Research examines coping strategies of African-American students in predominantly white schools

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A new study examining the interactions of black and white high-achieving students in elite, private high schools reveals how today's millennial generation is negotiating race, identity and academic success. In a paper presented Aug. 8 at the 104th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA) in San Francisco, Michelle Burstion-Young, a University of Cincinnati doctoral student in sociology, says she is breaking new ground in sociological research - exploring culture and race in the leadership class of the millennial generation - in academically competitive environments where an achievement gap does not exist.

Burstion-Young's study focused on a survey and follow-up interviews with approximately 20 students representing three private prep high schools in the Midwest, including an all-male, all-female and co-ed school.

"Schools are one of the most important sites to study if we are to gain an understanding of how racial interaction is shaped," Burstion-Young writes in the study. "Schools are important not only because they perform the function of education, but also because they are key to how children and young adults become socialized."

"Little is known about how students negotiate the social world of school or how being labeled black (by others and/or self) may influence their social decisions, either by removing options (such as being purposefully

excluded or not being included) or creating other options (such as a black social world)," she writes.

Burstion-Young's study examined what she called four coping strategies used by minority students in predominantly white schools

Assimilation - "Acting white" or "acting black" in this environment was not a question of academics, but identity. According to Burstion-Young, both black and white students were dedicated to academic excellence and there were no differences in academic standards. Contrary to previous studies which state that high achieving blacks are viewed as "acting white," Burstion-Young says the black students identified with black culture through association with consumer culture, such as fashion and music, as well as slang and social circles. The students who did not connect to black culture on these levels were viewed as "acting white" - academic achievement (or lack thereof) had little to do with it. In at least one case in this study, an African-American student became so integrated into the white community that she lost her connectedness to her own family and culture, greatly upsetting the family and, Burstion-Young says, eliminating the spirit of integration in creating a generation of bridge-builders across cultures, identifying with each other but accepting and respecting cultural differences.

Integration - Burstion-Young says she found that most of the students actually strived to be bi-cultural or integrated in their dealings with people. Almost all of them placed a great deal of value on being connected with their own black culture and also with the majority (white) culture. She states that they felt that the former was necessary in order for them to have a support system, and that the latter was necessary in order to learn how to be successful in "the real world." Because the students valued being bicultural, associating with white students was not enough to be considered "acting white." Exclusive association with whites was the determining factor.

Separation - During school visits, separation between the races was particularly noted during time spent in the school cafeteria. "Separation is an important strategy for cultivating and maintaining a sense of black culture and while many school officials and white students discourage it on principle," writes Burstion-Young, "most of the black students realize that by not engaging with the black group, they risk being completely ostracized in the long run."

Marginalization - An example would be a shy student representing the only African-American in an AP class. Yet, the same student could be included in extracurricular activities or join African-American friends for lunch in the school cafeteria.

In conclusion, Burstion-Young states that separation seems to be the most popular coping strategy for the social space of students outside of their prep school environments. "The black students in this study were very interested in spending their 'free time' with family, friends and neighbors outside of school," states Bastion-Young. "Because our most intimate connections with people tend to happen intra-racially, the family, friends and neighbors they sought during their free time were overwhelmingly of the same race as themselves."

During school hours, the study revealed that social separation was more likely to occur due to lack of access to the majority/minority, such as not being invited to parties; a lack of interest in the social majority/minority, such as displaying no interest in attending a party or event that crossed racial lines; or preoccupation with one's own culture so that students were not purposefully excluding the other race, but not actively including them.

"For all of these reasons, the terms of most of the school life of blacks seem to be dictated by the dominant culture," writes Burstion-Young. "Therefore many of the students feel they must be instrumental in

seeking a black cultural space. When they do, the black students themselves are often accused of being the sole cause of racial separation which I refer to as the 'self segregation paradox,' because it obscures the role the dominant group has in maintaining social separation."

"One of the most important findings of this study," writes Burstion-Young, "is that most students simultaneously use a variety of different coping strategies, but they do so in somewhat different combinations for somewhat different reasons. At the center of their negotiations, however, is an overall concern with identity; more specifically, their coping strategies are geared towards reconciling different, and sometimes contradictory, expectations on identity."

Source: University of Cincinnati (news : web)