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The Burden of Excellence: A Critical Race Theory Analysis of Perfectionism in Black Students

Janelle Raymundo

In this article, I interrogate the ways in which perfectionism perpetuates white supremacy, racism, and anti-Blackness specifically for Black college students. Black students who are considered “high-achieving” often face immense pressure and challenges to be perfect, and this label can feel like a burden. The push to be constantly perfect has serious implications for Black students’ development and identity. I explore how perfectionism plays a role in these issues from a critical race theory (CRT) lens. I focus on Black students in honors programs/colleges and in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors as these students grapple with a combination of high expectations and systemic racism, which can further compound the effects of perfectionism. A CRT perspective of perfectionism can inform how high-achieving Black students develop their identities and navigate these types of exclusive and white-dominant environments and guide recommendations for supporting these students.

Keywords: perfectionism, high-achieving Black students, STEM, honors programs, critical race theory

The pursuit of excellence in higher education is largely based on its capitalist structure that values financial gain and relies on quantifiable measures of student success (e.g., rankings, GPA, graduation rates) to bolster institutional reputation (Hotkins & Dancy, 2015). As a result, institutions seek “talented” or “high-achieving” students through methods like honors programs/colleges to increase their educational excellence and competitiveness. This traditional definition of excellence encourages a harmful internalization of perfectionism among students who are labeled as high-achieving, especially Black students. For high-achieving Black students, perfectionism – as a product of the white and capitalist systems in higher education – is compounded by racism and anti-Blackness (Anderson & Martin, 2018; Elion, 2012; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015). In this article, I specifically focus on perfectionism among Black college students within the context of honors programs/colleges and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors. Research on Black honors or high-achieving students is often situated in STEM, and both of these environments can

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be hostile and unwelcoming to Black students (Hotkins & Dancy, 2015). Honors programs/colleges and STEM fields are historically rooted in white supremacy and racism, and both continue to create oppressive environments for students who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) (McGee, 2018; Ong et al., 2018).

Given the salience of racism in the experiences of Black students, critical race theory (CRT) offers a framework to more holistically understand how Black college students navigate perfectionism in honors and STEM environments. For those in higher education who work in these competitive and achievement-driven settings, a better understanding of the experiences of Black students through a CRT-focused perspective on perfectionism can guide necessary changes to better support Black and other marginalized students. Finally, I offer implications of perfectionism for Black student development and recommendations to deconstruct perfectionism, center Black narratives, and empower Black students.

Author's Positionality

My work in this paper is inspired by a recent Call to Action to the administration of the honors college at my alma mater and subsequent systemic changes, which were spearheaded by current students (Davis et al., n.d.; Yeasky, 2021). In their Call to Action, the students shared the voices and narratives of Black honors college students and alumni whom they surveyed. The students named issues of racism and anti-Blackness they faced within the honors college, including some of the specific experiences of Black honors students in STEM. As an alumna of the honors college and emerging student affairs professional, I felt compelled to support their efforts and critically examine anti-Blackness in honors and STEM contexts through my writing.

In writing about the experiences of Black students, my identities influence how I approach this work and interpret these narratives. With my identity as a Filipina American, I do not experience racism and oppression in the same ways as Black folx, and my experience as an honors college student was not the same as my Black peers. I only began to process much of the racism and anti-Blackness that I witnessed and contributed to in the honors college upon entering graduate school. I acknowledge the immense privilege I have in my ignorance and in using my educational journey as a space for reflection. Although I find affinity with the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) community, I recognize that my Asian American identity comes with a complicated web of both privilege and oppression. The Asian American community perpetuates anti-Blackness in our culture and beliefs, and white supremacy culture directly places Asian and Black communities in conflict with one another mainly through the model minority myth and racial triangulation (Kim, 1999; Poon et al., 2016). At the same time, I have seen our communities come together to uplift, support, and stand by each

other against racism. I remain hopeful as I work to unlearn anti-Black rhetoric and behaviors while acknowledging the ways I upheld and continue to uphold anti-Blackness. Through my writing and research, I continue my self-work journey to engage in anti-racism, deconstruct oppressive systems, and center Black students, Black narratives, and Black experiences.

Theoretical Framework

I use critical race theory (CRT) as the foundation for my framework in analyzing perfectionism and its impact on Black students in honors programs/colleges and STEM. Perfectionism can shape students' understanding of their worth and development of their identity, but Black students in honors and STEM experience perfectionism very differently than their white peers and other students of color. Using a CRT perspective of perfectionism offers a more holistic understanding of how Black honors and STEM students experience perfectionism through identifying the influence of race and racism. Harris and Poon (2019) specifically use CRT to examine student development. In higher education and student affairs, using CRT allows us to center racism in our understanding and meaning-making of student experiences, as well as systems of oppression within higher education.

The four tenets of CRT include “racism as endemic, whiteness as property, challenging ahistorical narratives, and differential racialization” (Harris & Poon, 2019, p. 47). First, to acknowledge that racism is endemic, we as higher education professionals must see how racism permeates the lives and development of our students. Harris and Poon contend that higher education scholars and practitioners often refuse to acknowledge the role of racism in student development through using substitutes such as “chilly” or “harmful” and downplaying the influence of racism on students' experiences (2019, p. 48). These actions normalize racism and uphold systems of white supremacy. We must identify how racism and white supremacy in all its forms systematically influences students' development of their holistic identity. The second tenet, whiteness as property, refers to the function of whiteness in maintaining privilege and exclusion of BIPOC. Faculty and student affairs professionals prioritize whiteness through our differential interactions with white and BIPOC students. However, the cultural wealth of BIPOC students holds immense value that should be celebrated. The third tenet calls us to consider how the meanings of race change over time, which in turn changes the meanings of students' identities. Thus, student experiences must be placed in sociohistorical and contemporary contexts as race, racism, and power continue to shift over time. The final tenet acknowledges how marginalized groups are racialized based on “the needs of the majority group at particular times in its history” (Harris & Poon, 2019, p. 48). With these tenets in mind, we can more meaningfully analyze perfectionism and its role in upholding white supremacy and racism.

Anti-Blackness in Elite Spaces

To further ground our understanding of the experiences of Black students with perfectionism, we must also name the ways in which racism and anti-Blackness are perpetuated in programs founded on exclusivity, elitism, and whiteness. CRT asks us to identify racism and its influences explicitly and situate ourselves within the sociohistorical context of our analysis. Thus, in this section, I delve into a brief history of honors programs/colleges and STEM and offer insight into how racism and white supremacy culture are systemically maintained in these settings.

Honors Programs/Colleges

After World War II, faculty at public universities pushed for the creation of honors colleges/programs that offered enriched learning opportunities to attract academically talented and “superior” students who typically would not have considered their university in favor of more elite, private institutions (Sederberg, 2008, p. 13). Sederberg, in their argument for the value of honors programs/colleges, stated that “able and ambitious students are, surely, one of the university’s diverse, special needs populations; again, we charge our public universities with providing society with an educated citizenry and with leadership for it” (p. 15). Emphasizing education as a public good and service, Sederberg suggests that enrolling talented and high-achieving students would allow public universities to “contribute more fully and richly” to the economic and cultural welfare of the nation (p. 16).

Sederberg’s work fails to acknowledge the exclusivity and racism within honors programs/colleges. At their core, honors programs/colleges are based on exclusivity and elitism – they have specific courses reserved for honors students, more individualized relationships with faculty, and better facilities and resources, among others (Sederberg, 2008). This exclusivity shapes the experiences of Black honors and high-achieving students. Black students can be tokenized and feel pressured to succeed even more so than their white counterparts. According to Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007), “High-achieving [Black students] have been described as ‘the best and the brightest’ and are predicted to achieve the highest levels of academic and professional success” (p. 509). Yet in their interviews, the researchers identified several challenges that high-achieving Black students experience: being the only Black student in the classroom; seeing very few Black faculty; feeling pressure to behave in “non-Black” ways and “serve as positive example” for Black students to combat stereotypes; and being forced to prove their intelligence to counteract affirmative action claims from their white peers (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, p. 514). These are only a few ways in which racism and anti-Blackness show up in honors spaces, but they continue to be salient issues that Black honors and high-achieving students experience.

STEM

Examining the experiences of Black high-achieving students in STEM provides a deeper understanding of the multifaceted and systemic racism that shapes Black students' experiences with perfectionism in these unwelcoming environments. Similar to honors programs/colleges, STEM education is historically rooted in white supremacy and elitism (McGee, 2018; Ong et al., 2018). STEM was founded on the exclusivity of scientific knowledge that barred BIPOC, particularly Black people, due to their presumed genetic and intellectual inferiority (McGee, 2018). Current STEM cultural norms encourage behaviors that are traditionally white and male, namely “competitive, individualistic, and solitary practices,” which alienate women and BIPOC students (Ong et al., 2018). Given the exclusivity and racism within STEM, Black students face various forms of oppression that negatively impact their experiences and identity development as STEM students.

One way that racism and anti-Blackness show up in STEM is through the belief that Black students are “not competent enough” to be successful in STEM (Ortiz et al., 2019, p. 311). This pervasive assertion that Black students cannot succeed in STEM manifests in a variety of ways. For example, white and other non-Black students may believe that Black students were only accepted into certain STEM programs because of affirmative action, or that Black students are more suited for non-STEM careers like social work or athletics (McGee, 2018). Additionally, when Black students outperform their non-Black peers, they may be labeled as “geniuses” (McGee, 2018). The belief that Black students who do well in STEM are an exception, uncommon, or a “genius” reinforces the stereotype that Black students cannot perform at the same level as white or Asian students in STEM. In these ways, the racism and anti-Blackness within STEM shares many commonalities with honors programs/colleges.

Perfectionism Among Black Students in Honors and STEM

Keeping in mind the historical context of and inherent racism within honors colleges/programs and STEM, I now examine how perfectionism affects Black students in these spaces. The experiences of Black honors and STEM students are complex, and the perfectionism they struggle with is strongly influenced by the oppression in their environment. The coded language of “best and brightest” continues to promote white supremacist cultural norms of perfectionism, individualism, and singular views of success (Okun, 2020). Given the connections between honors and STEM, placing the experiences of Black students within both contexts simultaneously offers a more in-depth and holistic view into the influence of perfectionism in their development. Negative stereotypes about Black students and constant doubt of their worth only feed into perfectionism among Black students while promoting racism and anti-Blackness within these fields.

Representation and Stereotypes

The lack of Black representation in honors and STEM, widespread stereotyping, and expectations for high-achieving Black students to represent the entire Black community all contribute to perfectionism. Black students can feel othered by the lack of representation and visibility of Black students, faculty, staff in their environments (Greene, 2016; Ong et al., 2018; Ortiz et al., 2019). For Black women specifically, the lack of representation is especially prevalent, which causes them to feel even more isolated, excluded, and questioned by their peers (Ong et al., 2018). Given their hypervisibility in STEM and honors spaces, Black students feel pressured to be perfect as they face the expectation to act as representations for their race or “models” for their Black peers (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; McGee, 2018).

In relation to lack of representation, racist misconceptions and stereotypes about Black students in honors and STEM are widespread. Combating stereotypes of Black intellectual inferiority is a common challenge for Black students. These stereotypes cause tension between Black students in honors programs/colleges and their non-Black peers (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Greene, 2016; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015). In Hotchkins and Dancy’s (2015) study on high-achieving Black male students, interviewees shared how Black male intellectuals are seen as an academic anomaly and how others doubt their intelligence. Black students who do well in STEM are also met with shock, disbelief, and claims that they are a “genius” by their white peers, or in other words a fluke or exception (McGee, 2018, p. 9). Black students who are high-achievers are often told that they talk or act “white,” or that they are not Black, implying that Black students cannot perform as well as white students and that intelligence is restricted to whiteness (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Greene, 2016). The model minority myth also plays a significant role in creating tension between Black and non-Black students, especially with Asian students (McGee, 2018; Poon et al., 2016). The myth and stereotypes about Black and Asian students suggests that Asian students belong in high-achieving and STEM spaces more than Black students and reinforces the belief that Black students in these spaces are an anomaly.

These experiences – the lack of representation, labeling of whiteness, and constant shock or doubt of their abilities – reinforce the stereotype of intellectual inferiority and, at the same time, reassert white ownership of intelligence and success. Black students can feel trapped by these labels, and even try to fit into the genius or exceptionality stereotype by pushing themselves even more. These stereotypes and harmful perceptions can make Black students alter their authentic identities in order to prove their intellectual ability (McGee, 2018). Changing or adapting their identities can cause Black students to devalue their authentic and holistic selves and internalize these negative stereotypes about Black intelligence.

Proving Worth and Serial Excelling

Perfectionism for Black students also manifests in their intense need to prove their worth, intelligence, and ability. Black students are often forced into a position where they must prove to their white peers that they were accepted into an honors or STEM program because of their intelligence and not just because of race. In Fries-Britt and Griffin's (2007) study, these comments and assumptions made Black students feel like they did not earn their place, and that they were accepted into an honors program, received scholarships, or were admitted to an Ivy League solely because they are Black. Black students in STEM also feel pressured to work even harder than non-Black peers, especially when they are being compared to white students, to prove they belong (McGee, 2018). These harmful perceptions force Black students to feel stuck between two options: if they don't study, then they are proving that they don't deserve to be in STEM program; but if they do study and succeed, then they are either a cheater or genius (McGee, 2018). The constant questioning of Black students' academic ability and intelligence and demand to prove themselves results in self-doubt of their own worthiness – a hallmark of perfectionism.

The incessant questioning, doubt, and subsequent need to prove their worth makes Black students feel like they must always succeed, which is another characteristic of perfectionism. The pressure to achieve even higher creates an obligation "... to serial excelling in STEM, which saps their passion due to the strain of needing to prove themselves" as capable and belonging in rigorous STEM programs (McGee, 2018, p. 10). Furthermore, the hard work, persistence, and resiliency of Black students in STEM is often unacknowledged, which serves to invalidate their success and achievements (McGee, 2018; Ortiz et al., 2019). Being successful in STEM and honors programs requires resiliency, persistence, and other forms of cultural capital to navigate racism and oppression within the environment (Ortiz et al., 2019). The lack of appreciation for their work, hyper-focus on mistakes, and internalization of inadequacies that others choose to highlight are all manifestations of perfectionism.

Serial excelling is also connected to the concept of "Black Excellence." Black Excellence holds multiple connotations and meanings among Black students, but a common factor is the drive or need to be successful (Scott, 2017). For some, Black Excellence is also a burden of community and societal expectations of achievement and perfection; thus, Black folk may seek liberation from this burden of excellence through finding "...a space to say the wrong thing and reflect" (Scott, 2017, p. 111). Perfectionism and its expectation for Black students to be consistently successful does not allow Black students the space to be wrong and learn from mistakes. Any moment of imperfection invites further interrogation and doubt from their peers regarding their abilities and worth, which in turn af-

fects their self-worth and confidence.

Implications and Recommendations

Perfectionism is a form of oppression for Black students and is even more heightened for those in honors programs/colleges and STEM. Taken from a CRT perspective, perfectionism is grounded in racism and white supremacy, and when placed within the exclusive contexts of STEM and honors program/colleges, it undermines the development of Black students' authentic identities. Black students are made to feel like they do not belong nor can claim honors or STEM identities. They may not feel worthy or good enough because of the push to constantly prove their worth through serial success, which fuels perfectionism. These experiences are not limited to STEM or honors programs/colleges; any and all Black students can face these challenges because racism and white supremacy are systematic and embedded within higher education and our society.

In order to better serve Black students and encourage their development in more uplifting ways, we as higher education and student affairs professionals must dismantle perfectionism and white supremacy culture in our work. We need to create spaces that liberate Black students from serial excelling and restrictive connotations of Black Excellence. They should not have to constantly prove their worthiness to their peers, faculty, and administrators or be questioned any time they falter. A first and vital step is to acknowledge the racism that our Black students experience within honors, STEM, or other areas. When we fail to address or call out instances of racism, we only invalidate the experiences of our students. Next, Okun (2020) suggests several “antidotes” for perfectionism, including to: “develop a culture of appreciation” that celebrates everyone’s work and efforts; “develop a learning organization, where it is expected that everyone will make mistakes” and see them as learning opportunities; identify successes before giving criticism; ask for suggestions for how to give better feedback; recognize when we are being our own worst critic and how that impacts those around us (p. 2). A crucial component for dismantling perfectionism is to change our views of success and excellence in ways that center non-dominant understandings – this means framing success to center the experiences of Black and other marginalized communities. As Okun shared, we must also take time to recognize and celebrate success. This celebration can be a form of community care as well as a form of liberation from white supremacy culture.

Another antidote that Okun suggests is to reframe mistakes as moments for learning. We commonly associate fear with mistakes, but Black people often cannot afford to make mistakes as they face more risk in an anti-Black society. In higher education settings, we can make safer settings that allow Black and other students

to make mistakes without fear. To do so, we need to change how we talk about and react to mistakes and recognize racist and anti-Black associations we have about failure. Finally, we must do better to recognize perfectionism and name it for ourselves and our students. We can ask questions such as ‘are our expectations and interactions encouraging perfectionism or based in perfectionist standards? Are our students exhibiting behaviors associated with perfectionism?’ Recognizing perfectionism can help us to more proactively combat it. In these ways, we can work to support Black students in honors, STEM, and other environments where perfectionism may especially be salient.

Implementing these antidotes for perfectionism benefits all of our students as well. Perfectionism and the pressure to be consistently successful are compounded by racism and anti-Blackness for Black students specifically, but any student can still experience the effects of these issues to varying degrees. When we center the experiences of Black students and de-center dominance in our work, we uplift our other students at the same time. An environment that rejects white supremacy culture is a better environment for everyone.

Conclusion

Perfectionism is a function of white supremacy culture that acts as a form of oppression for Black students. When we hold Black students who are “high-achieving” or successful to exceptional standards, we only further burden them with perfectionist beliefs. The idea of perfection or being perfect is based in whiteness and inherently excludes Black and other students of color. For Black students in exclusive and white-dominant settings such as honors programs/colleges and STEM, racism and anti-Blackness are even more present in their experiences and amplify the effects of perfectionism. Black students in these settings are told they are “the best” while constantly being questioned in regards to their intelligence and academic abilities. This double consciousness leads to the internalization of perfectionism which causes self-doubt of their abilities and worth, invalidation of their successes, and pressure to always excel. The cultural norms of honors and STEM maintain white supremacy and anti-Blackness – these are oppressive environments for Black students that make it difficult for them to thrive and have ownership over. Furthermore, faculty and student affairs professionals continue to perpetuate white supremacy culture in our interactions with students (e.g., more visibility with white students, tokenization of Black students, placing labor of educating and addressing harm on Black and marginalized students, not talking about racism and race). To create a safer and more enriching environment for Black students, we as higher education and student affairs professionals must implement antidotes for perfectionism that deconstruct white supremacist cultural norms and reconstruct our views of mistakes and success.

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