

Afrofuturism as Applied to Self-Perception: an Experimental Vignette Study

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Abstract

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There exists an urgency for social workers to find new and compelling approaches in the field of social work. In an effort to address that call for innovation and quest for knowledge, this research was an exploration of how the broad genre of science fiction and social work can be linked. This study used vignettes written in an Afrofuturistic perspective as a framework to study self-perception among Black college students. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of four vignettes in which the protagonist's race and the story outcome were manipulated (Black versus White race and positive versus negative story outcome). Participants then rated themselves in the future on 18 personality dimensions. Analyses yielded a story outcome x protagonist race interaction. When the story outcome was negative, ratings of self in the future were more positive when the protagonist was Black versus White. When the story outcome was positive, in contrast, ratings of self in the future didn't differ as a function of protagonist race. There are several existing concepts that are expanded upon to explain the results including "resilience" for why participants rated themselves positively when the Black character performed negatively. With improvements made to the methodology, this research could benefit social work at all levels of practice: micro (clinical social work), mezzo (social work education), and macro (strategizing creative policy reform).

Keywords: *Social Work, Innovation, Afrofuturism, Self-Perception, Possible Selves*

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Introduction

The larger purpose of this research is to address two rather large and complex themes: innovation and knowledge formation as related to the field of social work. In Tricia Bent-Goodley's inaugural address as Editor-in-Chief of *Social Work*, the premiere journal of the National Association of Social Workers, it is stated that:

The world is complex and ever-changing, requiring innovation and a commitment to social justice... [social workers] are called to be innovators of new approaches and practices in a dynamic, fluid, and responsive manner while in the midst of changes at multiple levels.

These changes require social workers to be at the forefront of shaping discourse, advancing policy, and building on the science that supports practice (Bent-Goodley, 2014, p.101).

Social work innovation must include ideas that are creative, generalizable and sustainable enough to affect practice (Brown, 2013). Social work is unique in that its theoretical concepts are drawn from the fields of psychology, philosophy and sociology (Hutchison, 2003). These concepts are difficult to apply in professional settings as social work practice is nuanced and circumstances change according to the individual and the environment (Trevithick, 2008). Surprisingly, there is only one known practice model that was derived specifically from the social work discipline (Trevithick, 2008). Nevertheless, it is important to understand *who* and *under what contexts* these bodies of knowledge were created (Trevithick, 2008), as they historically lack cultural humility and applicability.

While there is seemingly no connection between mass media and the future of the social work profession, media's powerful impact on individual and public beliefs, attitudes and behaviors (Potter, 2013) has catalyzed it into a burgeoning tool to assess and evaluate the modern world (Center for Media Literacy). One popular trend in current media is the rise of superhero movies.

Though there are many factors that might explain this rise, from increased budgets and more realistic computer generated imagery (Yueh, 2014) to relatability of the superhero in harsh social and economic circumstances (Hyde, 2009), superheroes remain a mainstay in movie tropes. For the purposes of this research, superheroes are classified in the genre of speculative fiction as it involves components of science fiction, fantasy and horror characterized by protagonists dealing with non-fictitious realities (Daniel, 2011).

One innovative and creative option is to use media as inspiration to create new social work knowledge. More specifically, the goal of the present study is to answer Bent-Goodley's call for innovation by using speculative fiction, a popular trend in modern media, to frame an exploration of the effects of a) race and b) modeling (the behavior of role models and the observed consequences of those behaviors) on Black college students' self-perceptions, in particular, their visions of themselves in the future. This thesis focuses on strengths-based concepts as it relates to Black college students to pose as a counter narrative to the deficit lens that is so often used in research, prevention and intervention work with Black individuals and communities (McGee, 2009). In what follows, please find a brief overview of the disparate conceptual frameworks called upon in this thesis.

Afrofuturism

Afrofuturism is a form of speculative fiction that concerns itself with positioning Black themes at the center of imagined futures specifically in relation to technology (Dery, 1994). Since the mid-1980s, Afrofuturism has been regarded as a literary element typically prevalent in the writings from Black authors of science fiction (Yaszek, 2006) and, more recently, as an aesthetic in Black visual and auditory media (Van Veen, 2013). An emergence of Afrofuturistic scholarship originated after cultural critics began to parse out its most salient themes (centralization of Afrodiasporic bodies, possible futures and technoculture) and began using it as a method in which

to learn about the world (Yaszek, 2006). A rather unique attribute of this framework is that components of the Black experience are given to Black characters. For example, in Okorafor's (2015) *The Book of Phoenix*, the protagonist, a hybrid specimen and others like her endure systemic racism and are kept imprisoned in highly secured, government-run laboratories. The idea of placing resonant Black experiences in literature, albeit exaggerated by fantasy and science fiction, is the central theme of Afrofuturism.

Shift and Persist as a Strategy for Overcoming Adversity

Adversity is a risk factor for physical health problems (Braveman et al., 2010) but does not wholly determine such outcomes. Chen and Miller (2012) propose a shift-and-persist explanation for why lower socioeconomic status isn't *necessarily* deleterious for health. In the midst of adversity, a subset of individuals find positive role models who bolster their trust in others and teach them important life skills, such as emotion regulation strategies and the ability to focus on one's future.

Over time, these individuals respond to stressors in highly adaptive ways, by shifting, "accepting stress for what it is and adapting the self to it, in combination with persisting, enduring life with strength by holding on to meaning and optimism" (Chen & Miller, 2012, p. 1). These cognitive and behavioral responses mitigate the typically adverse physiological effects of chronic stress, thereby fending off disease. The majority of research on this construct has been conducted with persons categorized as lower in socioeconomic status and has focused on physical health-related outcomes such as risk for cardiovascular disease. However, given the conceptual underpinnings of the model, these strategies have relevance for other populations and outcomes as well.

As noted above, the presence of positive role models is an important component of shifting and persisting. Role models provide explicit examples of adaptive strategies through their own

behavior and outcomes and also through coaching. Emotion regulation strategies are modeled and/or taught, in particular, the ability to cognitively reappraise situations and events in order to mitigate or squelch the experience of strong negative emotions (Chen & Miller, 2012). This speaks to the “shift” aspect of the strategy. Persisting is also needed to overcome adversity. Chen and Miller (2012) frame persistence as drawing from resilience, which involves persevering through trauma while maintaining a sense of optimism about the future. Ungar (2011) offers a more socio-ecological perspective of resilience, arguing that it should be conceptualized less as an individual trait and more as a contextualized process in which individuals learn to navigate their social and physical ecologies. This fits nicely with the shift-and-persist framework in that role models can facilitate such navigation. Indeed, one study of 659 African American adolescents found that non-parent adult role models had protective, compensatory effects on adolescents’ externalizing and internalizing behaviors and school outcomes, thereby contributing to the adolescents’ resilience (Hurd et al., 2009).

Identifying protective factors among Black college students, in particular, factors that contribute to their ability to “persist” and then “shift,” is more of a recent and positive approach in research involving this demographic (McGee, 2009). While popular definitions of resilience have been signified as one such factor that might lead to shifting and persisting, researchers have also suggested that ability to “bounce back” (Strayhorn, 2010, p. 5) from failure and detrimental consequences also qualifies as resiliency. As posited by Chen, those who are resilient will use shift and persist strategies to overcome adversity (Chen et al., 2011).

Possible Selves

Exposure to a positive role model and the acquisition of adaptive cognitive and behavioral skills could shape not just responses to adverse situations but also the way in which persons view themselves, particularly themselves in the future. Accordingly, we draw upon a social psychological

construct called *possible selves* (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves represent “individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Such cognitions are important because they not only provide a framework within which to evaluate the current self but also because they guide future behavior. The construct has been applied to varied domains ranging from academics (Oyserman et al., 1995, 2006) to smoking (Song et al., 2013) to sexual orientation (King & Smith, 2004), and varied samples ranging from middle school students (Beier et al., 2012) and adolescents (Stein et al., 1998) to low-income mothers (Lee & Oyserman, 2009) and young fathers in prison (Meek, 2011). Prospective studies highlight links between possible selves and behavior (e.g., Lee et al., 2015). The relationship is bi-directional in that negative possible selves predict subsequent risky behaviors and risky behaviors predict subsequent negative possible selves (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006).

Aims and Hypothesis

There were 3 aims in the present study. The first was to test the feasibility of the vignette methodology. Afrofuturism was used as a framework to investigate the effects of a hypothetical role model on possible selves. Participants (students identifying as Black in race) were exposed to one of four randomly assigned science fiction vignettes. Two factors were varied across the four vignettes: the implied race of the protagonist (Black or White) and the valence of the story outcome (positive or negative). The second aim was to examine the effects of protagonist race and story outcome on self-perception. Self-perception was hypothesized to differ as a function of both factors. In other words, two main effects were predicted, such that:

1. Self-perception would be more positive when the story outcome was positive versus negative.

2. Self-perception would be more positive when the protagonist's implied race was Black versus White.

Figure 1 illustrates these hypothesized effects. Both stem from social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1963), which suggests that role models are more influential if they are similar to oneself. Additionally, role models who have honorable qualities and are justly rewarded are more closely observed than those who lack those same qualities (Bandura, 1971). Lastly, while this study's role model is presented through fictional text, the modeling process is the same as behaviors presented through pictures and other forms of media (Bandura, 1971). Essentially, social learning theory assumes that behaviors are likely to be replicated when the model looks like the subject and is rewarded positively. Accordingly, it was assumed that Black participants would more readily identify with the Black protagonist and the character who experienced the positive outcome. There was no predicted interaction between story outcome and protagonist race.

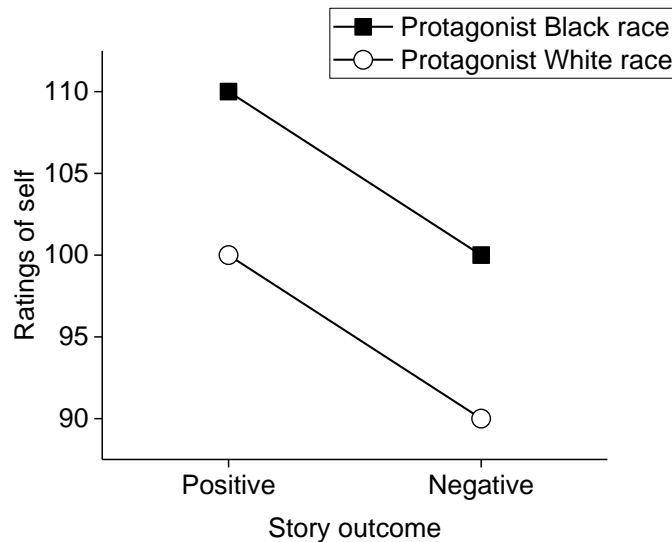


Figure 1: Predicted mean ratings of self as a function of implied protagonist race and story outcome¹

¹ Higher numbers indicate greater positivity

The third and final aim was to identify the possible and feared selves reported by Black college students after coding responses from a questionnaire (Appendix B) designed to assess this construct. In what is known as the “aspirations-achievement gap”, researchers have noted that while the chasm between “achievement” is large, the differences between Black and white student aspirations are even greater (Pizzolato, 2006). This concept is important because it informs how Black college students aspire to and then achieve academically, based on their possible self-schemata (Pizzolato, 2006).

Method

Participants

Forty-eight students identifying as Black in race served as participants. Potentially eligible students were recruited in multiple ways. First, the researcher approached leaders of pertinent organizations on the University of Washington campus, requesting the ability to attend one of their meetings and administer the experiment in person. Organizations were the Association of Black Business Students, African Student Association, Black Student Union, National Society of Black Engineers, Sisterhood, Association of Black Social Work Students, Black Law Students Association, Somali Student Association, and Retro Open Mic. All participants provided written consent (Appendix A) prior to completing the study.

Other participants were recruited on-line using two methods: through Facebook, a popular social media platform, and through messages sent to campus list serves. Facebook posts calling for the participation of self-identified Black college students were made to nine pages including: Seattle People of Color Salon, Eastern Washington Black Student Union, University of Arizona Black Student Union, University of Idaho Black Student Union, Northern Arizona University Black Student Union, University of Southern Florida Black Student Union, #Black@UW, The

Afrofuturist Affair and the Octavia E. Butler Legacy Network. E-mails were sent to two different list serves: Black Women in Grad School and the Association of Black Social Work Students, both of which are based at the University of Washington. The on-line surveys were hosted by Survey Monkey and required each subject to read the consent form before participating. Names and other online identifiers were not collected. As an incentive, all participants were given an opportunity to enter into a raffle to win one of two, \$100 dollar gift cards. Only the names and e-mail address of those interested in participating were collected and kept separate from their responses.

Design and procedure

Participants were exposed to one of four randomly assigned speculative fiction vignettes. Table 1 depicts the experimental design: a 2 (implied protagonist race: Black or White) x 2 (story outcome valence: positive or negative) between-subjects design. Protagonist race was implied through descriptions of the protagonist's skin color, hair color and texture, and through his/her name. To maximize the possibility of aligning or identifying with the character, female participants read about a character named Tarika (Black conditions) or Teresa (White conditions). Male participants, in contrast, read about a character named Tyronne (Black conditions) or Travis (White conditions). Valence of story outcome was manipulated by varying verbiage about whether or not the protagonist escaped impending captivity.

Table 1

Proposed 2-way Factorial Design

	Implied Protagonist Race	
Story Outcome	Black (concordant with participant race)	White (discordant with participant race)
Positive		
Negative		

Those randomly assigned to the positive story outcome/ implied protagonist Black race condition read the following vignette:

The Rezinlocs have occupied planet Eporia since the inception of time. They watched and waited for the most appropriate time to warn planet earth of their arrival and purpose. Yet earthen government officials failed to take heed to their messages for cooperation. The Rezinlocs vowed to usher in a new course for human existence as retribution for disobedience once they finally arrived. That day would come when a peculiar mist began to brew in the air. Though Tarika, an earthen resident, could not see it, she could feel the energy permeating through her skin and into her bones; she shivered in the heat. She thought pulling her kinky hair out of her face would help her gain some clarity but the moment at which she was ready to gather her tight curls into her hands, she noticed hundreds of massive and wonderfully engineered vessels, hovering in the air. The Rezinlocs grounded, disembarked from their vessels and used their strength, weapons and unsightly features to force people onto the ship. While Tarika was initially shuffled in with all of the passing bodies, her brown skin, similar to those around her, cloaked her movement to the back of the crowd. Once everyone was boarded, she strategically stood close to the vessel's only entrance and exit. The vessel began its ascent before the Rezinlocs were able to completely close the hatch. Tarika saw this as an opportunity to escape and jumped for the exit. She shook free from one Rezinloc who held her by her wrist before falling through the exit onto the ground. Though she underestimated the length of the fall, she breathed a sigh of relief that planet Earth was still her home.

Those randomly assigned to the positive story outcome/ implied protagonist White race condition read the following vignette:

The Rezinlocs have occupied planet Eporia since the inception of time. They watched and waited for the most appropriate time to warn planet earth of their arrival and purpose. Yet earthen government officials failed to take heed to their messages for cooperation. The Rezinlocs vowed to usher in a new course for human existence as retribution for disobedience once they finally arrived. That day would come when a peculiar mist began to brew in the air. Though Teresa, an earthen resident, could not see it, she could feel the energy permeating through her skin and into her bones; she shivered in the heat. She thought pulling her silky hair out of her face would help her gain some clarity but the moment at which she was ready to gather her blonde tresses into her hands, she noticed hundreds of massive and wonderfully engineered vessels, hovering in the air. The Rezinlocs grounded, disembarked from their vessels and used their strength, weapons and unsightly features to force people onto the ship. While Teresa was initially shuffled in with all of the passing bodies, her pale skin, similar to those around her, cloaked her movement to the back of the crowd. Once everyone was boarded, she strategically stood close to the vessel's only entrance and exit. The vessel began its ascent before the Rezinlocs were able to completely close the hatch. Teresa saw this as an opportunity to escape and jumped for the exit. She shook free from one Rezinloc who held her by her wrist before falling through the exit onto the ground. Though she underestimated the length of the fall, she breathed a sigh of relief that planet Earth was still her home.

Those randomly assigned to the negative story outcome/ implied protagonist Black race condition read the following vignette:

The Rezinlocs have occupied planet Eporia since the inception of time. They watched and waited for the most appropriate time to warn planet earth of their arrival and purpose. Yet earthen government officials failed to take heed to their messages for cooperation. The Rezinlocs vowed to usher in a new course for human existence as retribution for disobedience

once they finally arrived. That day would come when a peculiar mist began to brew in the air. Though Tarika, an earthen resident, could not see it, she could feel the energy permeating through her skin and into her bones; she shivered in the heat. She thought pulling her kinky hair out of her face would help her gain some clarity but the moment at which she was ready to gather her tight curls into her hands, she noticed hundreds of massive and wonderfully engineered vessels, hovering in the air. The Rezinlocs grounded, disembarked from their vessels and used their strength, weapons and unsightly features to force people onto the ship. While Tarika was initially shuffled in with all of the passing bodies, her brown skin, similar to those around her, cloaked her movement to the back of the crowd. Once everyone was boarded, she strategically stood close to the vessel's only entrance and exit. The vessel began its ascent before the Rezinlocs were able to completely close the hatch. Tarika saw this as an opportunity to escape and jumped for the exit. The Rezinlocs acted swiftly and seized her before she made it to the exit, placed her in isolation for disobedience and used her as an example to prevent others from acting similarly. Tarika, devastated, finally conceded planet Eporia would be her new home.

Those randomly assigned to the negative story outcome/ implied protagonist White race condition read the following vignette:

The Rezinlocs have occupied planet Eporia since the inception of time. They watched and waited for the most appropriate time to warn planet earth of their arrival and purpose. Yet earthen government officials failed to take heed to their messages for cooperation. The Rezinlocs vowed to usher in a new course for human existence as retribution for disobedience once they finally arrived. That day would come when a peculiar mist began to brew in the air. Though Teresa, an earthen resident, could not see it, she could feel the energy permeating through her skin and into her bones; she shivered in the heat. She thought pulling her silky hair

out of her face would help her gain some clarity but the moment at which she was ready to gather her blonde tresses into her hands, she noticed hundreds of massive and wonderfully engineered vessels, hovering in the air. The Rezinlocs grounded, disembarked from their vessels and used their strength, weapons and unsightly features to force people onto the ship. While Teresa was initially shuffled in with all of the passing bodies, her pale skin, similar to those around her, cloaked her movement to the back of the crowd. Once everyone was boarded, she strategically stood close to the vessel's only entrance and exit. The vessel began its ascent before the Rezinlocs were able to completely close the hatch. Teresa saw this as an opportunity to escape and jumped for the exit. The Rezinlocs acted swiftly and seized her before she made it to the exit, placed her in isolation for disobedience and used her as an example to prevent others from acting similarly. Teresa, devastated, finally conceded planet Eporia would be her new home.

After exposure to the vignette, participants completed measures designed to assess demographic characteristics (age and identified gender, race and ethnicity) and perceptions of a) the protagonist, b) themselves in the present, and c) themselves in the future. Measures are described in turn below.

Ratings of the protagonist. Based on a modification of Campbell and Fehr (1990), participants were asked to rate the protagonist with respect to eighteen dimensions using a semantic-differential format. Dimensions such as unintelligent/ intelligent, independent/ dependent, happy/ unhappy, and unassertive/ assertive were rated on a 1-7 scale. Individual items were reverse-scored if appropriate and summed; resultant scores can range from 18 to 126 with higher values indicative of greater positivity.

Ratings of self. Two additional sets of ratings were made using the modified semantic differential measure described above: one with respect to oneself in the present and a second with respect to oneself in the future.

Possible selves. Based on an open-ended measure described in several publications by Oyserman (e.g., Oyserman et al., 1995; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993), participants were asked to identify their hoped-for and feared possible selves. Instructions for the former were, “Who will you be next year? Each of us has some image or picture of what we will be like in the future. Think about next year. Imagine what you’ll be like, and what you’ll be doing.” Instructions for the latter were, “In addition to expectations and expected goals, we all have images or pictures of what we don’t want to be like; what we don’t want to do or want to avoid being. Think a minute about ways you would not like to be next year, things you are concerned about or want to avoid being like.” Per Oyserman (2004), responses for hoped-for possible selves were coded as fitting one of six categorical domains: achievement, interpersonal relationships, personality traits, physical/ health-related, material/ lifestyle, or negative. The same was true for feared selves with one exception. The negative category (any negative reference) was replaced with non-normative/ risky behaviors.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 23.0. Descriptive statistics were employed to characterize the sample. Inferential statistics (a 2-way Analysis of Variance) afforded examination of ratings of the protagonist, self in the present, and self in the future as a function of implied protagonist race and story outcome valence (three separate ANOVAs).

Results

Sample Characteristics

Table 2 lists demographic characteristics of the sample (n = 48). Respondents were, on average, 22 years old. Fifty-eight percent self-identified as women, a value commensurate with general population data for degree-granting institutions in recent years (FFF: Women’s History Month). The majority, in addition (85%), were undergraduate students.

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

N	48
Age, M (SD); range	21.9 (3.8); 17-32
Gender identification, n (%)	
Woman	28 (58.3)
Man	20 (41.7)
Racial identification, %	
Black	27 (56.2)
African American	10 (20.8)
African	11 (22.9)
Student standing, %	
Undergraduate	41 (85.4)
Graduate	7 (14.6)

Ratings of the Protagonist

A 2 (implied protagonist race: Black or White) x 2 (story outcome valence: positive or negative)

ANOVA conducted on ratings of the protagonist yielded no main or interactive effects, p values > .05. Mean ratings are nonetheless provided for descriptive purposes in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Mean Ratings of the Protagonist as a function of Protagonist Race and Story Outcome

Implied protagonist race	Story outcome	
	Positive	Negative
Black	85.82 (16.05) n = 17	86.50 (12.11) n = 14
White	87.73 (18.16) n = 11	73.00 (19.83) n = 6

Ratings of Self in the Present

A 2 (implied protagonist race: Black or White) x 2 (story outcome valence: positive or negative) ANOVA conducted on ratings of self in the present yielded no main effect of race, $F(1,$

46) = 0.17, $p = .686$, nor a main effect of story outcome, $F(1, 46) = 0.03$, $p = .860$. The analysis did, however, yield a significant story outcome x protagonist race interaction, $F(1, 46) = 5.16$, $p = .028$ (see Figure 2). When the story outcome was positive, ratings of self in the present were more positive when the protagonist was White versus Black ($p = .029$). When the story outcome was negative, in contrast, ratings of self in the present didn't differ as a function of implied protagonist race ($p > .05$).

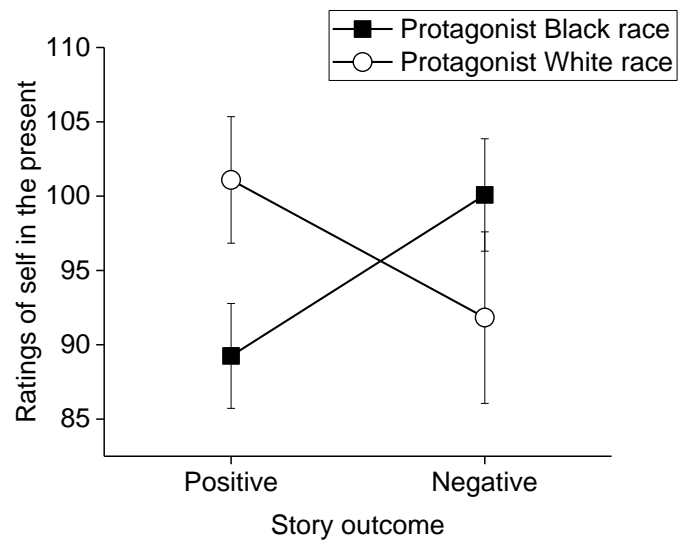


Figure 2. Mean ratings of self in the present as a function of implied protagonist race and story outcome.

Ratings of Self in the Future

A 2 (implied protagonist race: Black or White) x 2 (story outcome valence: positive or negative) ANOVA conducted on ratings of self in the future yielded no main effect of race, $F(1, 46) = 1.13$, $p = .294$ ($M_s = 107.34$ for the Black protagonist and 102.15 for the White protagonist), nor a main effect of story outcome, $F(1, 46) = 1.79$, $p = .188$ ($M_s = 108.02$ for the positive outcome and 101.47 for the negative outcome). The analysis did, however, yield a significant story outcome x protagonist race interaction. Figure 3 displays the nature of this interaction. When the story outcome was negative, ratings of self in the future were more positive when the protagonist was Black versus

White ($p = .036$). When the story outcome was positive, in contrast, ratings of self in the future didn't differ as a function of implied protagonist race ($p > .05$).

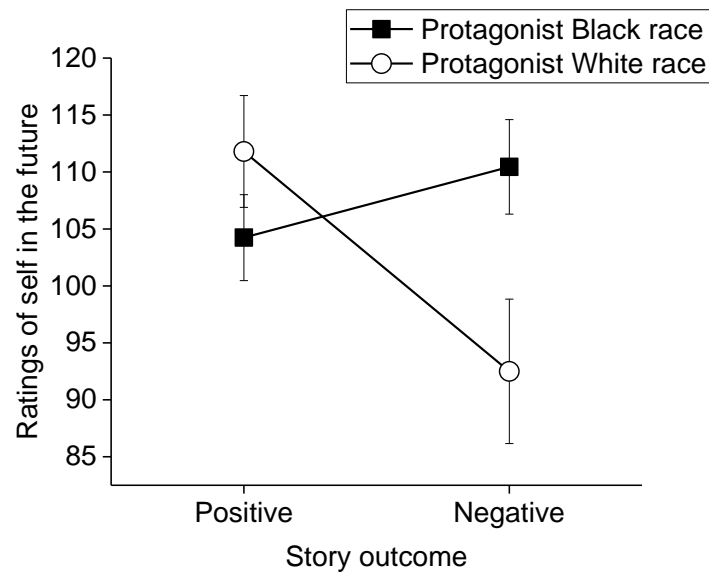


Figure 3. Mean ratings of self in the future as a function of implied protagonist race and story outcome

Possible and Feared Selves

As stated previously, the third aim of the study was to explore the possible and feared selves of Black college students. Tables 4 and 5 display the mean number of times possible and feared selves were mentioned, respectively. The most frequently mentioned possible selves were coded as fitting achievement and personality trait domains. Examples included *being a student with high grades* and *getting into my major* (achievement), and *being more independent and responsible* (personality). These domains also characterized the most frequently mentioned feared selves. Examples included *becoming depressed and miserable* (personality) and *failing* (achievement).

Table 4

Mean Number of Possible Self Mentions by Domain

Domain	M (SD)
Achievement	1.70 (0.85)
Personality Traits	1.57 (1.03)
Material/ Lifestyle	1.13 (0.35)
Physical/ Health Related	1.11 (0.33)
Interpersonal Relationships	1.10 (0.32)

Table 5

Mean Number of Feared Self Mentions by Domain

Domain	M (SD)
Personality Traits	1.44 (0.64)
Achievement	1.32 (0.55)
Physical/ Health Related	1.23 (0.44)
Material/ Lifestyle	1.20 (0.45)
Interpersonal Relationships	1.00 (0.00)

Discussion

This study was unique in that it used speculative fiction as a way to analyze self-perception and possible selves of Black college students, in an effort contribute to the social work knowledge base. Keeping in mind the historical ways in which medical research has been risky and painful (Grady, 2007) and social research has been deficits-based toward Black communities, research investigations aimed at centering and empowering these communities are needed. For example, the vignettes created especially for this study not only centered Black characters but were written in a way that “called in” oppressive histories. Afrofuturists have likened the popular trope of human abduction by aliens in traditional science fiction to the abduction of Africans by Europeans during the slave trade (Esteve, 2016). This is precisely why the alien species in the vignette “Rezinloc” is a near anagram of “Colonizer” and why their origin, planet “Eporia” is a near homonym of Europe.

Aim 1. To explore the feasibility of the study's vignette methodology.

There were several factors that may have played a positive role in the achievement of aim 1, particularly in participant recruitment. A total of 48 Black college students participated, of which more than half identified as women and had undergraduate student standing at the time the survey was administered. Given the principles of collectivism and interdependence found so very often in Black communities especially among students at predominately White institutions, (Carson, 2008) student leaders and the general membership of the organizations they represented were genuinely curious and eager to assist in providing data.

Because ratings of the protagonist did not differ by story outcome or protagonist race, we do not have a true check on the manipulation. Ratings of self, however, did differ as a function of these variables, not independently but interactively. Main or interactive effects of the independent variables on ratings of the protagonist would have aided our interpretation of the aforementioned interactive effects on self-perception. We do not know, then, if effects of the independent variables on self-perception were due to perceptions of the protagonist.

Aim 2. To examine the effects of the independent variable (implied protagonist race and story outcome) on the dependent variables (self-perception in the present and future).

A 2 (implied protagonist race: Black or White) x 2 (story outcome valence: positive or negative) ANOVA was the primary test conducted on ratings of self in the present and future. Results for both analyses revealed no main effects of protagonist race or story outcome. There were, however, interactive effects. (1) When the story outcome was positive, ratings of self in the present were more positive when the protagonist was White versus Black. When the story outcome was negative, in contrast, ratings of self in the present didn't differ as a function of protagonist race. (2) When the story outcome was negative, ratings of self in the future were more positive when the protagonist was Black versus White. When the story outcome was positive, in contrast, ratings of

self in the future didn't differ as a function of protagonist race. While these interactions were statistically significant, interpretations should be made with great caution given the varied cell sizes and, in particular, the small sample size for the White/ negative outcome cell. In what follows, we explore these results in the context of current literature.

When the story outcome was negative, participants rated their future selves more positively if the protagonist was Black versus White. This finding can potentially be understood in terms of resilience. Resilience is more than just persisting through adversity; it is characterized by a notion of “bouncing back” and the ability to “repair oneself after hardship” (McGee, 2009, p. 39). Additionally, a recent article describing the alarming rates of anxiety, stress, and depression among Black college students at predominantly White institutions theorized that these students rely on “grit” to develop and maintain characteristics that will help them succeed despite difficult external circumstances (Brasher, 2015). Despite efforts to avoid being kidnapped and ultimately failing, perhaps the participants in this study viewed the character exemplifying resilience and grit in the same ways they do at school and in other contexts.

When the story outcome was positive, participants rated their present selves more positively when the protagonist was White versus Black. Black college students may have felt disconnected from the Black character because they do not typically find aspects of themselves in speculative and science fiction in visual media or literature. That disconnection may have occurred as a result of limited examples of successful Black creators of science fiction literature (Butler, 2005) in comparison to White authors. In addition, Black characters that are traditionally depicted in science fiction are often stereotyped into being villainous or morally inferior and needing to be defeated by the greater race (Yaszek, 2006).

Aim 3. Explore the possible and feared selves reported by Black college students.

Descriptive data on the number of times possible and feared selves domains were mentioned revealed that the Black college students in this study frequently spoke to personality trait and achievement related domains.

Limitations

There are several limitations associated with the present study. One, the sample size was quite small. Recruitment was challenging given the small number of Black college students at the University of Washington, a predominantly White institution. In the fall of 2015, the campus was home to only 1,452 Black students across undergraduate, graduate and professional degree programs of all disciplines (Kim & Arquiza, 2016). Given this, we turned to on-line recruitment methods which presented challenges of its own. Many Facebook groups only feature posts made from their own account. Posts made by individuals are set to either be displayed in a small corner of the page or are only viewable by the owners and administrators of the page. Essentially, posts asking for participation made to the 9 different Facebook pages may or may not have been seen publically by visitors. Two, given the small sample and recruitment catchment area, the findings are not generalizable to other Black young adults in the United States or elsewhere. Replication with a larger and more heterogeneous sample is suggested. Three, the in-person administration was conducted not in a laboratory-based setting but instead in the context of a Black student group meeting designed for fellowship and thus perhaps not conducive to paying close attention to the vignette and questionnaire. Four, participants may not have aligned with the protagonist as intended given the brevity of the vignette (on average, 283 words). As mentioned from Bandura's work on modeling, the process by which behaviors are learned through text is essentially the same but it is also noted that various forms of modeling are not equally effective (Bandura, 1971). This might be due to the fact that some messages are not as easily conveyed through text and for some may not

command full attention (Bandura, 1971). Five, due to investigator error, the number of respondents in each cell was uneven. A typographical error was identified in the vignettes in which the White characters had brown skin. The error was not realized until after several surveys had already been administered. Data collected prior to identifying the error were excluded from analyses. Again, since the cell sizes were uneven and the number of participants responding to the White character that had the negative outcome was significantly lower, it is important to take caution in analyzing the results in which there was an interaction of protagonist race and story outcome.

Implications for Social Work

Harkening back to Bent-Goodley's call for social workers to lead the charge against injustices that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, the conceptual frameworks and approaches used in this study might be the catalyst needed to address those very issues in new and creative ways. Additionally, Bent-Goodley stressed the importance of social work practitioners responding to these injustices at multiple levels (Bent-Goodley, 2014). As such, implications are drawn from both micro, mezzo and macro levels of social work practice.

Micro level practice: culturally responsive super hero therapy. Though touted as a newer approach (Suskind, 2014), early psychotherapists have noticed the benefits of using superhero themes in their work since 1938, not surprisingly just three years after the introduction of Superman (Rubin, 2012). It was noted that largely due to the genre's popular trope of "good" defeating "evil" and overcoming adverse obstacles, superhero themes encouraged emotion regulation and increased self-esteem in children (Rubin, 2012). Presently, Superhero Therapy refers to using characters from fantastical genres, comics, science fiction, fantasy and horror, in order to promote rehabilitation and assist clients in processing their own circumstances and emotions all within evidence-based practices (Scarlett, 2015). Unlike the earlier, perfect and infallible superheroes of the 1930s (Rubin, 2012), today's superheroes struggle with grief, loss and mental

illness (Bray, 2014). Afrofuturistic superheroes and protagonists are modern in that they too struggle with those same real and intriguing human circumstances (Rubin, 2012) but with race, power and oppression which presents its own set of unique complexities (Bould, 2007). Superhero therapy might ignite shift and persist strategies within the client if strong connections are drawn from the client to the ways their favorite superheroes practice resilience and overcome adversity. Clinicians could help clients locate tangible examples of resilience (the Hulk managing anger) as opposed to unrealistic examples (the Hulk scaling buildings) that shape the superhero as legitimate role models. But, if images and stories of popular superheroes, who are often White and male, are the ones being used in a clinical setting, it is important to recognize that they perpetuate ideas of White dominance and Black internalized inferiority (Nama, 2011), all of which are counterproductive therapeutic outcomes. This research might encourage clinical social workers to build upon the current discourse around superhero therapy by encouraging cultural humility and continuously analyzing power and privilege in micro level practice.

Mezzo level practice: social work education. For nearly 30 years, case studies have been an important method by which concepts and theories are taught in a wide range of disciplines (Darling-Hammond, 2002). Case studies are stories that pose a problem needing to be analyzed, discussed and solved by students (Teaching with Case Studies, 1994). Unlike traditional methods of teaching where professors center themselves as the supreme body of knowledge that they impart upon passive but eager students, the case method allows students to work through the material in collaborative ways, apply theories to nuanced and complicated scenarios and think critically about the situation with the assistance of the professor (Golich, 2000). In fact, Schulman states that the case method of teaching is the most effective way of connecting theory and practice in professions that are essentially a “body of cases linked loosely by working principles” (Darling-Hammond, 2002). While some professors opt to use case studies from textbooks and other sources, it is not

uncommon that professors write their own cases (Case Studies). In looking at the innovative ways this research can be manifest beyond clinical practice, with a few relevant modifications, the vignettes in this study could serve as a case study and valuable teaching tool in social work classrooms. A science fiction case study, written in the future, would require students to think critically about the symbolism and imagery embedded in the text and how that would impact possible interventions and solutions.

Macro level practice: social change. In 2015, coeditors Adrienne Brown and Walidah Imarisha released an anthology of science fiction stories entitled *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories From Social Movements*. Written largely by activists and organizers of color, these stories depict magical and fantastical worlds that encourage readers to imagine new ways of existing without oppression (Octavia's Brood). Brown and Imarisha contend that science fiction is a method that allows individuals and communities to envision worlds and ways of being that do not yet exist. Another obvious implication of macro level social work is to advocate for more images of Black role models in science fiction and in general literature and media.

Directions for Future Research

This research is both innovative and creative and has the potential for emerging and groundbreaking implications both clinically and in practice with social work students. In future studies, the subject's interaction with the character should be multifaceted and multi-dimensional. Including in the experiment other forms of media or having participants write their own self-affirming stories, which has been proven to increase academic performance (Cohen, 2006), might strengthen the relationship between the subject and the character. Or having participants write stories about themselves in the future might aid in creating a possible self-schema. Participants would be challenged since writing about the future requires speculation and engaging in logic (if this, then that) and cognitive thinking (Peary, 2012). Additionally, expanding the subject pool to White

college students would add another layer to the study. Perhaps stronger support about the existence of the racial empathy gap can be made if results between Black and White participants could be compared. Increasing the sample size to adolescents and even aging older adults might also give insight into what possible futures are most salient for these groups and how they view their demographic as stakeholders in the future. Lastly, degree of shift and persist could be used as a moderator of the effects of story outcome and protagonist race on self-perception. One way to measure this would be to incorporate the shift and persist tool developed by Chen into future studies. This 16-item measure was developed based on similar tools that assess future expectations and life purpose with higher numbers indicating greater shifting and persisting (Chen, 2015).

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Appendix A

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON CONSENT FORM

Afrofuturism as Applied to Self-perception: An Experimental Vignette Study

Lead Researchers: Kayla Huddleston, MSW Candidate 2016, huddleup@uw.edu, 425.591.3687

Faculty Advisor: Shelby Langer, Research Associate Professor, School of Social Work, shelby11@uw.edu, 206.221.7879

RESEARCHERS' STATEMENT

We are asking you to be in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what we would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When we have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." We will give you a copy of this form for your records.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The primary aim of this study is to examine how certain elements in science fiction writing can impact the ways in which Black College Students perceive the character and themselves in the future.

STUDY PROCEDURES

You are being asked to participate in this study because we are interested in the responses of Black college students. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to:

- Read one of four randomly assigned science fiction vignettes
- Answer demographic questions about your age and identified gender, race and ethnicity
- Rate the main character in the vignette with respect to several personality characteristics
- Rate yourself with respect to several personality characteristics
 - How you see yourself now, in the present
 - How you see yourself in the future, one year
- Answer open-ended questions about how you see yourself in the future

Reading the vignette and answering the questions is expected to take approximately 10 minutes.

You may refuse to answer any item at any point. You may also choose to stop participation entirely at any point. Just let the researcher know.

RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT

No physical risks are expected to result from participating in this study. Anticipated psychological risks are mild. The vignette you read could affect your mood (as any fiction reading might do), as could thinking about how you see yourself now and in the future. Any mood changes, however, are expected to be short-term. If you feel that you need to speak to someone as a result of your participation in the study, please contact the UW Counseling Center. They provide free counseling services to students and can be reached at 206.543.1240.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

You personally are not expected to benefit from participation in the study. However, information gained from this study may help us find ways to use science fiction in social science research and practice in the future.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF RESEARCH INFORMATION

Your responses to the survey will be kept confidential and coded only with a study number, not your name or any other personally identifying information. If you sign this consent form, it will be kept separately from your survey responses.

OTHER INFORMATION

If you choose, you may enter a raffle for one of two \$100 gift cards for the University of Washington book store (as a thank you for participating). An individual unrelated to the study will randomly select two names. The winners will be notified via email. For this reason, if you choose to enter the raffle, we will need your email address. Like your name, this information will be kept separate from your survey responses.

You may refuse to participate and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

SUBJECT'S STATEMENT

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later about the research, or if I have been harmed by participating in this study, I can contact one of the researchers listed on the first page of this consent form. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call the Human Subjects Division at 206.543.0098. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

Printed name of subject

Signature of subject

Date

Raffle

By checking this box you are entering into a raffle drawing for one of two \$100 gift cards for the UW book store. Each participant has an equal chance of winning one gift card. To complete your entry, please provide your email address below. We will contact both winners via email.

E-mail address

Appendix B

SURVEY

1. What is your age? _____

2. How would you describe your gender?

3. How would you describe your ethnicity/ race?

4. Are you an undergraduate student or a graduate student at UW?

____ Undergraduate student

____ Graduate Student

5. How often do you read science fiction? (Please check one response below).

____ Never

____ Rarely

____ Sometimes

____ Always

Please rate each dimension below with respect to the **MAIN CHARACTER IN THE VIGNETTE YOU JUST READ**. Circle the number corresponding to your answer choice in each row.

Unintelligent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Intelligent
Appealing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unappealing
Insecure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Confident
Nervous	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Calm
Courageous	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Meek
Fearful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Fearless
Independent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Dependent
Cold	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Warm
Happy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unhappy
Timid	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Bold
Careful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Careless
Unassertive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Assertive
Heroic	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Cowardly
Unadaptable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Adaptable
Poised	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Awkward
Weak	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strong
Likeable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unlikeable
Uninspiring	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Inspiring

Please rate each dimension below with respect to **YOURSELF IN THE PRESENT**. Circle the number corresponding to your answer choice in each row.

Unintelligent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Intelligent
Appealing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unappealing
Insecure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Confident
Nervous	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Calm
Courageous	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Meek
Fearful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Fearless
Independent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Dependent
Cold	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Warm
Happy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unhappy
Timid	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Bold
Careful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Careless
Unassertive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Assertive
Heroic	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Cowardly
Unadaptable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Adaptable
Poised	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Awkward
Weak	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strong
Likeable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unlikeable
Uninspiring	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Inspiring

Please rate each dimension below with respect to **YOURSELF IN ONE YEAR**. Circle the number corresponding to your answer choice in each row.

Unintelligent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Intelligent
Appealing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unappealing
Insecure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Confident
Nervous	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Calm
Courageous	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Meek
Fearful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Fearless
Independent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Dependent
Cold	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Warm
Happy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unhappy
Timid	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Bold
Careful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Careless
Unassertive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Assertive
Heroic	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Cowardly
Unadaptable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Adaptable
Poised	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Awkward
Weak	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strong
Likeable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unlikeable
Uninspiring	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Inspiring

POSSIBLE SELVES

Who will you be next year? Each of us has some image or picture of what we will be like and what we want to avoid being like in the future. Think about next year; imagine what you'll be like, and what you'll be doing.

- In the left column below, write what you expect you will be like and what you expect to be doing next year.
- In the space next to each expected goal, mark NO if you are not currently working on that goal or doing something about that expectation or mark YES if you are currently doing something to get to that expectation or goal.
- For each expected goal that you marked YES, use the space in the right column to write what you are doing this year to attain that goal.

Next year, I expect to be:	Am I am doing something to be that way?		If YES, what I am doing now to be that way next year:
	NO	YES	
(1)			
(2)			
(3)			
(4)			

FEARED SELVES

In addition to expectations and expected goals, we all have images or pictures of what we *don't* want to be like; what we don't want to do or want to avoid being. First, think a minute about ways you would **not** like to be next year, *things you are concerned about or want to avoid being like*.

- Write those concerns or selves to-be-avoided in the left column below.
- In the space next to each concern or to-be-avoided self, mark NO if you are not currently working on avoiding that concern or to-be-avoided self or mark YES if you are currently doing something so this will not happen next year.
- For each concern or to-be-avoided self that you marked YES, use the space in the right column to write what you are doing this year to reduce the chances that this will describe you next year.

Next year, I want to avoid:	Am I doing something to avoid this?		If YES, what I am doing now to avoid being that way next year:
	NO	YES	
(1)			
(2)			
(3)			
(4)			

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY!