

The negative stereotypes about mental health, and African-American College students' willingness to seek counseling

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Abstract

Mental health issues, such as excessive stress, anxiety and depression, are common among the college students. Students from minority populations disproportionately experience these issues, which impacts their overall functioning. It is well known that African Americans and others underutilise mental health service and are more likely to discontinue services even when they seek such services. Given this observation, the present study examines the attitude of African American college students towards seeking mental health services. Specifically, the study will highlight negative stereotypes attached to seeking mental health services, and how these impact the willingness of African American college students to seek mental health services. The study will explore ways to combat these negative stereotypes. Additionally, the study will also discuss the many barriers that come in to play with African Americans in seeking mental health opportunities.

Keywords: Stereotypes, African Americans, mental Health, counseling, willingness.

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1. Introduction

College students across the world are experiencing significant mental health issues. Globally, it has been estimated that one fifth of all the college students experience mental health issues (Auerbach, 2016). In the United States, it was reported in 2008 that more than one in three college student experience depression and suicide ideation (American College Health Association, 2008). Blanco et al. (2008) also found that almost half of the college students met the DSM-IV criteria for at least one mental disorder in the previous year, including 18% for a personality disorder, 12% for an anxiety disorder and 11% for a mood disorder. In another study, it was also reported that 6% of undergraduate students and 4% of graduate students reported having suicide ideation (Drum et al., 2009). In a more recent study, it was found that 17% of students showed signs positive signs of depression, 9% showed signs for major depression and 10% of demonstrated panic or generalised anxiety disorder (Hunt, 2010). This presents a significant problem given that unidentified and untreated mental health disorders may have significant implications for a college students' academic success and productivity.

1.1. African Americans and mental health

Recently, it is estimated that 40% of African Americans are at risk for mental and behavioural health problems (American Psychological Association, 2005). With such a high prevalence rate, African Americans should have the appropriate services that are able to accommodate those statistics. The issues range from schizophrenia to Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Some predominantly black neighbourhoods are filled with criminal activity, and this is where PTSD comes into the equation. According to the American Psychological Association, there is a 25% chance of youth that have witnessed violence in some form will suffer from PTSD. Along with PTSD comes Schizophrenia, there is 50% more chance that African Americans will have Schizophrenia compared to Hispanics. Many issues are faced with Behavioural Health in African Americans, but those statistics are based on people that have willingly sought professional help, which means that those numbers could be higher.

1.2. African American college students and mental health

Attending college can create multiple circumstances, from high stress levels of stress to financial hardships. Thus, with being a college student comes in another obstacle that has to be accounted for. Levels of stress are heightened in the college. From course assignments to daily obligations (job) are a part of life during college years. As demands increase, many students struggle with findings coping skills to help them navigate through the process.

Along with the difficulties of maintaining a healthy mental status, some African American students have other issues to conquer. For example, being a first generation college student would be one circumstance. Being the first person of an ancestry to attend a post-secondary institution could create a few issues. To name a couple, not having anyone to empathise or provide financial support during the years of completing a degree.

1.3. Attitude of African American students to mental health

Negative stereotypes of mental health treatment can be resilient barriers to seeking mental health services. Along with stereotypes, other barriers are in place that sometimes hinder individuals from seeking help from mental health professionals. The issues, such as finances, insurance policies and cultural differences, are parts of the equation to why willingness for African American college students is limited.

1.4. Stereotypes

Stereotypes are generalised statements about a certain group of people. Stereotypes that are faced with African Americans often hinder actions towards combating mental disorders and issues. Several scholarly articles discuss how many African Americans seem to have many generalised thoughts on individuals that cope with mental health issues. *Racial Differences in Stigmatizing Attitudes Toward People with Mental Illness* discussed some of the most common stereotypes ascribed to individuals with mental health illnesses. One stereotype discussed was how African Americans were likely to view people with psychological issues to be violent. This common stereotype often discourages social interactions with others. Another stereotype that is frequently assumed is that mental differences are caused by some form of demonic spirit. Although the thought seems very religious, it is highly prominent within the African American community.

An article composed by Tepper, Rogers, Coleman, and Malony entitled *The Prevalence of Religious Coping Among Persons With Persistent Mental Illness* showed how many people saw prayer as an effective method of coping. Over 80% of people that participated in the study referred to some form of religious activity during times of distress while dealing with a mental illness.

1.5. Willingness

We can describe willingness as the drive or enthusiasm to complete or engage in acts. Willingness can explain how some African Americans do not want to participate in mental health services. It is important to know how a lack of willingness can hinder how African Americans prioritise mental health. One reason for this is the use of religious methods to treat psychological and emotional troubles instead of medication or other professional techniques of treatment.

An article composed by Tepper, Rogers, Coleman, and Malony (*The Prevalence of Religious Coping Among Persons With Persistent Mental Illness*) exposed how many people saw prayer as an effective method of coping. The heavy reliance of religious strategies could often deter African Americans from getting help from a mental health professional. Over 80% of people that participated in the study referred to some form of religious activity during times of distress while dealing with a mental illness. It is also important to acknowledge the history of religion when it comes to African Americans. Because of many African Americans viewing religious acts as treatment, people that battle with mental problems view seeking professional help as an 'easy way out' or not a necessity. Along with not being a necessity, religious perspectives view demonic or satanic spirits as a part of the issues with mental disorders. Although religion can be a tool that could be used in the treatment, it should not be the only source of treatment. By relying solely on religion can hinder people's willingness to seek help from an expert.

1.6. Statement of the problem

Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) collected research on the college students and discovered how nearly 50% suffered from some type of mental disorders. Even though the prevalence of mental health issues within college students are high, only 24% of students diagnosed with depression seek treatment. African Americans are 20% more likely to experience some form of a mental illness. With such a high level of the black population being affected, it is crucial to provide insight into the factors that engender negative stereotypes which constitute a barrier to students receiving services. More importantly, negative attitudes and stereotypes among African American college students towards mental health services are relatively unknown. It is, therefore, important to explore this topic to gain understanding.

1.7. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore negative stereotypes held by African American college students and how they impact their willingness to seek counselling. In order to achieve this purpose, a descriptive survey design will be used to collect the data from both graduate and undergraduate students that are enrolled in a large Historically Black University in a Southern State.

1.8. Significance of the study

College students are prone to struggle with depression. Focusing on a population that have to combat both dynamics of being a being black and a college student is important to understanding the various boundaries they encounter. This will help practitioners to develop strategies that can improve culturally accepted methods of the treatment. It is important to note that environmental factors and other affects are impactful in the ways that African American college students seek treatment.

1.9. Definition of terms

Stereotypes—generalised thoughts or feelings towards a particular group

African American—someone who identifies as 'black'; from African origin

Mental Health—wellbeing of the psychological state

Mental health services—these can be classified as going to counselling sessions as well as seeking psychiatric help from psychiatrists and psychologists

Religious Coping—using strategies, such as prayer, meditation for care of mental health illnesses

Depression—The individual must be experiencing five or more symptoms during the same 2-week period and at least one of the symptoms should be either (1) depressed mood or (2) loss of interest or pleasure.

1. Depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day.
2. Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day.
3. Significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain, or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day.
4. A slowing down of thought and a reduction of physical movement (observable by others, not merely subjective feelings of restlessness or being slowed down).
5. Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day.
6. Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt nearly every day.
7. Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day.
8. Recurrent thoughts of death, recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide.

*To receive a diagnosis of depression, these symptoms must cause the individual clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. The symptoms must also not be a result of substance abuse or another medical condition. * (DSM-5)

Suicide—killing of oneself

Suicide Ideation—the idea of killing oneself

First Generation College Students—someone who is the first of their lineage to attend college. Schizophrenia Two (or more) of the following, each present for a significant portion of time during a 1-month period (or less if successfully treated). At least one of these must be:

1. Delusions
2. Hallucination
3. Disorganised speech (e.g., frequent derailment or incoherence)
4. Grossly disorganised or catatonic behavior
5. Negative symptoms (i.e. diminished emotional expressions or avolition).

1.10. Prevalence of mental health among African Americans

A study done by Ward, Wiltshire, Detry and Brown (2013) examined the thoughts of African American women and men towards mental illness. After the completion of the study, it was concluded that African Americans were at a higher chance of believing that mental health issues could be resolved on their own. It was also shown that older African Americans saw mental illness as a weakness. Reason behind this article is to define how African Americans view mental health and the ways those thoughts are acted upon.

1.11. Disadvantages Faced by African Americans

Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley composed an article examining the large vocabulary gap among children in various socioeconomic status (SES). The longitudinal study happened over the course of 3 years. Hart and Risley have worked to understand the effects of SES on language for over 50 years. From their earlier studies in the 1960's, during the War on Poverty, statistical evidence was founded that supported the case of low SEC having a negative effect on language. In their earlier studies, they managed to increase the amount of words of children in families with low income levels but the skills were not sustained. In this study (the 30 Million Word Gap), they worked to view how the levels varied and grew across the 3-year time span.

Children ranged from the age of seven to nine months and lived between four SES brackets (upper, middle, lower and welfare). Hart and Risley recruited friends to participate and children from the Turner House Playhouse in Kansas City. They also promoted through birth announcements to promote families to participate as well. By the end of the study, 42 families remained for up to two and a half years of data collection. Of the 42 families, 17 were African American. Most of the children were within the upper and middle SES (13), 10 were middle SES and six were in families that were on welfare.

The experiment began when children were between the ages of seven and 9 months. Observational logging was the method that was used to collect the data. Recordings were also used to obtain very detailed material from the home. By the end of the experiment, Bart and Risley had over 1,300 hours of interaction between the children and their families. In addition to examining the word usage, conductors also focused on raising techniques of the parents. 29 of the 42 students were tested in the third grade to examine how their vocabularies grew up until the age of nine and 10.

Data showed that SES had a large effect on children's word level. Three-year-old children from families on welfare had less vocabulary than student from other SESs and were also adding words at a slower rate. Based on the recorded data collected, 3 year olds in upper SES experienced 2,153 words per hour, middle SES experienced 1,251 words per hour and children on welfare experienced 616 words per hour. Children from low financial background have roughly half of the amount of words per hours compared to children in higher financial backgrounds. 86% to 96% of words that children knew were words that parents once said around their children.

Prohibitions and affirmations were also measured. Children on welfare were receiving 5 affirmatives and 11 prohibitions per hour, whereas children in professional families were accumulating 5 prohibitions and 32 affirmatives per hour. Based on the number of affirmations and prohibitions, it shows that negative talk is far more prominent in the welfare community compared to

the others. A relationship could possibly be made between the amount of prohibition and words remembered. For example, it could be theorised that due to the lack of affirmation children, a smaller sense of motivation to learn and retain new information.

1.12. Challenges of African American college students

With African American women being one of the highest educated groups in the United States, it seems as if African Americans are finally in a progressive position academically. It is imperative to note the progress that African Americans have made in such a short amount of time. From overcoming laws that once banned any access to educational resources to now becoming one of the highest educated citizens is a great achievement, but more work needs to be done.

Many challenges are in place regarding academic achievement within the African American population. According to the *National Center for Education Statistics*, the average 4-year institution cost of tuition, fees and room and board rates charged for in-state full-time undergraduate students in degree-granting institutions was approximately \$19,000. These prices are continuously on the rise. With such high rates, many minority students cannot afford to attend post-secondary institutions. *Barriers to Blacks' Educational Achievement in Higher Education* states how above 30% of Blacks live below the poverty level. Such low levels of financial resources indicate that often times higher education is not affordable. College entry can also be an obstacle. Black students' average critical reading score declined from 434 in 1998 to 430 in 2008. With scores declining, it is vital to incorporate programs to assist students that may have difficulties scoring on entry exams. On page 17 of Marvel Lang's article stated that 'when the college entrance test scores of minority and White students of similar socioeconomic status and background are compared, their scores are relatively comparable'. (*Barriers To Blacks Educational Achievement in Higher Education*, 1992)

1.13. The negative stereotypes related to mental health in the African community

Many negatives stereotypes are experienced when it comes to African Americans seeking help regarding issues psychologically. Stereotypes range from thoughts within the community to self-taught judgements. These thoughts hinder people from seeking assistance. In this specific population, some of the main stereotypes are: being dangerous, weak and seeing mental health treatment as a luxury.

1.14. The barriers of seeking counselling and mental health services for African Americans

Various barriers are in place when it comes to seeking proper mental care. Because of the barriers that are in place, some become less likely to partake in services when it comes to mental care. Negative stereotypes about mental health create generalised thoughts that often time hinder people from seeking help.

1.15. Financial barrier

Health care can be expensive, particularly services that include precautionary mental health services. Statistics show us that the health care is one of the most expensive expenses. Uninsured patients are oftentimes not given the best service due them not having insurance. The research continues to show how discriminatory acts are shown within health care.

Low Socioeconomic Status and Mental Health Care Use among Respondents with Anxiety and Depression in the NCS-R explains how people of lower socioeconomic status receive less quality care from medical professionals. With financial resources being a barrier, it is important to know that certain populations are more likely to be a part of those group of people that often struggle with

financial resources. For example, African Americans are more likely to be within the bracket of being insufficient financially.

1.16. Financial barriers that cause career issues

Integrating Narrative Approaches with Early Recollections to Provide Career Counseling with Low-SES Secondary Students takes a look at how career counsellors are failing many students in low socio-economic schools (2018). The authors address many of the disparities that hinder this demographic of students from being successful after high school. The authors also express many different techniques for career counselling to utilise so students may start actively planning in their future.

The inadequacies in the daily resources for this demographic is a major hindrance for them to be successful. Some students may not have the necessities for their education, such as paper, pen, pencil, backpack and the only meal some may have may be what the school serves them. Student that reside in low socio-economic families and communities deal with many obstacles that allow them to fall short with their ability to develop a positive work identity. These students may also be behind academically than most affluent students. The schools in these communities normally have high dropout rates and low attendance rates. Meaning college, vocational or technical schools are not options for these students. Students in these communities have trouble aspiring for more or to do better than their families due to the lack of exposure.

According to the article, school counsellors lack the time and assistance to create activities for students that will prepare them for their future. The American School Counsellor Association states that a school counsellor is responsible for the developing a program that will prepare all the students for college and their careers. An affective counsellor must address three major domains or needs for student; which are academic, personal/social and lastly career development. The problem has been that many counsellors lack diversity which hinders aiding students of other demographics. Affective counselling consists of counsellors working with students, the student's teachers, as well as the student's parent/guardian to plan a successful future. This village must assist the student with a 4-year plan to graduation based on the students chosen college and career path. School counsellors have an abundance of information that will assist students with anything from high school course offerings, career options and the academic and career training needed for their future career.

Narrative career counselling is addressing a person's view of themselves based upon their perceptions of themselves, their lives, as well as their experiences. Utilising this method allows students to analyse their lives to choose what best suits them. The counsellor is allowing the student to take charge of their career choices and their future. The article was an eye opener on how society has changed the counsellor and student dynamics have changed over centuries. Students must be able to use their experiences and knowledge to explore their career options, in order to truly be successful with helping people of various demographics and children that are of a lower socioeconomic status.

1.17. Availability of services

As it relates to communities that are within a low socioeconomic status, health care is not readily available. Along with access, finances are another barrier. Many insurance companies have not advertised or made it well known that mental health services can be provided through policies. A law was put in place to enhance and prioritise mental health services among the United States. The law gives insurance makers the obligation to have policies that are inclusive of mental health resources. Even though this policy has been put into effect, many insurance holders are not aware of this. By making citizens more aware of this option of care that is affordable by health care, it could potentially increase treatment to people that have mental health issues.

1.18. Mistrust of health professionals

History has shown how health care professionals have often manipulated and mistreated African Americans. From the Tuskegee Experiment to the Sarah Baartman monument have exemplified the cruelties towards African Americans. A study done by Kennedy, Mathis and Woods (2007, p. 58) explained the different dynamics to the mistrust in African Americans towards health care professionals. The authors stated how 'patients that see physicians of their own race, rate the care that they receive higher than they see a physician from another race or ethnic group (African Americans and Their Distrust of the Health Care System: Healthcare for Diverse Populations, 2007). Even though seeking help is vital to survival it is not always as easy to do as an African American.

2. Recommendations

2.1. More mental health professionals of colour

As previously stated in the article by Kennedy et al., having a patient- caregiver the same race of you could potentially increase satisfactory of services. It is safe to say that some groups, specifically African Americans, do not see Caucasians relatable in their issues. By having more people of colour in the counselling and psychology field, African American patients can potentially feel more open to expressing issues. Per 'Data US', only 4% of Psychologist are black and 19% of counsellors are black. With this low amount, some issues are not easily understood by the majority.

An increase in representation within the psychology field could provide another lens to the field of psychology. It is known that the psychology is a fairly new science compared to others such as physiological studies. With the founding founders of the field being mostly high class white men, many theories and well know philosophies are based on biased and generalised point of views. Along with that, it is important to know that most psychological experiments were practiced on younger white males. For example, the famous 'The Little Albert experiment' done by the famous John B. Watson was highly pivotal in the field of psychology.

If more African Americans conducted research in psychology as well as developed strategic methods of mental health aid, to include methods that are conducive to the well-being of African Americans. Varied ways of thinking, not to say that most views are the same because most theorists are of the same race. But, many premises were in place due to those particular time period that discriminated against people of colour. In Bertha Holliday's (2009) *The History of African American Psychology: Multiple Pathway to Place, Space, and Authority*, she expounds on the various ways in which African Americans are continuing to strive in the field of psychology. It was not until 1920 where the first African American (Dr. Francis Summer) received a degree in Psychology (320). It was not until 1968 that The Association of Black Psychologist was established.

Though many barriers have been overcome by other there is much more work that needs to be completed

2.2. Including religious coping as well as professional aid

Many studies have shown how religious methods, such as prayer, helps with mental health treatment. In spite of how religion can be a barrier to seeking professional help, by intertwining both professional and religious methods into services could produce a higher rate of effectiveness for African American patients. By adding religion to the process of recovery, clients could view their treatment plan as being very genuine to their core values which can lead to a higher level of commitment for the client. Various methods can be used to help patients mentally, such as medications, physical stimulation (exercise), mental exercises (meditation). By including religion based options, it provides another option to helping themselves in a time of need. Statistics show that as problems worsen patients usually depend on their religious resources more (e.g., when symptoms are

heightened, an individual would pray more). 65% of participants reported how religion helped them cope with their symptoms of mental health issues.

Even though many individuals view religion as a method of aid, not all the clients will agree. In the process of evaluating, a client it is important to ask questions and maybe incorporate.

2.3. Increase in mental health awareness

Several individuals with some form of mental health issue go undiagnosed. Requiring evaluations that include psychological screenings for physicals could help combat this issue. Annual physicals should have a mental health component. Because physicals are commonly used during health screening for jobs and even school, it could possibly lead to an increase of mental health awareness.

As it relates to this specific population (African American college students), requiring mental health examinations along with immunisation records could also help in making students aware of their mental health status. Most standard collegiate processes for enrolment require immunisation records, adding a component that summarises a psychologic analysis could help future students to become aware of their mental status. It is important to note that these documents will not be used as selection criterion, to be sure of this, students should be required to provide documents after acceptance into the institution. Along with that, not only college students should be aware but parents of younger children. It is imperative to warn them of the vulnerabilities that African Americans face in regards to mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia and others.

2.4. Increase in mental health evaluation

Mental health evaluations are not prioritised when it comes to special populations, specifically African Americans. With the increasing number of black students obtaining degrees, it should be of top priority to know the status of those individual that are navigating through those institutions. Data show us that African Americans are twice as likely to be diagnosed with schizophrenia compared to non-Hispanic whites (American Psychological Association).

We must realise that systemic racism is a major contributor to how African Americans are able to seek care. Although African Americans are at a higher risk of having a mental illness and being financially troubled, health care facilities are limited in impoverished neighborhoods. 40% of African American youth are incarcerated. Along with that, 45% are in foster care (Office of the US Surgeon General, 2001) Increasing evaluation of those incarcerated and in foster care could lead to conquering behavioural issues that are occurring.

2.5. Creating more research that involves Black college students

Not many scholarly articles are produced explaining the dynamics of mental health issues within the African American community. In order to fully understand the dynamics behind the issues, it is vital to first understand the subject that is being examined. Conducting more research with people of colour, specifically African Americans, can create innovations to help those individuals cope as well as discover the specifics on how mental health services can improve to accommodate young African Americans.

3. Limitations

Alongside the strengths of this potential study, it is important to note the limitations. First, this study is based on students within one region of the US which may contribute a lack of randomisation. Most participants will likely be from the institution that I attend as well as of those of the surrounding area. Most data instruments are based on self-report methods, which opens the door for deceptions. As previously stated, students who participate are eligible to receive a gift card. By offering monies to

participate in the survey, some may provide dishonest information. It is also important to recognise that not all African American college students are 'young'. With many people obtaining their degrees of various ages, it is important to be cautious of that dynamic.

4. Conclusions

In spite of having the highest rate of mental health disparities, many African Americans do not seek treatment. As a way of investigating the explanations and generating potential help options, I evaluated articles and other scholarly archives to explain this phenomenon. After conducting literature review, the following implications were understood to be barriers: (1) mistrust of Healthcare system, (2) financial barriers, (3) negative stereotypes, (4) cultural barriers and (5) lack of black mental health professionals. A survey was compiled to generate potential questions that would be useful in understanding college students' perception and use of mental health services.

Being conscious of the historical gist of African Americans is important in understanding why seeking help is difficult for some. The barriers that are systemic and cultural are important as they relate to developing helpful strategies to alleviate these problems of schizophrenia, behavioural issues and others that many African Americans and African American college students face in the 21st century. Incorporating cultural inclusiveness to treatment and having more mental health professionals of colour could help in combating the problem of willingness to seeking mental health treatment among African American college students. Knowing that counsellors as well as development environments are crucial to educational outcomes and mental health risks. Unidentified and untreated mental health disorders may have significant implications for college students' academic success and productivity.

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