Speaker 1:

Welcome to the Michigan Minds Podcast, a quick and informative analysis of today's top issues, from University of Michigan faculty.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much for joining Michigan Minds. I'm really looking forward to talking with you today and learning from you. Can you please introduce yourself and tell us a bit about your role at the University of Michigan?

Dr. Kevin Cokley:

Yes, my name is Dr. Kevin Cokley, and I'm a professor of psychology here. I am the university diversity and social transformation professor, which is an endowed professorship, and I'm also the associate chair for diversity initiatives in the psychology department.

Speaker 2:

Thank you. And in what areas does your research focus?

Dr. Kevin Cokley:

My research focuses on the areas of, really, ethnic minorities, multicultural psychology. I tend to focus on issues pertaining to African-Americans, and for many years I focused on issues related to the achievement of African-American students. I looked at factors such as racial identity, academic self concept, academic motivation, really all of those psychological factors that impact the ways in which African-American students perform, particularly in college.

In recent years, I have turned my focus more into their area of the imposter phenomenon, and I've been really interested in looking at how the imposter phenomenon impacts academic and mental health outcomes, not only among African-American students, but among all students, particularly minoritized students.

Speaker 2:

So talking a bit about your recent work that examines whether imposter feelings would both moderate and mediate the relationship between perceived discrimination and mental health in a sample of diverse ethnic minority college students at an urban public university, can you highlight some of your findings in this area?

Dr. Kevin Cokley:

Sure. Let me just give you a little bit of background. The literature is well established in talking about the relationship between perceived discrimination and mental health outcomes, particularly depression and anxiety. We know that increased exposure to perceived discrimination increases the likelihood of experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety. So I was really interested, or we were really interested in looking at additional factors that would contribute to this dynamic.

And as I mentioned, I have been doing research on the imposter phenomenon, so really I was interested in to what degree does feeling like an imposter contribute to the relationship between perceived discrimination and mental health outcomes? And I was especially interested in examining this relationship amongst multiple groups of students, and minoritized students, because we know that all minoritized students are exposed to discrimination, but we wondered if they have the same sorts of experiences, or if the dynamics among perceived discrimination and mental health outcomes, if it's the same across groups or if there's some differences. That was really what was the motivation for doing the research.

One of the interesting findings, and consistent with other research that I've done, is that of those groups of students, which included African-American students, Latinx students, and Asian-American students, we found that African-American students reported the higher experiences of perceived discrimination, which is not surprising, which is fairly consistent with other research that has been done in the area. Interestingly, we found that there were no differences across the groups in reporting feeling like an imposter. This was pretty interesting because, in prior research that we had conducted, we actually found that Asian-American students reported higher experiences of feeling like an imposter, compared to African-American students and Latinx students, which was somewhat counterintuitive to what we had expected to find in previous studies. But in this particular study, there were no ethnic differences in experiencing feeling like an imposter, so those were some pretty interesting findings.

Speaker 2:

One of the main focuses of the study, imposter feelings as a moderator and mediator of the relationship between perceived discrimination and mental health among racial or ethnic minority college students, was to examine the extent to which perceived discrimination and imposterism predicted negative mental health outcomes. Can you share a bit more about these findings, and how perceived discrimination and imposterism impacts students' mental health?

Dr. Kevin Cokley:

Yeah. Again, when we're talking about minoritized students, racially and ethically minoritized students, there's quite a bit of literature that examines perceived discrimination with this group. We know, again, that perceived discrimination is very well documented to contribute to higher feelings of depression and anxiety, but less is known about imposterism, the imposter phenomenon, and how that contributes.

Preceding this study that we're talking about, we conducted a study where we found that imposter feelings actually were stronger predictors of mental health outcomes, compared to perceived discrimination, or actually compared to minority status stress. So we were interested in the degree to which both of these constructs contribute to the prediction of mental health outcomes.

We did it in a statistical model, and it was pretty interesting because we did find that perceived discrimination and imposterism both predicted mental health outcomes. But what was really interesting was, in the model that we examined, we found that part of the reason why perceived discrimination predicts mental health outcomes is because of imposterism. So in other words, when minoritized students experience discrimination, their mental health is compromised in part because they are experiencing feeling like an imposter. So one of the interventions that we could do as a result of the study is to work on reducing feeling like an imposter amongst minoritized students, because when you reduce their feelings of imposterism, then it minimizes the impact of perceived discrimination on their mental health.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much. Your book, Making Black Lives Matter: Confronting Anti-Black Racism, explores the history and contemporary circumstances of anti-Black racism, offering powerful personal anecdotes and providing recommendations and solutions to challenging anti-Black racism in its various expressions. Can you share the inspiration for this book and your experience collaborating with scholars, practitioners, activists, and students?

Dr. Kevin Cokley:

Yes, it was interesting. I was actually approached by the publisher, Cognella, and they asked me if I would be interested in working on a book that really was capturing the moment of, and of course we know, with George Floyd's murder and the uprisings in the summer of 2020, that there was a lot of conversation, national conversation around race and social justice, and so Cognella publishers really wanted to capture what was going on in the nation at that time. They approached me and asked me if I would be interested in putting together a book to really examine and to address what was going on. I was very excited. First of all, I was honored and humbled. There are a lot of people that they could have approached, but they asked me, and so I said yes.

Then the challenge was to figure out what exactly did I want to focus on? Because they didn't tell me, necessarily, they didn't tell me a title, they didn't tell me an exact focus, that was really left up to me. They just knew that they wanted to really capture the moment of what was going on in the nation at that time. So after giving it a lot of thought, I said, "Really, we are experiencing the protest, and Black Lives Matter movement", which was not just in the nation but worldwide, and so I knew that I wanted that to somehow be reflected in the title. I also knew that what we were really dealing with was anti-Blackness, and we saw George Floyd as yet just another example of anti-Blackness at play in law enforcement.

That was how the idea really became crystallized. And what was so attractive to me about doing the book was it was not going to be your typical academic book. In other words, it was not written just for an academic audience, and it was not going to just involve scholars, it involved community activists, it involves students, and practitioners. So a very diverse set of voices and experiences contributed to the book, and I think that makes the book particularly exciting for people who want something beyond just the typical academic approach in writing a book.

Speaker 2:

Wonderful, thank you. Black History Month is celebrated during the month of February. Can you discuss the importance of learning and understanding the history behind this significant observance?

Dr. Kevin Cokley:

We always have to remind people that Black history is American history, and so we're not talking about learning a segregated form of history. All informed and educated Americans should be familiar with not only Black history, but Latinx history, Asian, Asian-American history, indigenous histories. I mean, all the different groups that make up the beautiful diversity and tapestry of this country all deserve to have their histories learned, and so Black history is just part of that.

Black History, of course, has been celebrated in this country for many years. We know we can go back and thank Carter G. Woodson for introducing this to us initially in the form of Black History Week, and then of course, Black History Week became Black History Month. But it's really an opportunity to just reflect and to celebrate all of those wonderful achievements that African-Americans, that Black folks have made to this country, and they are many. We don't often have an opportunity to really talk about, reflect on and celebrate those achievements, and Black History Month gives us an opportunity to do that.

Speaker 2:

Can you share any educational resources where people can go to learn more about Black History Month, or provide ways in which people can continue learning and celebrating beyond this observance?

Dr. Kevin Cokley:

Well, I would be remiss if I did not offer my book, Making Black Lives Matter: Confronting Anti-Black Racism, it's a shameless plug for my book. I would refer people to an organization. The National Council of Black Studies is the premier academic organization dedicated to Black studies, and it is a wonderful site and resource for people who want to get exposed to more information, including books that people might read to learn more about the Black experiences. So I would refer people to go to their website in particular, and to become familiar with the individuals who make up the National Council of Black Studies and the work that they do.

Speaker 2:

As the podcast comes to a close, what is one thing you hope listeners remember from this conversation?

Dr. Kevin Cokley:

I hope that listeners remember that Black History is American history. And in light of the things that are going on in this country right now, I will remind people about what's going on in places like Florida, where advanced placement, African-American studies has been excluded from the curriculum, that we live in a highly contentious set of times now, and it is important that people recognize that Black history is something that we should all be exposed to, that we should all learn, and it should not be politicized to the extent that it ceases to be offered to students.

Speaker 2:

And is there anything else you would like to share?

Dr. Kevin Cokley:

I would share that I hope that people take the time to educate themselves beyond what they might learn in schools. Because we know that, while what we learn in schools is certainly important, it's limited, and that education never stops with formal schooling, but should be a lifelong process, and people should be committed to learning more about Black History Month, as well as the histories of other racial and ethnic groups.

Speaker 2:

Fantastic. Thank you so much. It has been an absolute honor to talk with you today and learn from you. Thank you for taking the time to join us.

Dr. Kevin Cokley:

You're very welcome.

Speaker 1:

Thank you for listening to the Michigan Minds Podcast, a production of the University of Michigan. Join the conversation on social media with #UMichImpact.