2018

From Invisible to Visible: Exploring Invisibility Syndrome and Coping Among African American Men

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INTRODUCTION: African American men may experience feelings of invisibility when maneuvering throughout the public education system. Encounters with alienation, discrimination, and prejudice play a major role in influencing one’s decision to remain in school or drop out. The research investigated the degree to which invisibility syndrome and associated coping mechanisms manifested in retrospective accounts in the K-12 experiences of African American college men. Findings suggest that alienation was the most prevalent feeling of invisibility followed by discrimination. Emotional regulation and higher education encouragement were found to be the most frequently used coping mechanisms among the participants. CONCLUSION: Overall, findings revealed that participants associated feelings of invisibility, but they possessed the psychological assets needed to overcome such a challenging emotional and psychological state. Implementing culturally responsive and relevant teaching practices in addition to cultivating a positive family-school-community connection can assist in promoting confidence and motivation within African American men to remain in school and persist to higher education.

BACKGROUND

Race related trauma is an event, encounter, or experience associated with race that disrupts emotional, physical, and/or psychological well-being (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2008). One of the numerous consequences of race related trauma includes invisibility syndrome. Invisibility syndrome is the belief system that one’s personal talents, abilities, and character are not acknowledged or valued by others due to racial prejudice (Franklin & Boyd, 2000). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2010), one of the primary reasons students leave school before graduation is a sense that school is not fulfilling their needs or goals. The interview protocol was developed to guide participants on their experiences in the public education system. In-depth interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The facilitator of the interview used a pre-screen questionnaire to ask each participant the same questions about their public education experiences. (i.e., Can you describe a time where you ever felt isolated or as if you did not belong in school?) The interviews were semi-structured and depended on the account of memories. Participants were then asked to recall a time where they felt discriminated against, experienced witness violence in school, and any academic or behavioral challenges they may have faced in school. The responses from participants were separated into codes that correlated with feelings of invisibility and codes that highlighted coping mechanisms used to overcome negative feelings. Text segments were included to provide verbatim content from participants during their interviews. The percentages of each code were calculated and then placed in order from most to least prevalent among the participants.

METHOD

The interview protocol was developed to guide participants on their experiences in the public education system. In-depth interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The facilitator of the interview used a pre-screen questionnaire to ask each participant the same questions about their public education experiences. (i.e., Can you describe a time where you ever felt isolated or as if you did not belong in school?) The interview protocol was developed to guide participants on their experiences in the public education system. In-depth interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The facilitator of the interview used a pre-screen questionnaire to ask each participant the same questions about their public education experiences. (i.e., Can you describe a time where you ever felt isolated or as if you did not belong in school?) The interviews were semi-structured and depended on the account of memories. Participants were then asked to recall a time where they felt discriminated against, experienced witness violence in school, and any academic or behavioral challenges they may have faced in school. The responses from participants were separated into codes that correlated with feelings of invisibility and codes that highlighted coping mechanisms used to overcome negative feelings. Text segments were included to provide verbatim content from participants during their interviews. The percentages of each code were calculated and then placed in order from most to least prevalent among the participants.

RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Invisibility Codes</th>
<th>Coping Codes</th>
<th>Text Segment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alienation (100%)</td>
<td>Extracurricular Activities (40%)</td>
<td>...after getting into high school and getting involved in all the groups and clubs and activities... kinda changed that.” (Male 5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discrimination (80%)</td>
<td>Emotional Regulation (100%)</td>
<td>... And I would be like “Can I be the line leader?” And so the teacher would be like “You can be the line leader.”... Honestly I was just thinking about it... it’s funny. It’s kind of funny... “ (Male 2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Mattering (40%)</td>
<td>Faculty Support and Guidance (20%)</td>
<td>... guidance counselor at my high school... I just went to her office and it was a safe place for me.” (Male 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Discipline (40%)</td>
<td>Family Support (80%)</td>
<td>... Like every time that I got into trouble it was always a reason behind it, they knew I never really started anything I always finished it. So it was like anything that caused me to get into a fight there was a good stand behind it... for the most part my parents knew it was a normal response from anybody. So it was kinda’s okay.” (Male 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally Irresponsible (40%)</td>
<td>Higher Education Encouragement (100%)</td>
<td>...The history that I learned about was... all Europeans... But now it’s I’m actually getting something you know here in my background.” (Male 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Harassment (40%)</td>
<td>Religion (20%)</td>
<td>...I believe in my religion and I’m very strong in it... it’s not just me going through it, it’s all Muslims basically.” (Male 3)</td>
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REFERENCES


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CONCLUSION

The study aimed to identify the extent to which invisibility syndrome manifested in the K-12 experiences of African American men. Findings suggest that school counselors should:

• 1) Develop programming for students new to school;
• 2) Advocate for culturally responsive and relevant teaching practices; and
• 3) Cultivate positive family-school-community connections.

In larger schools, it may be important for teams of counselors, administrators, and other faculty and staff members to collaborate on ways schools can create formal and informal opportunities for students to feel significant valued. Practical strategies for counselors include:

• 1) Partnering with administrators to increase awareness among faculty and staff on the importance of having a positive emotional climate in the school;
• 2) Being highly accessible and visible to students as a form of social support;
• 3) Providing opportunities for students to discuss their feelings, and
• 4) Modeling positive interpersonal relationships with other adults in the community.

The study has several limitations. The sample was extracted from a larger study of 22 participants and only highlighted the experiences of African American men. The study focused on the Experiences of Five Male Non-African American Male Urban High School Students’ Experiences of Mattering to Others at School. Professional School Counseling, 14, 135-145. doi: http://www.jstor.org/stable/43793462.


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American Men