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The Relevance of Double Consciousness among Black Males in College

Kevin L. Wright

“The Souls of Black Folk,” by W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) is a means to explain the experience of the Negro in the late 1800s. Many of the attitudes and perceptions of Black people are still present today. In Du Bois’ work, he discussed his coined term, double consciousness; Du Bois indicated that it is a curse along with a gift, a most unwelcome one. He discussed the racial binary of what a Black person experiences in society compared to White people. The experiences a Black man has in a predominantly White society can mirror the experiences of a Black man who attends a predominantly White institution (PWI). It is imperative for current student affairs practitioners to understand why this topic is important. This article explains how double consciousness is a timely concept that is applicable to Black males who attend PWIs.

In *“The Souls of Black Folk,”* Du Bois’ defines double consciousness as, “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (p.7). Du Bois’ published his work in 1903, and yet, through the lived experiences of Black male student and administrators, double consciousness is still a relevant concept. In *“The Souls of Black Folk,”* much of the Black male voice expressed varying struggles centered on racial tensions. In the context of this article, multiple narratives about double consciousness in this piece stem from Black male college students and Black male college administrators. I created a survey and facilitated interviews to guide my analysis of double consciousness among Black males at PWIs. The experiences of these students and administrators were similar and aligned to produce a few themes. These themes provide context to how they correlate with their relevance in the present day.

Credibility, Proof of Self, and Hope

The first theme is credibility: Each person saw double consciousness as a means to measure their credibility amongst their coworkers or classmates. Administrators spoke of how taxing it is to go through double consciousness on a daily basis. It is exhausting to look at one’s self to make sure it is measuring up to the work of others; the term “Black tax” came up in the interviews quite often. Black tax is the notion that Black people have to work and perform regular tasks twice as well

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as White people in order to receive the same level of recognition. When it comes to credibility in the workplace or even the classroom, double consciousness has a presence in neither space because of the Black tax. The interviewees would ask themselves why their efforts were so problematic to their White counterparts. Du Bois wondered why White people did not directly ask him, “how does it feel to be a problem?” (p. 6). The efforts he put forth to advance his community were always problematic to the White community, yet none would directly address it with him.

The second theme is self-proof, where the interviewees all wanted to prove their competence to themselves and to others. Repeatedly, many of the statements from students indicated double consciousness as a struggle because they wanted to prove how much they did not fit a stereotype. These students went to class knowing their White counterparts already have a preconceived idea of them, and the students cannot do anything else, but prove their White counterparts wrong. As a result, the Black students try to do everything the right way. Two administrators explicitly said that Black people are victims for not being White. Other narratives from administrators detested this statement, both with wanting to prove something to their peers and to themselves for personal enlightenment and development. “*The Souls of Black Folk*” strives to examine the nature of Black visibility through veiled constructs and explicit racism. Du Bois’ words resonate with this when he stated, “then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil” (p. 6).

The last theme is hope. A few students mentioned they enjoy receiving good grades and being good students. Good grades act as a representation of how they like to view themselves and how that mentality can spread through the Black students’ community. A couple of administrators mentioned that Black males have to be mindful of how White people see them. Awareness of double consciousness is significant for Black males to be successful, but double consciousness does not rule how they operate. Through the interviews, both students and administrators made a decision to either take ownership of double consciousness and use it to their advantage, or negate the concept entirely. Du Bois said, “One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (p. 7). In the scope of relevancy, the experiences of Du Bois similarly align with the experiences of Black males in the present day.

Connection to Literature

Additional scholars have provided personal narratives and theoretical frameworks to connect to double consciousness. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) implicitly references double consciousness and discusses the impact of borderlands theory. Eduardo

Bonilla-Silva (2010) discusses his approach to the importance of a quality education contributing to the mental development of students, along with the alleviation of the negative impact of double consciousness. Connections to literature provides additional legitimacy to the topic of how double consciousness impacts Black students in college.

Double consciousness is a concept within higher education due to a campus community that mirrors its outside local community. “To the real question, how does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word” (p. 6). The statements from students and administrators provided insight to how Black males critically analyze this question through double consciousness. It is crucial to acknowledge and address double consciousness in higher education because it is apparent in various campus communities and racial communities, not just PWIs, and not just between Black students and White students. Some students indicated they feel as if double consciousness is apparent in every community. The contributions from Du Bois align with providing a relevant concept that affects Black men. However, with how society has changed over time, the contribution from Du Bois interrupts his narrative due to how folks view double consciousness as not just a Black experience. The interviews provided a belief that every community has their own set of moral standards and if a person does not fit to that standard, they will be perceived as the “other.” If Black people are not living up to a standard within their own Black community, or living up to the standards of another racial community, they are not perceived as Black. Having to please multiple communities or identities is similar to experiences discussed in other literary works (Anzaldúa, 1987; Bonilla-Silva, 2010).

In “*Racism without Racists*,” Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010) discussed color-blind thinking, racial stratification, and racial inequities. Bonilla-Silva provided multiple perspectives through the narratives of students who discussed their experiences pertaining to race inside and outside of the classroom. Through multiple interviews, he affirmed what Black people may think when they experience double consciousness. The veiled constructs and concerns with race are apparent through the critical discussions Bonilla-Silva had with each of his students. “*Racism without Racists*” aligns with Du Bois (1903) in the sense that the race problem society had over 100 years ago never left, and contributes to the importance and relevance of this topic. Double consciousness creates a balancing act among folks to meet the standards of how others perceive them, but also how they perceive themselves. This matter then creates or invisible boundaries for an individual to navigate through within society.

“*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*,” written by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) is a work of literature that details the implicit and invisible “borders” that exist between Latinx and non-Latinx men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals,

and other populations. Much of Anzaldúa's work connects to Du Bois' (1903) work in regards to double consciousness and a concept he coined as "the veil" (p. 6). Double consciousness can translate to the concept of the invisible borders as discussed in Anzaldúa's (1987) work based on a person of color having to assess how people perceive them, both within and outside of their community. Anzaldúa's work provides enough context to address how people of color assess themselves through the eyes of others.

Bonilla-Silva (2010) and Anzaldúa's (1987) literature provide a connection to the foundation of Du Bois' (1903) work. Their scholarship and narratives contribute to why double consciousness is a relevant concept in the present day. A theme between Du Bois and Bonilla-Silva (2010) was the significance of education. Du Bois (1903) indicated that education should serve as a means to "give to our youth a training designed above all to make them men of power." Additionally, Bonilla-Silva (2010) suggested, "we need to nurture a large cohort of anti-racist whites to begin challenging color-blind nonsense from within" (p. 267). Both scholars provide a course of action on how to navigate through one's education, but with differing approaches.

Interviews with Black Male Students and Campus Administrators

I conducted interviews to obtain insight from Black male students and administrators from varying institutional types, and institutions ranging across different regions of the United States. During the interviews with Black male students and administrators, I asked questions to gauge how they view the concept of double consciousness (see appendix). Some quotes that stuck out from these questions are as follows:

I don't walk around looking at how people look at me. I don't spend time wondering how people view my effectiveness as a leader on a college campus. I would be a slave to their thoughts.

– Assistant Vice Chancellor

What do I have to do to survive in a world that is not controlled by me? Am I at a greater risk to not be successful because of this? We need to be honest with ourselves, double consciousness needs to be at the forefront because of privilege and bias. When will the dominant culture cease to present hegemonic practices that are detrimental to black students? It creates a psychological dissonance.

– Vice President of Student Success

People wouldn't be surprised if I failed, so I want to prove them wrong. I don't see issues with double consciousness, I see issues with being black in general. I'm concerned about the challenges of depression because of the lived experiences of black people.

– College Student

Black males on our campus are impacted [sic] by double consciousness from the moment we take our first stride onto an HBCU campus... Men are constantly required to prove themselves as competent enough to strive in the classroom as they matriculate, not in an American society, but in a White American Society.

– College Student

Additionally, I questioned participants about initiatives they experienced or would like to experience to address the struggle of double consciousness. Over half of the students mentioned that there was some kind of Black Student Union or Black Male Initiative at their institution and indicated how these initiatives led to movements such as protests and programming. These movements were accompanied by a critical social justice lens to address the needs and concerns of a specific student population on campus. In terms of administrator perspective, many professionals talked about the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework created by Dr. Shaun Harper (2012) from the University of Southern California. The Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework is a model used to develop an understanding about Black male college student success.

Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework

The Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework addresses the contributing factors to a Black males' collegiate experience from three standpoints: their pre-college socialization and readiness, their college achievement, and their post-college success. Specifically, in the scope of this paper, Harper's (2012) framework addresses factors contributing to a Black males' double consciousness such as the concern of being at an educational disadvantage, underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, and Black male attrition. "Black undergraduate men, like some other racial minority students at predominantly White institutions, routinely encounter racist stereotypes and racial microaggressions that undermine their achievement and sense of belonging (Bonner II, 2010; Harper, 2009; Singer, 2005; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007). With the presence of microaggressions, implied or explicit racism, and stereotyping, double consciousness can heavily affect a Black male. It creates the notion of "measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 7).

With the implementation of Harper's (2012) framework, the intended outcome is to lead Black males to either using double consciousness to their advantage as they navigate through their education, or to ignore it altogether as previously mentioned. Based on participant narratives, some students and administrators have already developed the mentality of turning their hope into reality. They believe double consciousness provides an opportunity for Black males to understand and consider how others are looking at their work. As emerging adults, the concept of double consciousness lets Black male students evaluate how they identify and

how they relate to the world and how others look at them, as well as how they choose and make decisions. The Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework hopes to develop this mentality among all Black male students in college. Based on the narratives provided by the interviewed students and administrators, much of how they think relates to progress, not elitism. Their statements delivered a message of wanting to progress in life because of their own values and beliefs, not because of the expectations of their White counterparts.

Conclusion

Du Bois (1903) stated, “The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife--this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (p. 8). Du Bois’ statement aligns with many of the reasons why Black male students attend college in the first place. Based on the literature of Du Bois, among other scholars that have referenced his work, there is enough evidence to support how crucial double consciousness is as a concept. This second sight, as Du Bois refers to it, plays a major role in the experience of a Black male student attending a PWI. However, the literature and narratives showed how double consciousness is a concept that holistically affects Black males. Inside the classroom, outside the classroom, within society, and anywhere in the world, the two-ness a Black male feels is always present. Du Bois’ strategic approach allowed him to express the experiences of a Black man in America.

Much of today’s scholarship (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Smith, et al., 2007; Harper, 2009) references Du Bois (1903) as a means to navigate toward various solutions. Moving forward, it is imperative for current student affairs practitioners to understand the importance of this topic; it has been an issue since the early 1900s. By incorporating intentional programming that is aligned with the Anti-Deficit Framework as its guiding model, there is an opportunity to further serve and retain Black male students. Lastly, the research I conducted through interviews was very minute compared to what research scholars conducted in previous studies. However, with further research, stakeholders at institutions can develop an advanced competency on how to further assist and support its Black male students. It is my hope there can be additional conversations to address what is needed within one’s specific campus community to effectively recruit, retain, and graduate Black male students.

Appendix

Interview Questions

The following questions were asked toward Black men that currently serve as administrators in higher education:

1. How is Double Consciousness a timely concept for you? For your students?
2. How is Double Consciousness a struggle for Black male students on your campus?
3. What initiatives have you witnessed or established to address this struggle?
4. In what ways has Double Consciousness served as a benefit to the Black males students you serve?
5. What are some challenges and opportunities you see with Double Consciousness as an Administrator of Color?

The following questions were asked toward Black males that currently attend predominantly White institutions as well as historically Black colleges and universities:

1. How is Double Consciousness a timely concept for you?
2. How is Double Consciousness a struggle for Black male students on your campus?
3. What initiatives have you witnessed or established to address this struggle?
4. In what ways has Double Consciousness served as a benefit to you?
5. What are some challenges and opportunities you see with Double Consciousness as a man of Color?

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