

Chapter 58

Mapping Mindset and Academic Success Among Black Men at a Predominantly White Institution

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ABSTRACT

Based on a larger research project, this chapter highlights findings from an exploratory study investigating the link between mindset and academic success among Black college men. Drawing on a self-reported survey instrument designed by the researcher, a regression analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between academic mindset (i.e., growth, fixed) and college grade point average (GPA), controlling for high school GPA and parents' education level. While the final model from a hierarchical linear regression ($N = 34$) indicates that high school GPA, parents' education level, and mindset accounted for 31% of the variance in Black males' college GPA, mindset did not significantly predict college GPA above and beyond Black males' precollege academic ability and parents' education level. Practical considerations for research and practice are discussed.

If you can control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his action. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do. If you make a man feel that he is inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one. (Woodson, 1933, p. 55)

INTRODUCTION

The mind of Black Americans, particularly Black men, has been a consistent target all throughout the history of the United States. One might argue that there has been no other group of men in this country who have been confronted with more subjugation or psychological assaults on their humanity than Black men. Author and correspondent of the *Atlantic*, Te-Nehisi Coates (2015) further elucidates this argument in his widely popular text, *Between the World and Me*, when he makes the case that both institutional and historical acts of racism packaged through Jim Crow, urban crime and violence, mass incarceration, and police brutality have induced heightened levels of fear throughout Black communities. Aside from the physical harm that Black men find themselves in by living in a world that firmly rejects them merely for being incased in a Black body, one could certainly argue that the minds of Black men are constantly under attack. Feminist theorist and writer, bell hooks (2004) echoes this claim when she asserted, “Black males often exist in a prison of the mind unable to find their way out” (p. xii). When juxtaposing the arguments pushed by Coates and hooks with the aforementioned quote from Woodson from his 1933 piece, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, it becomes clear that a man’s thinking (e.g., mindset) is a critical component to how he orients himself to the world and more importantly, to the actions that then follow.

One of the true tragedies of the United States is that Black men are constantly relegated as the bottom caste of the social ladder. One only needs to turn on the news or be moderately engaged in some form of social media to notice the dominant narrative around what it means to be a Black man is laced in a portrayal rooted in criminalization and dysfunction. Not only do these negative and pejorative stereotypes influence the minds of young Black men, they also shape the ways in which Black males experience their education. Within the K-12 school system, the dominant message to and about young Black men is characterized in failure. National data indicates that young Black boys are three times more likely to be suspended from elementary and secondary schools than their White, Latino, and Asian peers (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). Moreover, prior data suggests that students who have been suspended are three times more likely to drop out of school by 10th grade. Even worse, those who do not complete high school are also three times more likely to end up in jail (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012). Prior literature also reveals that Black boys are less likely to attend well-resourced community schools, disproportionately represented in special education and remedial courses, and overwhelmingly underrepresented in gifted and talented and advanced placement classes (Palmer, Wood, Dancy, & Strayhorn, 2014).

Focusing on the postsecondary educational experiences of Black men, Dr. Michael Cuyjet’s edited volume from 1997, *Helping African American Men Succeed in College* and Ronald Roach’s (2001) provocative question in *Black Issues in Higher Education*, “Where are the Black Men on Campus?” both served as major contributing forces for more scholarly attention on the academic study of Black college men. Since then, several academic journals have been founded, including: *Journal of African American Males in Education* (JAMME) (2010), *Journal of Black Masculinity* (2010); and *Spectrum: The Journal on Black Men* (2012), just to name a few. In addition, hundreds of peer-reviewed articles, books, monographs, national reports and dissertations on Black men in college have also been published. We now know much more about Black men across institutional contexts such as community colleges (e.g., Wood, 2011), historically Black colleges and universities (e.g., Palmer & Gasman, 2008), and predominantly White institutions (e.g., Strayhorn, 2008b). We know more about Black males’ encounters with racism and racial stereotypes (e.g., Harper, Davis, Jones, McGowan, Ingram, & Platt, 2011), their academic and social engagement (Harper & Quaye, 2007), and their identity development and gender expression

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