

Bridging the Gap: The Impact of Organizational Culture on Racial Stress and Agency Among Educational Leaders

Abstract

Despite district leaders' efforts to recruit leaders of color (loC) to match the growing percentage of students of color (soC) in U.S. public schools, a significant representation gap remains. This study examined the influence of organizational culture on racial stress, agency, and perceptions of organizational constructs among educational leaders. Using Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations, the research highlighted how systemic processes and practices perpetuate racial disparities. Data from 774 leaders across five school districts were collected in fall 2022 through the Organizational Culture Survey, which examined the dynamics of racial conflicts in school settings. Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis and measurement invariance tests validated the measurement model. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) compared latent means and investigated relationships between constructs of racialized organizations, racial stress, and agency.

Findings revealed significant disparities in perceptions of racial stress and agency between loC and white leaders. LoC reported higher levels of professional racial suppression and lower support for racial questioning, indicating environments less conducive to open discussions about race. SEM analysis showed that organizational support for racial questioning negatively correlated with racial stress and positively with agency, with stronger effects for loC. These results underscore the critical role of supportive organizational cultures in mitigating racial stress and enhancing loC agency to influence diversity initiatives and address racial issues.

The study underscores the need for robust quantitative models to measure racial stress, agency, and organizational constructs, as well as the relationships between them. Such models reveal disparities in perceptions across racial groups, uncovering systemic processes affecting leadership experiences and district diversification efforts. This data-driven approach promotes leadership diversity, fosters inclusive environments, supports open racial discussions, and empowers loC to enact their agency.