The Relationships Among Racial Identity, Perceived Ethnic Fit, and Organizational Involvement for African American Students at a Predominantly White University

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In the present study, the idea of person-environment fit was explored for African American college students in a predominantly White university. The relationships among African American students' demographic backgrounds, beliefs regarding race (racial ideology and racial centrality), and their perceived fit in the college environment due to their ethnicity (PEF) were examined. These factors were used to predict student organizational involvement in race-specific organizations and mainstream campus organizations. Participants were 164 African American students from a predominantly White university. It was found that both the meaning of race (ideology) and the importance of race (centrality) were related to the extent to which students felt comfort in expressing their ethnicity and, subsequently, their social participation in ethnic group affirming activities. The findings suggest the importance of the students' perceptions of congruence between themselves and their educational environment.

The research on African American students on predominantly White campuses indicates that African American students often encounter difficulty in social and academic integration (Allen, 1987; Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Bean & Hull, 1984; Braddock, 1981; Davis, 1986, 1995; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In much of the research on African American college students at predominantly White colleges and universities (PWIs), it is implicitly assumed that African American students experience

social alienation as a function of conflicting cultural beliefs and values due to an incongruence between the cultural and social values of the students and the underlying values and philosophies associated with a PWI environment (Allen, 1987). However, little research actually has examined the relationships among African American students' beliefs and philosophies regarding race, their perceptions of fit in their college environment, and the extent and nature of social integration in the college environment. In particular, researchers examining African American students at PWIs begin their research on the premise that all African American students on majority campuses are less likely to fit in and more likely to feel alienated. Consequently, in much of the research on college students, race essentially is used as a defining category for students for comparative purposes (Stage, 1988, 1989). Such research indicates group differences but does little to inform about characteristics of individuals within those groups and their interaction with the college environment that may help explain their educational experiences and outcomes.

This article represents an examination of African American students' perceptions of the fit between their ethnic culture and their college environment at a PWI. The model used in the present article is based on the Perceived Threat paradigm of Ethier and Deaux (1990, 1994). Their model posits that minority students' group identity salience is related to the congruence between individuals' ethnic background and their college environment (Ethier & Deaux, 1994). Second, they assert that the college environment, because it represents a developmental transition in the lives of many adolescents, may have a large impact on individuals' self-definition (Ethier & Deaux, 1990). In entering mainstream college settings, ethnic minority students often face unique challenges regarding the meaning or value of their ethnic identity, which may represent threats to their identities. Finally, individuals' group salience is related to their responses to this perceived threat. For some, ethnic group salience may be related to feelings of pride and result in more intense identification with one's group. For others, however, identification with an ethnic group may be related to aversive feelings. Specifically, feeling that one's group is discriminated against may lead to a deemphasis on that group and/or its attributes (Ethier & Deaux, 1990).

In the above model, Ethier and Deaux (1990) conceptualized perceived threat as the extent to which individuals felt a challenge to their ethnic identity in their college environment. Their construct taps into individuals' beliefs that they cannot express their cultural values in school settings, that their ethnic culture was incompatible with their college environment. For example, their Perceived Threat Scale consists of items such as "I feel that my ethnicity

is incompatible with the new people I am meeting and the new things I am learning" and "I often feel like a chameleon, having to change my colors depending on the ethnicity of the person I am with." Because the present article is concerned primarily with students' perceptions of cultural compatibility in their school setting, the discussion will focus on students' perceived ethnic fit (PEF).

The present article attempts to build on the above model by incorporating the role of both the importance of race and the meaning of race to individuals in the relationship between students' perceived ethnic fit and individual outcomes. Perceived ethnic fit will be related to individuals' precollege ethnic background, as well as their engagement in African American organizations on the college campus. The study findings will be discussed in terms of the need to examine within-group differences in the perceptions, beliefs, and academic experiences of African American students.

BACKGROUND–SCHOOL CONGRUENCE

Traditionally, studies of African American college students and school outcomes have relied on demographic characteristics as independent variables. African American students on the average have parents with lower incomes, less prestigious jobs, fewer years of education, and are more often single parents than White students' parents (Nettles, 1988). These factors have been used to help explain the discrepancy between African American and White students' overall college adjustment and persistence (Allen et al., 1991; Astin, 1982, 1984; Fleming, 1984; Hall, Mays, & Allen, 1984; Nettles, 1988; Thomas, 1984).

Another source of variation among African American students lies in the nature of their precollege backgrounds. Individuals entering new settings may confront a number of demands that may have implications for adaptation in those settings (Felner, Ginter, & Primavera, 1983). A critical factor that may influence the degree to which individuals cope successfully is prior experiences. Specifically, the level of congruence between students' prior experiences and the new circumstances defining the new setting may be central to their degree of adaptation or difficulty in adaptation (Adan & Felner, 1995; Boykin, 1984; Graham, Baker, & Wapner, 1985). For individuals adjusting to a setting in which they are the minority, the importance of congruence may be magnified (Allen & Boykin, 1991; Graham et al., 1985).

One type of background factor that has been identified as important in the college adjustment process of African American students is the similarity between the high school and neighborhood environment and the college

environment (Davis, 1995; Graham et al., 1985; Sherman, Giles, & Williams-Green, 1994). PWI students from more racially homogeneous neighborhoods and high schools have reported college as involving greater adjustment than students from more racially heterogeneous environments (Sherman et al., 1994). This incongruence may influence students' perceptions of their new college environments and the extent and nature of their adjustment to the environments (Adan & Felner, 1995; Bennett, 1984; D'Augelli & Herschberger, 1993; Graham et al., 1985). D'Augelli and Herschberger (1993), for example, found that African American and White students at a PWI differed in their general well-being, with African American students reporting lower scores. However, African American students who came from predominantly White neighborhoods and high schools did not differ from White students in their general well-being.

RACIAL IDENTITY AND PERCEIVED ETHNIC FIT

Another important source of variation among African Americans that has been cited in the college research on African American students lies in their beliefs and attitudes regarding race (Mitchell & Dell, 1992; Parham & Helms, 1981). Racial identity research on African American students suggests that students' beliefs about self and race are major factors in their social and academic outcomes at PWIs. One portion of the small field of research on racial identity and African American students has suggested that social and academic success at predominantly White schools is related to lack of connectedness to African American culture (Fleming, 1981, 1984; Fordham, 1988; Hughes, 1987). On the other hand, other researchers assert that mainstream views or lack of connectedness to African American culture is detrimental to African American students' academic and social development (Baldwin, Brown, & Rackley, 1990; Taub & McEwen, 1992).

Mitchell and Dell (1992) suggest that intragroup variation in racial identity beliefs may influence social college outcomes for African American students, such as daily functioning and behaviors within the college environment. They examined the relationship between students' racial identity and participation in campus activities using the Racial Identity Attitudes Scale (Parham & Helms, 1985). Students with attitudes that indicated stronger African American identification were more likely to be involved in ethnic-related organizations. Similarly, students with attitudes that deemphasized race were less likely to participate in African American organizations. Students with attitudes that acknowledged the importance of race but also endorsed a perspective that acknowledges the similarities of African Americans with other groups were more likely to participate in noncultural or

mainstream organizations. For the strongly identified individuals, the ethnic-related organizations may serve as a protective or supportive factor, whereas such organizations may be less important for African American students who are less strongly identified with their ethnic group or who also identify with other groups. Taub and McEwen (1992) found negative relationships between racial identity beliefs reflecting less racial group identification and measures of autonomy and interpersonal development for African American undergraduate women at a PWI. They conclude that psychosocial development may be delayed for those with more mainstream group identification, making it more difficult to achieve academic goals.

The interaction of individuals' ethnic identity and feelings of fit in their college environment related to their ethnicity has been explored for other minority groups. Ethier and Deaux (1990, 1994) explored the extent to which students felt that their culture was compatible with their college environment for Hispanic students entering predominantly White universities. The researchers found that strongly identifying with their ethnic background acted as a buffer to students' feelings of culture-environment incompatibility (Ethier & Deaux, 1990). Students who identified less strongly were more likely to experience feelings of threat and have lower levels of collective self-esteem. Furthermore, strong racial identification was linked to participation in more ethnic-affirming campus organizations (Ethier & Deaux, 1994). The implication is that strength of identification, or the centrality of race to the individual, may play a protective role in minority students' feelings of social fit, as well as influence their social activity in the PWI environment.

In addition to the importance of race to individuals, it also may be informative for researchers to consider the role of students' specific ethnic views in evaluating minority students' psychosocial outcomes in the college environment. Research suggests that not only is the extent to which students identify with their race important, but the meaning of that identity may influence student college perceptions and social outcomes as well. There is little empirical research, however, that actually has examined the relationship between African American students' perceived environmental fit in college and their actual sociocultural beliefs and values related to their ethnic group.

In the Ethier and Deaux (1990, 1994) studies, for example, the researchers reported variation in identity meaning as well as strength of identification for the Hispanic students. Although their sample size did not allow for examination of the influence of the meaning that the individual places on his or her ethnic identity, they suggest its importance as an influence on minority students' perceptions of threat to their ethnic identity on entering the PWI environment (Ethier & Deaux, 1990) as well as on the extent of participation in ethnic-related organizations (Ethier & Deaux, 1994). Murguia, Padilla, and

Pavel (1991), in a qualitative study of Hispanic and Native American students at a PWI, examined the extent to which students identified with their ethnic group as well as their perceptions of why it is or is not important to identify with their group. First, students varied greatly in their descriptions of what it meant to be a member of their ethnic group. These varying definitions resulted in different behaviors regarding intergroup and intragroup social interactions, as well as feelings of connection to the university at large.

In this article, racial identity will be conceptualized and evaluated using the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). The MMRI defines racial identity as that part of the person's self-concept that is related to his or her membership within a race. The present research examines two of the stable components of racial identity proposed by the model in examining perceptions of college fit and adjustment outcomes for African American college students: race centrality and racial ideology.

Racial ideology is defined as the general attributes, characteristics, and values that the individual associates with a particular ethnic group. This dimension represents the person's philosophy about the ways in which African Americans should live and interact with society. The MMRI delineates four racial ideologies. They consist of nationalist, minority, humanist, and assimilation perspectives. A nationalist philosophy is characterized by a viewpoint that emphasizes the uniqueness of being of African descent. A person holding nationalistic views might, for example, believe that Blacks should own and patronize only Black-owned businesses and institutions. An oppressed minority philosophy is characterized by a viewpoint that emphasizes the commonalties between African Americans and other oppressed groups. An individual with a minority viewpoint might feel that Blacks should form coalitions with other oppressed groups to oppose discrimination by the dominant group. An assimilation philosophy is characterized by a viewpoint that emphasizes the commonalties between African Americans and the rest of American society. Such an individual might see integration into mainstream institutions as the ideal social and economic outcome for Blacks. He or she may wish to be seen as an American as well as an African American. Finally, a humanist philosophy is characterized by a viewpoint that emphasizes the commonalties of all humans. A person with a humanistic perspective might stress the commonalties of all human beings. A humanistic individual may not wish to be seen as Black or White, but simply as a human being.

The centrality dimension of racial identity refers to the extent to which a person normatively defines himself or herself with regard to race. It is a

measure of whether race is a core part of an individual's self-concept. Implicit in this conceptualization of centrality is that an individual may have a number of different identities that differ in importance with regard to its overlap with the individual's primary self-definition.

Using the MMRI will allow for the examination of both the strength and nature of individuals' race identification in examining their perceptions of ethnic fit in their college environment. It has been suggested that individuals' ideologies regarding race are based in part on the way the individual feels the world works for their racial group (Sellers, Smith, et al., 1998). For African American students, individuals' racial ideologies may be related to how they experience their college environment in relation to their group. Research using the model reveals differences in the relationships between individuals' affective beliefs about their racial group (private regard) and personal self-esteem for African American high school and college students (Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1997), as well as between individuals' racial ideologies and academic performance (Sellers, Chavous, & Cooke, 1998) for students with differing levels of race centrality. For instance, Rowley and colleagues (1997) found that stronger racial centrality was related to a positive relationship between private regard and self-esteem, whereas no relationship was found for students with lower race centrality. Similarly, in the context of the present study, African American students who differ with respect to the importance they place on race may differ in the extent to which they feel a fit between their ethnicity and environment. Furthermore, even among students with similar beliefs regarding ethnic fit, the impact of those feelings may be different for those with varying levels of race centrality.

PRESENT STUDY

The aforementioned research suggests that minority students' responses to the college environment are related both to their racial beliefs and the importance of race to them. The extent and nature of ethnic identification may limit access to majority resources through self-selection or social and institutional segregation. For some African American students, being in a PWI environment may result in acute awareness of discrimination and feelings of isolation due to race. For other students, few such conflicts may be experienced. There is little empirical research, however, that examines the variation in African American students' race beliefs and attitudes and its relationship to perceptions of the college environment directly related to their racial group.

The present study examines the relationships among student background, racial identity, and PEF with the college environment for African American students at a PWI. Based on the Ethier and Deaux (1990, 1994) paradigm for Hispanic students at PWIs and the research on racial identity and African American college students, it is expected that PEF will be related to (a) a greater match between precollege racial composition and college racial composition, and (b) more social involvement in group-affirming organizations.

Furthermore, it is expected that PEF will mediate the relationship between racial ideology and organizational involvement, such that PEF and participation in African American organizations will be related to higher levels of views that emphasize the uniqueness of African Americans (nationalist ideology) or other minority groups as oppressed groups in America (minority ideology), and lower levels of views that emphasize humanism or integration into mainstream society (assimilation ideology).

Finally, the above relationships will be moderated by racial centrality. Specifically, for individuals for whom race is more important (higher race centrality), racial ideology will strongly predict PEF and organizational involvement. In contrast, there will be a weaker relationship between racial ideology and PEF and racial ideology and organizational involvement for students with lower race centrality.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 164 African American undergraduates attending a 4-year predominantly White university in the southeastern United States. There were 46 men and 118 women participating, averaging about a sophomore class level. Students' family household income mean was approximately $64,000. Mothers' and fathers' education levels indicated at least some college education.

PROCEDURES

Participants were recruited through introductory psychology and 200-level psychology classes and advertisements placed in various areas on campus. The psychology pool participants received course credit for their participation. Other participants received $5 to participate. The paid and unpaid participants did not differ significantly on any of the study variables.

The participants completed the study measures in group administration sessions. All participants were assured that any information given would be kept confidential and that their participation was voluntary. Following completion of the measures, all participants were debriefed.

MEASURES

Students completed a demographic measure in which they provided information about their precollege backgrounds. They provided information about class year, gender, parental education levels, parental income, and racial makeup of high school and neighborhood.

Students were asked to list the campus organizations in which they participated. In addition, they indicated with an asterisk (*) the organizations that were African American organizations. Examples of such organizations were African American student government organizations, university gospel choirs, and African American student professional organizations.

The ideology and centrality subscales of the Multidimensional Inventory of African American Identity (MIBI) (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997) were used in the present study. The ideology scale consists of 50 items that evaluate the four philosophies—assimilation, humanism, minority, and nationalism—outlined in the MMRI. Each ideology subscale is assessed across domains associated with the way African Americans view political/economic issues, cultural/social issues, intergroup relations, and attitudes toward the dominant group. The centrality subscale consists of 10 items measuring the extent to which being African American is central to the respondents' definitions of themselves. Participants were asked to respond regarding the extent to which they endorse the items on a 7-point Likert scale. The subscales of the MIBI have shown adequate internal consistency in samples of African American college students (alpha coefficients ranged from .67 to .81) (Rowley et al., 1997; Sellers et al., 1997). For the present sample, alpha coefficients ranged from .66 to 85.

The Perceived Ethnic Fit Scale (PEFS) for the present study was based on Ethier and Deaux's (1990) six-item Perceived Threat Scale for Hispanic students. The PEFS is a nine-item scale that measures the extent to which students feel threatened in expressing their ethnic identity in their college institution, as well as the extent to which they feel that their ethnic identity is compatible with their college environment. Examples of scale items are "I feel that I have to change myself to fit in at school" (from original scale items) and "I do not feel free to express my ethnicity at school" (from added items). Each statement was rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Internal consistency for the scale items was high

(Cronbach's alpha coefficient = .87). Higher scores on the scale indicate feeling less of a fit between participants' ethnicity and their institution.

RESULTS

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Table 1 provides summary information and intercorrelations among the study independent variables. It should be noted that the mean score for the PEF scale was low overall ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 1.03$). However, participants' scores represented high and low mean scores on the measure, ranging from $M = 1$ to $M = 6$.

ORGANIZATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

Organizational involvement was examined in two ways. First, a variable representing the total number of organizations students reported was created. A second variable, African American organizations, indicated the number of those organizations that were predominantly African American in makeup. For total number of organizations, the mean participation was a little over two organizations ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.35$), and the range was between zero and five organizations. Students were involved in an average of 1.02 ($SD = 1.03$) African American organizations, with a range of zero to four such organizations. They were involved in an average of 1.02 non-African American organizations ($SD = .99$) and were involved in between zero and four such organizations. The number of students who reported being involved in no organizations was 27, whereas 137 were involved in at least one organization.

ANALYSIS STRATEGY

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine background and racial identity predictors of perceived ethnic fit and participation in campus organizations. Analyses proceeded in the following manner. First, the relationships of students' background with PEF and organizational involvement were explored. Second, the relationship between individuals' racial ideologies and their perceptions of ethnic compatibility was examined. Next, PEF was examined as a predictor of organizational involvement. Finally, racial centrality was examined as a moderating variable in the above model relationships.

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of Racial
Centrality, Racial Ideologies, and Perceived Ethnic Fit (PEF)

	M	SD	*Centrality*	*Assimilation*	*Humanism*	*Minority*	*Nationalism*	*PEF*
Centrality	5.53	1.09	1.00					
Assimilation	5.19	0.80	−.33**	1.00				
Humanism	5.23	0.80	−.45**	.54**	1.00			
Minority	4.82	0.98	−.15*	.29**	.44**	1.00		
Nationalism	4.19	0.88	.60**	−.44**	−.67**	−.27**	1.00	
PEF	2.01	1.03	−.15	.08	−.02	.05	.07	1.00

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

To help account for the influence of time attending the university on perceived fit and organizational involvement, class year was controlled for in each analysis. In addition, background variables that were found to have significant predictive relationships to organizational participation or perceived ethnic fit were included in subsequent analyses as control variables.

STUDENT BACKGROUND AS PREDICTOR OF PERCEIVED
ETHNIC FIT AND ORGANIZATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

Multiple regression analyses were conducted, examining student background variables (family income, mother's education, father's education, percentage of African Americans in neighborhood, and percentage of African Americans in high school) as predictors of perceived ethnic fit, controlling for students' class year. Results indicated no significant relationships. Next, the relationships between background variables and number of African American organizations and non-African American organizations were examined in two multiple regression models. No significant findings resulted for African American organizations. However, a significant model was found for non-African American organizations ($F = 2.09, p < .05$). Regression coefficients indicated a significant, negative relationship between percentage of African Americans in neighborhood and number of non-African American organizations ($\beta = -.20, p < .04$). See Table 2.

RACIAL IDENTITY AS A PREDICTOR OF PERCEIVED ETHNIC FIT

To test the hypothesized relationship between racial ideology and perceived ethnic fit, multiple regression analyses examining the four racial

TABLE 2
**Summary of Multiple Regression Analyses of
Background Variables as Predictors of Number of Black
Organizations and Non-Black Organizations**

	Model Predicting Black Organizations			Model Predicting Non-Black Organizations		
	B	Beta	Model R^2	B	Beta	Model R^2
Constant	.73	—	.07	.47	—	.10*
Class year	.08	.09		.07	.07	
Income	.02	.08		.03	.09	
Percentage of Blacks in neighborhood	.08	.13		−.12	−.20*	
Percentage of Blacks in high school	−.02	−.02		.02	.03	
Mother's education	.10	.16		−.04	−.07	
Father's education	−.04	−.19		.02	.05	

*$p < .05$.

ideologies as predictors of PEF, controlling for class year, revealed no significant relationships.

PERCEIVED ETHNIC FIT AS A PREDICTOR OF ORGANIZATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

The relationship between perceived ethnic fit and organizational involvement was examined in separate multiple regression analyses, in which the number of African American organizations and number of non-African American organizations were regressed on PEF, including class year and percentage of African Americans in neighborhood as control variables. Findings indicated a significant model when African American organizations was entered as the dependent variable ($F = 5.17$, $p < .007$), accounting for 8% of the variance in the dependent variable. Class year was positively related to the number of African American organizations ($\beta = .15$, $p < .05$). In addition, PEF was negatively related to African American organizations ($\beta = -.20$, $p < .009$), indicating more African American organizations for those who reported more ethnic fit. For the model predicting non-African American organizations, only percentage of African Americans in neighborhood

TABLE 3
Summary of Multiple Regression Analyses of Perceived
Ethnic Fit (PEF) as a Predictor of Number of
Black Organizations and Non-Black Organizations

	Model Predicting Black Organizations			*Model Predicting Non-Black Organizations*		
	B	*Beta*	*Model* R^2	B	*Beta*	*Model* R^2
Constant	.92	—	.08*	1.10	—	.07*
Class year	.10	.15*		.04	.04	
Percentage of Blacks in neighborhood	.11	.12		−.15	−.24**	
PEF	−.21	−.20**		.11	.12	

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

predicted number of organizations ($\beta = -.24$, $p < .002$). Table 3 summarizes the findings for the above models.

THE MODERATING ROLE OF RACIAL CENTRALITY

Racial Ideology and Perceived Ethnic Fit

The hypothesized moderating role of centrality in the above relationships was examined next. A multiple regression analysis was conducted including class year, the four ideologies, racial centrality, and interaction terms for each ideology and centrality (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The resulting model was significant ($F = 2.17$, $p < .05$) and accounted for 8% of the variance in perceived ethnic fit. Higher nationalism scores were related to perceptions of less fit ($\beta = .48$, $p < .05$). In addition, there was a negative association between the interaction term, Nationalism × Centrality, and perceptions of ethnic fit.

To examine this interaction, a variable indicating higher or lower centrality level was created using a median split of participants' centrality scores. It is important to note that the median centrality score was fairly high (5.5 on a 7-point scale). Therefore, students were placed in a group that was characterized by higher or lower race centrality relative to the other group. Multiple regression analyses predicting PEF from nationalism were conducted for lower and higher centrality level groups, controlling for class year. Results indicated a significant model for lower central students ($F = 4.94$, $p < .001$),

TABLE 4
Summary of Multiple Regression Analyses of the
Four Racial Ideologies as Predictors of Perceived
Ethnic Fit for Lower and Higher Race Central Students

	Lower Centrality			Higher Centrality		
	B	Beta	Model R^2	B	Beta	Model R^2
Constant	−.38	—	.22	2.03	—	.02
Class year	−.29	−.26**		.08	.09	
Nationalism	.45	.37***		.07	.06	

NOTE: For lower centrality, $F = 4.94$, $p < .001$; for higher centrality, $F = .48$, ns.
**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

accounting for 22% of the variance in PEF ($R^2 = .22$). Nationalism was positively related to perceived ethnic incompatibility ($\beta = .37$, $p < .001$). For higher race central students, the model was nonsignificant. Table 4 summarizes the results for the above model.

Perceived Ethnic Fit and Organizational Involvement

Next, multiple regression models examining centrality and perceived ethnic fit as predictors of African American organizations and non-African American organizations were conducted, controlling for class year. As in the above analyses, an interaction term, Centrality × PEF, also was included in the model to test for moderator effects for racial centrality. The predictor model was significant ($F = 25.41$, $p < .001$), accounting for 32% of the variance in the dependent variable. Both PEF and racial centrality were positively related to percentage of African American organizations ($\beta = .53$, $p < .001$, and $\beta = .25$, $p < .001$, respectively). In addition, the interaction term was negatively related to African American organizational involvement ($\beta = -2.65$, $p < .001$).

Next, separate regression analyses were conducted for higher and lower centrality groups as defined in previous analyses. Again, only the predictor model for the lower race central was significant ($F = 5.68$, $p < .01$). Class year was associated with participation in more African American organizations ($\beta = .29$, $p < .01$), and PEF was negatively related to African American organizations ($\beta = -.23$, $p < .04$). No significant relationships were found for higher race central students.

DISCUSSION

PREDICTORS OF PERCEIVED ETHNIC FIT

The expected relationships between precollege background factors and perceived ethnic fit did not emerge. This does not support research that has found that congruence of precollege environment and college environment racial makeup was related to better perceived social adjustment for African American college students (Adan & Felner, 1995; Graham et al., 1985). One possibility for the difference in findings for the present study may be differences in the type of student perceptions that were evaluated. In the studies noted above, social adjustment was evaluated by students' self-report of such factors as academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal adjustment, and emotional attachment. The present study explored students' feelings of social fit related to their ethnicity specifically. Though African American students' demographic backgrounds may be related to perceptions of poorer college adjustment in general, their backgrounds may not be related to feelings of incompatibility due to their ethnicity.

In contrast, racial ideology did predict PEF. Though background factors and racial ideology were correlated, only the latter predicted students' perceptions about their fit in their college environment. This may indicate that students' beliefs regarding race may be a stronger influence on their college experiences than demographic characteristics. However, because the present study is cross-sectional, it is possible that individuals' beliefs regarding race may have been influenced by their experiences in their college environment. The fact that neither precollege demographic characteristics nor class year was related to PEF does suggest that perceived ethnic incompatibility is not simply culture shock or a part of the sometimes difficult first year transition period noted in research on college students in general and minority students in particular (e.g., Allen, 1988; Nettles, 1991). However, the fact that class year was related to racial ideology suggests that students' experiences in the PWI environment may influence their beliefs regarding race. A longitudinal study examining these constructs could help clarify the extent to which precollege characteristics influence perceptions of environmental fit, as well as the directional relationship between racial ideology and PEF for different individuals.

PREDICTORS OF ORGANIZATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

Although students' backgrounds were not related to PEF, their backgrounds were related to organizational involvement. Students who came

from neighborhoods that had fewer African Americans reported being involved in more non-African American organizations. The findings do not support the research indicating that students from stronger cultural backgrounds (indicating neighborhoods that were more racially homogeneous) became involved in more ethnic-oriented campus organizations. However, the findings suggest that having more precollege interracial contact may lead to participation in more mainstream or multiethnic organizations.

PEF was related to African American organizational participation in that students who felt less fit due to their ethnicity participated in fewer ethnic group–dominated organizations. This supports the Ethier and Deaux (1990, 1994) findings for Hispanic students at PWIs. PEF did not predict other organizational involvement. Perceptions of incompatibility due to race may lead to or hinder students' participation in activities related to their ethnic group, but they may be less related to social participation in other types of organizations.

THE ROLE OF RACIAL CENTRALITY

The strength of one's ethnic identification, or racial centrality, was related to students' perceived ethnic fit and organizational involvement. As in other research on minority students, perceiving race as central to one's identity was related to participation in more African American organizations (Mitchell & Dell, 1992). The present findings indicate that the relationship between PEF and number of African American organizations differed for students with higher and lower centrality relative to one another. First, students who defined race as a less central part of their identities participated in fewer African American organizations. For these students, feeling that their ethnic group was not compatible with their college environment was related to being in fewer African American organizations as well.

Perhaps students with lower race centrality who feel that their ethnicity and college environment are incompatible would avoid joining organizations that may emphasize the same aspects that the individuals view as incompatible with their environment. Another possibility is that perceiving a misfit between characteristics of their ethnic group and their college environment may not compel such students to seek support and affirmation from African American organizations, because they do not hold race as an important aspect of their identities.

Having stronger racial centrality was related to involvement in more African American organizations, but perceiving their ethnicity as incompatible with their college environment did not influence the extent to which higher

race central individuals joined African American organizations. Perhaps having higher race centrality is enough to influence some students to join African American organizations, regardless of whether they feel that their ethnicity is compatible with their college environment. Such organizations may simply be a means of interacting with students with similar views and beliefs. Other higher race central students may seek out African American organizations as sources of social support in reaction to perceiving ethnic incompatibility. Crocker and Major (1989) suggest that when individuals have high ethnic group centrality, they are more likely to engage in self-protective strategies to enhance self-esteem. For many African American students, African American campus organizations provide such protection and support (Moran, Yengo, & Algier, 1994; Nettles, 1991). However, because PEF was not related to number of African American organizations for higher central students, such students do not necessarily seek out African American organizations when they feel ethnic incompatibility in their college environment.

Centrality also was important in the relationship between racial ideology and PEF as well as the relationship between ideology and organizational involvement. Again, the predictive relationships seemed to be strongest for lower race central individuals. For such students, having strong nationalist views relative to other ideologies was related to less perceived ethnic fit, whereas no relationship existed for higher central students. At first glance, it may seem unlikely that some students for whom race is less central might hold strong nationalism beliefs, and furthermore, that these beliefs would be predictive of race-related outcomes. However, Ethier and Deaux's (1990, 1994) studies with Hispanic college students may provide an explanation. Although their studies did not examine the meaning of race to individuals, the studies did indicate that students with lower race centrality were more vulnerable to the effects of perceiving their culture to be incompatible with the mainstream school environment. It is feasible that African American students who choose to deemphasize race as a large part of their identity, but who feel that African Americans are a uniquely oppressed group in America (nationalism as defined in this study), may encounter more difficulty in negotiating an environment in which race and group differences are extremely salient. In contrast, individuals with higher race centrality and strong nationalism views may not encounter this difficulty.

Overall, the study suggests that race centrality may play a complex role in the social behavior of African American college students. Though students overall reported low levels of perceived ethnic compatibility, the feeling that one's group does not fit into one's college environment at all may have a

substantial impact on social integration outcomes for some students. The findings suggest that PEF influences student organizational involvement only for those with lower race centrality. In addition to the fact that PEF only predicted African American organizations for lower central students, PEF was not related to total organizations or to being involved in an organization at all. Centrality alone seemed to have a stronger relationship with these outcomes, being positively related to African American organizations, total organizations, and involvement in any type of organization.

One plausible explanation for the study results is that race centrality may play a buffering role in the effects of both perceived ethnic incompatibility and racial ideology on organizational participation. For lower central students, having specific racial ideology beliefs may have a stronger influence on their participation in organizations within that environment. Higher race central students, on the other hand, may perceive less ethnic fit, regardless of their ideological beliefs regarding race. One explanation could be offered by the parental racial socialization research (e.g., Bowman & Howard, 1985), which suggests that emphasis on race awareness and acknowledgement of the existence of discrimination toward African Americans is related to positive school adjustment outcomes for African American children and adolescents. However, higher race central students may be more likely to participate in campus activities, both ethnic and nonethnic oriented, regardless of their racial ideologies. The findings support research such as that of Mitchell and Dell (1992), who found that racial identity attitudes were more predictive of participation in cultural organizations than noncultural ones. They suggest that students may participate in organizations for reasons of professional development and advancement. Therefore, a person with strong nationalist views may still choose to be involved in a mainstream organization because of opportunities for networking and professional support, for example.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Several points must be addressed in interpreting the study findings and generalizing them to other students at other universities. The issue of selectivity of the sample is an important one. It is not reasonable to assume that the selective sample of African American students who chose to attend this particular institution is representative of the broader African American population or even the population of African American students. Second, colleges differ in the students they select and in the environments they provide. Differences in perceptions of ethnic fit could be related to the type of students who

apply to the institution and of the racial environment of the institution. Finally, issues of design and methodology may influence what can be concluded from the study findings. Class year was controlled for in study analyses. Therefore, statements could be made regarding intergroup differences in study outcomes. The cross-sectional nature of the study, however, does not allow the examination of intraindividual change, the extent to which students' perceptions of ethnic fit increase or decrease in response to their college environment, and the influence of PEF on racial identity attitudes. Longitudinal research examining incoming students could help delineate such questions.

In spite of the above limitations, the study findings have several implications. First, the findings indicate that the experiences of African American students may be similar in some ways to other minority groups, given the congruence of findings with research such as that of Ethier and Deaux's (1990, 1994) examination of Hispanic students. Most significant, the findings indicate that the social integration process for African American students at PWIs may differ according to the way in which the individuals think about race. Furthermore, for some African American students, the decision to participate in the college environment as well as the channels through which they choose to participate are related to their perceptions of how well they, as members of a minority group, fit into the environment. The continued examination of campus involvement and other indicators of social integration is especially important, given that organizational involvement has been demonstrated to be important in student satisfaction and retention in general (Mallinckrodt, 1988). Furthermore, college student research consistently has shown social integration to be a more important predictor of performance and retention for African American students than for mainstream students (Murguia et al., 1991).

In much of the research on African American college students, students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds are expected to interact in certain school types (in terms of size, racial makeup, and prestige) in similar manners. The idea of a general effect of the same experience is one that pervades the college student literature (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1991). It is important to note, however, that African American students are not a homogeneous population. Wide variations exist in their family background, socioeconomic status, experiences, and perceptions. Thus, the assumption that all African American students will react, perceive, and perform similarly in the same environment is erroneous (Sherman et al., 1994). It is essential, therefore, that researchers, institutions, and educators gain a better understanding of the unique characteristics of this population and how these characteristics influence their college integration process.

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