

Pelliccio report on Faculty Development Grant funding for 2024

Lukas Pellicico, PhD
Department of Communication

I received funding April 2024 to complete my project titled: *Examining HBCU students' lived experiences with ostracism*. The goal of the project was to complete my IRB approved study on ostracism at HBCUs and to submit a final manuscript for publication in the journal of *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*. I accomplished these goals and in November submitted the manuscript titled, "Left Out of the Family: A Qualitative Exploration of HBCU Students' Social Ostracism Experiences" to the journal. It is currently under review with a decision expected to be made by March of 2025. I have a receipt of my submission to the journal below.

Qualitative Research Reports in Communication

Left Out of the Family: A Qualitative Exploration of HBCU Students' Social Ostracism Experiences

Submission ID	242674114
Article Type	Research Article
Keywords	ostracism, HBCU, support, coping
Authors	Lukas Pelliccio, Trejha Whitfield

For any queries please contact:

journalshelpdesk@taylorandfrancis.com

Note for Reviewers:

To submit your review please visit <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/rqrr>

Authors

Lukas Pelliccio, PhD

Associate Professor, Department of Communication, Lincoln University of PA

Trejha Whitfield

Assistant Professor, Department of Communication, Lincoln University of PA

Title

Left Out of the Family:

A Qualitative Exploration of HBCU Students' Social Ostracism Experiences

Abstract

Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are important institutions in the United States that have served as access points into higher education for Black Americans for decades. They are considered a haven for the free expression of Black social and cultural heritages and give individuals a sense of pride, inclusion, and unity. In spite of the “family” atmosphere, HBCU students still face instances of social ostracism, which can be hurtful and negatively impact their mental health and interpersonal relationships. In this study, researchers conducted interviews with HBCU students to better understand their lived experiences with being ostracized and how they use communication to interpret messages and cope with ostracism. The findings reveal that the “family” ideology can impact students’ experiences in different ways and that through effective social and institutional support, students can better cope with and make sense of being ostracized.

Introduction

Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are important institutions in the United States that have served as access points into higher education for Black Americans (Crewe, 2017). They are considered a haven for the free expression of Black social and cultural heritages and give individuals a sense of pride and unity that they might otherwise not be able to attain at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (Gay, 2016; Kennedy, 2012). Recently there has been a revitalization of interest in attending HBCUs (Davis, 2023) as they help students with personal racial development (Van Camp, et. al, 2009), offer a vibrant and unique campus culture (Johnson, 2017), and the potential for students to feel a stronger sense of belonging (Green, 2022). In spite of the inclusive and familial atmosphere that the institutions seek to create, there are instances in which HBCU students are ostracized from social groups, relationships, or conversations (Goings, 2016). Studies show that ostracism is an important, common, and hurtful interpersonal experience that can potentially have long lasting negative psychological effects on targets (Williams & Nida, 2017). Such experiences can be significant for HBCU students and require further investigation. Therefore, the goal of this study was to conduct an exploratory examination of HBCU students' lived experiences with being ostracized while attending college and how they use communication to interpret, make sense of, and cope with ostracism events. The findings of this study give insight into the nuances of HBCU students' interpersonal interactions and a deeper understanding of the contextual elements of ostracism communication.

HBCUs

HBCUs were established in the 19th century to specifically help Black Americans gain access to higher education and pathways to careers (Quinlan, et al., 2022). Beyond advanced degrees, HBCUs offer students personal and cultural identity affirmation (Patton, et al., 2023).

HBCU social environments are often described as a "family" that help students feel a sense of belonging, liberation, pride, and comfort (Cooper & Newton, 2021). Sharing racial and cultural identities with faculty, staff, and administration, listening to the same genres of music, and communicating through a familiar vernacular further reinforces students' sense of inclusion (Harris, 2012; Kennedy 2012). This helps create a space where students feel as though faculty and staff better understand their perspectives (Cooper & Newtown, 2021).

However, some studies examine instances where HBCU students do not feel included and it negatively impacts their education and well being. For example, if students have professors who are unavailable or difficult to communicate with, it can increase their stress and sense of isolation and make them disinterested in continuing at the school (Sun, 2022). If students do not belong to the dominant cultures of the institution, they may feel othered in certain spaces (Greenfield, et al., 2015). Likewise, high-achieving Black students reported instances of "achiever isolation" where they were ignored by professors or excluded by certain peers for excelling academically (Fries-Britt, 1998). Other studies reported instances where LGBTQ HBCU students felt ostracized simply because of school traditions that require gendered attire or behavior to participate (Patton & Simmons, 2008). Lastly, HBCU students who are not Christian or Black may experience instances of exclusion in conversations, organizations, or classroom lessons (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019).

Being ostracized or ignored by peers can have a significant impact on an individual's self esteem and mental health. Ostracism is a common human experience that takes place in all cultures and can have serious negative psychological impacts on targets depending on the circumstances of the interaction (Williams, 2001; Hartkergard, et al, 2015). Researchers consider a wide variety of message types and interactions as ostracism communication, ranging from

minor episodes of interpersonal silent treatment or being ignored in a conversation, to major life changing events where individuals are systematically pushed out of groups or organizations (Kerr & Levine, 2008). Although individuals face rejection experiences every day, ostracism is a communicative experience said to occur when people violate social norms related to acknowledgement, inclusion, or response (Robinson, O'Reilly, & Wang, 2012). After interpreting a message as ostracism, a target will feel acute psychological reactions of shock, sadness, anger, and/or confusion, followed by reduced senses of belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004; DeWall & Baumeister, 2006; Pelliccio & Walker, 2021a). Targets use communication and intrapersonal reflection to make sense of and cope with their experiences (Williams & Gerber, 2005; Pelliccio & Walker, 2021b). In severe cases, ostracism can foster instances of self-harm or suicidal thoughts (Buelow et al., 2015; Chen, et al., 2020; Riva, et al., 2017).

Thus, ostracism is an important and nuanced human experience that can potentially have significant impacts on targets. For HBCU students who seek an inclusive college experience, being ostracized could negatively affect their mental health, well-being, and education. By examining HBCU students ostracism experiences researchers, practitioners, and institutions can gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences and find more effective support measures that can foster inclusive social environments at HBCUs. Therefore, the following research questions were posed to begin exploring this idea:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of a students' being ostracized at an HBCU?

RQ2: How do HBCU students use communication to interpret and cope with ostracism?

Methods

After obtaining IRB approval, qualitative interviews were conducted with current HBCU students who self-reported ostracism experiences while attending an HBCU. There were 23 interviews (12 males, 11 females) (Age 19-30, M = 21). Participants self-identified as African-American/Black (N=19), biracial/multiracial (N =3), and white (N=1). They were asked to reflect on the details of a past experience in which they were ostracized or ignored by an individual or group while attending an HBCU. Interviews were recorded and lasted between 26-115 minutes (M= 45 minutes). Interview transcriptions totaled 275 pages of single-spaced text and were analyzed through phenomenological procedures that allowed the dominant and interesting themes to emerge (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Moustakas 1994)

Results

The findings of this exploratory study helped to reveal 5 dominant themes surrounding HBCU students' lived experiences with being ostracized.

1) "I'm still different"

Although participants generally described their HBCU as an inclusive space where they felt welcomed, they also reported instances where they were ostracized because their beliefs, actions, or identities did not align with the dominant culture of a specific peer group or the broader student body. For example, Marcus identified as Muslim and felt that he was ostracized by his peers because of his beliefs.

"Being a Muslim you're not supposed to drink and you're not supposed to smoke. There are people on this campus that are the same religion that don't care about that and [my friends and roommates] all try to use people and say, 'He smokes. See, he drinks'....They will try to shun me out...they would say like, 'We're all going here' and they would purposely leave me out."

“Coming to school I expected that I don't have to deal with that stereotype because everyone here is basically a minority...Being here, it makes me feel like I'm still different.”

Other participants explained that they were excluded from groups or conversations because they were non-traditional students, veterans, or not African-American. Participants viewed their institution as welcoming and inclusive but with isolated incidents of interpersonal ostracism.

2) “Family” matters

Many participants reinforced the pervasiveness of the HBCU as “family” ideology and that the institution had their best interest at heart. However, participants reported that the ideology affected meaning making and communication in different ways. For some, the family ideology gave them a sense of comfort following ostracism because it offered them reassurance that they were still a part of the “family.” For example, Layla stated:

“If you are having an experience where it affects you negatively, I feel like every time you see that person you are going to get reminded of that situation. So it's better to resolve that situation so that next time you encounter that person you don't have that negative experience...I feel like it's also a part of how they say HBCUs are like family because you don't want to have or cause problems in your family. So resolving those issues is important.”

Conversely, other participants reported that the family ideology made it harder to make sense of their ostracism experience. For example, Tonya stated:

“It does make it hurt a little more because you're like, ‘These are supposed to be my people and I'm supposed to be a part of these things, and understand these things, and be

cool with these things.’ It just makes it sting a little bit more because this is a place that I am supposed to fit in and if you find out you don’t, it just hurts.”

The family ideology offers a unique nuance to ostracism message interpretation that varies for each student. Participants spoke about it in relation to their experience in positive, negative, and neutral ways depending on the circumstances of the interaction. One participant discussed these nuances in this way:

“I feel like some people come here and think it’s supposed to be a family. It *is* an HBCU and when you see how HBCUs are advertised and promoted on social media it’s like, ‘family, family, family.’ ...Some schools really are one big family but families also have arguments, fights, and disagreements. Everything is not always going to be smooth. That’s what people have to understand.”

3) Students use past experiences and expectations to inform interpretations and coping

Research suggests that a target’s past experiences and interaction expectations are foundational aspects of their interpretation of interpersonal ostracism messages and social support (Burgoon, 1993; Pelliccio & Brown, 2021). Participants frequently pointed to past experiences as key meaning systems they drew from to interpret present day events and communication. For example, Warren was ignored by a group of his peers at an orientation and was upset at the time but overcame the rejection fairly quickly due to his past experiences and expectations of others.

“I’m from New York. It’s rough out there...People are either going to be friendly or they’re not. So, when I came here and saw people that didn’t want to associate with me, I understood that energy. So, it was just like, ‘Ok. Cool. I’m just not going to mess with that person anymore.’ At that point, it is what it is.”

In another example, Courtney reported feeling angry and sad after she was not selected for a university dance organization, but was able to overcome the negative feelings by reflecting on her past experiences and expectations: "I danced for some of the top dance schools in the city [before college]. So, I wasn't even really worried about it. That kind of helped me get over [being ostracized] a little bit."

4) Support seeking from family, friends, and institution

Participants discussed different means of support seeking after the initial ostracism interaction, but they particularly pointed to the positive influence of support from close friends and family. Several participants explained that conversations with their parents were a primary source of coping and sense making after ostracism.

"I just felt shitty. I would call my mom and I would be like, 'I don't know if I'm gonna make any friends here.' And she was like, 'No. You'll find your group of people.

Everybody is going to go through that. You're going to find your people.'"

Other participants discussed the ways that university clubs, organizations, and orientations could help foster an inclusive environment and make it easier to cope with the feelings of being ostracized.

"I feel like just getting involved and joining organizations is an extra resource because those organizations have events where you can come out and meet people... You see all the flyers and stuff like that. So just going out and going to those events is a way you can get involved and not be left out."

5) Ostracism can foster personal growth and identity development

All participants reported feeling hurt, confused, or sad when they were ostracized but several explained that over time they were able to use communication and self-reflection to

reinterpret the ostracism event as a learning experience to better understand themselves, their identity, and/or the HBCU. For example, one participant was excluded from a party by her friends and discussed the lessons she learned from it.

“It helped me realize that you can't get through college without feeling excluded, without putting yourself out there sometimes to get excluded, and to know that you can express [to others] that you don't want to be that person on the outside. You want to be in. But you can't know that that affects you unless you are put in that position to be left out.”

In another example, a participant described feeling hurt when all of her closest friends went to the cafeteria, did not invite her, and then posted a picture on social media. Following a period of reflection and support she reinterpreted the experience.

“I definitely have to learn not to depend on people as much, especially if it's for my personal needs, because if we're not working together to get money or anything then I don't have to depend on you. With independence, I think everybody should be okay with going out and getting food by themselves. So, I think that is something I'm still learning today; it's just being out, being comfortable in my own skin and just being confident.”

Discussion

Overall the findings show that in spite of the best efforts by HBCUs to foster an inclusive “family” environment, students still experience isolated instances of social ostracism. However, through effective social, emotional, and institutional support, targets can better make sense of their experiences and foster personal and relational development. The lived experience of being ostracized at an HBCU is unique in that the racial and social significance of the institution and the “family” ideology can directly influence individuals' interpretations of events and their post-ostracism sense making. For some students, they struggled to understand why they were

being rejected from the family, while others were unphased because they could easily connect with other groups or they saw the family as being irrelevant to their individual experience.

The findings reinforce the importance of emotional, social, and institutional support in ostracism coping (Chaudhry, et al., 2024; Nishiyama, et al., 2015; Waldeck, Tyndall & Chmiel, 2017). Participants frequently reported that they communicated with friends and family to cope and make sense of ostracism. If the institution has a better understanding of the individual needs of their students, they can facilitate pathways for support such as using scales or frameworks to assess students' needs (see Gross, Qingxia, & Lockwood, 2019; Ndumu & Walker, 2021). Furthermore, the findings offer insight into specific aspects of students' social experiences that can help faculty and administrators further develop culturally-affirming pedagogies that simultaneously center Blackness while also still being inclusive and supportive of safe spaces for conversation (Williams, Russel, & Summerville, 2021). HBCUs are important institutions in the United States and through further research, they can continue to improve students' lived experiences.

Works Cited

- Booker, K. C., & Campbell-Whatley, G. (2019). Student perceptions of inclusion at a Historically Black University. *Journal of Negro Education*, 88(2), 146–158. doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.88.2.0146
- Buelow, M. T., Okdie, B. M., Brunell, A. B., & Trost, Z. (2015). Stuck in a moment and you cannot get out of it: The lingering effects of ostracism on cognition and satisfaction of basic needs. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 76, 39-43. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2014.11.051
- Burgoon, J. K. (1993). Interpersonal expectations, expectancy violations, and emotional communication. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 12(1-2), 30-48. doi:10.1177/0261927X93121003
- Chaudhry, S., Tandon, A., Shinde, S., & Bhattacharya, A. (2024). Student psychological well-being in higher education: The role of internal team environment, institutional, friends and family support and academic engagement. *PLoS ONE*, 19(1), 1–23. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0297508
- Chen, Z., Poon, K., DeWall, C., & Jiang, T. (2020). Life lacks meaning without acceptance: Ostracism triggers suicidal thoughts. *Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology*, 119(6), 1423-1443. doi:10.1037/pspi0000238
- Cooper, J. N., & Newton, A. (2021). Black female college athletes' sense of belonging at a historically black college and university (HBCU). *The Journal of Negro Education*, 90(1), 71-83.
- Crewe, S. E. (2017). Education with intent- The HBCU experience. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 27, 5, 360-366. doi:10.1080/10911359.2017.1318622

- Davis, J.E. (2023, September 17). HBCUs see surge in applications after George Floyd protests, help from black celebs. *USA Today*. Available at:
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2023/02/18/more-students-apply-historic-black-colleges-and-universities/11155356002/>
- DeWall, C. N., & Baumeister, R. F. (2006). Alone but feeling no pain: Effects of social exclusion on physical pain tolerance and pain threshold, affective forecasting, and interpersonal empathy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91(1), 1-15.
doi:10.1037/0022-3514.91.1.1
- Gay, G. H. (2016, Spring). Helping youth understand the benefits of HBCUs. *US Black Engineer and Information Technology*, 40, 15. Retrieved from
<https://proxy.lib.wayne.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/docview/1811695733?accountid=14925>
- Goings, R. B. (2016). Investigating the experiences of two high-achieving Black male HBCU graduates: An exploratory study. *Negro Educational Review*, 67(1-4), 54-75.
- Greenfield, D. F., Innouvong, T., Aglugub, R. J., & Yusuf, I. A. (2015). HBCUs as critical context for identity work: Reflections, experiences, and lessons learned. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2015(170), 37-48. doi:10.1002/he.20130
- Gross, T. J., Qingxia Li, & Lockwood, A. B. (2019). Pilot study to develop an augmented student support needs scale to address the needs of HBCU students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 88(3), 213-228.
- Harris III, O. D. (2012). From margin to center: Participating in village pedagogy at historically black colleges and universities. *The Urban Review*, 44(3), 332- 357.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-012-0199-0>

- Hartgerink, C. H., van Beest, I., Wicherts, J. M., & Williams, K. D. (2015). The ordinal effects of ostracism: A meta-analysis of 120 Cyberball Studies. *PloS ONE*, 10(5). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0127002
- Johnson, J.M. (2017), "Choosing HBCUs: Why African Americans Choose HBCUs in the Twenty-First Century", Brown, M.C. and Dancy, T.E. (Ed.) *Black Colleges Across the Diaspora: Global Perspectives on Race and Stratification in Postsecondary Education* (Advances in Education in Diverse Communities, Vol. 14), Emerald Publishing Limited, pp. 151-169. doi:10.1108/S1479-358X20160000014008
- Kerr, N. L., & Levine, J. M. (2008). The detection of social ostracism: Evolution and beyond. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 12(1), 39-52.
- Kennedy, J. L. (2012). The HBCU Experience: Liberating or Not? *The Urban Review*, 44(3), 358–377. doi:10.1007/s11256-012-0200-y
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ndumu, A., & Walker, S. (2021). Adapting an HBCU-inspired framework for Black student success in U.S. LIS education. *Education for Information*, 37(2), 219–229. doi:10.3233/EFI-211511
- Nishiyama, Y., Okamoto, Y., Kunisato, Y., Okada, G., Yoshimura, S., Kanai, Y., Yamamura, T., Yoshino, A., Jinnin, R., Takagaki, K., Onoda, K., & Yamawaki, S. (2015). fMRI Study of social anxiety during social ostracism with and without emotional Support. *PLoS ONE*, 10(5), 1–14. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0127426
- Patton, L. D., Blockett, R. A., & McGowan, B. L. (2023). Complexities and contradictions: Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer students' lived realities across three urban HBCU contexts. *Urban Education*, 58(6), 1355-1382.

doi:10.1177/0042085920959128

- Patton, L. D., & Simmons, S. L. (2008). Exploring complexities of multiple identities of lesbians in a Black college environment. *Negro Educational Review*, 59(3–4), 197–215.
- Pelliccio, L. J. & Walker, S. (2021). Examining ostracism as communication: A seven-phase model of interpersonal ostracism message reception and interpretation. *Florida Journal of Communication*, 141, 228–258.
- Pelliccio, L. J. & Walker, S. (2021b). What is an interpersonal ostracism message?: Bringing ostracism into communication studies. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 1-16. doi: 10.1080/15456870.2020.1859509
- Pelliccio, L. J. & Brown, T. (2021). Ostracism hurts, but how is it communicated?: A qualitative exploration of the interpersonal communication of ostracism. *Kentucky Journal of Communication*, 39 (2), 26-43.
- Quinlan, C. L., Picho, K., & Burke, J. (2022). Creating an instrument to measure social and cultural self-efficacy indicators for persistence of HBCU undergraduates in STEM. *Research in Science Education (Australasian Science Education Research Association)*, 52(5), 1583-1601. doi:10.1007/s11165-021-09992-8
- Riva, P., Montali, L., Wirth, J. H., Curioni, S., & Williams, K. D. (2017). Chronic social exclusion and evidence for the resignation stage: An empirical investigation. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 34(4), 541–564. doi:10.1177/0265407516644348
- Robinson, S. L., O'Reilly, J., & Wang, W. (2013). Invisible at work: An integrated model of workplace ostracism. *Journal of Management*, 39(1), 203-231. doi:10.1177/0149206312466141
- Sun, W. (2022). HBCU undergraduate students' perceived stress management and coping skills.

Qualitative Research Reports in Communication, 23(1), 27–38.

doi:10.1080/17459435.2020.1871402

Van Camp, D., Barden, J., Ren Sloan, L., & Clarke, R. P. (2009). Choosing an HBCU: An opportunity to pursue racial self-development. *Journal of Negro Education*, 78(4), 457–468.

Waldeck, D., Tyndall, I., & Chmiel, N. (2015). Resilience to ostracism: A qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Report*, 20(10), 1646–1669.

Williams, K.L., Russell, A. & Summerville, K. (2021). Centering blackness: An examination of culturally-affirming pedagogy and practices enacted by HBCU administrators and faculty members. *Innov High Education*, 46, 33–757.
doi.org:10.1007/s10755-021-09562-w

Williams, K. D. (2001). *Ostracism: The power of silence*. New York, NY. Guilford Press.

Williams, K. D., & Gerber, J. (2005). Ostracism: The making of the ignored and excluded mind. *Interaction Studies*, 6, 3, 359-374.

Williams, K.D. & Nida, S. (2016). *Ostracism, Exclusion, and Rejection*. Psychology Press.

Zadro, L., Williams, K. D., & Richardson, R. (2004). How low can you go? Ostracism by a computer is sufficient to lower self-reported levels of belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 40(4), 560–567.
doi.org:10.1016/j.jesp.2003.11.006