



Expanding on “Screening, Diagnosis, and Intervention for Autism: Experiences of Black and Multiracial Families Seeking Care” to Support BIPOC Autistic Postsecondary Students

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As researchers and individuals with lived experience focused on neurodiversity, autism, and Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) populations, we read with interest the article, “Screening, Diagnosis, and Intervention for Autism: Experiences of Black and Multiracial Families Seeking Care,” (Weitlauf et al., 2023) in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. This mixed methods study shed light on critical issues related to BIPOC autistic children and their families, including the need for culturally sensitive and accessible care related to developmental monitoring, diagnosis, and follow-up care.

To be sure, this need is well-supported in the literature and aligns with the growing body of research that finds inequities for this population early in development (Fombonne & Zuckerman, 2022). In accordance with life course science, there is, however, a corollary need to support this population across development, particularly during sensitive developmental periods of high risk and opportunity after childhood (Halfon & Hochstein, 2002). Currently, there is an urgent need to support this population during emerging adulthood (Arnett et al., 2014), particularly in postsecondary education settings (Arnett, 2016).

In this Letter to the Editor, we seek to underscore and expand on the critically important contribution to the

literature made by Weitlauf et al. (2023). We aim to expand on this article by adopting a developmental lens—that is, a lens that is particularly attuned to the needs of BIPOC autistic individuals at the critical transition to adulthood within salient developmental ecosystems (i.e., the postsecondary context). We highlight research on autistic postsecondary students who are BIPOC; identify key gaps in the literature; and propose recommendations for supporting this population.

Research on BIPOC Autistic Postsecondary Students

Autistic and BIPOC individuals are increasingly enrolling in postsecondary institutions (Department of Education, 2020; Petcu, 2021). Although conclusive and up-to-date prevalence estimates for autistic postsecondary students are currently unavailable, recent findings with a nationally representative sample of first-time, full-time college students attending four-year colleges and universities suggest that autistic individuals comprise almost 1% of college students (Fernandes et al., 2021). Importantly, this estimate does not account for the finding that almost 80% of autistic individuals will attend a community- or two-year college (Roux et al., 2015), nor does it account for the approximately one-third of autistic college students who do not identify as having a disability (Shattuck et al., 2014). Emerging evidence suggests autistic students may struggle with the transition into college—in part due to lack of educational fit and inclusion in the institution—and ultimately struggle to complete their degrees (Bakker et al., 2023). Among non-autistic BIPOC postsecondary students, outcomes including retention, grade point average (GPA), and graduation

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rates are lower relative to those of their White counterparts (*Indicator 23: Postsecondary Graduation Rates*, n.d., p. 23; Umbach et al., 2019). Challenges are pronounced among BIPOC students in STEM fields (Park et al., 2020; Umbach et al., 2019), particularly among BIPOC women (Fletcher et al., 2021).

There are myriad barriers encountered by degree-seeking autistic and BIPOC students that likely contribute to these disparate outcomes. Overall, autistic students report negative experiences in postsecondary settings related to academic performance, social relationships and bullying, and physical and mental health (McLeod et al., 2019, 2021). These findings align with the broader research base that finds autistic individuals to experience unique challenges in the transition to and during adulthood (Cage et al., 2018; Doherty et al., 2022). As an example, many autistic adults have experienced a lifetime of chronic stressors—such as persistent and cumulative experiences of stigma, discrimination, rejection, exclusion, and victimization across interpersonal, educational, and healthcare contexts (Aubé et al., 2021; Brosnan & Gavin, 2021; Han et al., 2022)—well before they reach adulthood. These experiences may partially lead them to engage in camouflaging (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Hull et al., 2017), which is associated with worse mental health outcomes (Cook et al., 2021)—including symptoms of anxiety and depression (Hull et al., 2021)—and makes autistic individuals feel like they are “losing themselves” (Hull et al., 2017).

With respect to BIPOC postsecondary students, barriers to success include experiences of racism-related stress—that is, stress experienced by those who observe or directly experience racial discrimination in their daily lives at individual, cultural, and institutional levels (Reynolds et al., 2010). Indeed, BIPOC individuals experience structural, internalized, and interpersonal racism across the life course (Yusuf et al., 2022). As an example, BIPOC children experience school resource officer over-policing, which presents a danger to their safety and well-being and impedes access to appropriate intervention services (Miller & Meyers, 2015; Wallace et al., 2021). In BIPOC postsecondary students, racism-related stress directly impedes academic motivation and performance (Reynolds et al., 2010), is linked to lower engagement with the institution, and predicts greater reliance on maladaptive coping behaviors such as alcohol use (Pittman & Kaur, 2018). Beyond experiences of racism-related stress, students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) experience disproportionate inequities related to social determinants of health (SDOH), including food insecurity at levels that exceed estimates reported among students attending predominantly White institutions (Duke et al., 2023).

According to the minority stress model, individuals from minority backgrounds experience additional stress burden beyond the overall life stress experienced by the general population (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022). Both autistic and BIPOC populations experience minority stress (Botha & Frost, 2020; Calabrese et al., 2015). In the postsecondary context, this stress is linked to students’ decreased motivation to complete their degrees and is attributable, in part, to factors in the physical and cultural institutional environment (Wei et al., 2011). As an example, perception that the postsecondary institution values minority students has been suggested to be an important factor related to minority students’ motivation to graduate (Wei et al., 2011).

There is, however, an overall lack of research on BIPOC autistic postsecondary students. Lack of research may be due, in part, to the barriers to receiving a timely autism diagnosis among racial and ethnic minorities and subsequent lack of identification of autism among BIPOC college students. As an example, research suggests that BIPOC individuals are significantly more likely to receive a late autism diagnosis (Fombonne & Zuckerman, 2022). Research is also emerging on the prevalence of self-diagnosis among groups who are less likely to receive a formal autism diagnosis (i.e., women and girls) (Lewis, 2016).

Despite limited research on BIPOC autistic students, extant research suggests that individuals who align with multiple marginalized identities may experience compounded stress (Parra & Hastings, 2018). Indeed, youth and emerging adults with multiple marginalized identities—including racial, ethnic, and gender minorities and neurodivergent individuals—experience distinct patterns of victimization, discrimination, psychological distress, and self-efficacy in educational settings (Farquhar-Leicester et al., 2022; Shramko et al., 2018). These findings spurred calls for implementing a range of reforms in postsecondary education, including enhancing counseling and mental health services; increasing faculty interest in diversity; and creating institutional supports for those with multiple marginalized intersectional identities (Farquhar-Leicester et al., 2022; Shramko et al., 2018). Limited data on BIPOC autistic students specifically, however, limits the extent to which these efforts can be tailored to the distinct needs of this population.

Recommendations

As neurodiversity awareness and advocacy initiatives spread across postsecondary campuses (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2013), there is a need to ensure adequate support is provided for BIPOC autistic postsecondary students. We

propose the following recommendations for further efforts towards this end.

First, there is a need to improve the state of the research. Based on the literature, there are several key priorities for approaching this line of inquiry. Most importantly, due to the lack of available research on this population, there is high utility for participatory research (Nicolaidis et al., 2011), specifically research that engages autistic BIPOC incoming and current postsecondary students to understand their needs, experiences, and perspectives. Importantly, these studies should adopt a lens of intersectionality to understand the potential unique experiences of those who are both autistic and BIPOC. To date, the narratives surrounding autism and autistic people have been intertwined with narratives that reflect whiteness and maleness (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022), making this a critical area for future research. Using an intersectional lens, we can become more flexible in our understanding of positive autistic identity development and strategies to promote it (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022). It is also critical to adopt a life course approach that includes this population in research well before they enter postsecondary institutions. This research should focus on investigating key developmental transitions across the life course (Halfon & Hochstein, 2002).

Adopting a participatory, intersectional, and life course approach to this research is critical for examining several priority research areas. Given the overall lack of research on this population, there is a broad need to investigate barriers that exist for BIPOC autistic postsecondary students, both within educational settings and across multiple systems and sectors. These include the potential role of access to timely diagnoses and healthcare; experiences of stigma and discrimination; and obstacles to academic and social success in educational institutions. This line of research will inform efforts to proactively dismantle barriers for autistic BIPOC students.

Beyond executing a research agenda focused on BIPOC autistic postsecondary students, there is a need to create an infrastructure for developing and testing supports and services for this population. As an example, there is a need for researcher-educator partnerships with HBCUs and other minority-serving institutions to co-develop and test supportive interventions and programming. These efforts have recently been spurred by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Autism Transitions Research Project (ATRP) (Roux et al., 2023), which will be supporting a portfolio of research on autistic transition-aged youth, including those attending HBCUs and community colleges. We recommend additional initiatives in postsecondary education more globally. Researchers affiliated with academic institutions may be particularly well-positioned

to implement these initiatives due to their proximity to students, faculty, and administrators.

Finally, there is utility in proactively creating more curricula for postsecondary students around stigma, racism, and intersectionality. These efforts have the potential to empower all students to strive towards fostering an equitable educational environment. Initiatives are underway with respect to addressing stigma towards mental health conditions (Milin et al., 2016) and specific minority groups (Madireddy & Madireddy, 2020). In alignment with the need for more participatory approaches in the development of research and programming for underserved groups (Nicolaidis et al., 2011), there is a need for curricula that is co-developed with autistic BIPOC students. This will ensure that content is responsive to the specific and intersectional needs, experiences, and priorities of this population. Although there are limited supports and services for autistic BIPOC postsecondary students, existing research of postsecondary programming (Bolourian et al., 2018; Capriola-Hall et al., 2021; Hotez et al., 2018) suggests several promising approaches that could potentially be integrated into pilot programs. These include mentorship components, self-advocacy building approaches, and institutional reforms that address systemic barriers (Cox et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The article, “Screening, Diagnosis, and Intervention for Autism: Experiences of Black and Multiracial Families Seeking Care,” (Weitlauf et al., 2023) in *the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* elucidates next steps for supporting BIPOC autistic individuals early in life. There is a critical need to support this population across the life course, particularly during developmentally sensitive periods of risk and opportunity, including during postsecondary education. We look forward to advancements in research and practice that can support this important population.

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Declarations

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