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

## American Men

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### ABSTRACT

**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 dropout. **METHOD:** This research investigated the degree to which invisibility syndrome and associated coping manifested in retrospective accounts in the K-12 experiences of African American collegiate men. **RESULTS:** 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 participants assumed internalized feelings of invisibility, but they possessed the psychological assets needed to overcome such a damaging 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, 2005). 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-Franklin, 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 for them. Males receive 71% of all school suspensions and comprise of 67% of all special education students by the time they reach high school (Rubel & Schulz, 2011). This study aims to investigate the degree to which invisibility syndrome manifested in retrospective accounts in the K-12 experiences of African American collegiate men.



### METHOD

#### PARTICIPANTS

A sample of five men were extracted from a larger qualitative study exploring the public education experiences of African American and Latinx college students. Participants were selected on a voluntary basis and were required to self-identify as Black/African American and experience some form of race related trauma in the public education system. Participants from this study ranged between 19 and 22 years and identified as either Black/African American or African.

#### PROCEDURE AND ANALYSIS

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 retrospective and depended on the recount of memories. Participants were then asked to recall a time where they felt discriminated against, experienced or 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

Invisibility Codes	Coping Codes	Text Segment
Alienation (100%)	Extracurricular Activities (40%)	"..after getting into high school and getting involved in all the groups and clubs and activities ...kinda' changed that." (Male 5)
Discrimination (80%)	Emotional Regulation (100%)	" ... And I would be like "Can I be the line leader?" ... And so the teacher would be like "You can be the caboose." ...Honestly I was just thinking about it ... It's funny. It's kind of funny ... " (Male 2)
Lack of Mattering (40%)	Faculty Support and Guidance (20%)	"... guidance counselor at my high school ...I just went to her office and it was a safe place for me." (Male 1)
School Discipline (40%)	Family Support (80%)	"...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 reason behind it ...for the most part my parents knew it was a normal response from anybody. So it was kinda' okay." (Male 5)
Culturally Irresponsive (40%)	Higher Education Encouragement (100%)	" ...The history that I learned about was like ... all Europeanized ...But now it's like I'm actually getting something you know here in my background." (Male 5)
Verbal Harassment (40%)	Relied on Religion (20%)	" ..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)

### CONCLUSION

The study aimed to identify the extent to which invisibility syndrome manifest in the K-12 experiences of African American men. Findings suggest that experiencing alienation was the most prevalent followed by discrimination. Majority of the participants resonated with feelings of loneliness and isolation when discussing their experiences. School discipline, lack of mattering, verbal harassment, and culturally irresponsible were tied for being the least prevalent due to only one or two participants expressing these codes of invisibility. Participants that expressed the need to feel included and accepted in the school setting were able to push through feelings of invisibility as a result of 6 coping strategies. Coping centered on higher education encouragement, emotional regulation, and support from family.

#### Implications:

Diminishing hostile and antagonistic school environments can assist in promoting confidence and motivation within African American men to remain in school and persist to higher education. Rubel and Schulz (2011) suggests 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 and 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) Showing concern for students daily and connecting with them verbally and
- 4) Modeling positive interpersonal relationships with other adults in the school and in the community.

Simply asking students how they are and inquiring about their families can go a long way in establishing positive school climate (Dixon et. al (2010).

#### Limitations:

The study has several limitations. The sample was extracted from a larger study of 22 participants and only highlighted the experiences of males. The sample size only consisted of five participants which narrowed variation within the results. Future research may include individuals from other ethnically diverse groups and correlate the differences or similarities of feelings of invisibility and coping mechanisms across these groups.

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