

# The Influence of Racial Trauma on the Vocational Choice Decisions of Black Collegians

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## Abstract

The mental health concerns of Black collegians at an urban HBCU were examined to identify possible connections to career choice decisions and racial trauma. The current study used findings from an initial inquiry regarding the help-seeking behaviors of Black collegians. Of the 43 fields of academic study represented by students seeking services, the disciplines of social work, psychology and nursing represented one-third. This finding led to the current inquiry as to factors influencing the phenomenon. Holland's theory of vocational choice was employed to explain how common interests and experiences influence career choice decisions. Critical race theory was used to explain how the common experiences of racial trauma and past and present discrimination might lead to careers in the helping professions. Racial trauma has been linked to a host of mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and stress as well as a greater likelihood of physical health conditions such as hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes. Researchers concluded that the stress associated with high level coping in the face of inequality, financial hardship, and racial discrimination challenge individual resilience wells and negatively impact mental and physical health resulting in healthcare disparities.

**Keywords:** Racial trauma; Career choice; Field of academic study; Mental health concerns

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## Introduction

Many have heard the saying that people are attracted to the helping profession because they need help with their own problem. There may be truth to that saying especially when we consider Holland's (1959) theory of vocational choice companioned with critical race theory. Findings from an earlier study regarding the help-seeking behaviors of Black collegians revealed that students from certain fields of academic study were disproportionately more likely to seek professional help for their mental health concerns than other disciplines. Social work, psychology, and nursing students represented 33% of the 428 Black students seeking professional help at an HBCU counseling center, leading to the current inquiry as to factors that would explain the phenomenon. The common interests and experiences espoused by Holland are represented by racialized trauma, discrimination, structural inequality, lethal policing, and oppression.

## Results and Discussion

**Table 1** identifies the top ten fields of academic study by presenting mental health concerns. The top six presenting mental

health concerns for social work, psychology, and nursing students suggest common mental health experiences.

**Table 2** disaggregates referral source by field of academic study. The majority of the referrals for services were self-generated, suggesting positive perceptions about help-seeking.

Students from the three disciplines reported similar mental health histories of emotional abuse, sexual assault or abuse, physical assault or abuse, suicidal behavior, and a family history of psychiatric illness, suggesting common past experiences **Table 3**. Intergenerational trauma and current racialized trauma have been reported to impact the mental health and the physical health of Black Americans [1-6].

## Conclusion

Critical race theory suggests that Black Americans are continually impacted by past and present racialized experiences. These experiences provide a foundation for common interests and concerns, which in turn could influence vocational choice decisions as proffered by Holland. Racial trauma, discrimination,

**Table 1:** presenting mental health concerns by field of academic study.

Field of academic study	f	Academic difficulties	Anxiety	Anger control	Couples problems	Depression	Family problems	Peer interpersonal	Situational adjustment	Stress	Suicide
Biology	20	7	6	2	7	7	11	11	3	2	2
Business	18	2	6	6	6	9	6	5	2	3	1
Computer Science	18	5	4	0	5	6	7	5	1	4	2
Exercise Science	15	3	6	1	5	7	6	6	6	4	3
Nursing	46	14	14	6	12	21	17	21	3	11	6
Mass Comm	24	6	6	4	9	3	7	12	7	5	1
Psychology	52	8	15	6	25	16	22	19	2	18	4
Political Science	23	7	8	1	5	8	10	10	4	8	4
Social Work	46	9	18	4	17	23	22	20	3	14	5
Sociology	21	3	7	2	7	8	8	7	3	5	2

**Table 2:** Referral source by field of academic study.

Referral source	Social work	Psychology	Nursing	Total	%
Self	16	23	17	56	45.16
Faculty	14	7	9	30	24.19
Friend	6	12	12	30	24.19
Parent/Family	4	3	1	8	6.45
Total	40	45	39	124	99.99

**Table 3:** Field of academic study by past mental health history.

Majors	f	Previous counseling	Suicidal thoughts	Emotional abuse	Physical assault	Sexual assault	Other traumatic loss	Family history of Psychiatric Illness
Nursing	46	13 (28%)	12 (26%)	12 (26%)	6 (13%)	11 (24%)	3 (6%)	6 (13%)
Psychology	52	25 (48%)	10 (19%)	18 (34%)	6 (11%)	14 (27%)	0	22 (42%)
Social Work	46	20 (43%)	11 (23%)	13 (28%)	7 (15%)	13 (28%)	4 (8%)	10 (21%)

oppression, and lethal policing are offered as likely factors in Black collegians’ career choice decisions, particularly those espousing a social justice perspective. In spite of its limitations, this study provided valuable information related to the types of students most likely to seek counseling and suggests an opportunity to expand research in this area. Students in the helping professions were more likely to seek professional counseling than students from other disciplines, suggesting these students may have experienced sufficient trauma, discomfort, or mental health concerns in the past or present that could influence their desire to help others in similar situations. Study findings add to the limited research on Black/African American students’ actual help-seeking behavior, particularly as it relates to the students’ field of academic study. In consideration of the socioeconomic inequality impacting Black collegians, faculties are encouraged to adopt a liberatory praxis facilitating student self-advocacy and social justice.

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