

Black college students get better grades with white roommate: study

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A new study of college freshman suggests that African Americans may obtain higher grades if they live with a white roommate. A detailed study of students at a large, predominantly-white university revealed that while living with a white roommate may be more challenging than living with someone of the same race, many Black students appear to benefit from the experience.

For African American students, this could translate into as much as 0.30-point increase in their GPA in their first quarter of college.

White students, on the other hand, were affected more by the academic ability of their roommate than by their race.

While the study results may seem one-sided, earlier studies by these researchers and others reinforces the value of students' experience with members of different races and ethnic groups.

Researchers from Ohio State University and Virginia Commonwealth University found that nearly one in every six interracial roommate relationships failed, meaning at least one roommate moved out, by the end of the first quarter. But African American students who were paired with a white roommate performed better academically than did those with a same-race roommate.

These African American students may be better adjusted to college because they live with someone who can help them learn about the

challenges and norms of a different environment, said Natalie Shook, lead author of the study, who started the work as a graduate student at Ohio State.

"It's already known that interracial roommate relationships are more difficult than same-race relationships. But despite the problems, we've shown that there are benefits in how well Black students perform academically," said Shook, who is now an assistant professor of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University.

She conducted the study with Russell Fazio, a professor of psychology at Ohio State, who has been studying interracial attitudes and relationships for the past 15 years. The pair published the results in the October 2008 issue of the journal *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*.

The pair collected data on college freshman in more than 2,700 dorm rooms at a large, predominately white university. They studied how successful relationships were for students who specifically requested to live with someone, as well those who were randomly assigned to a roommate. Room assignments were studied alongside the students' SAT or ACT scores, autumn quarter GPA in the fall of 2001 and 2002, and their ethnic background to test for significant differences between students in all room types.

The results showed that randomly assigned roommates were more likely to move to another room, regardless of the students' race. Fifteen percent of randomly paired interracial relationships dissolved, compared to the 8.1 percent and 6.4 percent of randomly assigned same-race white rooms and same-race African American rooms, respectively.

But the researchers point out that the number of interracial room dissolutions was much lower than they expected.

"The university in the study was experiencing a housing crunch that year, so more students probably may not have been able to change rooms for the first quarter. Some of the previous work showed much higher rates than did our work here. But of the 85 percent of those that did try to work things out, we see real, tangible benefits," Fazio said.

The researchers found that African American students who scored higher on their ACT (24 and above) and SAT (1040 and above) were more likely to be successful in college if they were randomly paired with a white student. Black students who scored lower on their ACT and SAT did not see any improvement in their GPA if they roomed with a white student.

The findings suggest that the interaction between a white and an African American student may help orient these minority students to a predominantly white university, Shook said. By living with their white counterparts, the African American students are finding someone with whom they can study and learn from in ways other African American students cannot offer.

"Particularly for minority students, there is a lot of added stress to belong and succeed at a predominately white university. This intergroup contact and exposure to diversity may help minority students adjust in ways same-race relationships cannot," Shook said.

"And if we can help them adjust more quickly to find their university identity, then hopefully that can also translate into more academic success."

However, white students' grades were virtually unaffected by the race of their roommate. White students earned higher GPAs when assigned to someone who was more successful academically.

"It's a predominately white institution, so their roommate is not a means by which they can get integrated into the community. So the race of the roommate proves irrelevant and the day-to-day environment becomes more important. If their roommate is very competent and studious, or less competent, more of a partygoer, that has a larger impact on their success," Fazio said.

Even though the race of their roommate did not affect them academically, the researchers believe that living with an African American benefits whites in another way.

Fazio said previous research suggests that many of the automatically activated stereotypes that whites may harbor about African Americans, consciously or subconsciously, dissolve when they interact extensively with someone of another race. This interaction not only helps white students get over their initial fears and prejudices, it also affects comfort level with other minorities in the future.

"It is definitely not easy for students at first; it is more stressful and more difficult to live in an interracial situation than in same race situations. But if people stick with it, their racial attitudes improve and it definitely outweighs any initial difficulty. This is just one way we can overcome our misconceptions and biases and learn to appreciate our differences earlier on in life," Shook said.

Source: Ohio State University

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