
Predictors of Black Students' Race-Related Reasons for Choosing an HBCU and Intentions to Engage in Racial Identity–Relevant Behaviors

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Abstract

This study explores the antecedents and consequences of race-related reasons for historically Black college and university (HBCU) choice. A total of 109 undergraduate students attending a historically Black university completed questionnaires assessing their race-related reasons for choosing the university and their intention to engage in race-related activities, as well as individual difference measures. Students with less contact with other Blacks growing up or more central racial identities were more likely to cite race-related reasons for HBCU college choice. Furthermore, lack of contact and higher racial centrality predicted greater intention to engage in behaviors to develop racial identity (e.g., race-oriented clubs and personal reading). Critically, race-related reasons for college choice mediated the impact of both contact and centrality on behavioral intentions. Finally, non-race-related reasons for

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college choice (i.e., academic and financial) were distinct from race-related reasons and failed to predict race-relevant behavioral intentions. Thus, the race-related reasons behind this critical life choice form a bridge between the race-relevant aspects of the past and intentions to engage in racial identity–developing behaviors in the future.

Keywords

college choice, race identity, racial centrality, ingroup racial contact, social identity

For students who have the opportunity, choosing a college or university is one of the most important decisions of their adult lives. Which college students choose to attend has ramifications for the rest of their lives, including finding a mate, choosing a profession, and earning an income (Ooesterbeek, Groot, & Hartog, 1992; Zhang, 2008). The reasons students choose colleges can be influenced by a variety of academic, social, and economic reasons, such as the reputation of the institution and academic department, the social life, tuition rates, and financial aid (Bowers & Pugh, 1973; Braddock & Hua, 2006; Corey, 1936; Erdman, 1983). While there is a fair amount of research on reasons for choosing a college, both theory and empirical research have focused on the experience of White students in college choice, leaving open the issue of whether students from other racial groups approach college choice in a different manner (Smith & Fleming, 2006).

In particular, relatively little is known about what factors influence college choice decisions among Black students. One reason for this could be that most studies examining racial differences focus primarily on whether students from underrepresented groups choose to attend college at all (Freeman, 1997; Perna, 2000; Pitre, 2006), rather than the choice of which college to attend. It has been suggested that Black students are likely to make college choices for reasons that are different from White students, in terms of the college choice process (Litten, 1982), and in terms of the importance of college selection factors (Perna, 2000). However, few research studies have investigated these proposed racial differences in college choice factors, and little is known about the reasons Black students choose particular colleges. In one notable exception, Braddock and Hua (2006) asked Black students to rate the importance of 18 different factors that may influence their college choice. Factor analysis of these items identified 4 factors that determine college choice: academic/career, economic/practical, social, and demographic. The demographic factor included diverse reasons such as school size, geographic location, and the race/ethnic composition of the institution. However, the role of racial

composition in the college choice process of students is still unclear, since the remaining results did not focus on the demographic factor; in particular, there was no test of association between the demographic factor and any critical variables such as behavior. Moreover, no results using the single item of race/ethnic composition were reported. Rather than handling race as one of many demographic variables, the current research investigates the multifaceted aspects of race-related reasons for college choice, and the critical predictors and consequences of these reasons. The college choice literature, as a whole, has largely focused on samples dominated by White students and on reasons that are unrelated to race and racial identity. In particular, empirical research has largely ignored the possibility that Black students might make college choices based on reasons related to race and racial identity.

It is proposed that the reasons that Black students choose a college include race-related reasons, which have not previously been explored as the focus in an empirical quantitative investigation. The existence of race-related reasons for college choice have been suggested in the popular press (Suggs, 1997), nonempirical writings (Hale, 2006), qualitative data (Tobolowsky, 2005), and empirical research (Braddock & Hua, 2006; Nora, 2004). These writings have focused in particular on exploring the reasons why Black students chose to attend historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and the multiple perceived benefits of doing so (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Hale, 2006; LeMelle, 2002). Students who chose to attend HBCUs cite non-race-related reasons such as tuition rates or scholarship opportunities, familial ties, perceived easier admissions, and institutional reputation (Suggs, 1997; Tobolowsky, 2005). These reasons mirror the reasons commonly identified in the college choice literature using White samples (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). However, students also list feelings of personal acceptance and social fit as important when choosing a college (Nora, 2004). This may be especially true for minority students. For example, Black students cite race-related reasons such as not wanting to be a minority and having classes that incorporate the Black perspective (Suggs, 1997; Tobolowsky, 2005). To provide a more formal and detailed investigation of the role of race-related reasons for college choice, the current investigation focuses on Black students who chose to attend an HBCU, and in particular explores individual differences and situational variables that determine the extent to which Black students cite race-related reasons for this school choice, as well as the perceived behavioral consequences of doing so.

Racial Centrality and College Choice

One fundamental difference between Black and White children growing up is that Black children contend with developing a racial identity to a greater

extent than White children (Phinney, 1989, 1990). This challenge, which starts at an early age, may represent a key potential difference underlying the reasons that Black and White students make different important life decisions later on in life, such as choosing a school. Racial identity refers to the quality or extent of identification a person has with his or her racial group; it is therefore considered to be an individual difference variable. Racial identity develops over time, typically during adolescence (Phinney, 1989), but once developed, it is generally stable across most situations (Shelton & Sellers, 2000). Sellers and colleagues outlined seven factors in the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997), and centrality is perhaps the most widely studied of these constructs. Racial centrality refers to the extent to which race is a core part of the self-concept, or the extent to which people normatively define themselves in terms of race (Sellers et al., 1998). Sellers argued that it is problematic to assume that race is highly central to all Blacks, and that there is diversity along this dimension. Indeed, the extent of racial centrality has important consequences for a variety of life domains, including lower adolescent alcohol use (Caldwell, Sellers, Bernat, & Zimmerman, 2004), increased protection from the psychological distress resulting from perceived discrimination (Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003), and higher personal self-esteem (Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998), to mention a few. Most relevant to the current research, racial centrality is related to the extent to which students were comfortable expressing their ethnicity and engaging in ethnicity-affirming activities, at least among Black students at predominantly White institutions (PWI; Chavous, 2000). Thus, evidence suggests that Black students whose racial identity is more central to who they are may be more likely to make key life decisions, such as choosing a college or university, based on race-related reasons.

Intragroup Contact and College Choice

One unique opportunity offered by HBCUs is the extensive contact with Black faculty and students. For racial minorities, contact with the racial ingroup is a critical source of cultural information, and provides positive role models for development (Tatum, 2004). A high level of contact may also allow a level of comfort not present in either predominantly White or mixed environments. Indeed, predominantly White environments may be sources of stress and alienation (Parker, 2004; Terhune, 2008) and this may affect the student's academic, social, and personal success (Adan & Felner, 1995; Allen, 1981, 1992; Astin, 1982; Fleming, 1984; Suen, 1983).

The extent of intragroup contact a child experiences growing up has far reaching implications for racial identity, self-esteem, cultural sensitivity, and sociopolitical ideology (Thompson, 1995). Children begin to develop an awareness of race around the age of 4 to 5 years, which coincides with the period in which they exhibit the strongest favoritism toward others from their racial group; this favoritism tends to decline gradually thereafter (Aboud, 1988). So these early years form the foundation of a positive view of the racial ingroup relative to outgroup members. Students who do not have this contact experience may have a stronger desire for intragroup contact than others, in order to counteract a lack of contact earlier in life. Evidence from qualitative interviews with Black students (Freeman, 1999) suggests that Black students from predominantly White high schools are more likely to consider an HBCU than students from predominantly Black high schools. The reasons provided by students included the pressure of being Black in mixed environments, the nature of race relations, the desire to learn how to deal with your own people, to connect with one's roots, and to learn about Black history and culture. This suggests that a lack of contact with other Blacks growing up could lead students to rely more on race-related reasons in choosing to attend an HBCU. On the other hand, Black students who grow up with more extensive contact with other Blacks should be less concerned with addressing a lack of contact, so they may be less likely to focus on race-related reasons for college choice.

Behavioral Consequences

Prior research has not investigated race-related reasons for college choice in depth, so little is known about whether these reasons have broader consequences. It seems likely that students who choose a school for race-related reasons will approach their college experiences differently than students who choose a school for other reasons; in particular, they may engage in college activities related to these specific race-related reasons, which are likely different from the college activities of students who chose the school for other reasons. The college years are formative ones, during which students develop cognitively, psychosocially, and morally (Wolf-Wendel & Ruel, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). According to Astin's (1970, 1985) Theory of Involvement (TI), students who develop and learn most during their college years are those who actively seek the opportunities provided to them. However, this and other models of undergraduate activities are typically based on data collected from predominantly White samples engaging in activities that are seen as unrelated to race, such as tutoring students, campus politics, and athletics (Astin, 1977, 1985, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In one

exception, Ethier and Deaux (1994) found that Hispanic students with strong racial identities were more likely to become involved in on-campus ethnic activities, and this resulted in a strengthening of their racial identity. HBCUs and a growing number of PWIs offer opportunities for students to engage in activities that allow them to connect with the Black community, culture, and history. Examples include student organizations, cultural housing options, and classes that focus on issues associated with race and ethnicity. The current research explores one potential consequence of race-related reasons for attending college, namely, whether students who cite race-related reasons for attending a school intend to engage in behaviors that are more relevant to race and racial identity.

The predictions that have been developed thus far reflect a general orientation of exploring thoughts and beliefs in order to understand social behavior. This approach is in line with the cognitive revolution, which has produced a number of influential theories focusing on cognition as a key variable in understanding opinions and behaviors, including Cognitive Response Theory (Greenwald, 1968), the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TOPB; Ajzen, 1985). For example, the TOPB has received substantial empirical support as a framework to predict behavior intentions (see Ajzen, 1985; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000, 2005; Ajzen & Gilbert Cote, 2008, for reviews). The TOPB holds that antecedent situational and dispositional factors are responsible for thoughts and beliefs, and that these cognitions in turn serve as critical determinants of behavior intentions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). Consistent with this viewpoint on the role of cognition, we suggest that antecedent situational (prior intragroup contact) and dispositional (racial identity centrality) variables predict current cognitions (race-related reasons for attending a college), and that these cognitions in turn predict behavioral intentions (relevant to racial identity development). To be clear, the current investigation is not intended as an overall assessment of TOPB, since certain variables in that theory were not measured (e.g., behavioral control and actual behavior). The role of TOPB is to provide a general framework for understanding the hypothesized relationships between antecedent conditions, current cognitions, and intentions for future behavior.

Method

Participants

A total of 109 self-identified Black students at Howard University participated in return for partial course credit; 82% of the sample was female. Participants'

ages ranged from 18 to 26 years ($M = 18.74$ years). Overall, 63% of our sample were first year students, 26% were second year, 7% were third years, and 4% were fourth year and beyond. Howard University is a private institution with substantial public support. It draws its students from a broad range of socioeconomic groups, but it is selective on student academic accomplishment. Our sample reported a mean combined parental income that fell within the \$60,000 to \$75,000 bracket, within a range from <\$15,000 to >\$100,000, with 53% indicating incomes between \$45,000 and \$90,000. Thus, the distribution appears to represent a diversity of demographics of Black HBCU college students, with the majority falling in the middle class.

Measures

Contact index. A three-item measure assessed level of contact with Blacks while growing up. Participants were asked the following questions: "What percentage of your elementary school was Black?," "What percentage of your middle school was Black?," and "What percentage of the neighborhood you spent most of your childhood (before age 13) was Black?" Percentage ratings were used to focus participants on concrete demographics and to minimize the impact of subjective factors and memory biases. Responses were provided on an 11-point scale ranging from 0% to 100%. Participant's responses to all three items were averaged to form a contact index. Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .81. This is comparable with the reliability observed in previous research (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$) using a very similar measure (Postmes & Branscombe, 2002).

Racial identity centrality. The centrality subscale of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (Sellers et al., 1997) is an eight-item scale designed to measure the extent to which race is a core part of an individual's identity. The centrality subscale has been validated across diverse Black samples, showing predictive and construct validity (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Sellers et al., 1997). An example item is, "I have a strong attachment to other Blacks." Responses are made on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). A person's centrality score is the mean of his or her responses to all eight items after three are reverse coded. A higher score indicates that race is a more central part of that person's identity. Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .71, which is comparable with the range reported in other studies (Sellers et al., 1997; Shelton & Sellers, 2000), including a sample from a predominantly African American university (Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$; Sellers et al., 1997).

Race-related reasons for college choice. The seven-item Race-Related Reasons for College Choice Scale (Van Camp, Barden, Sloan, & Clarke, in press)

was used to assess the extent to which students endorsed race-related reasons for choosing Howard University. The scale contains items asking the extent to which college choice was made for the following race-related reasons: it is an HBCU, the student body is predominantly Black, the classes offered have a race focus, to learn more about race, to develop racial identity, attending the school assists in developing racial identity, and it is a matter of racial pride (see Van Camp et al., in press). Responses were assessed on 10-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*not very much*) to 10 (*very much*). Items were averaged into an index so that a higher score indicated that the participant chose to attend Howard University for race-related reasons. Cronbach's alpha for the current study was .82, which is comparable with the reliability found for this scale in prior research using a separate sample taken from the same population as the current study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$; Van Camp et al., in press).

Non-race-related reasons for college choice. This five-item questionnaire assessed other, non-race-related reasons for choosing to attend Howard University, including academic reasons and financial reasons. Prior research identified academic and financial reasons among the major categories of college choice reasons commonly listed by predominantly White samples (Bowers & Pugh, 1973; Corey, 1936; Erdman, 1983), and these have also been identified as important in Black samples (Braddock & Hua, 2006). The content of these items was developed from this college choice literature and further validated using a separate sample taken from the same population as the current study (Van Camp et al., in press). Participants indicated the extent to which they chose to attend Howard University for academic reasons: the academic reputation of the program, the school's record for placing graduates in graduate school, and the school's record for placing graduates in jobs. They also indicated the extent to which they chose to attend Howard University for financial reasons: the tuition rates/cost of attendance and the financial aid available. Responses to all five items were made using a 10-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not very much*) to 10 (*very much*). Cronbach's alphas for this sample were .69 for the financial items and .69 for the academic items, both within the acceptable range. The reliability of these non-race-related reasons is somewhat lower than our race-related reasons measure, which could reflect the smaller number of items in each scale.

Behavioral intentions. In order to establish a measure of behavioral intentions that are seen as relevant to racial identity development, a scale development sample and a scale validation sample were collected. Both samples were recruited in the same manner from the same population as the current study. In the scale development sample ($N = 25$), students were asked to spontaneously generate up to four separate responses using open-ended instructions which

were adapted from a commonly used thought-listing technique (see Burnkrant & Howard, 1984; Petty & Wegener, 1998):

We are interested in how Howard students learn about and develop their racial identity. In the box below, please type ONE way that you learn about and develop your racial identity and then press <ENTER>. You can ignore spelling or grammar.

Repeated themes were identified within the spontaneous responses, and these were used to develop a six-item questionnaire to assess the students' intentions to engage in a variety of behaviors related to racial identity development throughout the coming semester. Items assessed how likely students were to engage in the following behaviors: take classes with a race-related focus, read material pertaining to race matters, join campus clubs which have a race- or race identity-related focus, engage in other activities to explore their racial identity, talk with their friends about race issues, and spend time thinking about race-identity issues. The scale validation sample ($N = 87$) completed the behavior intention scale and then returned to report their actual behaviors during a follow-up session held 1 to 2 months later. Actual behaviors were assessed by asking participants how race focused the classes that they took were, whether they read materials, joined clubs, thought about race, talked with friends about race, or engaged in other activities pertaining to race and racial identity. Responses to all items were made using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*not very much*) to 5 (*very much*). The behavior intention measure was found to be reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .65$), and behavior intentions correlated with subsequent actual behaviors, $r(87) = .54, p < .001$. The current study used an identical scale of behavior intentions as just described, with participants responding on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 5 (*definitely*). Items were averaged into an index such that a higher score indicated a greater intention to engage in activities that develop racial identity. Cronbach's alpha for the current study was .78.

Demographics. General demographic information was collected, including number of semesters at the university, age, gender, and parental income. Parents' combined annual gross income was assessed by selecting one of a number of income brackets of \$15,000 increments from "\$0 to \$15,000" to "over \$100,000."

Procedure

Students from Howard University's Introduction to Psychology pool were recruited via voluntary sign-up sheets to participate in a study evaluating

experiences and behaviors. Participants received one hour of extra credit toward their Introduction to Psychology grade in return for participation. Research assistants greeted participants and gave them a preamble containing a brief description of the study and documenting IRB approval. This served as informed consent for this study. All other instructions and materials were then presented on personal computers situated in individual cubicles using MediaLab software (Jarvis, 2006). The study took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Participants completed the instruments in the following order: contact measure, race-related reasons for college choice questionnaire, non-race-related reasons for college choice questionnaire, behavioral intentions questionnaire, centrality scale, and demographics. The contact measure was placed first to ensure that it was as non-reactive as possible and was not biased by the other measures. The order of the remaining measures followed a temporal sequence from previous contact to recent reasons for college choice, then future behavioral intentions, and in keeping with convention, individual differences and demographic measures were assessed last.

Results

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for all variables are provided in Table 1. As predicted, a lack of intragroup contact and greater centrality of race were associated with race-related reasons for choosing to attend an HBCU and increased intent to engage in racial-identity developing behaviors. In addition, the lack of a reliable correlation between the centrality and contact variables indicated that these were independent indicators of race-related reasons and behavioral intentions. Furthermore, no demographic variables were correlated with any of the variables of interest and so do not need to be controlled for in later analysis.

Regression Analysis

Simultaneous multiple regression analysis was used to test whether contact and centrality predicted race-related reasons for attending the university and intentions to engage in racial identity–developing behaviors. In the first analysis, race-related reasons served as the dependent variable, and centrality and contact were entered as predictors (see Table 2). Both centrality ($\beta = .48, t = 5.82, p < .01$) and contact ($\beta = -.21, t = -2.53, p < .05$) were reliable independent predictors of race-related reasons. A total of 30% of variance in intentions to engage in race identity–developing behaviors was explained by centrality and contact.

Table 1. Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for All Study Variables ($N = 109$)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Contact	—							
2. Centrality	-.14	—						
3. Race-related reasons for college choice	-.27**	.51**	—					
4. Racial identity-developing behavioral intention	-.26**	.41**	.48**	—				
5. Age	.09	.17	.15	.10	—			
6. Gender	-.00	-.03	.14	.10	-.09	—		
7. Parental income	-.13	.00	.04	-.05	-.06	.14	—	
8. Number of terms at university	.06	.16	.11	.07	.89**	-.02	-.04	—
<i>M</i>	5.90	5.14	5.61	2.68	18.73	—	5.16	2.17
<i>SD</i>	2.53	0.94	2.08	0.71	1.43	—	2.06	1.86

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2. Regression of Contact and Centrality on Race-Related Reasons for College Choice

Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	R^2
Contact	-0.17*	.07	-.21	.30
Centrality	1.06**	.18	.48	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

In the second analysis, intention to engage in racial identity–developing behaviors was the dependent variable, and centrality and contact were entered as predictors (see Table 3). Both centrality ($\beta = .38$, $t = 4.35$, $p < .01$) and contact ($\beta = -.21$, $t = -2.36$, $p < .05$) were reliable independent predictors of race identity developing–behavior intention. A total of 21% of the variance in intention to engage in race identity–developing behavior was explained by centrality and contact.

One final regression analysis was conducted to investigate the possibility that students who had higher racial identity centrality would be more likely to

Table 3. Regression of Contact and Centrality on Racial Identity–Developing Behavioral Intention

Variables	B	SE B	B	R ²
Contact	-.06*	.02	-.21	.21
Centrality	.29**	.07	.38	

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

Table 4. Correlations Between Reasons for Attending the University and Race Identity–Developing Behavioral Intention (*N* = 109)

	1	2	3	4
1. Race-related reasons for college choice				
2. Academic reasons	.04			
3. Financial reasons	-.17	.22*		
4. Race identity developing behavioral intent	.48**	.06	-.01	
<i>M</i>	5.61	7.52	4.02	2.68
<i>SD</i>	2.08	2.07	2.94	0.71

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

make choices to compensate for lower prior intragroup contact by choosing to attend an HBCU for race-related reasons and intend to engage in race developing behaviors while there. To test this possibility, a new variable was created for the interaction between centrality and contact, and this interaction term was entered into both regression analyses described above at Step 2 after all the main effects were entered. Results showed that this interaction did not significantly predict either race-related reasons ($\beta = -.36, t = -.71, p = .48$), or racial identity–developing behavioral intention ($\beta = .63, t = 1.15, p = .26$). Thus, the impact of less intragroup contact on race-related reasons and racial identity–developing behavioral intention held for participants regardless of whether race was highly central to the self or not.

Table 4 shows the relationship between race-related reasons for college choice, non-race-related reasons for college choice, and behavioral intentions. Results show that race-related reasons were not reliably related to non-race-related reasons. Critically, race-related reasons were uniquely associated with intention to engage in racial identity developing behaviors, whereas other non-race-related reasons for college choice were not associated with these intentions. This supports the notion that race-related reasons are distinct

from non-race-related reasons for college choice (i.e., academic and financial reasons). Finally, the mean of the race-related reasons variable indicates that these reasons were endorsed by students at a level that suggests that race-related reasons are important to them, and comparable in importance with other non-race-related reasons.

The regression analyses established that greater racial centrality and lack of contact with other Blacks growing up were independent predictors of increased race-related reasons for choosing to attend an HBCU, and of behavioral intentions related to racial identity development. This offers an opportunity to investigate whether race-related reasons for attending college serve as a mediator of either the relationship between contact and behavioral intention or racial centrality and behavioral intention.

Mediational Analysis

Mediational analysis is a technique widely used in a number of disciplines to assess whether the relationship between an independent variable (IV) and dependent variable (DV) are carried or explained by a third, intervening variable, called a *mediator*. A mediational model (e.g., Figure 1) proposes that the IV (racial identity centrality) affects the mediator variable (race-related reasons for college choice), which then in turn affects the DV (racial identity-developing behavioral intention). The intervening variable is considered a mediator if the following conditions are met (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The IV must significantly predict the DV. The mediator variable must predict the DV. Critically, when both the IV and mediator variable are entered into a multiple regression simultaneously, the predictive power of the IV on the DV should reduce significantly. This indicates that some of the variance explained in the DV by the IV is the same variance that is being explained by the mediator variable. The Sobel (1982) statistic tests for the significance of the effect of the IV on the DV that occurs solely through the mediator's relationship to the IV and the DV (called the indirect effect). A statistically significant Sobel test is taken as support for the notion that the mediator provides an explanation for the relationship between the IV and the DV (i.e., it represents a significant portion of the variance). Consistent with relationships between variables implied by the TOPB (Ajzen, 1985), results to this point show that antecedent situational (prior intragroup contact) and dispositional (racial identity centrality) variables predict both current cognitions (race-related reasons for attending a college) and behavioral intentions (relevant to racial identity development). Mediational analysis provides a tool to assess whether race-related reasons for college choice serve as an explanation for why each of the antecedent

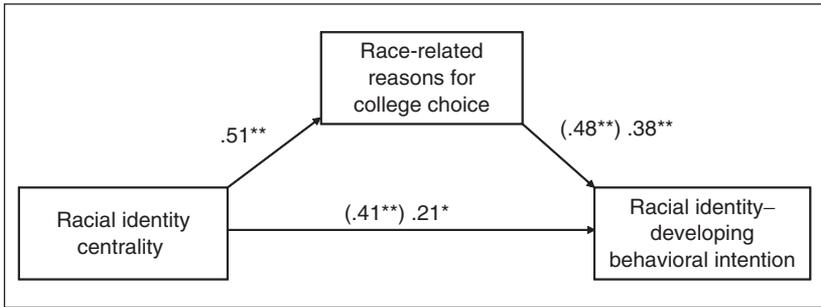


Figure 1. The association between centrality and the intention to engage in racial identity–developing behaviors, as mediated through race-related reasons for college choice
 Standardized betas are reported. Coefficients not in parentheses represent parameter estimates for a regression model containing both predictors. Asterisks indicate parameter estimates that differ from zero at * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

variables predicts behavioral intentions. That is, it serves as a test of the proposed sequential and cognitively mediated process.

To test whether the relationship between racial identity centrality and the intention to engage in racial identity–developing behaviors was mediated by race-related reasons for college choice, analyses were conducted using centrality as the IV, racial identity–developing behavioral intention as the DV, and race-related reasons for college choice as the mediator (see Figure 1).

As a first step, racial identity–developing behavioral intentions were regressed on centrality. Centrality was found to be a significant predictor of behavioral intentions ($\beta = .41, p < .01$). Second, race-related reasons for attending an HBCU were regressed on centrality. Centrality was found to be a significant predictor of race-related reasons ($\beta = .51, p < .01$). Finally, behavioral intentions were regressed on both centrality and race-related. Race related reasons significantly predicted behavior intentions ($\beta = .38, p < .01$); however, centrality was reduced in its ability to predict behavior intentions ($\beta = .21, p < .05$). Sobel’s (1982) test confirmed that there was a significant reduction in the variance in behavioral intentions explained by the predictor centrality when race-related reasons were included in the regression ($z = 3.34, p < .01$). Therefore race-related reasons for college choice mediated the relationship between racial centrality and the intention to engage in racial identity–developing behaviors (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

To test whether the relationship between prior contact and the intention to engage in racial identity–developing behaviors was mediated by race-related

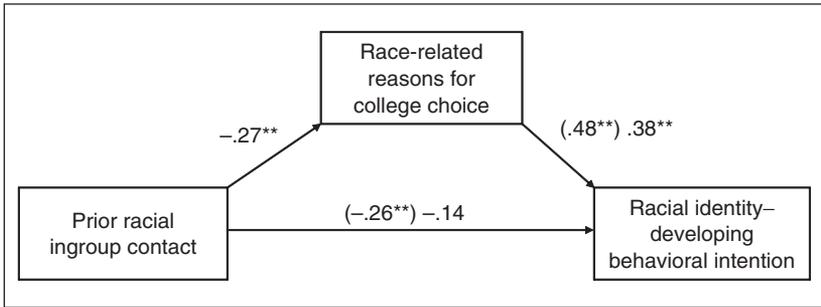


Figure 2. The association between prior contact and the intention to engage in racial identity–developing behaviors, as mediated through race-related reasons for college choice

Standardized betas are reported. Coefficients not in parentheses represent parameter estimates for a regression model containing both predictors. Asterisks indicate parameter estimates that differ from zero at: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

reasons for college choice, analyses were conducted using contact as the IV, racial identity–developing behavioral intentions as the DV, and race-related reasons for college choice as the mediator (see Figure 2).

As a first step, racial identity–developing behavioral intentions were regressed on contact. Contact was found to be a significant predictor of behavior intentions ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .01$). Second, race-related reasons for attending an HBCU were regressed on contact. Contact was found to be a significant predictor of race-related reasons ($\beta = -.27$, $p < .01$). Finally, behavioral intentions were regressed on both contact and race-related reasons. Race-related reasons significantly predicted behavioral intentions ($\beta = .38$, $p < .01$); however, contact no longer significantly predicted behavioral intentions ($\beta = -.14$, $p = .13$). Sobel's (1982) test confirmed that there was a significant reduction in the variance in race identity–developing behavioral intentions explained by the predictor contact when race-related reasons for attending an HBCU were included in the regression ($z = -2.54$, $p < .05$). Therefore, race-related reasons for college choice mediated the relationship between contact and intention to engage in racial identity–developing behaviors (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Discussion

Evidence on the reasons students choose what college to attend comes almost exclusively from samples dominated by White students. What research exists using Black students is typically focused on the decision of whether to attend

college or not, rather than the reasons Black students choose to attend a given school. To illustrate the need to study the reasons that Black students choose a college, the current investigation explores race-related reasons for college choice as one area where Black students are likely to differ from White students. The current investigation identifies two variables associated with race-related reasons for attending an HBCU, racial centrality and lack of intraracial contact growing up. Critically, race-related reasons for college choice have consequences for the intentions students have to engage in racial identity–developing behaviors while in college, and these effects are independent of non-race-related reasons (i.e., financial and academic) which have been previously identified in the college choice literature.

In general, having a racial identity that is more central to the self is likely to have an impact on a variety of important life decisions, including the reasons students have to attend a given college or university. Consistent with this notion, the current results show that students who are higher in racial centrality report that race-related reasons have more to do with choosing to attend an HBCU. The current findings provide quantitative evidence that, at least for some Black students, race-related reasons are an important part of their school-choice decision, a point that has gone largely unnoticed within the scientific community. Critically, race-related reasons for school choice have consequences for how students approached their undergraduate experience overall.

Students with race-related reasons for college choice are more likely to endorse intentions to pursue behaviors on campus directly related to developing their racial identity, including formal activities such as classes and student organizations, as well as less formal activities such as conversations with friends and personal reading. Other reasons for their college choice (financial and academic) are not associated with these behavioral intentions. Critically, a validation sample (as described in the Method section) established that these behavioral intentions are predictive of subsequent racial identity–developing behaviors (e.g., class choices, student clubs, personal reading). In short, those students who indicate that race has more to do with their college choice are more likely to approach their college experience as an opportunity to explore race and racial identity.

The second key finding of the current research is how Black students who felt a lack of contact with their own race approach the choice of attending a particular HBCU and in engaging in activities while there. The current results show that growing up with less intragroup contact makes it more likely for students to cite race-related reasons for attending an HBCU. Furthermore, students with less intragroup contact are more likely to endorse intentions to

engage in racial identity—developing behaviors. That is, students who feel a lack of intraracial contact are actively engaged in developing themselves through important life decisions (choosing to attend an HBCU), and behaviors they intend to engage in at the university. This shows an awareness of the self as well as a conscious and intentional pursuit of racial identity.

One final finding of interest in the current results is that no relationship was found between prior intragroup contact and racial identity centrality. This, along with the multiple regression results, indicates that these two variables serve as independent predictors of race-related reasons for college choice and behavioral intentions. Previous studies using similar measures have found a positive relationship between intragroup contact and racial centrality (Ashburn-Nardo, Monteith, Arthur, & Bain, 2007), although the relationship is not always reliable (e.g., Postmes & Branscombe, 2002). In the current research, we found high internal reliability for both the contact and centrality measures, and each had robust relationships with the other variables. This suggests that if contact and centrality had a positive relationship in the population, we should have found evidence of it. One possibility for the difference in findings is that our study was conducted at an HBCU, while these other studies were conducted at PWIs. Both intragroup contact and racial identity centrality could be different for students who chose to attend a PWI, and this would affect the relationship between these variables. Replication and further studies are needed to more fully understand when these factors are related and when they are not.

The current results provide the first quantitative evidence the authors are aware of supporting the importance of childhood intragroup contact in determining reasons for school choice. In addition, these results clearly show that studying reasons for school choice based on predominantly White samples fails to account for critical aspects of the experience of Black students, since prior research has not identified race-related reasons for college choice. Furthermore, race-related reasons were distinct from two key non-race-related reasons (financial and academic) included in prior research on college choice. In general, more research is needed to better understand the reasons Black students choose colleges, and particular attention should be placed on those aspects that are likely to have been overlooked based on samples that are predominantly White.

Limitations and Future Directions

One alternative account that might be raised for the current results is that they occurred due to social desirability. That is, participants varied in how responsive

they were to socially desirable answers related to race and racial identity. Since we did not measure the social desirability concerns of our participants, this explanation cannot be completely ruled out. However, a social desirability explanation was not supported in the current results, because any social desirability that led a student to report choosing a college for race-related reasons and intending to engage in race-relevant behaviors is unlikely to lead a student to point out that he or she had less contact with fellow Blacks growing up. On the other hand, it is not possible to rule out social desirability for the current findings related to the centrality of race, so this should be addressed in future research. That said, social desirability does not appear to provide a compelling explanation for the current results taken as a whole.

One limitation of the current study is the use of a measure of behavioral intention rather a direct measure of behavior. Although a measure of behavior was not collected, there are reasons to believe that the behavior intention measure does predict behavior. First, as reported in the methods section, a validation sample taken from the same population found that this measure of behavior intention correlated substantially with racial identity–developing behaviors reported retrospectively 1 to 2 months later, $r(87) = .54, p < .001$. Second, in line with the TOPB (see Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005, for a review), research shows that behavioral intentions are good predictors of behavior, although the relationship weakens somewhat in the absence of volitional control or behavioral opportunity (Ajzen, 1985; Ajzen & Gilbert Cote, 2008; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). Specific behaviors that are subject to factors that go against volitional control, such as condom use (Albarracín, Johnson, Fishbein, & Muellerleile, 2001) and smoking cessation (Godin, Valois, Lepage, & Desharnais, 1992), are less associated with behavior intentions. However, even in these cases correlations between intention and behavior remain in the .50 range ($r = .44$ to $.56$, cf. Albarracín et al., 2001), which, according to Cohen (1992), represents a large effect. Critically, the current study assessed intentions to engage in student activities relevant to race (taking classes, reading books, joining clubs, and talking with friends), which seem likely to fall under volitional control, and at an HBCU there are ample opportunities to engage in racial identity–relevant behaviors. Indeed, behavior intentions similar to those assessed in the current study have shown substantial influence in predicting subsequent volitional behaviors, including class choice (Randall, 1994), college attendance (Carpenter & Fleishman, 1987), exam success (Phillips, Abraham, & Bond, 2003), and leisure behaviors (Ajzen & Driver, 1992; Hrubes, Ajzen, & Daigle, 2001; see Ajzen & Gilbert Cote, 2008, for a review). In sum, the validation sample as well as prior theory and findings supports the notion that with behavioral opportunity and volitional

control, as is likely the case in the current study, behavioral intentions should be expected to predict behavior. Future research is needed to explore the relationship of actual behavior with other key study variables, such as lack of intragroup racial contact, racial centrality, and race-related reasons for attending an HBCU. In addition to cognitive factors, which were the focus of the current investigation, affective factors (emotions, moods, and arousal) may also have both direct and indirect influences on behaviors (Zajonc, 1968; see Clore & Schnall, 2005, for a review), and so assessment of these factors would also provide a more complete picture in future research (see Dutta-Bergman, 2005).

Many of the most intriguing questions raised by the current investigation center on whether the findings would generalize to other circumstances and populations. While this study examined the race-related reasons for choosing one particular HBCU, there is reason to believe that these findings would generalize to other HBCUs. Howard University has a student body that comes from diverse geographic, socioeconomic, and demographic backgrounds. None of the demographic variables assessed, including age, parental income, and sex, predicted race-related reasons for HBCU choice, so the current findings are not qualified within the range of variability of this sample. That said, future research is needed to confirm this generalizability and to explore the race-related reasons that Black students choose PWIs, and in particular what relationship these reasons have to prior intragroup contact or racial identity centrality. Another point related to the generality of the current research is that the sample was made up of students who had already passed through all of the stages highlighted in college choice models (i.e., predisposition, search, and choice; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). It would be interesting to investigate the impact of intragroup contact and centrality at each of the earlier stages of choice. One set of circumstances highlights a number of these generalizability issues simultaneously, that of a Black student who is in the early stages of his or her college choice decision, and who is considering both PWIs and HBCUs. Some students under these circumstances might be focusing on race-related reasons for college choice and racial identity–developing activities, whereas other students might not. This sort of variability suggests that the current findings could be even stronger under these very different circumstances. Of course, such speculation awaits future research.

The current result showing that low intragroup contact is associated with race-related reasons for college choice raises questions about other outcomes for these students. One possibility that is beyond the scope of the current research is that students with less prior contact face additional challenges fitting in at an HBCU. If so, this would be consistent with prior work indicating

that a mismatch between prior circumstances and college circumstances leads to less effective adjustment to the chosen institution (Graham, Baker, & Wapner, 1985). Such a result would not necessarily be inconsistent with the current findings. Indeed, more intention to engage in racial identity–developing behaviors among those with less prior intragroup contact could represent an effort to fit in. Overall, future research incorporating additional outcome measures and different sample populations is critical in order to fill in the picture of the experience of the diversity of Black college-bound students during this pivotal time in their lives.

Conclusions

The current study of students at an HBCU validates the importance of race-related reasons for college choice. In addition to this contribution, the current results have implications for HBCUs. One of the greatest challenges that HBCUs currently face is attracting top students in an increasingly competitive college admissions environment. Taking into account the diversity of reasons that students find these schools appealing provides one way to increase the appeal of these schools for individual applicants. Students who have less contact with other Blacks while growing up, and students who see their racial identity as important, are likely to respond most favorably if HBCUs emphasize the added opportunities for students to explore their racial identity.

The current research also makes it clear that not all students come to HBCUs for race-related reasons. This suggests that HBCUs should continue to emphasize all of the additional advantages of these schools, such as academic prestige, social advantages, and financial considerations. Whether students chose to attend an HBCU because of its ability to satisfy a desire to be in a predominantly Black environment, or because of the high quality education on offer, they can benefit in all respects. Students who choose an HBCU highlight the race-related reasons for their choice as comparable in importance to other reasons for college choice. The basis for this choice suggests an added value that is simply not available to the same extent at PWIs in terms of contact with Black students and faculty, class offerings, available student organizations, or historic legacy, to name a few. So while the debate over the future of HBCUs persists, these schools will continue to offer something unique to their students, including the opportunity to develop their racial identity in a predominantly Black environment. For many students, this unique experience is a driving force behind their college-choice decision.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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