On October 28-29, 2011, ISPRC hosted its eleventh annual Diversity Challenge. The Challenge was a two-day interactive conference that brought together scholars, educators, mental health practitioners, community activists, and other parties interested in promoting social justice across racial and cultural groups. The theme of Diversity Challenge 2011 was “Intersections of Race or Ethnic Culture with Gender or Sexual Orientation.”

Over 120 presentations focused on the Challenge theme in the form of workshops, individual presentations, symposia, structured discussions, posters, and panel discussions. More than 300 people from around the country attended and participated in the sessions conducted by over 200 presenters.

Invited speakers were well-known experts in the areas of race, ethnic culture, gender, and sexual orientation. Our sincere thanks to invited speakers Jean Lau Chin, Ed.D.; Beverly Greene, Ph.D.; Janet E. Helms, Ph.D.; Maryam Jernigan, Ph.D.; M. Brinton Lykes, Ph.D.; Michael Mobley, Ph.D.; Lisa Paler, Ph.D.; Leyla Perez-Gualdron, Ph.D.; V. Paul Poteat, Ph.D.; and Y. Joel Wong, Ph.D.

The conference concluded with a reception and dance performances by the Boston College dance troupes P.A.T.U, an African dance group, and F.I.S.T.S., a step dance team.

Janet E. Helms, Ph.D. was one of 15 notable professors who received a $25,000 cash award. The award ceremony took place in Atlanta, Georgia on January 7, 2012. Each of the distinguished award recipients motivated their students to create real-world success because of his or her inspiration.

“Student affiliates often come with ideas about how they would like to change communities of interest to them for the better. I try to mentor them to think about community interventions with some complexity and to value the communities as well as themselves as scholar-practitioners with relevant life experience,” explained Dr. Helms. “Often my racial identity theories give them a language for understanding and communicating about the racial experiences they have in these settings as well as designing effective interventions.”

Dr. Helms was nominated by former student, Maryam Jernigan, Ph.D., Yale University School of Medicine. "Through Dr. Helms’s role as a mentor and teacher, she inspired myself and many others to understand our ability to take our knowledge and skills gained in a formal setting and use them for the greater good of society to benefit those around us. One person cannot do all of the work needed to promote social justice; they can, however, pass on to others to help facilitate the process of us taking responsibility to take on and tackle larger social issues,” said Dr. Jernigan.

While Dr. Helms has received numerous awards and recognitions as a pioneer in her field, the Elizabeth Hurlock Beckman Award is particularly gratifying to Dr. Helms: “I have always been a student-oriented educator. My focus with these students has been to encourage them to become involved and give back to some community that needed their skills.”
Racial Identity and College Counseling: A Training at Bentley University
Natasha Torkelson facilitated a training on racial identity for the staff at Bentley University’s Counseling and Student Development Center. The training provided an overview of Helms’s People of Color and White Racial Identity Models. In addition, staff members were introduced to Helms’s Racial Identity Interaction Model to help understand the ways that interactions between and across racial identities can affect each member of a dyad or group. Specifically, staff was led in a discussion about the ways that racial identity shapes the therapeutic alliance, therapeutic goals and interventions, and the mental health issues of clients. The group was also challenged to consider the ways that the model uniquely applies to college students, in general, and specifically on Bentley’s campus. The training concluded with an understanding of ways in which racial and cultural issues at Bentley University and the Counseling Center can have a more positive focus, as well as possible strategies to achieve relevant goals.

Career Choices Panel
Shatina Williams participated in a panel discussion for youths of Color in Roxbury, Massachusetts, focusing on career choices and professional development. She shared her personal reflections and challenges of pursuing an education as a person of Color and the possible career opportunities for mental health professionals. She, along with a retired judge, an art curator, and others, shared their life stories.

Consultation Programs and Community Outreach

2011 Diversity Challenge Closing Reception

News from Our Affiliates / Associates

Newly minted Ph.D., Carlton Green reports that he has accepted a post doctoral fellow position at the University of Houston in Counseling and Psychological Services. Dr. Green also recently participated in the Society of Counseling Psychology Leadership Academy, a project designed to inspire, recruit, and develop future leaders in counseling psychology.

Dr. Maryam Jernigan and Dr. Carlton Green presented a workshop on Racial Trauma in the Educational Setting at the Trauma and Learning in Post-Secondary Education Conference. This conference was designed to expose participants to the range of traumatizing events and traumatic responses related to students’ experiences in their homes, communities, work settings, and schools.

Fostering national and international collaboration between educators, mental health providers, and scholars with interests in the psychological study of race, culture, and social policy

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Continuing the Conversation: A Support Group for Women of Color
Through her practicum at the Counseling and Student Development Center at Bentley University, Natasha Torkelson collaborated with the staff at the Multicultural Center to create a support group for women of Color. The goal of this group was to facilitate dialogue about the experiences of women of Color on Bentley University’s campus. Topics included the role of women of Color on campus, experiences of prejudice, the lack of a unified Black community, and challenging stereotypes and classism. Currently, Natasha is collaborating with the Multicultural Center and the Counseling and Student Development Center to develop a similar, more comprehensive program for women of Color during the 2012-2013 school year.
Burke School Initiative

Burke School Advocacy Program
For the second year, ISPRC collaborated with Jeremiah Burke High School, a racially and ethnically diverse high school in Dorchester, Massachusetts, to provide an advocacy counseling program for high school students. The advocacy program aims to provide students with a voice and empower them to identify the barriers to their success and advocate for their own needs.

Eight students in Boston College’s Master’s in Mental Health Counseling program participating in the social justice lab section of the class on Principles and Techniques were assigned as counseling advocates for one or two high school students. Throughout the school year, advocates used an assessment to determine barriers to student engagement. The information from the assessment was used for two reasons. First, the advocates were given feedback and training on their interviewing and cultural competency skills. Second, the information was used to inform individualized interventions to address the barriers to student success. Additionally, throughout the year, an ISPRC staff member conducted training for advocates in interviewing skills, working with culturally diverse clients, interfacing with families and teachers, and treatment planning. Interventions conducted by advocates addressed improving students’ grades; helping students improve their self-esteem and motivation; navigating the college application process; gaining access to health and mental health treatment; extracurricular and tutoring services; and providing them with space to discuss difficult experiences in their lives that were inhibiting their academic success.

Burke High School Girls’ Groups
Girls of Color often experience unique challenges in educational, social, and economic domains. For the 2011-2012 school year, ISPRC collaborated with Burke High School to work with groups of girls to discuss the challenges they face at school, home, and in their communities, as well as their personal reactions in those environments. Five ISPRC team members, Shatina Williams, Dana Collins, Ashley Carey, Dericka Canada, and Christina Solomon, facilitated workshops and discussions with eighteen girls in two psychoeducational groups focusing on achievement, relationships, self-care, community and civic engagement, and identity. Also, the groups focused on helping the girls to identify challenges and think critically about their reactions to the events they face. For example, one group recently discussed the tragedy of Trayvon Martin in relation to their experiences as youths of Color, particularly the stereotypes and prejudices they encounter. The other group analyzed the school as a system and considered how both their own views and others’ views shaped their experiences of and reactions to the system. The goals of the groups were to foster good decision making skills, promote positive racial and gender identity, and increase critical consciousness. The facilitators engaged the girls in structured and open dialogue, activities, and projects that helped them reach the group goals.

Promoting social justice at home and around the world in teaching, research, and practice
What is an Advocate?
By: Kelsey Rennebohm

At times, my role as an advocate at the Jeremiah E. Burke High School has felt unclear. Am I there to lend the listening ear that my students so desperately need? Am I there to encourage them to boost their grades? Am I there to help them navigate a chaotic school system? And I have found that the answer is yes; I am there to do all of these things. Over the course of the year, I have worked with two incredibly insightful students, both of whom face social and emotional challenges that affect their academics. Every week with these students brings something new. Sometimes I accompany them as they meet with a teacher, sign up for the health center, or organize their notebooks. Other times I listen to what happened at home last week, what annoyed them in math class, or what they think about racial dynamics at the Burke. These tasks and conversations don’t always lead to clear-cut or immediate academic improvements, but they do offer opportunities for my students to gain agency and voice in their complex environments. At the Burke, I have come to understand that being an advocate means sharing in my students’ strengths and struggles, and helping them find the internal motivation and the external resources to gain some control over their futures. Above all, I think all of us advocates have thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to learn how our students experience the world, to laugh and joke with them, and to share in their journeys. We’ve discovered that at the core of our work as advocates are the relationships we’ve built with these incredible students.

RISE Research Award

The 2012 RISE Research Award from the Association for Psychological Science (APS) was awarded to Ethan Mereish, a fourth year BC doctoral student and ISPRC team member. According to the APS, “The purpose of the RISE Research Award is to cultivate scholarly research in psychological fields related to socially and economically underrepresented populations, as well as to acknowledge outstanding research by student members.” Ethan’s research: “Discrimination, Diminished Sense of Control, Depression? a Mediation Analysis Among Sexual Minority Middle Aged Adults” is a study testing the mediating effects of sense of control on the relation between discrimination and depression in a sample of middle aged sexual minorities. Congratulations to Ethan who, as one of only four national winners, will present his research in a symposium at the 2012 APS Annual Convention in Chicago, IL in May 2012.

Promoting a more complete understanding of race and culture in society through psychological study and related psychoeducational interventions

Moving On...

Talitha Collins will be working in the Boston area next year. Her clinical work will focus on social and cultural aspects of clients’ lives that affect their mental health as well as their ability to successfully maneuver life roles. Her work will stem from feminist theory and will aim to empower clients with whom she works.

Hammad S. N’cho will be completing Officer Development School at Naval Station Newport in Newport, RI, commissioned as a Lieutenant in the United States Navy Medical Service Corps, and will be stationed at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland for his predoctoral internship. His training will focus on providing mental health assessment, psychotherapy, and consultation to active duty and retired members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines and their families. During his internship, he will also receive training and clinical supervision at the Marine Corps training facility at Camp LeJeune, North Carolina and while underway aboard a Nimitz Class aircraft carrier. Upon completion of his internship, Hammad will begin fulfilling a three-year service commitment to the Navy. He is excited to begin this new chapter in his career, but will greatly miss the unfailing support and encouragement that was provided by the ISPRC team.

Christina Solomon will be returning to her alma mater at the University of Michigan to study health behavior and health education in the School of Public Health. She will be gaining knowledge in the areas of health promotion, obesity prevention, and program development to help marginalized populations.

Amelia Dean Walker is headed to New York to begin a doctoral program in Counseling Psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research and clinical work will focus on the psychosocial consequences of racism and classism in both academic and community settings. She is indebted to Dr. Helms and the ISPRC team for their support and encouragement over the last two years.
Collaborative Research Studies

This year we initiated three collaborative research initiatives with Dr. Lisa Paler at Kingsborough Community College, Brooklyn, NY, Dr. Alfred Bryant, Jr. at the University of North Carolina, Pembroke and Dr. Maryam Jermigan at Yale University School of Medicine, New Haven, CT. Each initiative focuses on health and mental health concerns in an underserved population of Color from a racial identity or womanist identity perspective. Projects stemming from the collaborations are described more substantially in subsequent sections.

Paler Collaborative Projects
Skin Color Attitudes, Racial Identity, and Physical Attractiveness
As the racial and ethnic composition of our society continues to evolve, greater attention is being given to racial and ethnic mental health disparities and the way in which historical and current struggles surrounding race and culture affect the psychological well-being of ethnic minorities. People of Color, stigmatized by physical markers of group membership, are challenged to maintain healthy self-concepts in a society that historically has labeled them as deviant from the ideal, primarily based on presumed skin color. For the African American community in particular, skin color appears to play a significant, but unacknowledged role in the lives of African American women. However, the degree to which African American women internalize these stereotypes may depend on both their attitudes toward their skin color and their level of racial identity. This quantitative study seeks to investigate relationships among African American women’s self-reported skin color, racial identity, and perceptions of physical attractiveness. Participants included self-identified African American women selected from a larger study of ethnic minority college women attending public and private colleges. Participants responded to measures involving self-reported perceptions of physical attractiveness, racial identity, and attitudes toward skin color. Preliminary results of this study suggest that combinations of differences in skin color and racial identity were related to the women’s satisfaction with their physical appearance. The results support the need for more complex analyses of the effects of societal skin-color dynamics on Black women’s self-appraisals. Findings from this study will be presented at the 2012 American Psychological Association conference held in Orlando, Florida in August.

Body Image Measurement
Theorists contend that poor body image may serve as a precursor to many eating-related disorders. For women of Color, body image derives from complex relationships between personal (e.g., self-esteem) and social (e.g., racial) characteristics. For these women, development of a positive body image is quite complex. The role of physical features, such as hair texture, skin tone, and ethnic features (e.g., shape and size of lips and nose) are absent in measures of body image satisfaction currently used to evaluate Black women. Moreover, existing measures of physical features often lack psychometric rigor and do not permit a reliable and valid assessment of satisfaction. Using existing data, collected by Dr. Paler, analyses are currently being conducted to create a culturally sensitive measure that assesses the body image satisfaction of Black women.

Womanist Identity Attitudes and Body Image in Black Women
In American society, the model for desirable body images is defined by societal standards that value thin, petite and light-skin body types for girls and women. However, these standards often do not coincide with standards of femininity in communities of Color, especially African American, African ethnic, and Latina/Latino communities. Thus, for women in these communities to develop a positive and healthy sense of their physical selves, theorists argue that the women must learn to resist standards imposed by society and substitute personal standards. Womanist identity theory has been proposed as a cognitive process by which such resistance to culturally non-responsive standards and positive self-definition may occur. The cognitive process involves a progression from accepting whatever standards society imposes on women to self-defined valuing of oneself as a woman. In this project, a sample of 148 Black women completed the Womanist Identity Attitude Scale (Helms, 1990) and a measure of body image. Relationships were found between womanist identity attitudes and various aspects of body image. These findings will be presented at the American Psychological Association Convention in Orlando, Florida in August, 2012.

Bryant Collaborative Project
Native American Health Study
The goal of this collaborative study is to obtain information about the eating behaviors, as related to racial and cultural factors, of Native American college students from the Lumbee tribe in North Carolina. The Lumbee tribe is the second largest tribe east of the Mississippi and its members constitute about one half of the Native Americans in North Carolina. Yet, as is true for most Native Americans, research related to obesity, eating disorders, and health-related problems has lagged far behind research on other U.S. ethnic minority populations. Moreover, virtually no research has focused on how issues of racial identity, racism, and cultural factors contribute to risky health behaviors and subsequent poor health indicators, such as diabetes and obesity, in any ethnic group. However, intervening to improve the health status of Native American populations with respect to such issues requires more collaboration with Native American scholars and a greater research focus on specific groups of concern. In recognition that specific tribal affiliation may shape the eating practices and race-related experiences of tribal members, the proposed study focuses specifically on racial identity and physical and psychological outcomes of Lumbee Native American college students as a first step toward preventative health interventions.
Collaborative Research Studies (cont.)

Jernigan Collaborative Project
Racial Factors and Health Outcomes
Although theories suggest that racial factors, such as discrimination and racial identity, are related to poor health outcomes for people of Color and related immigrant groups, very little research has empirically investigated such relationships, and the few existing studies have tended to focus on comparing racial groups on outcome measures rather than studying the impact of the psychological effects of discrimination within diverse racial groups. In a proposed study, a national sample of adults of Color will be asked to describe their racial experiences and health symptoms that may be precursors of diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. Ideally, findings will contribute to better preventative interventions that integrate racial stressors that are relevant to the life experiences of the focal groups and their health behaviors. Moreover, perhaps the results of the study will help explain the disparities in health outcomes for people of Color relative to their White counterparts.

Current Projects: Research Initiatives

Evaluating Evidence in Culturally-Adapted Empirically Supported Therapies and Evidence-Based Practices
Theorists and researchers have begun to question the appropriateness of traditional counseling and psychotherapy for people of Color and non-dominant cultures. However, virtually no research or theory has questioned the quality of the measures used as evidence to test hypotheses regarding use of existing traditional therapy approaches with service recipients of Color or non-dominant cultures. To determine whether scales that researchers have used as evidence for effectiveness of therapy have included people of Color or their racial or cultural life experiences in the scales’ development, Dr. Helms and student researchers Ashley Carey, Kelsey Rennebohm, and Amanda Reyome are conducting a study to investigate the psychometric evidence pertaining to scales used in outcome studies. The scales were collected from peer-reviewed studies of outcomes of empirically supported therapies or evidence-based practices involving service recipients of Color. The basic research question is whether researchers and scale developers incorporated race and ethnicity in their development of psychological outcome measures. Preliminary results of the study will be presented at the convention of the Society for Psychotherapy Research in June.

Another Puzzle Piece: Multiracial and Monoracial Scores on the PRIAS
Multiracial people represent one of the fastest growing minority groups in the U.S. However, there has been a lack of research in counseling psychology on multiracial individuals. In particular, there are few quantitative studies examining the applicability of theoretical models to multiracial populations. The purpose of this study is to compare monoracial and multiracial individuals’ results on the People of Color Racial Identity Attitudes Scale (PRIAS). To date, there has been no quantitative examination of the PRIAS with multiracial individuals. Findings can help increase the understanding of multiracial identity and the ways that multiracial individuals score on the PRIAS. Results will be presented as a poster presentation at the American Psychological Association Conference in Orlando, Florida in August, 2012.

Research Initiatives (cont.)

Multicultural Training Experiences and Multicultural Competence: Examining Counselor Trainees’ Perceptions
Counselor education programs have increasingly recognized the need to promote the development of multicultural competence among beginning counselor trainees. Although research indicates that curricular changes tend to increase trainees’ multicultural competence, there is a lack of empirical research in the area of how to conceptualize, measure, and investigate trainees’ growth. The paucity of empirical research in this area makes it difficult to determine the efficacy of specific interventions and whether programs are meeting their multicultural training objectives. The ISPRC worked with Boston College’s Diversity Committee to develop a research initiative that examines the process through which Boston College mental health counseling students develop the knowledge, skills, and awareness necessary to work with clients from diverse backgrounds. First-year mental health trainees’ evaluations of different multicultural training experiences were compared to their perceived levels of multicultural competence. The aim was to identify whether meaningful relationships existed between how helpful trainees rated past and present training experiences as being, and how competent they felt in the areas of knowledge, awareness, skills, and developing multicultural counseling relationships. A second round of data collection is currently in progress. ISPRC and Diversity Committee members will present their findings at the August 2012 American Psychological Association (APA) Convention.

The Influence of Role Models on Identity Development in Black Adolescent Girls
Black girls are socialized in environments in which they are either negatively stereotyped or ignored, treatment that potentially leads to school disengagement and poor life outcomes. Yet positive role models may offer positive racial and gender messages that counteract negative stereotyping and foster a sense of self-worth for the girls. To discover whether Black girls have role models and, if so, what functions the role models serve in the girls’ lives, we conducted a focus group of Black adolescent girls between the ages of 15 and 17 years old. Research questions investigated were (a) who the girls chose as role models outside of their families, (b) why they chose certain role models, (c) how chosen role models influenced the girls’ perceptions of themselves and life goals, and (d) how role models influenced racial and gender identity development. We found that the girls used a variety of non-familial role models, most of whom were of the same race and gender. For the girls, choosing role models tended to involve an interactional process whereby girls selected role models who would foster the girls’ previously held values and beliefs and thereby give them confidence in themselves and their identified goals. Based on the findings, we suggested strategies and interventions for engaging Black adolescent girls in exploring attitudes and values and promoting positive identity. The study was presented as a poster at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association in August, 2011.


Helms, J.E. (2012, April). Invited Speaker, Racial Identity in Everyday Life, Psychology Colloquium, Salem State University, Salem, MA


Torkelson, N.C. (2012, April). Racial Identity and College Counseling. training for the Counseling and Student Development Center staff. Bentley University, Waltham, MA.

