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# Race And Student's Perception Of School Counseling

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**RACE AND STUDENT PERCEPTION OF SCHOOL COUNSELING**

by

**NICOLE LITTLE**

**THESIS**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University

Detroit, MI

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

2015

MAJOR: SOCIOLOGY

Approved By:

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Advisor

Date

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my mother, Debra Little, who always encouraged me to work hard throughout my school career. She instilled in me the importance of education and helping people. Thank you, Mom, for reading my papers and for helping me with them.

I also dedicate this thesis to my grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Beverly and Bernice Walker, who have passed away. While they were alive, they were always there for me and had positive things to say to me. They made me believe that I could be anything I wanted to be. Without the support of my mother and grandparents, I would not have made it through college.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the fifty years since the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, high-school graduation and college enrollment rates for African Americans have increased substantially. In 1960, the high-school graduation rate for African Americans was 38.6%, compared to 63.7% for white students (NCES, 2013). By 2013, these rates increased to 94.1% for white students and 90.3% for black students. In 1960, 11.8% of white students and 5.4% of black students earned a bachelor's degree or higher. In 2013, 49% of 25-to-29-year-old whites and 20% of black students in that age range had attained a bachelor's or higher degree (NCES, 2013). In 1980, eighty-three percent of whites represented college students; by 2010, white students made up 63% of college students. Over this time span, black students attending college increased from 10% to 15%. (Merolla & Jackson, 2014; Aud et al., 2013) Overall, more black students are graduating from high school and attending college today than 50 years ago.

However, a race gap in education still exists. White students still perform better in school, achieve higher test scores and grades, and attend college at higher rates than black students do. (Orr, 2003) Phillips, Crouse & Ralph (1998) discovered that, from first grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, the gap in mathematics scores between white and black students widens by 0.18 standard deviations. These results indicate that a black student who enters school with the same test scores as an equivalent white student will likely have lower test scores than the white student upon leaving the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. (Orr, 2003) Such disparities may partially explain why black students are more likely to drop out of high school than white students. (Blount, 2012). In addition, blacks continue to have significantly lower grade point averages (GPA) and standardized test scores, and are less likely to participate in academic-related school clubs. Black students are suspended and expelled

three times more than white students; 5% percent of white students are suspended, compared to 16% of black students. (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2014). Studies have indicated that black students have fewer educational opportunities than white students and are at a disadvantage on several educational outcomes (Orr, 2003), including school grades, standardized tests, and honor-level or Advanced Placement high school classes. Because black students tend to academically perform below their white peers in secondary school, African-American high-school graduates are less likely than white ones to enroll in and to complete college. (Halliman, 2001) For example, in 2011, 39% of white adults aged 25-29 had bachelor's degrees, compared to 20% of black adults. (Merolla, 2013)

To help close this racial gap in college attendance and completion, we must examine these disparities in high-school grades, disciplinary issues, test scores, and especially college preparation in high school, because college education is increasingly important for socioeconomic mobility. College graduates tend to earn higher incomes and accrue more wealth throughout their working lives than those without college degrees. (Neild, Stoner-Eby & Furstenber, 2008) In 1999, average annual incomes were \$53,985 for college graduates and \$33,184 for mere high-school graduates. Also, about one-third of the jobs in 2012 required postsecondary education, and, in general, 6 out of 10 jobs call for highly trained workers with advanced skills available only to those with a two-year junior college or four-year college degree. (McDonough, 2005; Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003; U.S. Department of Labor, 2004b)

Several theories explain the racial gap in education. Jon Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory argues that African Americans perceive the opportunity structure differently than white middle-class youth do, thus tend to put less effort and dedication into their schoolwork



(Mickelson, 1990) because they value instant gratification over hard work. This may lead one to believe that black students are uninterested in education because of a particular “black culture.”

Conversely, the racial inequality thesis argues that lack of resources in racially segregated neighborhoods of concentrated poverty with poor families, underfunded schools and lack of role models accounts for black students’ lower performance in school. In addition, structural processes remain that make race one of the most potent predictors of economic standing and early school preparation (Merolla, 2013). Some studies even indicate a net black advantage: black students attain more education than their white counterparts after statistically controlling for socioeconomic status (SES) and academic characteristics. (Merolla, 2013; Alexander, Holupka, & Pallas, 1987a, 1987b; Bauman, Charles, Roscigno, & Torres, 2007; Hauser, 1993; Kane & Spizman, 1994; Rivkin, 1995) Thus black high school students will find counseling more helpful than white students because they may need more educational support due to the lack of resources.

This study examines racial differences in the perception of academic counseling for high-school students, based on the premise that African-American ones will find counseling more helpful than their white counterparts because “Coleman and his colleagues found that black students held positive views toward education regardless of their academic performance.” (Mickelson, 1990)

The school counselor, defined here as a “counselor who works in a school and gives professional advice to students on what curriculum track and course of high-school study that compliments their educational and professional goals to their interests and abilities” (Lee and Ekstrom, 1987), is more responsible for increasing college enrollments than any other school

staff member. (McDonough, 2006) The school counselor's regular availability to provide direct services to students and parents can have a positive effect on a student's ambition, accomplishment, and financial aid knowledge (McDonough, 2006; Adelman, 1999; McDonough, 1997 and 2004; Orfield & Paul, 1993; Plank & Jordan, 2001). School counselors' roles include helping students to search and apply for scholarships they may not know exist, and to prepare for aptitude tests such as the ACT and SAT. Frequent meetings with a counselor increase the probability of a student's enrollment in a four-year college, especially if students, parents, and counselors work together. Furthermore, the lack of acceptable counseling significantly affects the college enrollment rate of low-income students. (King, 1996; Plank & Jordan, 2001) Research has constantly shown that schools and school personnel—principals, support staff, teachers, school counselors—contribute much to the development of educational resilience among (K-12) students at risk of school failure. (Williams, Greenleaf, Albert, & Barnes) Many studies show the benefits of school counseling for students, especially for at-risk and low-income black students.

Although most high schools have counselors, many questions about students' interest in counseling and how helpful they feel counseling has been for them remain unanswered. A few studies have been conducted on this subject, but student views on counseling have rarely been explored from a sociological perspective (Armor, 1969: 120-123; Knox, Pratto, & Mann Callahan, 1974: 466) One nationwide sample revealed that counseling had a better effect on working-class high-school seniors than on middle-class ones (Knox, Pratto, & Mann Callahan, 1974; Armor, 1969: 129), but other components of counseling still need to be studied to help improve these student services.

Racial differences in perceptions of school counseling have not heretofore been examined. This issue must be addressed, because counselors often fill the gap between what parents can provide and what students need. A statewide study of Missouri high schools found, after controlling for enrollment size and socioeconomic status, that students in schools with more effective counseling programs earned higher grades, their education better prepared them for the future, and their school provided them with more career and college information. (Dimmitt & Holt) Yet the questions remain: Is there a difference between the number of times black and white students go to the school counselor? Do black and white students find counseling equally helpful?

This research has important implications for the funding and staffing of counselors in schools, particularly in poor, racially segregated African-American ones, where high-school counselors can be useful in identifying at-risk students and providing interventions to help them graduate and go on to higher education. This is how school counselors may assist in closing the education gap between white and black students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research shows that students from middle- and upper-class families tend to go to college at higher rates than those from lower-class families, because the former possess more of the social capital (a person's social network) and cultural capital (knowledge, skills, language mastery, style of dress, and personal values) that better prepare them for college. Middle- and upper-class families can provide their children with more educational materials such as computers, tablets, books, educational games, tutoring, private music lessons, etc., than low-income families because they have a higher disposable income. (Orr, 2003) Middle- and upper-income students also have parents, family members, friends and acquaintances who are in a variety of professions, which expose the students to different careers. Low-income parents, however, tend to be less educated and may not understand their children's homework, may not know how to help their child apply to college or financial aid, may be less aware of the educational resources available to assist their children such as tutoring services, or cannot always afford them. This is important to examine, because a young person's motivation to attend college is affected by the parents' ability to support that child. (Orr, 2003)

Furthermore, low-income communities have fewer resources available to students than middle- and upper-class neighborhoods do. Wealthier neighborhoods tend to be safer and have better libraries and schools, whereas many low-income neighborhoods have high rates of crime, and it is often dangerous for children to walk outside to go to the library, parks, stores, or even schools. In addition, low-income neighborhood schools receive fewer funds than those in higher-income areas, which have a higher tax base. Thus middle- and upper-class community schools are able to purchase more computers, better technology such as smart boards, and up-to-date

textbooks, as well as offer more college preparatory courses (AP, etc.), enrichment courses, ACT and SAT preparation courses, and, above all, hire more and better quality staff so that students can enjoy a lower student-to-teacher ratio. (Orr, 2003) On the other hand, schools in low-income and minority neighborhoods are allocated new teachers almost twice as often as middle and upper class communities (Penske & Haycock, 2006), most low-income students receive little or no preparation for SAT or ACT tests, and their classes often fail to prepare them for college. Furthermore, higher-income neighborhood schools usually have fewer behavioral problems in the classroom, so the teacher can spend more time teaching and less time attending to classroom management issues.

Black students tend to come from lower-income families than white students. Low-income black parents are often less educated than middle-class white parents, thus may not know how to advocate for their children in the school setting and may not be able to help with homework they themselves cannot comprehend. Black children from poor families may have less exposure to high-quality schools, to educational supplies in their homes, to college, and to status symbols. (Orr, 2003) Substandard housing, too, can adversely affect the self-esteem and confidence of African-American adolescents, which can lead to lower achievement in school. (Orr, 2003; Liu et al., 1992; Sterbin & Rakow, 1996) Also, higher-income white parents have the money to provide their children with extra educational resources: tutoring, computers, etc. “Family background to this day is still a strong predictor of a student’s achievement.” (Orr, 2003; Crane, 1996; Downey, 1994; Jones, 1984; Lee, 1993; Milne et al., 1986; Myers et al., 1987; Teachman, 1987; Vanfossen, Jones & Spade, 1987)

In addition, many schoolteachers in low-income neighborhoods have less teaching experience than those in higher-income neighborhoods. “Regardless of the evidence that new teachers are not as effective as they will be in the future, students in high poverty and high minority schools are more often assigned to beginning teachers.” (Peske & Haycock, 2006) Also, many teachers in schools with high black populations are not certified in the subject they are teaching. “In high schools in which there are mostly minority students, almost one in three classes are assigned to an out-of-field teacher compared to about one in five in predominately Caucasian schools.” (Peske & Haycock, 2006) To make matters worse, the books in many predominantly black schools are not up to date, and their classrooms have inadequate educational technology compared to predominately white schools.

Racial disparities in family resources, community and schooling explain some of the differences in educational outcomes. Low-income black families often cannot help their child pursue higher education because they cannot afford the cost of college, though they may give their child more encouragement to prepare for college if they are sure they have the money, just as higher-income white parents are more likely to encourage their children to attend college.

Despite these racial disparities, many black students maintain a greater aspiration for higher education and place more of a value on it than white students do. Several studies support this. Patchen (1982) and Mickelson (1984) determined that blacks have a high respect for education but consistently underachieve. (Mickelson, 1990) “Blau (2004) concludes that positive attitudes of black students toward education are associated with the historical importance of education for black Americans.” (Merolla, 2013) Thus many black students may value higher education, though the lack of resources and encouragement may prohibit them from receiving it.

Given this, African-American students may be more interested in receiving school counseling and find it more valuable than white students do. Black students may benefit from counselors' assistance to them in selecting classes, searching for and applying to colleges, and obtaining information about scholarships, because all of this information is new to those students. School counselors may inform them of scholarships set up for minorities or based on financial need, or may expose students to different careers they were not aware of.

Nevertheless, a study found that people with less wealth are less likely to question school officials' decisions regarding their students' education. Black students from low-income families may passively accept what school personnel say, even if they have questions, because they believe that person has absolute authority: "A nationwide sample found that counseling seems to have a greater effect on working-class seniors than on middle-class seniors." (Knox, Pratto, & Callahan, 1974; Armor, 1969: 129).

Which leads to this study's two central hypotheses:

### **Hypotheses**

1. African-American high-school students are more likely than white students to request counseling.
2. African-American high school students are more likely than white students to rate their counseling as helpful.

It is assumed that students who go to the school counselor are more concerned about their grades and pursuing higher education and are seeking more guidance for their education. For the second hypothesis African-American students may not have as many resources as white students and, as a result, may find guidance counselor's assistance to be more helpful.

**Measures***Dependent variable: Desire for and rating of counseling*

The desire for counseling variables dichotomously examines the extent to which students desire more counseling generally and want much more counseling in the following areas: course selection, dealing with personal problems, help with educational plans, and help with career plans. I also examine the extent to which students want much less counseling on military plans. The counseling rating variable examines the extent to which students found their counseling to be helpful. The responses ranged from 1 (not at all helpful) to 5 (extremely helpful).

*Independent variable: Race/Ethnicity*

The race variable is based upon self-report.

*Control variables*

This study also accounts for the extent to which students are 18 or over, the presence of their mother and father in their household, the level of education of their mother and father, the gender of the students, and whether they live in a large city.



## **METHOD**

This study obtained data from *Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth*, a 12<sup>th</sup> grade survey the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research conducted in 1999. This study explores changes in important values, behaviors, and lifestyle orientations of contemporary American youth. Data were collected from high-school seniors from approximately 130 public and private high schools, selected to provide an accurate cross-section of high school seniors throughout the United States.

Approximately 2,337 students were sampled for the study; 84.6% (1,551) were white, and 15.4% (282) were black; 48.5% (1,054) were male, and 51.5% (1,119) were female; 25.5% (564) did not live in a household with a father or male guardian, and 74.5% (1,646) did. A total of 503 responses were missing.

This study examined whether students who went to the school counselor more often had higher GPAs than those who went less often or not at all. (GPA is defined as a grading scale from 4.00 to 0.00: 4.00 = A, 3.00 = B, 2.00 = C, 1.00 = D, and 0.00 = E. The school grades were based on responses from the student survey.)

### **Statistical Analyses**

Cross-tabs and logistic-regression analyses were employed to examine the bivariate and multivariate effects, respectively, of race on perception and rating of school counseling.

## **RESULTS**

The analyses presented in this study generally indicate that African-American students are more likely than their white counterparts to request school-based counseling and to have a more positive evaluation of their counseling experiences.

### **Bivariate Analyses**

The bivariate analyses presented in Table 1 indicate that black students were roughly two to three times more likely than whites to request all forms of counseling. The sole exception is military counseling, of which blacks are more likely to request less.

### **Multivariate Analyses**

Similar to the bivariate analyses, the ordinal regression reported in Table 2 indicates that blacks are more likely than whites to request more counseling in all areas except military planning, and are more likely to report that their counseling experiences were helpful. These analyses also make clear that race is the most consistent social-demographic predictor of counseling preferences and rating, and that if the student's father had a college degree or higher the students wanted much less counseling for personal problems. Also, girls requested more counseling for personal problems than boys. In all other cases, the non-race demographic variables are unrelated to counseling preferences and rating.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper is to examine racial differences among high-school students in wanting and assessing school-based counseling. Even though more black students attend college at higher rates than 50 years ago, they still go to college at lower rates than white students. In 2011, 60% of white students attended a four-year college or university, compared to 46% of black students. (Merolla & Jackson, 2014) School counselors may help to close the race gap in education: schools with developed counseling programs have higher rates of low-income, urban and minority students going on to college (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2006), and low-income black students may desire more counseling to assist them with their educational career.

This study's results reveal that black high-school students see the school counselor more than white students. This supports hypothesis 1: African-American high-school students are more likely than white students to request counseling. Also, the results indicate that black students generally find counseling more helpful than white students. This supports hypothesis 2: African-American high-school students are more likely than white students to rate counseling as helpful.

Black students may see the school counselor and value the information from counseling more because they generally have fewer educational sources at their disposal than white students, as they tend to come from lower-income families who cannot afford to buy them computers or other homework assistance devices. Also, their parents may be less educated, therefore may not know how to assist their children with their educational careers. In addition, many black children attend inner-city schools that lack up-to-date technologies and books compared to schools in higher-income communities. Students of higher socioeconomic status usually have more

information sources, know more about college costs and have parents who save for college. (National Association for College Admissions Counseling, 2006) School counselors, therefore, are in a position to help lower-income black students improve their academic prospects.

This study supports the racial inequality theory that structural discrimination (e.g. racial segregation, concentration of poverty and violence) is at the root of the racial achievement gap in education, while refuting the culture-ecological theory that many black students perform less well academically because they are opposed to mainstream culture and reject education. The results show that black students are interested in school counseling, meet with counselors more than white students, and find school counseling more helpful to them than their Caucasian counterparts.

This study is important to help determine how policymakers may approach the provision of counseling within high schools. Counselors are particularly needed in racially segregated and inner-city schools that black students disproportionately attend. Policymakers trying to balance the country's budget continue to reduce funds for education, which has caused school districts to cut the number of counselors in high schools. In 2006, nationally on average, a school counselor had to serve 478 students each school year. In Michigan, one counselor worked with an average of 671 students per year. (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2006) Low-income and inner-city areas have even fewer counselors in the schools, where they are needed most, as they assist in increasing the number of students who enter higher education, thereby helping to close the racial gap in education.

**Table 1: Impact of Race on Counseling Preferences: Cross-Tabulation**

	% Want More Counseling (r_v1693)	% Helpful Counselor (r_v1694)	% Want Much More Counseling on Course Selection (r_v1699)	% Want Much More Counseling on Problem Courses (r_v1700)	% Want Much More Counseling on Personal Troubles (r_v1701)	% Want Much Less Counseling on Military Plans (r_v1702)	% Want Much More Counseling on Education Plans (r_v1703)	% Want Much More Counseling on Career Plans (r_v1704)
<b>White</b>	25.91	38.39	16.34	10.37	6.19	33.11	16.23	20.51
<b>Black</b>	44.27	52.36	38.02	30.99	18.41	48.72	35.83	40.83
<b>N=</b>	1, 546	1, 207	1, 521	1, 505	1, 467	1, 439	1, 491	1, 498

\*<.05; \*\*<.01

ta v1151 r\_v1693, row chi2

**Table 2: Impact of Race and other Social Demographic Characteristics on Counseling Preferences: Logistic Regression**

	Want More Counseling	Helpful Counselor	Want Much More Counseling on Course Selection	Want Much More Counseling on Problem Courses	Want Much More Counseling on Personal Troubles	Want Much Less Counseling on Military Plans	Want Much More Counseling on Education Plans	Want Much More Counseling on Career Plans
Black	0.864 (5.50)**	0.609 (3.66)**	1.269 (7.35)**	1.313 (6.98)**	1.120 (4.84)**	0.504 (3.18)**	0.918 (5.30)**	0.936 (5.63)**
Age: 18+	0.091 (0.79)	-0.027 (0.22)	0.089 (0.66)	0.183 (1.16)	0.086 (0.43)	0.209 (1.83)	-0.264 (1.94)	-0.113 (0.89)
Mother in House	-0.070 (0.34)	0.362 (1.62)	-0.126 (0.53)	-0.363 (1.46)	-0.477 (1.63)	0.101 (0.50)	-0.607 (2.77)**	-0.604 (2.86)**
Father in House	0.243 (1.62)	-0.160 (1.06)	0.341 (1.94)	0.015 (0.08)	-0.160 (0.68)	-0.128 (0.90)	0.004 (0.03)	0.268 (1.64)
Mother College Graduate	-0.174 (1.35)	-0.237 (1.76)	0.081 (0.55)	-0.067 (0.38)	-0.064 (0.29)	-0.185 (1.46)	0.172 (1.14)	0.035 (0.25)
Father College Graduate	0.071 (0.55)	0.250 (1.84)	0.102 (0.68)	0.082 (0.46)	-0.050 (0.22)	-0.334 (2.61)**	-0.245 (1.56)	-0.099 (0.69)
Male	-0.072 (0.62)	0.102 (0.85)	0.117 (0.87)	0.083 (0.53)	0.302 (1.52)	-0.245 (2.15)*	-0.307 (2.21)*	-0.443 (3.45)**
City	0.132 (0.82)	-0.001 (0.01)	0.294 (1.67)	0.304 (1.52)	0.252 (1.01)	-0.068 (0.42)	0.274 (1.51)	0.343 (2.02)*
N	1546	1207	1521	1505	1467	1439	1491	1498

\* $<.05$ ; \*\* $<.01$  (Standard Errors in Parentheses)

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**ABSTRACT****RACE AND STUDENT PERCEPTION OF SCHOOL COUNSELING**

by

**NICOLE LITTLE****May 2015****Advisor:** Dr. Khari Brown**Major:** Sociology**Degree:** Master of Arts

The United States still has a race gap in education. Black students tend to perform less well in school on standardized tests and tend to receive lower grades than white students. Many black students come from low-income families that do not have the access to the educational and financial resources middle- and upper-income Caucasian students have. High-school counselors can support these students by referring them to tutors, giving them college and career advice, and assisting them in applying to colleges and applying for scholarships.

This study examines how black and white students feel about their respective high-school counseling experiences. This research examined the *Monitoring the Future* study, in which 2,337 high-school students were surveyed across the United States. That study revealed that African-American students are more likely to request to see school counselors than their white counterparts and are more likely to find counseling more helpful than white students. School counselors can help close the racial gap in education.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

Nicole Little received her bachelor's degree from Michigan State University in 1991 and her master's degree in social work from Wayne State University in 1995. She worked for 13 years as a school social worker for Ecorse Public Schools. She will receive her second master's degree in sociology from Wayne State University in May 2015. Her field of study is education and counseling.