .92 for the total student-professor interaction score.

Black American Professors and Racist Experience

Students were asked to report the number of Black American professors they had since enrolling at the university. Responses ranged from 0-20, with the mean being 2.53. It is possible that, given the composition of the campus, 20 was an outlier and an incorrect response as only one student reported such. This response was omitted from analysis. Students were also asked if they felt they had a positive relationship with one or more Black American professors. 65 percent of the students reported having a positive relationship with a Black American faculty member. Finally, students were asked if they ever experienced instances of racism or prejudice on campus and to provide a narrative of the experience. In regards to procedures, students were recruited through a university subject pool. They received an email that contained a hyperlink inviting them to participate in the online survey. Data collection occurred via the Internet using Qualtrics. Qualtrics, an online survey software, allows researchers to provide a hyperlink to participants to complete questionnaires. Students were told to complete study materials independently. They were also informed that although the materials asked for sensitive information regarding their attitudes and feelings, all responses they share would be kept confidential and, therefore, they should respond accurately and honestly. At the conclusion of the survey there was a debriefing statement that provided the purpose of the study.

Results

For cultural mistrust, student-faculty interaction, number of Black American professors, and GPA, the mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficients were calculated and presented. The mean value for mistrust in the education and training subdomain, the interpersonal relationships subdomain, and total cultural mistrust for females and males, and gender did not yield a statistically significant difference in the level of mistrust in education and training or the interpersonal relationships subdomain, nor in the total level of mistrust;

and there was no statistically significant difference in total perceptions of student professor interaction, caring attitude, approachability, and connectedness across gender as well, with again, no significant differences were found between under and upperclassmen when examining cultural mistrust or student-professor interaction.

Continuing, there was no significant difference in cultural mistrust levels for students who endorsed having experienced racism or discrimination ($M = 3.39, SD = .73$), and those who did not ($M = 3.21, SD = .68$). However, analysis revealed that students who endorsed having experienced racism or discrimination ($M = 4.14, SD = 1.42$) felt less connected to professors than those who did not ($M = 4.64, SD = 1.19; t [131] = 2.22, p = .03$). Students who endorsed having a positive relationship with one or more Black American professors reported feeling more connected to professors ($M = 4.60, SD = 1.23$) than did those who did not ($M = 3.73, SD = 1.32$), $t(114) = 3.28, p = .001$. In contrast, having a positive relationship with one or more Black American professors yielded no significant difference for college grade point average ($M = 3.31, SD = .99$) in comparison to those students who did not endorse such relationships ($M = 2.97, SD = 1.21$), $t(112) = 1.52, p = .13$. And finally, analysis revealed a negative correlation between total cultural mistrust and student faculty interaction ($r = -.32, p < .001$). Considering the components of each, Education and training was significantly correlated with approachability ($r = -.35, p < .001$) and caring attitude ($r = -.31, p < .001$) but not connectedness ($r = -.07, p = .42$). Further, Interpersonal Relations was correlated with approachability ($r = -.32, p < .001$), connectedness ($r = -.06, p = .503$), and caring attitude ($r = -.33, p < .001$).

A moderated hierarchical regression analysis was performed using total student faculty interaction as the dependent variable and cultural mistrust and positive relationship with a Black American professor as predictors. Cultural mistrust and positive relationship scores were entered in the first step; cultural mistrust scores, positive relationship scores, and the interaction term were entered in the second step. There was a significant main effect for cultural mistrust, $B = -.34, SE = .20, t(132) = -2.67, p = .01$, but not for the entered interaction term, $B = -.01, SE = .27, t(132) = -.02, p = .99$ on student professor interaction.

Discussion

This study sought to examine the relationship between cultural mistrust and student-faculty interaction in a predominantly white institution. Specifically, it assessed levels of mistrust in the areas of interpersonal relationships as well as education and training, and student-faculty interaction based on perceptions of faculty approachability, caring attitude, and connectedness. It was hypothesized that there would be a negative correlation between cultural mistrust and student-faculty interaction, such that students who were more mistrustful, would have negative perceptions of their interactions with their professors. This study also tested the hypothesis that have a positive relationship with a Black American professor would reduce the negative relationship between cultural mistrust and student professor interaction; and the results did not support this hypothesis.

Researchers have speculated that cultural mistrust may negatively impact Black Americans' perceptions of White institutions and White Americans (Terrell & Terrell, 1981). This mistrust is more so aimed toward whiteness overly pushed in historically white spaces. Although suspected to impact interpersonal relationships and interactions, no investigation has directly examined the link between levels of cultural mistrust and interpersonal connections, especially in an academic setting, a relationship that was confirmed.

In this study, higher levels of mistrust in the education and training domain were negatively correlated with students' perceptions of professors' caring attitude and approachability. Thus, when compared to students with lower levels of cultural mistrustful, those students who were more mistrustful perceived professors to be less approachable and unconcerned the student's educational outcomes. Importantly, the current **study** also found that higher levels of mistrust in interpersonal relationships are negatively linked to students' perceptions of faculty's caring attitude, approachability, and connectedness. This is a crucial finding, as it not only supports what was previously theorized by researchers Terrell and Terrell (1981) in regards to mistrust and interpersonal relationships, but also lends to the notion that Black Americans may not fully identify with and feel supported by the educational system (Steele, 1997).

Having a positive relationship with and Black American faculty member did not moderate the relationship between cultural mistrust and student-faculty interaction as expected. While researchers have suggested for decades to diversify the classrooms in higher education (Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2008) in an effort to increase Black student's comfort and connection, this does not impact their perceptions of faculty interactions. Such finding lends to cultural mistrust being something far more engrained with a large scale effect that needs to further be assessed. Perhaps it is not a "call to action" to have Black American faculty attempt to put a band aid on feelings of hurt, or fill the role of ambassador and mediator with whiteness and white institutions, but more so confronting and facing the issue in a candid and frank interaction; repairing these fragmented exchanges.

Limitations

Like all studies, this work is not without limitations. First, there are other aspects of student-faculty interaction that could have been assessed and may have been more crucial to understanding the role that cultural mistrust plays on this dynamic. This study does not consider other aspects of the student-faculty relationship. The scale used assessed 6 other areas (i.e. off-campus interactions, accessibility, career guidance, respectful interactions, negative experiences, and a validity scale: Cokley, et al., 2006), but in the interest of the length of the survey, a shortened version of the scale was used. Doing so limited the findings to only include three components of student's perceptions of their interaction with faculty.

Perhaps knowing more about their perceptions, such as negative experience would lead to a deeper conceptual understanding of cultural mistrust. Second, participants in this study came from a single institution in the Southwestern region of the United States. The demographics and encounters of racism and prejudice are somewhat unique in this region. Perhaps had data been collected at several different institutions from other regions, findings would have been somewhat different. Last, this study did not capture background information on the origins of mistrust. As it broadly focused on mistrust for individuals in an educational institution, it would have been worthwhile to further obtain information on whether personal or large scale cultural experiences was linked to the presence of mistrust.

The current study was the first to establish the negative relationship between cultural mistrust in interpersonal relationships and education and training and its impact on student-faculty interaction at a predominately white institution of higher education. Simply, the more mistrustful one is of Whiteness and spaces historically associated with whiteness, the least likely they are to interact with professors in this space. These are fragmented exchanges. Exchanges that have been broken, but have the potential for meaningful repair.

From a psychological perspective, to start the repair process, or healing, perhaps several steps need to happen first: An acknowledgement and clear understanding of the intricate pieces of mistrust. It is far greater than a mistrust for whites and white institutions as originally proposed by Terrell and Terrell (1981), and such a definition does not lend to the complex concept of large scale mistrust of a culture. We also need to confront the extent to which this mistrust now impacts the daily lives of Black Americans. Can it be rationalized as a wound that will not completely heal which only sometimes causes trouble, or a persistent nagging pain? Understanding this impact is to not encourage the “get over it attitude”, but to acknowledge its detrimental effect and break the psychological cycle. Coming to terms with these concepts will help to create an “intervention”: One that will either force Black Americans to settle in the status quo, or empower them to move forward in battle: realizing they cannot change others, but change themselves, their behavior, and how you respond to others

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