

Cultural Clash & Mismatch among African American Students

A Theoretical Approach

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Introduction

Being African Americans, and the implications that gender and sex has on identifying as an African American male or female on this campus, has brought about a new wave of misconceptions. Our findings focused on cultural mismatches and clashes that are now, more than ever, prevalent throughout society. Cultural mismatch can be defined as a discrepancy between the conditions, needs, and means of the people based largely upon the culture one is brought up in and the inability of another to relate to that particular upbringing (dictionary.com). One such cultural mismatch we researched was that of teachers and students:

A cultural mismatch among African American school students and their teachers, due to diverse values, norms, and expectations, often provokes inappropriate teacher response to student conduct, thereby inciting disruptive student behavior. The management of this diversity, when the environment is devoid of a teacher's sensitivity to the student's life, can impact students' behavior, and ultimately, initiate an alternative school referral. This study examines such student-teacher interactions through the lens provided by the analogous dynamics of iatrogenic harm, wherein an intervention by a medical or other specialist results in additional impairment or disease. This study intends to reveal, through the voice of the urban African American alternative school student, how a teacher's response to student behavior can inadvertently create a condition in the student that spurs problematic behavior. Other teachers understand that culturally motivated actions are often construed as negative, but choose to respond in a way that creates positive interaction. Through stories of the researcher, participants, and other students, this study will qualify the unspoken, and glorify the lives of those who might otherwise not be heard (Berger, 2006).

This “mismatch”, such as the one above, is common within American educational systems beginning in pre-kindergarten years and lasting all the way through secondary schooling. This next mismatch, also found in the education sphere, reiterates the fact that many education systems are ill prepared to deal with diverse situations and require more educating on the issue:

Cultural Practices of the Pacific are communal and cooperative rather than competitive. Pedagogy, on the other hand, often tends to model historic western educational training with a focus on individual strengths and practices. This research in progress seeks to identify areas of cultural mismatch in teaching practices and identify potential foci for teacher education programs which prepare teachers from and for the Pacific. Multicultural education, a recent phenomenon in the western world, seeks to find answers

in differences in achievement in schools between students of different cultures. Generally, ideas presented suggest that there is a mismatch between pedagogy and culture, i.e., that a change in teacher attitude and pedagogy will make a difference in achievement (Bailey & Monroe, 2002).

Along with the cultural mismatches we have touched upon, we wanted to focus on cultural clashes throughout society that relate to the issue proposed. Cultural clash can be defined as uncommon cultural and personal experiences that lead to one group perceiving the other and not knowing how to accommodate or associate accordingly with that group (dictionary.com). One such cultural clash prevalent in society is between teachers and students:

A conceptual framework was developed to provide proactive relationship building strategies for professionals in special education and the African American families they serve. Cultural clashes have occurred between the respective groups because of the dissimilar cultural and personal experiences that shape one group's perceptions of the other. Yet, collaborative parent-provider relationships can be established through deconstructing the disparate factors that influence both the perceptions of African American parents and those of professionals. Through utilizing a family- and culture-centered planning approach to services, professionals may begin to more fully understand the factors that shape their own experiences and those of the families they serve. This will serve to reduce the cultural clash between the respective groups and create more positive outcomes for parents and providers (Boyd & Correa, 2005).

The abstract above reinforces the growing accountability of cultural clash between teachers and students. Another cultural clash we focused on was one between different races:

This examines the use of culture as an analytical tool for understanding African women's experiences, focusing on its use as a weapon of resistance against oppression & basis for a new world order. The cultural clash between patriarchal European & matriarchal African peoples & its role in European domination are discussed. The origins & evolution of racist ideologies, attitudes, & behavior in European civilizations are traced. It is argued that European patriarchy underlies the resulting social inequalities affecting African men & women. The role of African womanism in the construction of the African worldview is assessed. Resistance to European oppression & its manifestation in the Pan-Africanist & Black Nationalist movements is described, highlighting the role of women as mothers. It is concluded that African womanist theory will play a key role in African liberationist efforts to recover complementary relationships between men & women as the basis for self-determination (Dove, 1998).

A growing phenomenon often ignored and not researched enough is that of cultural mismatch and clash between members of the same race. Being members of the minority

group sparked an interest in this research, because it has often been overlooked, under researched and there is an under representation for those experiencing such clashes and mismatches on campus.

The prevalence of cultural mismatch between African American males and females on the UNH campus is becoming increasingly customary. The major paradigm is a discrepancy between what appropriate gender roles are for African American men and women, and what is actually occurring. In this review we will be attempting to distinguish what the causal factors are for this “unacceptable behavior” and the university’s efforts to address this growing epidemic.

Our inquiries led us to the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs. With research and outreach programs relative to the research we have proposed, “O.M.S.A.” was the perfect candidate. The Office of Multicultural Student Affairs is an organization established by UNH that creates opportunity for people to participate in an inclusive community and explore and understand diversity, injustice and equity. OMSA’s work is grounded in an understanding of diversity that includes people of all abilities, ages and ethnicities, genders, nationalities, races, religions/spiritual traditions, socio-economic classes, and sexualities. Providing support and development for students of color and LGBTQ students is at the heart of the work conducted by OMSA officials and affiliates. The ways in which OMSA accomplishes its mission is through actively advocating for members of protected groups, promoting self-awareness of discrepancies and inadequacies that circulate through society, providing students with new social networks both within OMSA and by introducing UNH students to other individuals with commonalities and similar areas of interest and concern, and by directing students to

other resources on the UNH campus, or abroad, if OMSA cannot deal with the presented issue on its own. OMSA also offers cultural and educational programs, provides computers for students to surf the web, check their email, or write a paper, free printing for students, social and study space, a video library, and educational resources for faculty, student life and residential life staff (OMSA Information Pamphlet).

The Director of OMSA

Richard and I (Marco) personally interviewed the Director of OMSA, Sean McGhee, on Wednesday November 14th at 3:00pm in his office. We sat and talked with Sean for roughly 2 hours, as he provided us with all the data found in this review. Mr. McGhee has been in office at OMSA for the past 10.5 years. He has also conducted work and research in the Ivory Coast of Africa both before and during his time as Director. As Mr. McGhee has traveled and observed countries outside of the United States, and countries not influenced by a European world view, he has studied the differences of culture around the globe. Moreover, he has examined the many faults and discrepancies, such as cultural clash/mismatch within the same race, symptomatic only to the United States, and had the opportunity to compare those inadequacies to those found in other parts of the world. An African American individual himself, Sean McGhee's compassion for his work runs deep in his veins, as it is certain that he himself has faced injustice personally.

General Focus of OMSA

The general focus of OMSA, as it pertains to issues of gender and sex overall, is aimed at the adequate treatment of members of the LGBTQ community and educating students on the negative implications of being ignorant towards LGBTQ concerns.

Moreover, OMSA is heavily involved in attempting to alleviate the UNH community from acts of Sexism, Genderism and Trans-Genderism. The ways in which OMSA accomplishes this is through educating students about sexual orientation and freedom of expression, promoting information about trans-phobia, teaching ideologies about gender dynamics, correcting misconceptions and false pretenses through the presentation of liable factual information, and helping individuals understand the relevance of social construction in all of these areas (Sean McGhee 11/14/07).

The Office of Multi-Cultural Student Affairs offers both “walk in” services to UNH students and service by appointment. The dedicated individuals that work in OMSA, such as Jay Green & Ellen Semran, are available for counseling services during normal business hours, and also act as Active Advocates for students inside OMSA, around the UNH campus, and even outside of Durham if needed. The director himself, Sean McGhee, will personally accompany any UNH student seeking advocacy as long as he is told in advance. OMSA is a firm believer in active support services, and its commitment is reflective in the lengths in which members will extend their “arms” in order to accomplish this mission. OMSA is also connected with many other resources such as UNH Legal Services, and has influential organizations like the NAACP on speed dial- if OMSA is presented with any dilemma that exceeds its capacity (Sean McGhee 11/14/07).

Particular Issue OMSA Addresses

Although OMSA is heavily involved with numerous operations, and often forced to juggle many problems simultaneously, a particular issue of concern that OMSA has always had to deal with is that of cultural clash and cultural mismatch. Overall there has

been a lack of diversity on the UNH campus, and even though the university has made several attempts to diminish this problem, it is one that is still quite prevalent. Surprisingly however, more evident than cultural clash and mismatch across races at UNH, has been an established and growing problem of cultural clash and mismatch between members of the same race. More specifically, a clash and mismatch between African American Men and African American Women. The problem seems to reside in the gender and sex expectations that Black men and women have for one another, and the differing personal identifications that these men and women have conceptualized for themselves (Sean McGhee 11/14/07).

With a limited selection available, it is already difficult for Black men and women who are interested in a same race relationship to find a partner. With the addition of the cultural clash and cultural mismatch phenomenons, successful same race relationships have been next to impossible. But how can it be feasible for individuals in the same race to develop such a misconception of one another, especially in an environment where there aren't many of their kind to begin with? According to director Sean McGhee, differing expectations between Black men and women are due to the differing dynamics of the Black individuals recruited to come to UNH. The majority of Black male students on campus are athletes who come from environments or attended schools that are considered "suburban", while the Black females on campus identify with cultures that are more urban, and were schooled in those respective areas before coming to UNH. These different cultural upbringings have brought about different views, beliefs, values, and expectations similar to those found across different races. But in this instance, according to Black women, Black men aren't "acting" like real Black men. While on the other hand,

according to Black men, Black women are being irrational and inconsiderate to how they have been socialized (Sean McGhee 11/14/07).

The majority of Black males on the UNH campus are athletes; in addition they are athletes that played sports for high schools where most of the students were white. As a result, many of these Black students have been exposed to higher amounts of white individuals prior to attending UNH, and identify more with many of the characteristics and traditions considered to be “white”. Moreover, these same Black males are accustomed to the notion of interracial relationships, as the majority of women available to them have always consisted of white individuals (Sean McGhee 11/14/07).

On the contrary, the Black females on the UNH campus have been exposed to minute amounts of “white culture” previous to college, and are originally from, or have been, schooled in urban environments. So upon attending UNH, many of them have suffered from severe cultural shock. They have long sought support from their Black male counterparts, but have historically been left hanging in the wind. While Black females struggle to adapt to their new world, Black males seem to blend in more naturally to the UNH environment, as it is one that differs minimally from what they were already accustomed to in high school and at home. Moreover, Black men continue to seek comfort from the same types of women they have always known, and as a result, many Black women are often overlooked and ignored. This pattern of events has lead to severe levels of misconception between Black men and women. While Black men continue to engage in the same actions they have always engaged in, and continue to behave in a manner that reflects suburban socialization, Black women get the impression that they are

being betrayed by Black men, and that the Black men have abandoned their roots and are losing touch with their heritage (Sean McGhee 11/14/07).

History of Cultural Clash & Mismatch

The University of New Hampshire has been criticized for its lack of diversity for years, and as a result there have been considerable efforts made to try and change this reality. Although the lack of diversity found here at UNH is quite extreme, due to the demographics of the state of New Hampshire as a whole, it is inevitable that there are cultural discrepancies in the schooling systems. UNH, along with many other universities located in rural areas across the nation, has struggled to meet the difficult demands of providing a diverse environment for attendees, while simultaneously making sure that those students who are accepted also meet the university's strict academic requirements and standards. As a result, UNH has relied heavily on the recruitment of minority athletes and minority scholars to fill the diversity void. The problem here however, is where these athletes and scholars are coming from. In order to be desired by a university and eventually accepted, students must acquire a certain level of human capital that is primarily obtained in those schools and environments that are suburban identified. Not to say that all students attending college come from suburban environments, but the majority of them do. As a result, the few students who do not come from suburban environments and are more urban identified, yet still have the grades and extra-curricular activities that meet the university's standards, are allowed into college but not adequately compensated with classmates who have experiences similar to their own; a result of a lack of individuals from urban environments achieving educational levels higher than high school. This method of recruitment fulfills the university's requirements to actively

seek minority students, and it provides minority scholars with other students of the same race; however, it does not adequately provide students with individuals of the same culture. Race is not a synonym for culture, and therefore it cannot replace it. But since race has been used as a supplement for culture in the recruitment process historically, a new age of cultural clash and mismatch has developed (Sean McGhee 11/14/07).

How OMSA Has Addressed Cultural Clash & Mismatch

For the past 9 years, OMSA has been confronted with various issues pertaining to tribulations between Black males and females. After addressing the problem for 3 years and still falling short of an adequate solution, in the spring of 2001 OMSA aligned itself with the Black Student Union, more commonly known as BSU. Together the two organizations worked diligently to try and find the causal factors involved with the developing problem of “cultural clash/mismatch” between the African American students enrolled at UNH. On the surface, the issue seemed to stem from a lack of African Americans all together, but after conducting several formal meetings and discussions with Black Male Athletes and Black Female students on campus, members of OMSA and BSU quickly discovered the problem was much more complex (Sean McGhee 11/14/07).

Neither of the parties had anything positive to share about the other when vocalizing their opinion. As previously stated, Black females felt as if they were being betrayed by Black men, and that Black men have lost touch with their roots and heritages. It was discussed in the spring meeting that, if Black male students at UNH have abandoned their roots, that detachment took place years before attending UNH, so that isn't the problem of concern. The issue isn't the abandonment of roots or heritage on the Black males end, but rather a difference in roots from the get go, and an inappropriate

assignment of what a Black male is and should be according to Black females. It was also determined that Black women on this campus seek Black males that are urban identified, and it is their generalization of the “urban identified Black male” into the “Black male” that brings about this modern day notion of cultural clash and mismatch. On the contrary, Black males are not completely innocent. It was determined that Black male athletes, although being socialized and accustomed to environments lacking diversity earlier in life, still have a moral responsibility as Black individuals to reach out to Black females as supporters, advocates, and resources for them (Sean McGhee 11/14/07).

The Office of Multicultural Student Affairs stills works closely with the Black Student Union to provide counseling, advocacy and support on the issue of cultural clash and mismatch between African American students. Together the two organizations have held several follow up meetings with Black Athletes and Black Female students regarding this issue. OMSA and BSU also plan to hold yet another meeting in the near future addressing the same concept, unfortunately however, neither that information nor the findings in the follow up meetings post spring 2001 have been released for our availability. Although OMSA does not in any way play “match maker” for Black students, OMSA has been successful in educating students as to why they are confronted with their cultural discrepancies, and through providing proper knowledge, have helped students cope with, address, and better their situations (Sean McGhee 11/14/07).

Why OMSA's Work Is Important

Both Richard and I (Marco) are minority students on the UNH campus, and as a result we have both been confronted with issues of cultural clash/mismatch and numerous other situations pertaining to Race, Ethnicity, and lack thereof, on several occasions

during the course of our years here. Due to this misfortune, we both have relied on OMSA at one point or another for advocacy, counseling or resources to some degree. Moreover, through being in close contact with the faculty members of OMSA and the many students who affiliate and familiarize themselves with OMSA, the both of us have expanded our social networks and established a safe haven for ourselves if ever one is needed.

More important than our personal biases however, is the fact that OMSA is directed and coordinated by well educated individuals who have a sincere passion for the work they do and believe in. Director Sean McGhee has held his position at OMSA for the past 10.5 years, and has great interests and expertise in all that OMSA is involved in. Other faculty members include Jay Green and Ellen Semran, who provide expertise in Multicultural affairs and LGBTQ concerns respectively. With a strong and compassionate leader organizing and heading its existence, along with superior faculty members with years of personal and educational experience under their belts, it is no wonder why OMSA has been operating in the Memorial Union Building for over a decade. OMSA's overall effect on the UNH community as a whole is immeasurable, even without including all that is has provided for the members of protected groups.

Conclusion

The University of New Hampshire has put forth efforts to increase diversity on campus through programs such as "Discover UNH" and "CONNECT", but there is still more work ahead. The foundation for these problems, which we have chosen to focus on, is diversity. Thus, ending said problem (diversity), would allow more time to be spent on ending other problems pertaining to the subject at hand.

The prevalence of cultural misconstructions has not only been found on this campus, but rather increasingly across the nation on a larger scale. Significant numbers of immigrants coming into this country widen the cultural gap. Thus, furthering the disconnection between cultures and resulting in an increase in cultural mismatches and clashes alike. This inability to connect, convey, and comprehend what is trying to be transmitted is adding to the ever increasing cultural misreading.

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Interview with Sean McGhee on Wednesday November 14th, 2007

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