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Black Minds Matter: A Phenomenological Inquiry Examining the Prevalence of Racial Trauma Among Black Doctoral Students

Abstract

Systemic and institutionalized racism is endemic to life in the United States and contributes to the daily marginalization of Black people. While the negative psychological and physiological effects of racism have been well-documented, the notion that racism can be experienced as a trauma is a newer theory. Racial trauma has been understudied and underappreciated, though it is a theory that clinicians should incorporate when working with Black clients and other clients of color. Exploring the ways in which Black doctoral students attending a predominantly White institution (PWI) have experienced racism is an essential contribution to the existing racial trauma literature. The current research also assists in identifying ways clinicians across the country can provide adequate and ethical care for Black clients.

The purpose of this study was to explore how Black doctoral students experienced racism in their program, the subsequent impact to their psychological wellbeing, and how they cope and/or utilize protective factors against such racism in order to complete their degrees. Using a phenomenological approach to qualitative research and the framework of Critical Race Theory, data was gathered from four Black doctoral students through two, 90-minute, semi-structured interviews both in-person and via Skype. Through the use of horizontalization, coding and literature, five themes emerged from the analysis: 1) Racial socialization, 2) Black Identity Development, 3) Experiences of Racism, 4) Impact of Racism, and 5) Coping and Protective Factors. First, the results of this study supported the existing literature about the ways in which racism has negative mental and physical health effects for Black people. Second, the results highlight the importance of Black American's ability to identify racist acts, how racism can impact their mental well-being, and the various coping methods they may adopt to protect themselves from further psychological harm. Finally, the study underscores the need for practicing clinicians and training programs to put more time and energy into properly attending to the psychological trauma of racism in the course of their work with Black clients and clients of color.

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A Phenomenological Inquiry Examining the Prevalence of Racial Trauma Among Black
Doctoral Students

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Jazmyne Peters

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The disenfranchisement and marginalization of Black bodies is a phenomenon that characterizes the history of the United States. Beginning with slavery, leading into Jim Crow and persisting today, racism is a fundamental aspect of the Black experience that impacts mental health (Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2011), and the overall quality of life for Black people in this country. Pre-Civil Rights America was characterized by overt and legal racism. The implementation of Jim Crow laws following the *Plessy v Ferguson* (1896) “separate but equal” clause included segregation of Black and White facilities, the right to deny services to Blacks, and a full denial of voting rights, overtly conveying the message that Blacks were neither equal nor afforded the same opportunities as their White counterparts (Tischauer, 2012).

The Civil Rights Movement began when Black people started to challenge their position in society; and through various means such as protests and public rhetoric, forced the government to acknowledge segregative and racist practices as inhumane (Tischauer, 2012). Thus, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted to outlaw such treatment and ensure constitutional rights for Black Americans as well as other minoritized groups (Costly, n.d.). However, there was a strong resistance to the idea of Black as equal, and several institutions either did not adhere to the new legislation or found loopholes to ensure that White spaces remained White. This resistance transformed

blatant racist tactics of exclusion to that of subtler discriminatory practices within several institutions including education, housing and employment (The Oppression of Black People, 2008). The continuation of these practices was eventually countered by the enforcement of the Civil Rights Act legislation; and followed with the creation of policies such as *affirmative action*, to ensure the “fair” treatment of Black individuals and other marginalized groups (Tischauer, 2012).

The 2008 election of Barack Obama marked the first time in this country’s history where a Black man became President of the United States. While monumental, his election ushered in whispers of a post-racial society (Reed, 2010); a society in which race no longer mattered and did not influence the prosperity of one race, or the struggles of another. The notion that everyone was on an “equal playing field” reinforced the myth of meritocracy and sparked conversation about how racism was eradicated following the Civil Rights movement, and President Obama was proof (Reed, 2010).

The proposition of a post-racial society blatantly ignores the influences of systemic and institutionalized racism that still plagues people of color (POC), specifically the Black community (Harris & Lieberman, 2015). However, in the past several years, multiple incidents involving the slayings of Black individuals – many of which have been video recorded and uploaded to social media sites – have been the topic of controversial media coverage and aroused emotionally charged discussions about racism, whether or not it exists, and how it may or may not be the cause of Black deaths (Hadden, Tolliver, Snowden & Brown-Manning, 2016). This controversy began with the murder of unarmed Black teenager, Trayvon Martin, at the hands of Neighborhood Watch “vigilante” George Zimmerman in 2012, which resulted in Zimmerman’s acquittal (Thomas & Blackmon,

2015). It has continued with the killing of unarmed Blacks across the country at the hands of White individuals, often police officers, who fail to be convicted of – or even charged with – the murders of Black bodies (Lowery, 2016).

The 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump was followed by the resurgence of overt racism which has been normalized through blatant racism, misogyny, xenophobia, islamophobia, homophobia, and transphobia displayed in his campaign rhetoric; and continued through his policies and commentary since his inauguration. Although racism has always been alive and well (Reed, 2010) and studied by many scholars, these events rebirthed the public conversation surrounding racism and how it is felt by POC.

Authors Positionality

As a Black woman studying counseling psychology, the topic of race, racism and mental health is very close to me. I have experienced my share of racism both overt (e.g. being called a “nigger”) and covert (e.g. White people assuming I have no educational background because of my race), and I have felt the impacts of these experiences. When these events occur, an emotional trigger immediately follows, and within seconds I am in a position where I must respond to the aggressor. Within seconds I must appraise what happened, whether or not it was racially motivated (specifically in the context of covert racism), how I feel about the aggressor, what I will say or do following the event, and what the consequences of my response will be. I am often left to feel overwhelmed, emotionally harmed, unsure of what to do, and/or questioning if my actions were appropriate to the situation and true to who I am (i.e. if I ignore a racist comment/action, am I going to feel like I did not stand up for myself later?).

In addition to carrying the burden of responding to a racist situation that I did not provoke or deserve, there is the added pressure of feeling I have to justify my feelings and/or responses about the situation to White people. Several times I have experienced discriminatory acts that were ambiguous and undetectable to my White counterparts, and I can distinctly recall the frustration and invalidation felt when my concerns were minimized, and/or other rationales were used to make sense of what happened to me. In the past, this process has resulted in me questioning myself and the situation (was it really racism, or am I being overly sensitive?), feeling angry at others for not identifying and acknowledging the situation as racist, feeling depressed, anxious, and – at times – defeated. I have experienced racism in ways that have caused me to have trouble focusing due to my preoccupation with the event, and even resulted in poor academic work and achievement because I have felt unable to attend to simple tasks. Through conversations and interactions with several other people of color, specifically Black individuals, I found that I am not alone in feeling frustrated and resentful of the responsibility we hold when it comes to experiencing racism, having to respond to it, having to justify it and the impact it has on our emotional well-being.

Shared feelings of anxiety, low self-worth, depression, and self-blame among fellow POC was my initial motivation in studying the topic of racial trauma, and how it affects one's mental health and quality of life. I entered into this program in order to gain the tools and skills necessary to provide care to and be an advocate for mental health among Black individuals. This came after witnessing a myriad of problems in the Black community that were direct results of mental and emotional health concerns going unaddressed and untreated. Through administering therapy to both White people and

POC, I began to notice that there are differences in the way that POC internalize messages surrounding race and culture. These messages have a significant impact on mental health; and due to cultural differences and manifestations of different experiences and traumas, they often changed the ways in which clients of color presented with issues such as depression, anxiety, and trauma. This realization directed my interests to the topic of racial trauma and the implications of clinicians understanding this phenomenon.

Recognizing that Black and other POC may be experiencing racism as a trauma, I began to take note of different case presentations and client conceptualizations made by peers in various classes and group supervisions. I quickly became aware that many of my peers were using stigmatizing diagnoses with their clients of color (i.e. personality disorders, schizophrenia, bipolar, etc.) without thoroughly evaluating the role of culture, race and racism. What was even more alarming about these diagnoses, was that my peers often noted that their clients of color “did not quite fit criteria for ___ diagnosis” or “do not present as one with ___ would typically present;” indicating that their client may not be suffering from the diagnosis they received. After sitting through several of these discussions and feeling strongly about the inaccuracy of their assessment and disregard for culture, I began to speak up and emphasize that the role of culture need be taken seriously and expressed my concern about unnecessarily pathologizing clients. Unfortunately, this was met with invalidation, and half-hearted promises to “look into [culture] in the future.” The few times I was able to follow up with my peers about the clients I expressed concern about, the diagnosis never changed, and the evaluation of culture was minimal at best.

Racial trauma has not been identified by the American Psychiatric Association or American Psychological Association as a formal diagnosis, and I find myself pushing against the diagnoses POC receive and the need for racial trauma to be formally recognized as a diagnosis. It is my hope that this dissertation contributes to the growing literature about the effects of racism and how it can be experienced as trauma. Additionally, I highlight the necessity of clinicians to diversify their knowledge and ability to identify how the experience of racism can change the way POC present in clinical settings.

Key Terminology

In order to further explore racism and its impact on the Black community, several terms must be defined. These terms include race and ethnicity, racism (institutionalized, systemic, and individualized), White supremacy and White privilege. In the following sections I will use the aforementioned terminology to assist in exploring a broader overview of how racism affects Black people in different facets of society, giving specific attention to the two areas that have impacted Black Americans the most: the criminal justice system and education. These terms are also available in Appendix A.

Ethnicity and race are frequently used interchangeably although they are not the same. Kinloch's (1974) definition of race is: *a social rather than biological construct, with perceived physical differences between racial groups that inform the way we think, behave, and react toward each other*. This is not to be confused with ethnicity, which is differentiated as not having any biological bearing, and refers to *clusters of people who share common cultural traits such as language, geographic location, values, beliefs, traditions, food, religion, etc.* (Jones, 1997). The most note-worthy differentiation

between the two terms is that race refers to physical features of difference that cannot be changed, and it is socialized as a hierarchy; ethnicity/culture falls into a more malleable category, where one's attitudes and beliefs can change, and never should include physical features (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Though the Kinloch reference is dated, the relevancy of this definition across generations is foundational, and still applies to what is seen today.

Racism is defined as the experience of oppressive acts that are either personal or systemic and include segregation or aggression due to the perception of racial differences (Lemburger & Lemburger-Truelove, 2016). To add to this, Oliver (2001) says that this discriminatory treatment results in the systematic deprivation of individual's equal access to opportunity. Randall (2009) states that racism is either overt or covert and can take three different forms: Individual, institutional, and systemic. Individual racism is defined as "overt acts by individuals that cause death, injury, destruction of property, or denial of services or opportunity". Institutional racism is defined as "more subtle but no less destructive. Institutional racism involves policies, practices, and procedures of institutions that have a disproportionately negative effect on racial minorities' access to – and quality of – goods, services, and opportunities". And systemic racism being "the basis of individual and institutional racism; it is the value system that is embedded in a society that supports and allows discrimination" (Randall, 2009).

In order to gain an understanding of racism in the Black community, one must understand the concept of White supremacy. Alexander (2010) states that White supremacy is the belief that the White race is superior to the Black race and should therefore dominate society. Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas (1995) specify that

race and racism cannot be separated from the beliefs held within White Supremacy because they are evident in all aspects of society including socially, legally, and politically. White privilege is the positive consequence to Whites as a result of White Supremacy, in that they enjoy luxuries that other races do not. Though they have not earned these luxuries, they are afforded them *because* of their Whiteness. Holladay (2000) posits that:

White skin privilege is not something that white people necessarily do, create or enjoy on purpose. Unlike the more overt individual and institutional manifestations of racism... White skin privilege is a transparent preference for Whiteness that saturates our society. White skin privilege serves several functions. First, it provides White people with “perks” that we do not earn and that people of color do not enjoy. Second, it creates real advantages for us. White people are immune to a lot of challenges. Finally, White privilege shapes the world in which we live — the way that we navigate and interact with one another and with the world.

Statement of the Problem

In 2020, we see a shift in the social acceptability of racism from the Civil Rights Era to now. Instead of the blatant and overt racism, there is a subtler practice of discrimination that is deeply rooted within various institutions and systems (Alexander, 2010). New literature has explored how the impact of racism on individual POC can manifest symptoms of psychological trauma as defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders fifth edition (DSM-5)* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), in contrast to reducing racist interactions to mere “unpleasant” experiences (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005). However, there are still gaps in the literature in terms of how racial trauma manifests for POC and the way in which it affects their daily interactions within White America. This study explores the effects of racism on Black Americans, and how it can result in psychological trauma. It explores how these separate

entities come together to form racial trauma (also referred to as race-based trauma) and what has been studied in regard to how it presents in Black individuals. It will also serve as a foundation for establishing the existence of racism and White Supremacy in the United States, and the impact that these constructs have had on the mental health of members within the Black community.

Purpose of the Study

The impact of racism on Black Americans and their mental health must be more intentionally and deliberately understood. Exploring the ways in which Black doctoral students attending a predominantly White institution (PWI) have experienced racism is essential to gaining this understanding and finding ways for clinicians across the country to provide adequate care for Black clients. This study identifies the ways in which one experiences racism while attending a PWI; which includes how these experiences affect their propensity for academic success, overall mental health, and ways in which students cope with racist experiences. Accordingly, a hermeneutical phenomenological design will be employed to examine their experiences of racism and the consequences of these experiences, utilizing phenomenological interviews, while centering myself, my beliefs and my reactions in the research. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the experiences of Black doctoral students attending a PWI through a lens that considers the influences of culture and race, which has significant impacts on their mental health outcomes.

The experiences of Black doctoral students attending a PWI are highlighted because little information is known about how racist experiences may or may not manifest as trauma, what factors play a role in these experiences, and how it affects the

mental well-being of said students. Research has focused on the deleterious mental health effects of experiencing racism and discrimination among undergraduate students of color, but there are only a handful of studies that explore these effects among Black doctoral students, and little to no research relating these experiences to symptoms of trauma. The subject of “Black doctoral student” is of particular interest for this study because Black students pursuing a doctoral degree are in the process of obtaining the highest level of academic achievement, and therefore have presumably transcended years of racial discrimination in the realm of education. This research analyzes the various influences of racial trauma and provides a more complete picture of what it looks like, how it manifests within the Black community, what protective factors help to prevent the manifestation of trauma, and coping strategies that are most effective.

Research Questions

A comprehensive understanding of how racial trauma is experienced among Black students provides information that will assist in allowing counselors across the country to adequately address the needs of Black people and provide competent and holistic care for Black clients. The overarching question which guides this inquiry is *how has the experience of racism impacted the mental well-being of Black doctoral students attending a PWI?* The following sub-questions are also explored:

1. How do Black doctoral students attending a PWI describe their experiences of racism within their program and on campus?
2. How does their experience of racism in their program and on campus affect their mental well-being?
3. How does the manifestation of racism influence their perception of their ability to

succeed academically within their program?

4. What are the ways that Black doctoral students have found to cope with racialized issues that may or may not have manifested as racial trauma?

Significance of the Study

The marginalization of the Black community in the United States involves a long and complex hierarchical history with Blacks seen as an inferior group in comparison to Whites who use power and privilege in order to remain “superior.” Despite the election of former President Barack Obama, there has not been an eradication of racism, and we do not live in a post-racial or post-racist society (Harris & Lieberman, 2015).

Institutionalized racism is prevalent in all aspects of American society and continues to cause many disadvantages for Black individuals, including the status of their mental well-being. Although these disadvantages are well-documented throughout the history of this country, the idea of racism as a trauma is a newer concept that deserves more attention.

Very little research has been done in the area of racial trauma, and what has been done is primarily in the Black community (Polanco-Roman, et. al., 2016). However, racial trauma appears to have potential to be experienced by individuals from almost every minoritized, non-White, racial group. Although there is information that speaks to the symptoms of trauma that are present after being confronted with racism, there is much more work to be done in order to establish how it manifests itself among Black Americans. In addition to needing to know more about the manifestation, there is little knowledge about what coping mechanisms help to ease trauma symptoms, or what potential protective factors may prevent someone from developing symptoms of trauma (Polanco-Roman, et. al., 2016).

Racial Trauma is a complex concept to grasp, in part because the experience of racism is not an isolated event as is the case with some other trauma inducing incidents; rather, racism is visible daily and can be felt by Black Americans in every aspect of society. That is why working within the context of Critical Race Theory (explored in chapter two) in the exploration of racial trauma is an essential framework because of the understanding and assumption that race and racism are the foundation of this country and operate as such. It is necessary to see how the presentation of racism affects the onset of racial trauma. This information is essential as Black people have historically been manipulated and abused by counseling professionals in the past; whether that be as a result of their racialized experiences being minimized, or their reactions to racism being pathologized, leading to an inaccurate diagnosis and ineffective treatment plan. In order to reduce the occurrence of misdiagnosing and overpathologizing Black individuals, there must be an understanding of exactly how racism and/or racial trauma can influence the way in which Black people perceive and navigate their world. This will contribute to the understanding of Black mental health and that racism can be experienced as a trauma, meaning that the symptomology of Black clients will look different than what clinicians are trained to identify.

Summary

In this chapter, I have provided a brief background of the history of racism within the Black community as it relates to how Black people have been marginalized. I took this information to begin talking about the concept of racial trauma, and how issues and experiences of racism have been theorized to manifest as a trauma within Black communities. I have provided a description of my own positionality in order to be

transparent in displaying my biases and connectedness to this specific topic. I centralized these issues as they relate to the mental health of Black individuals, provided the purpose of the study as well as delineated the research questions to be explored. Finally, I provided the significance of the study in order to articulate the importance and necessity of this topic in exploring the racialized experiences of Black students attending a PWI, and the subsequent mental health implications.

In the following chapter, I will review the literature of Critical Race Theory and how this framework is foundational for this study. I will also review the literature on systemic and institutionalized racism in the Black community, stress, race-related stress, trauma, racial trauma, and Black experiences at PWI's.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following sections, I will explore several relevant aspects of the Black experience that are necessary in order to understand the marginalization of Black Americans in the U.S. Though there are numerous ways in which to approach the history of racism and discrimination in this country, I have chosen to highlight the negative effects of the criminal justice system and educational disparities for Black people, while also giving a brief overview of more general impacts of racism and discrimination. I will then explore the concept of stress, race-related stress, trauma, racial trauma, and the effects of being Black at a PWI in order to provide a comprehensive review of the existing literature and demonstrate the connection between the history of marginalization and the subsequent effects of mental health directly related to marginalization and racism. Before exploring the aforementioned concepts, it is necessary to provide an overview of the theoretical framework chosen to guide this study.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that centers race in critical analysis while challenging Whiteness and the idea of “neutral” terms such as objectivity, colorblindness, meritocracy, and equal opportunity. (Roithmayr, 1999; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT unapologetically names racism where it is present and works to deconstruct race-related paradigms while also challenging prior research that

deemphasizes the importance of race. This is accomplished by demonstrating how the social construct of race affects marginalized racial groups, and the ways in which the ideals of White supremacy characterize the standards of society that exclude POC (Roithmayr, 1999; Solorzano, 1997, 1998; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Critical Race Methodology focuses on the value and legitimacy of the lived experience and perspectives of POC, and challenges the theories, texts and “re-telling” of POC’s experiences (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). In this methodology, qualitative methods such as counter-narratives, case studies, biographies, family histories and storytelling are used in order to understand and accurately analyze racial subordination (Solarzano & Yosso, 2002).

CRT is a product of both civil rights and critical thought and was developed in response to Critical Legal Studies (CLS), a legal framework in which scholars emphasized issues related to social class and law. This theory was comprised of majority White liberal scholars who demonstrated that neutral terms such as consent, duress, and liberty of contract were rooted in class-based, institutional, and political ideology (Roithmayr, 1999). Although this foundation was essential for understanding the law and how it contributes to institutional and systemic marginalization, CLS failed to make the connection between racial power and law or use formalized structures in order to address racism and was criticized for its perpetuation of “false consciousness” (Bergerson, 2003; Roithmayr, 1999). Under CLS, liberal White scholars put a focus on race-neutral terms such as “equal opportunity,” “merit,” and “equal protection,” and assumed racism to be a deviation from these terms due to irrationally using characteristics such as race to blatantly devalue and question the merit of another (Roithmayr, 1999). Through this lens,

CLS was used to eradicate legal discrimination and policies such as segregation of schools and employee discrimination; however, the use of this rhetoric neglected to recognize the perpetuation of racism through race-neutrality, and that racism was much more than blatant and willful ignorance.

CRT diverged from CLS in 1989 with originators such as Derrick Bell, Mari Matsuda, Kimberle Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado (Bergerson, 2003) in order to address the need for a more nuanced and complete explanation for social inequity, and the impact it has on people of color (Cook & Dixson, 2013). It notes that race-neutral terms are actually race-specific because they were created within the context of racial exclusion by White elites who acquired social power by excluding POC (Roithmayr, 1999). Additionally, it put more emphasis and credence to the idea that although social power and legal consciousness forces marginalized individuals to participate in their own oppression, racism and racial power held by Whites forces oppression on unwilling people as it relates to race and people of color (Roithmayr, 1999). CRT insists that racism is present, often ambiguous, and deeply ingrained in our society (Cook & Dixson, 2013), and maintains one of its most essential constructs, which is that marginalized groups are subordinate to dominant groups in terms of power and privilege (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000; Trahan Jr. & Lemberger, 2013)

Several scholars have highlighted various tenets of CRT, however there are six major tenets that encompass CRT holistically, and they are:

1. CRT recognizes racism is endemic to American life (also known as ordinariness of racism);

2. CRT challenges dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy;
3. CRT presumes that racism has contributed to group advantage and disadvantage (also known as interest convergence);
4. CRT recognizes the experiential knowledge of people of color (narrative storytelling);
5. CRT is interdisciplinary; and,
6. CRT seeks to eliminate racial oppression as a broader goal of ending all forms of oppression (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Matsuda et al., 1993).

Counter-storytelling is essential to the understanding of racial trauma and is emphasized by the use of a phenomenological method for this present study. The four purposes of counter-storytelling are: avoidance of silencing the experiences of oppressed individuals by allowing them to speak their truths while exploring evidence neglected by White America, resulting in psychic preservation; challenging White norms by viewing experiences and stories in more than one way; listening to POC and using their stories as a foundation for understanding the impacts and function of race and racism; and intentionally disrupting liberal ideology (Cook & Dixson, 2013; Bell, 1995; Bernal, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Using counter-storytelling as a methodology allows for a phenomenon to be explored and contributes to the collective experiences of the many in three ways: collecting personal stories and narratives, collecting other people's stories and narratives, and creating a composite counter-story (CCS) to emphasize the shared history and experiences of racism, discrimination, and White Supremacy (Cook & Dixson, 2013).

The CRT framework is in keeping with the topic of racial trauma in the Black community in that it not only makes the assumption but insists that racism exists on an institutional and systemic level and impacts the lives of POC. A large piece of examining racial trauma, is the understanding that White ideals are deeply rooted within our systems and institutions within the U.S. and can threaten the psychological and emotional well-being of those who do not fit White standards (Pieterse, et. al., 2011). Bell (2003) talks about the presence of a master narrative that depicts US society as fair, meritocratic, and perpetuates the idea that our society has learned from its past injustices and continues to move forward and become increasingly progressive over time. CRT's recognition and deconstruction of racism, Whiteness, and "neutrality" is essential to defying this master narrative and its attempts to erase the struggles of POC, while challenging the US to live up to its purported ideals of democracy. The theory also remains important for the understanding of how racism and discrimination can be experienced as traumatic and cannot truly be escaped or ignored by those who do not have a White identity.

The concept of covert racism, and the ability to identify racist acts that are not blatant or even intentional (Parker & Lynn, 2002) are assets of CRT's application in the exploration of racial trauma. Brown (2003) states that the race problem is hard to fully understand, and potentially impossible to rectify due to the claims of objectivity and meritocracy that mask the self-interest, power, and privilege of White people. This is important when taking into consideration that a POC often experiences ambiguous and covert racism, which can be equally – if not more – traumatic than overt racism and contribute to the presentation of trauma symptoms (Carter, 2007).

The development of CRT has always been applicable to the Black community which works in conjunction with the idea of racial trauma among the Black population. Although CRT was conceived as a movement in law, its interdisciplinary nature (Parker & Lynn, 2002) allows for a clean shift in focus from education to counseling psychology without disrupting the frameworks purpose, focus, or foundation. With that, it is possible to evaluate origins of racial trauma and specific aspects of the experiences of racism without having to compromise the importance of the roles of race, racism, and White supremacy. Counter-storytelling is an essential concept when evaluating the presence and impact of racism as a trauma, as it reinforces the idea that Black people are competent and able to communicate and explain the meaning and consequences of racism due to the fact that they are on the receiving end of an oppressive system.

Brown (2003) outlines three ways in which CRT can be used in evaluating the mental health of Blacks and other POC. The first being to study the social conditions and risk factors that may affect mental health; the second being a critique of standard mental health identifiers for psychiatric and psychological disorders; and the third and final one examining the unique effects of racism on mental health among POC. The latter is of particular use in the study of racial trauma, as the concept of experiencing racism as a trauma is unique to POC in US society and has never been formally recognized as a mental health diagnosis by either the American Psychiatric or Psychological Associations.

General Impacts of Racism

Understanding racism against Black Americans is fundamental in understanding the dynamic of this country, as it is present in every aspect of American society. Racism

comes through different channels; among those are the depiction of Blacks on television as gang members, drug dealers, single mothers, intellectually inferior to White counterparts, the over reporting of crimes committed by Blacks in the media, educational disparities, housing and employment discrimination, as well as the over-representation of Black individuals in the criminal justice system (Horton, Price & Brown, 1999; Harris & Lieberman, 2015). These factors influence the overall perception of Black people in the United States.

The media displays content that is pleasing to White Americans and has a large influence on what others believe to be true about any given topic (Horton, et. al. 1999). News and media outlets contribute to these negative perceptions by reporting a disproportionately high volume of crimes committed by Black individuals, even though the actual frequency of crime by Blacks is not much higher than any other race (Dixon, 2008). This false reporting assists in the population believing that Black people are more criminal and violent. A study done by Dixon (2008) found that when people hear about a violent crime, they are more likely to assume the suspect was a Black person even when they were not given the race of the suspect. What is portrayed on television is often the only reference White people have about Black culture; therefore, these negative images reinforce their unfavorable perception (Horton, et. al., 1999).

These perceptions influence the way Blacks are treated by White Americans and perpetuate the ideals that Black Americans are inferior and undesirable. Black people in the U.S. generally fall into the lower end of the socioeconomic status and tend to live in low-income neighborhoods (Harris & Lieberman, 2015). These neighborhoods are rarely prioritized for access to healthy food and quality education, but heavy marketing of

cheap, unhealthy fast food and alcohol helps contribute to poor health and premature deaths of those who reside in these communities. This is largely due to majority views that Black people are incapable of succeeding and not worth the resources; therefore, the low-income communities where a majority of Black people live are neglected (Harris & Lieberman, 2015).

Negative perceptions of Black Americans and subsequent poor treatment by White Americans can result in Black people internalizing feelings of inferiority and discomfort in groups of White people (Seaton & Douglass, 2014). Experiences of discrimination are also linked to feelings of depression, low levels of self-esteem, and shyness (Seaton & Douglass, 2014; Chao, et. al., 2014) and can result in self-fulfilling prophecy behavior that conforms to the messages of inferiority. In a 2013 study by Cornileus that looked at the ways Black men navigated their workspace, she found that Black men downplayed their level of intelligence so as not to intimidate their White superiors and isolated themselves from social situations out of fear of not being accepted by their White colleagues. These actions can be interpreted as a direct result of the internalization of negative messages related to what it means to “be Black,” which led to decreases in their ability to perform and compromised their chances of promotion. The phenomenon of Blacks underperforming in the presence of Whites due to racist ideals that reinforce feelings of inferiority is very common, and is felt by many Black individuals (Cornileus, 2013).

The Criminal Justice System

Black people are disproportionately targeted by the criminal justice system in several ways. A prominent example of this is the war on drugs announced by President

Ronald Reagan in the early 1980's, lasting through the early 1990's in an effort to regulate crime and drug trafficking in the United States (Alexander, 2010). Though the projected goal of the war on drugs was to get drugs off of the streets, it is a strongly held and well documented belief that this was intended to be a genocide of Black and Brown bodies (Alexander, 2010). Along with this declaration came ordinances that had profoundly unequal outcomes for communities of color, particularly Black communities (Alexander, 2010; Eberhardt & Fiske, 1998).

Prior to the war on drugs, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 was passed which contributed to administering disproportionate jail sentences for those who were apprehended with crack-cocaine in comparison to those with cocaine and other illegal substances (Alexander, 2010; Eberhardt & Fiske, 1998). The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 declared that anyone caught trafficking 5 mg of crack-cocaine were to be charged with a felony and had to serve a mandatory minimum of 5 years in prison; whereas the same amount of cocaine was a misdemeanor and accompanied with a maximum of 1 year in prison (Eberhardt & Fiske, 1998). Given that crack-cocaine was a much cheaper variant of cocaine and spread quickly among low-income communities of color in the mid-1980's, this Act disproportionately affected the criminal punishment of Black individuals. In 1991, 52% of crack-cocaine users were White but only accounted for around 10% of convictions for possession of crack, whereas 38% of users were Black, and accounted for 84% of convictions for possession of crack (Eberhardt & Fiske, 1998).

The war on drugs reinforced a norm in which it was acceptable – and expected – to target Black people for criminal behavior far more than their White counterparts, and the impact is still seen today in the criminal justice system. According to the U.S. census

(2010), Black people only account for 13% of the U.S. population, but represent a staggering 40% of incarcerations; while White people make up 64% of the U.S. population and account for 39% of incarcerations (Sakala, 2014). Considering that White Americans account for more than four or five times the number of Black Americans, these numbers are overwhelmingly unequal. Well over 1,500 police departments have records that reflect the number of Black arrests at a disproportionately higher rate than any other race (Heath, 2014). Black men are 10 times more likely to be arrested than their White counterparts, and a Black child is twice as likely as a White child to be arrested and charged for carrying a weapon (Heath, 2014). Recent studies show that White youth use cocaine 4.6 times more than Black youth, crack-cocaine at 1.5 times the rate of Blacks, smoke marijuana at a rate 46% higher than Black adolescents and use equal amounts of heroin as Blacks. White adolescents also report being more likely to sell drugs by almost one-third the rate of Black youth (Jones, 2011). Despite the numbers of reported drug dealings and drug use among youths being much higher for White adolescents, Blacks aged 12-17 still represent 48% of the youth arrested for a drug-related offense (Jones, 2011).

The impact of brutality against Black Americans has been widely publicized in the years since the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin. The events leading up to the deaths of Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Alton Sterling, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, and far more have been widely disputed across the country. The publicity of unarmed Black deaths at the hands of police has prompted many to provide the counterargument that more Whites are killed at the hands of police than Blacks (Lowery, 2016). While the actual number may seem to confirm that claim, the percentage is what makes this argument obsolete.

There may be more shootings of Whites numerically, but there are roughly *160 million more* White Americans than Black Americans in the United States. As previously stated, White Americans make up around 62-64% of the population, and account for 49% of police shootings, whereas Black Americans only make up 13% of the population, yet account for 24% of officer-involved killings. In other words, percentages – not numbers – are what matters; and a much larger percentage of Black people are killed by the police annually, making Blacks 2.5 times more likely to die at the hands of an officer than White people (Lowery, 2016).

The idea of “Black on Black” crime, where Blacks are thought to perform significantly more intra-racial killings than any other race (Tan, 2016) is a concept that suggests the real problem in the Black community has nothing to do with White supremacy. Rather, the problem is Black people dying at the hands of their own people. The following is a quote from Rudy Giuliani, a former Mayor of New York City, during an interview on the political news broadcast, *Face the Nation*:

There's too much violence in the Black community...(If you want to deal with this on the Black side, you've got to teach your children to be respectful to the police and you've got to teach your children that the real danger to them is not the police; the real danger to them, 99 out of 100 times, 9,900 out of 10,000 times, are other Black kids who are gonna kill them. That's the way they're gonna die.

Although popular, this argument is incredibly flawed. Lowery (2016) reports FBI numbers from 2014 showed 90% of intra-racial killings within Black communities (Blacks killing Blacks) compared to 82% of intra-racial killings in White communities (Whites killing Whites). Essentially this data shows that although the percentage is slightly higher for the Black population, the amount of intra-racial killings does not reflect a wide disparity in comparison to the intra-racial killing of Whites.

Though there is no concrete evidence that the disproportionate interactions of Black individuals with the police are a result of the war on drugs, racism or prejudice; one can deduce that the reflection of this data is racially driven. There is no explanation for these staggering numbers other than one that attempts to falsely accuse Black people of being inherently more criminal than any other race.

Education

American values place an emphasis on education as the path to success; however, it is difficult for Black people to obtain high quality schooling in the nation's public schools. Racist tactics have a well-established history of making it difficult for Blacks to receive an education – whether that be seeking higher education, or even finishing grade school. Black people are overrepresented in low-income communities, families, and schools (Harris & Liebermann, 2016). Within those schools there are a lack of resources such as books, qualified teachers, and technologies that are allotted to schools in higher income (majority White) neighborhoods (Hatt, 2011). This in turn causes Black students to be inadequately prepared for standardized tests and college applications which affects their ability to enter into higher education (Hatt, 2011).

From childhood and throughout adolescence, students are beginning to explore and recognize their identity as a person of color. The level to which they understand how their identity impacts their interactions with the world can play a huge part in how they handle stress (McCreary, et.al., 1996), and can directly relate to their emotional adjustment to discrimination, and ability to succeed in school. Racism and prejudice affect not only what type of education Black versus White students receive, but also how they are treated in school which impacts the likelihood of academic success. One factor

that contributes to the success of a student of color (specifically a Black student) is their teacher's perception of them, which is a huge predictor of their academic performance and their own self-perception (Brittian et. al., 2014). Newman et. al. (2000) found that other contributing factors to high performing students of color had much to do with an overall understanding of what they needed in order to be successful and being around peers who were driven for success as well.

Although this may appear to be a simple concept, there are several aspects to consider. With under qualified and/or overwhelmed teachers placed in lower income schools, they often lack the skills necessary to provide a nurturing and high functioning academic environment (Kaufman, et. al., 2008). Black students face an additional barrier in dealing with subtle and blatant forms of stereotyping and discrimination (Kao, 2000) which includes being treated poorly by their teachers and can lead to a decrease in academic efficacy as well as self-efficacy (Hurst, 1992). Although this occurs frequently at schools in low income neighborhoods, young Black students face adversity in high income, predominantly White schools as well (Seaton & Douglass, 2014).

Teachers have reportedly treated Black students worse than White students and have even suggested to them that they do not have what it takes to be in school or stay in school. Brittian et. al. (2014) demonstrated the poor treatment of Black students by White teachers due to the teacher's disbelief that Black students would be successful. White teachers treated their Black students as if they were incapable of succeeding in the classroom and unable to perform as highly as their White counterparts (Brittian et. al., 2014; Hatt, 2011). When teachers model this behavior, Black students tend to be treated this way by their White peers as well (Seaton & Douglass, 2014). Poor treatment and

discrimination lead to feelings of depression, inadequacy and an overall lack of self-efficacy. Given this, it is not easy for Black students to feel as if they have the tools to be successful or surround themselves with peers (especially fellow Black peers) who have that understanding either.

In the public schooling system, Black students are often treated as criminals before they have even committed a crime – if they commit one at all (Hatt, 2011). Zero tolerance policies began to be implemented within schools in 1986 as a way to be “tough” on drug crimes; however, it is difficult to name a specific set of interventions that characterize zero tolerance policies (Newburn & Jones, 2007). Included in zero tolerance practices is the placement of law enforcement within schools and harsh punishments for students who have committed minor offenses (Newburn & Jones, 2007). These policies disproportionately affect Black students. Trivial offenses such as disobeying authority figures, falling asleep in class, and developmentally appropriate reactions to unfair treatment (i.e. raised voices or “temper tantrums”) have adversely harsh punishments such as suspension or expulsion from school, minimum jail sentences, and even charging juveniles as adults for petty crimes (Morris, 2016; Hatt, 2011). Due to the serious implications of zero tolerance policies, they have contributed to what has been named the School to Prison Pipeline (Hatt, 2011).

The School to Prison Pipeline is a metaphor that describes “the patterns of school socialization, school discipline policies, and low educational attainment by inmates that help to explain why many youth, especially low income, African American and Latino males, end up in a jail cell rather than a college classroom” (Hatt, 2011). Although the

emphasis in this quote is on Black and Latino males, the effects are the same, if not worse, for young women of color as well (Morris, 2016; Newburn & Jones, 2007).

Once incarcerated, they are exposed to violence and more serious criminal activity and often have a hard time adjusting back to society when they are out of jail (Hatt, 2011). Thus, the cycle is perpetuated as many of these students ultimately end up incarcerated due to the systemic and institutionalized racism within the criminal justice system as previously discussed. The lack of encouragement from teachers and active criminalization of Black students leads many Black youth to drop out of school and find other means of survival which often leads to criminal behavior, as they have been conditioned to believe they are criminals (Hatt, 2011).

Given the existence of racism and its influence on the quality of life for Black Americans, it is plausible to say that these daily lived experiences can manifest as a form of psychological trauma. In order to understand how trauma may develop, there must first be an understanding of the impact of stress.

Stress and Stressors

Stress has been defined as an emotional, physical, and/or behavioral response to an event that is appraised as either positive or unwanted (Carter, 2007). A stressor is an act or event that causes stress through either a physiological or psychological strain on an individual. Stressors can be either absolute (something that anyone exposed to the event would find to be stressful), or relative (something that only some people would interpret as being stressful); both of which yield different reactions within different people (Centre for Studies on Human Stress, 2017). Stress has been linked to a person's ability to cope with or adapt to a stressor; and when a stressor is perceived as negative, the need for one

to adapt and cope with the stress that ensues becomes imperative (Carter, 2007; Taylor, 1999). Stressful situations that are perceived by a person to be particularly intense may override their ability to cope and adapt, which can lead to feelings of anger, anxiety, paranoia, helplessness/hopelessness, frustration, resentment, and fear (Utsey, 2002).

The ways in which stress is felt can increase when an event is perceived as ambiguous, negative, unpredictable, and uncontrollable (Taylor, 1999). Scholars have agreed that psychological stress can have serious implications for both mental and physical health (Briathwaite & Taylor, 2001), and the ability to cope with stressors is contingent on an individual's personal characteristics. The capacity that one has to cope with daily life stressors is also indicative of how they may react to more chronic or long-term stress (Taylor, 1999). Several scholars have found that the differences in the ways people react to daily stressors and events can result in higher levels of stress due to their predispositions to react to any event (Carter, 2007), which influence the ways in which stress affects one's overall health (Taylor, 1999). People in general have been found to be able to adapt to long-term and chronic stress when situations are ongoing and unchanging. However, even when someone is seemingly able to adapt to long-term and chronic stress psychologically, physiological changes can occur which still affect a person's psychological well-being. Regardless of an individual's ability to cope or adapt, long-term and chronic stress can still make one sick and have negative psychological and physiological consequences (Taylor, 1999). Long term and chronic stress can be conceptualized as daily stressors that add up and have potential to override coping abilities. These daily stressors have potential to result in depression, anxiety, and a decline in overall physical health (Taylor, 1999).

Race-Related Stress and Stressors

Considering the nature of racism and discrimination, it is important to highlight the relevance of daily, long-term and chronic stress/stressors. According to Utsey & Ponterotto (1996) race-related stress occurs as a result of both acute and chronic encounters with racism and discrimination. Harrell (2000) provides a more comprehensive definition of race-related stress, stating that it is “the race-related transactions between individuals or groups and their environment that emerge from the dynamics of racism, and that tax or exceed existing individual and collective resources or threaten well-being.” Similar to general stress, race-based stress is linked to an individual’s ability to cope, and what coping mechanism are employed in the presence of race-related stress (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). The characteristics of an individual’s reaction to race-related stress are distinguished from general stress in that variables such as their experience of racial socialization, racial identity development, and experiences of racism are factors to consider in addition to personal experiences, collective experiences, individual characteristics and situational characteristics (Truong & Museus, 2012; Branscombe, Schmitt & Harvey, 1999; Brondolo et. al., 2009; Bynum, Burton, & Best, 2007; Carter, 2007; Cheng, 2003; Harrell, 2000).

Racialized stress is accompanied by additional considerations for the person experiencing the stressor because there are several decisions they must make when reacting to a situation and employing coping techniques. Depending on the setting and circumstance within which the event occurred, certain coping mechanisms may increase levels of stress due to the fact that certain responses may result in the person being further or less oppressed (Cheng, 2003). Truong and Museus (2012) present the example of

utilizing social support, which can help with rationalizing the racist event or interaction but has potential to trigger the person who experienced the event when they must relive what happened by doing so. Additionally, certain coping strategies such as confronting the oppressor in any given situation can lead to more marginalization and possible other negative consequences like being unfairly reprimanded (such as with a supervisor or boss), or being invalidated (Truong & Museus, 2012). The process of determining how to respond to racism and discrimination is likely to produce even more stress, sometimes even more than what was felt during the initial experience.

Researchers have documented and observed that holding a marginalized racial identity is a source of stress in and of itself (Slavin, 1991; Smith, 1985) whether the stress is induced by personal or structural aspects of racism (Clark, 1999). Literature has shown that negative health outcomes can be attributed to direct experiences of racism and discrimination. Anxiety and worry tend to be the most immediate response felt by POC and may lead to one engaging in rehearsal behaviors for more aggressive and defensive responses to racism in order to cope (Harrell, 2003). Implications for physical health in experiencing racism and discrimination have been documented and include hypertension, high blood pressure, risk for heart disease, Black women delivering babies with low birth weights, and increased vulnerability for other negative health outcomes as result of psychological and emotional distress (Carter, 2007).

It is important to note that not all stress results in harm to an individual; though harm can be caused when an event is perceived as negative, prolonged, and exceeds the individual's capacity for coping which then makes the stress more intense, and more likely to produce trauma. Severe stress is comprised of three core reactions: intrusion or

re-experiencing, arousal or hyperactivity, and avoidance or psychic numbing. Each of these can be expressed through physiological, emotional, cognitive, and/or behavioral modalities (Carlson, 1997). Core reactions can develop into depression and anxiety and be characterized by low self-worth, self-blame, difficulty with intimate and interpersonal relationships, as well as guilt (Carter, 2007). Severe stress can manifest as trauma when one experiences either a single event or an accumulation of stressors that exceed their ability to successfully cope and adapt. Though every stressful event does not develop into trauma, the key difference between stress and trauma lies within the severity of the event, and an individual's reaction to it which can produce a trauma response.

Trauma

Trauma is defined as the experience of a major discrepancy between threatening stimuli and a person's ability to cope (Fischer & Reidesser, 1999). It is comprised of both objective and subjective aspects of an experience; and given the role of subjectivity, it should not be limited to the sole presence of harmful, dangerous, or threatening stimuli (Sar & Ozturk, 2006). Carlson (1997) developed a model for assessing and defining traumatic reactions in which she identified three key elements of traumatic stress: 1) an individual subjectively perceives the event as negative; 2) the event is experienced as occurring suddenly and unexpectedly; and 3) the event is perceived as out of the person's control. As mentioned before, the primary distinction between whether or not an event will manifest as trauma for an individual, is related to their resources, opportunity, and coping capabilities necessary to respond to the traumatic event in an adequate way (Sar & Ozturk, 2006). There are several possible responses that one may have to a traumatic event which include escaping the traumatic situation, processing the event until it is

resolved, and denying aspects of the situation – which often results in insufficient processing and increased likelihood of mental suffering for a longer period of time (Sar & Ozturk, 2006; Fischer & Reidesser, 1999).

A traumatic experience is not perceived as a trauma while it is happening, rather it is identified as such after it occurs. Without an immediate resolution or adequate response to the trauma one may utilize a significant amount of energy to process the event, which is done in present time (Sar & Ozturk, 2006; Horowitz, 1986). The goal of successfully processing trauma is for one to return to their life, personality, and life goals as they were before the traumatic event occurred. To accomplish this, it is necessary to engage in processing the event in order to integrate their trauma within their existing schemas with minimal interruption. The dangers associated with processing trauma arise when the event and/or its details are recounted in the person's mind repeatedly without resolve. This can lead to obsessive and intrusive thoughts, and eventually one being "stuck" in the moment of the trauma, resulting in a potentially permanent change in schema that can also negatively change the self-concept and personality of the individual (Sar & Ozturk, 2006; Ozturk, 2003). A fear response typically develops from the experience of the trauma due to the unpredictable and unexpected nature of the event. In addition to fear, the lack of ability for one to attribute meaning to the situation leads to feeling like they are not in control of their life and can result in feelings of helplessness (Fischer & Riedesser, 1999), depression, anxiety, and often anger. These intense feelings hinder the ability for one to successfully process their trauma, furthering emotional dysregulation which can be reflected through suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, self-harm, substance

use, and rage often generalized to other people in their lives who are not associated with the trauma (Ozturk, 2004).

Sar and Ozturk (2006) state past traumas that have gone unresolved can result in distorted perceptions of reality, intrusive thoughts, and worsening of trauma symptoms. The experience of a traumatic event interferes with one's psychological development and can impact their social adjustment, defense mechanisms, problem solving and coping skills; along with feeling as if their intellect, affective characteristics, and personality are inadequate. It can be difficult to distinguish helpful environmental stimuli from destructive ones, thus furthering emotional dysregulation and overall distress. Again, whether or not someone experiences an event as traumatic depends on their subjective experience of the event, as well as their ability to cope and adapt. Not all potentially traumatic events manifest as trauma for every individual; and for those who do experience a trauma response, further evaluation is necessary to determine if the symptoms qualify as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) outlines several criteria for a diagnosis of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The criteria include the following: directly experiencing the traumatic event; witnessing, in person the event as it occurred to others; learning that the event occurred to someone close to the individual; experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to the aversive details of the event; recurring and intrusive memories of the event; avoidance of event-related stimuli or thoughts; prolonged psychological distress; hypervigilance; and irritable behavior. In order to meet criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD, all of these symptoms must have lasted for more than one month. The full list of symptoms and criteria for PTSD can be found in the DSM-5.

Research has found protective and risk factors associated with whether or not traumatic experiences will result in psychological symptoms. Pre-trauma risk factors are variables that operate before the trauma that may indicate the likelihood of developing psychological symptoms. Factors such as gender, race, socioeconomic status (SES), and education have been found to influence the possibility of one experiencing psychological symptoms as a response to trauma based on the marginalization of the identity, and whether one has the resources to cope with the event as well as additional life stressors. Other risk factors include an adverse childhood, prior trauma, pre-trauma life stress, environment, and pre-trauma psychopathology (Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000; DiGangi, Gomez, Mendoza, Jason, Keys, & Koenen, 2013). Time of trauma risk factors refer to the variables present and/or occurring at the time of the incident. Among these, severity of trauma, type of trauma and dissociation have been found to predict the likelihood of one developing PTSD (Ehring, Ehlers, & Glucksman, 2008; Carlson, Garvet, Macia, Ruzek, & Burling, 2013). Post-trauma variables are the factors that are present/occur after the incident. Factors associated with post-trauma variables include one's social support, social constraints, life stress, negative thinking following the event, acute psychological reactions, and dissociation (Ehring, Ehlers, & Glucksman, 2008; Cardena & Carlson, 2011; Bryant, Creamer, O'Donnell, Silove, McFarlane, 2008; Carlson, Dalenberg, McDade-Montez, 2012). Strong social support has been found to counter the possibility of developing psychological symptoms following trauma and was noted by Herman (1992) that social support and positive environment are necessary in recovering from trauma, as recovery cannot be done in isolation.

Racial Trauma

Racial trauma is described as a phenomenon in which individuals belonging to an historically oppressed group manifest symptoms of post-traumatic stress as a direct reaction to racist experiences and interactions (Utsey & Ellison, 2000; Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005). Racial trauma has gone by several different names in the literature, including race-based trauma, societal trauma, intergenerational trauma, racist incident-based trauma, insidious trauma, psychological trauma, emotional abusiveness, and racism (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Carter, 2007; Carter & Helms, 2002; Daniel, 2000; Loo et al., 2001). Carter (2007) proposes a clinical standard for Race-Based Traumatic Stress Injury where he identifies three types of racism that are experienced by POC. The first is Racial Discrimination, an avoidant racism in which dominant racial groups (White individuals) are able to engage in racism without appearing to do so by means of behaviors, thoughts, policies, and strategies that distance and/or minimize contact between dominant and non-dominant (POC) racial groups. The second is Racial Harassment in which policies, behaviors, actions and strategies that are characterized by a more hostile racism are implemented in order to communicate to the non-dominant groups that they are inferior due to their race. The last one is Discriminatory Harassment in which racism is experienced in an aversive and hostile way involving thoughts, behaviors, policies, feelings, actions, or procedures that are intended to create distance from a racial group after a person from that non-dominant group has gained entry into an environment they were previously excluded from.

Racial discrimination can be perceived as a threat to the safety and integrity of the person on the receiving end, and by these standards would qualify as a source of

traumatic stress (Carter, 2007). Another qualifier of traumatic stress is that the event is perceived as negative, unexpected, ambiguous, repeated, and out of that person's control, which is typically the case when experiencing racism. In a society where racism has been made legal by way of various forms of discrimination, POC tend to have repeated, reoccurring, blatant, and subtle experiences of racism. Due to this centuries-long practice, there are circumstances in which racism and discrimination may be expected and predictable, but out of their control, meaning that it can still manifest as trauma (Carter, 2007). Racial discrimination may negatively impact one's mental health through psychological and emotional injury that develops into traumatic stress; especially when they do not have the coping skills or ability to respond to racist interactions (Carter, 2007).

Research has documented experiences of racism that have been found to impact several different facets of a person's well-being. Cognitive symptoms found in individuals experiencing racism include difficulty concentrating, remembering, and focusing. Affective symptoms include hypervigilance, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, emotional numbing, anger, grief, intrusive thoughts, and cognitive avoidance. Relational symptoms reflect distrust of dominant groups as well as internalized racism leading to distrust of other POC, in addition to behavioral symptoms such as self-medicating through substance abuse or engaging in self-harm, avoidance of certain spaces, people or places. Spiritual effects such as questioning faith in God or other higher powers, humanity, or both have also been documented as a response to racism and racial trauma (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Loo, Singh, Scurfield, & Kilauano, 1998). Nationally represented studies in the US have also found that perceived racial

discrimination was linked to a lifetime history of Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) and PTSD. As previously mentioned, racism has been documented to have effects on physical health, with somatic symptoms such as migraines, nausea and body aches. Additionally, it has been documented that Blacks harbor a distrust of medical facilities, leading to a decrease in follow up for medical care which can result in chronic illnesses, obesity, and overall negative effects on physical health. It is clear that adverse and unhealthy stress reactions to experiences of discrimination can seriously compromise one's overall well-being (Polanco-Roman, Danies & Anglin, 2016). Given the severity of these reactions, racism should be considered as having potential to manifest as a response to trauma rather than dismissed as an unpleasant situation or encounter.

There are several ways in which the severity of racism can be experienced, ranging from physical threats to one's life to indirect stereotypes and microaggressions. Scurfield and Mackey (2001) suggest three ways that the onset of exposure to racism can take form: single or repeated exposures that have a lasting and memorable impact; covert and subtle exposures to racism; and insidious exposure, which is chronic and pervasive exposures to racism. They posit that over time, repeated and cumulative exposures to racism can be traumatically impactful; and at some point, assumptions that the dominant culture is unconcerned with one's well-being and may even hold malevolent views about one based on their race become reinforced. Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005) speak to this point by highlighting specific trends when a POC has experienced a blatant physical or verbal assault by Whites or even other POC. They stated, "if the person of Color is 'arrogant,' does not know his or her place, 'is trying to get more than he/she deserves,' is viewed as overly sensitive or has a criminal record" then the incident is often either not

viewed as racist, and/or is minimized or dismissed entirely. In addition to having an assault or attack potentially dismissed or minimized, POC are often blamed in some way for having caused the situation in which they were harmed (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005). This reality is important to highlight as the experience of any trauma or severe stressor is often far worse for POC to endure because of their racial identity and the overwhelming negative response by dominant society when they seek help, support, or justice; increasing the likelihood of developing negative psychological symptoms.

Though overt and blatant displays of racism can definitely cause psychological harm to a POC, the way racism is experienced today is much more covert and ambiguous in a way that may be difficult to detect, even for individuals experiencing the event. This is often referred to as a microaggression, which is defined as an evolved form of racial discrimination that is more subtle, covert, and chronic in nature and can manifest as intentional or unintentional slights, snubs, or behaviors that communicate a negative or derogatory message to people of color (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). Sue et. al. (2007) categorized microaggressions into nine different domains which are as follows: 1) perceived as an “alien in one’s own land;” 2) intelligence assigned on the basis of race; 3) color blindness or denial of reality of race; 4) assumption of criminal status on the basis of race; 5) denial of personal racism; 6) denial race plays a part in life successes; 7) pathologizing cultural values/communication styles; 8) ascribing second-class status on the basis of race; and 9) environmental microaggressions at systemic or environmental levels. It may seem as if the most emotional damage occurs in the realm of overt racism; however, Carter (2007) states that daily slights and discriminatory behaviors such as microaggressions can indeed result in

harm when they become memorable and have lasting effects on the individual experiencing the microaggression. As previously stated, the chronic and cumulative nature of microaggressions is directly referenced as a type of onset exposure to racism as insidious exposure by Scurfield and Mackey (2001).

It can be argued that exposure to microaggressions causes more overall damage than overt racism. In fact, it has been found that subtler forms of racism were more related to harmful physical reactions than blatant racism (Carter, 2007). There are several possibilities for microaggressions and covert racism causing more physical and psychological damage than overt forms of racism. Due to the fact that overt forms of racism are no longer accepted by the general society, many people refrain from making blatant racial slurs or engaging in hate crimes for fear of social retaliation or legal consequences. Instead, many more White people engage in subtle forms of discrimination and racism to degrade and devalue POC (Hollingsworth, Patton, Allen, & Johnson, 2018). While there are definitely Whites who intentionally engage in microaggressions and subtle forms of discrimination and racism (also known as micro-assaults and microinsults) (Sue et. al., 2007), there are many more who do so unintentionally because their biases against POC are deeply ingrained and outside of their immediate awareness. Regardless of the intentionality behind microaggressions, they are still incredibly damaging to the mental well-being of Blacks and other POC. Microaggressions and covert racism have the ability to result in a traumatic stress response not because they are severe as a single occurrence, but because of the culmination of these occurrences over the lifespan. When thinking about the severity of racist incidents that can trigger a trauma response, severity could be the accumulation of a lifetime of racist interactions that

finally overwhelm an individual's ability to cope. In other words, something minor rather than a major event could be the "last straw" for someone who has experienced racism and discrimination throughout their life (Carter, 2007).

Evidence shows that ethnic/minority adults who have experienced racism endorsed feelings of guilt and shame, avoidance or numbing, hypervigilance, and anxiety far more than those who had not (Palanco-Roman, et. al., 2016). Studies have been done to determine which coping strategies are most effective for Black individuals who are attempting to cope with race-related stress versus general life stress. They found that Black individuals ruminated on race-related stress much more than general life stress and appeared to do more harm to themselves when engaging in passive behaviors related to racist experiences (i.e. acceptance, resignation, avoidance) and displayed more avoidant symptoms (e.g. emotional numbing) (Hoggard, Byrd, & Sellers, 2012; Sanders, Thompson, 2006). What the authors found to work as a protective factor was individuals actively seeking support to process their experiences, and trouble-shoot with someone they trusted. Black individuals have confirmed feeling as if a racist event or experience was stressful, and in some cases the stress lasted for a substantial amount of time (Carter & Forsyth, 2010). This information shows that experiencing an overtly racist event can, at the very least, yield PTSD symptoms if not qualify for a formal diagnosis of PTSD.

Black Students at PWI's

Attending a PWI as a Black student does not exempt one from the experiences of race-related stress and/or racial trauma. In fact, it has been well-documented by scholars that there are significant challenges for Black students at PWI's, often resulting in psychological and physiological harm due to race-related incidents (Pieterse, Carter, &

Walter, 2010; Payne & Suddler, 2014; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000; Truong & Museums, 2012; Lo, McCallum, Hughes, Smith, & McKnight, 2017; Reynolds, Sneva, & Beehler, 2010; Jones & Reddick, 2017). The negative perceptions and assumptions about Black Americans ingrained in U.S. culture make it difficult for Black students to feel accepted, comfortable and have a sense of belonging on White campuses (Bernard, Hoggard, & Neblett Jr., 2018; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Lo et. al., 2017). It has been found that the perception of the racial campus climate affects all students attending a university; however, Black and other racial/ethnic minoritized individuals experience much more distress from a negative racial campus climate than their White counterparts (Perry, 2013; Rankin & Reason, 2005). White students tend to report race-relations on campus as positive and often do not perceive there to be an issue of race (Chang, 2013; Hurtado, 1992; Miller & Sujitparapitaya, 2010; Perry, 2013; Rankin & Reason, 2005) whereas Black students attending the same universities report a negative racial campus climate. Studies have found this negative perception and subsequent racially charged interactions to be positively associated with poor mental health and academic outcomes (Pieterse et. al., 2010; Chavous, 2005). The perception of a positive racial climate for Black students is essential for their success at a PWI. Solorzano & Yosso (2000) outlined four elements necessary for a positive racial campus climate: 1) being inclusive of faculty, staff, students, and administrators of color, 2) embodying a curriculum that is reflective of the accurate histories and experiences of POC, 3) establishment of programs to support the recruitment, retention and graduation of POC, and 4) the utilization of a mission statement that reinforces the institutions commitment to pluralism. Without these elements intentionally and genuinely ingrained in the values of the institution and

appropriately executed, the likelihood of Black students perceiving a positive racial campus climate is unlikely and leads to negative outcomes.

Solorzano and Yosso (2000) found that students of color attending PWI's experienced several forms of discrimination on campus. They reported feeling invisible in classrooms as professors often ignored the presence of Black students and their needs in the classroom by omitting, distorting, or stereotyping experiences of Black people and other POC; and also reported that professors expressed low expectations of their academic capabilities both verbally and non-verbally. White peers would often refrain from being in a group with Black students in class because they did not believe they were smart enough to contribute to a group task or project, and even engaged in discussion about how Black students were only accepted into the university as a result of affirmative action policies rather than their own merit. Outside of the classroom, Black students reported that social functions and gatherings comprised of Black people were heavily policed in comparison to White student gatherings, often resulting in events getting shut down prematurely by campus police without sufficient cause. Additionally, when Black student organizations attempted to have events geared toward the Black population on campus they were met with more rules and regulations in comparison to White groups, making it more difficult to successfully create and execute said events. In response to these incidents, Black students reported feeling drained from perceived or anticipated verbal and non-verbal microaggressions from faculty, staff and peers, general feelings of discomfort inside and outside of the classroom, and anxiety about being the "spokesperson" for their race. Students stated that they had feelings of isolation and segregation in class, feeling despondent, helpless, and unable to perform academically

due to the pressure of maintaining grades and high academic performances while also having to respond to racism and discrimination, and also reported that it was harder to participate or engage in class because of the anticipation of racism and microaggressions. This was reported to result in students dropping out of classes, changing their majors, or even leaving the university entirely in order to escape the racism and discrimination experienced on campus (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000).

Several other studies have seen similar trends among Black students attending PWI's and the negative effects associated with racial discrimination. Steele and Aronson (1995) looked at the effects of stereotype threat among Black people and found that Black students who were asked to identify their race prior to taking the GRE performed worse than those who were not asked to do so. They noted that Black individuals are aware of the negative stereotypes regarding their intellect and are prone to impaired academic performance when taking tests or engaging in academic tasks despite their knowledge and abilities. The experiences of microaggressions and stereotype threat often lead to insecurities, self-doubt and social isolation amongst Black students (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Lopez, 2005; Sue, et. al., 2007). Experiences of discrimination and racism have led to negative mental health and behavioral effects, including risky behaviors such as substance use and risky sexual behaviors among Black individuals (Brody, Chen, Kogan, Smith, & Brown, 2010; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). Metzger, Cooper, Ritchwood, Onyeuku, & Griffin (2017) conducted a study on risky behaviors and discrimination and found Black students who endorsed drinking and engaging in sexual acts (as opposed to those who abstained from these acts entirely) were more likely to report higher instances of discrimination

indicating that they may be engaging in these behaviors in an effort to cope with their experiences of racism. There are also negative effects on interpersonal and social aspects of Black students lives as well. Chao, Mallinckrodt, and Wei (2012) found that Black students suffering from perceived racial discrimination distress may have increased interpersonal difficulty related to making friends, establishing relationships with peers, as well as dating concerns. Additionally, they noted other concerns such as body image issues, maladaptive eating patterns, and perfectionism. Financial distress is another stressor for Black students who come from a low-income background entering any college; and concerns about finances in conjunction with racial discrimination has been shown to lead to disruptions in relationships that were previously sources of social support (Kogan, Brody, Chen, Grange, Slater, & DiClemente, 2010). Differences in sleep hygiene is another area that has been shown to be directly linked to perceptions of racism and discrimination as Fuller-Rowell, Curtis, Sheikh, Duke, Ryff & Zgierska (2016) demonstrated in a study that showed Black students had more sleep issues than White students after their first year and a half of college due to perceptions of discrimination.

An important concept that has been identified as affecting Black students is the imposter syndrome, which is defined as “an internal experience of intellectual phoniness in high achievers who are unable to internalize successful experiences” (Bernard, Dollinger, & Ramaniah, 2002, p. 321; Smith, Bernard, Hurst, Jackson, Stone, Awosogba, Saucer, Bailey, & Roberts, 2017). Imposter feelings have been found to be predictive of psychological distress and well-being, and low self-esteem among Black individuals who report higher stress levels related to their minority status (Cokley et. al., 2013). In a study on imposter syndrome among racial minorities, Cokley et. al. (2017) reported findings

that depression was significantly linked to feeling like an imposter when combined with racial discrimination, but only for those who reported high levels of imposter syndrome; leading to exacerbated associations of perceived discrimination and depression. Those who reported having lower levels of imposter syndrome did not report the same levels of depression. They suggested this could be due to the fact that those experiencing high levels of imposter syndrome already feel unable and ill-prepared to handle college leading to feelings of vulnerability, lack of belonging, and feeling undeserving of their position at the university, which is then exacerbated by discrimination. In another study on imposter syndrome and discrimination, Bernard et. al. (2018) found that racial discrimination was positively correlated with higher levels of imposter syndrome, stating that discrimination leads to feelings of isolation which perpetuates the imposter feelings. In this study, high racial salience was found to be related to lower levels of imposter syndrome and appeared to serve as protective factor for POC who experienced racial discrimination. Although a high racial salience can be protective in some cases, the feeling of isolation and lack of belonging due to racism can still result in students of color engaging in self-blame in order to make sense of racial discrimination which can cause depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, eventually leading to the imposter syndrome (Jones, Peddie, Gilrane, King, & Gray, 2016).

Much of the literature has focused on undergraduate students attending PWI's, but little has focused on graduate student experiences. Truong and Museus (2012) explored the experiences of racial trauma among doctoral students of color. Their inquiry yielded similar results related to the negative effects of racism and discrimination seen in undergraduate students'. In this phenomenological study, participants reported

experiences of discrimination such as White peers not speaking to them and gossiping about them behind their back, difficulty in balancing their desire to advocate for racial justice while maintaining relationships with their advisor and other faculty, suppressing reactions to oppression and oppressors, writing papers that appease faculty but do not reflect their own views, code-switching to appear less threatening, and internalizing negative assumptions about themselves based on their race. These experiences produced racial trauma symptoms among doctoral students of color such as shock, self-doubt, depression, dissociation, physical symptoms (i.e. physical paralysis, stomach pain, weight loss, hair loss, mysterious rashes, etc.), spiritual pain, and even feelings of nausea when coming into contact with the institution. Other studies of graduate student experiences of racism and racial trauma have also pointed to students of color internalizing negative messages about themselves, feeling isolated and silenced by others, and an inability to speak up on issues related to race for fear of appearing disgruntled (Gonzalez, 2006; Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011). Many of these interactions resulted in students not attending class, developing a distaste for academia, dropping out of their programs, disengaging in course content and disengaging from peers within their program. These studies show that the effects of racism at a PWI carry over into the pursuit of an advanced degree; however, there is scant literature in this area, and much more research is necessary to understand the effects of racism on Black graduate students.

Surviving a PWI While Black

Many Black students attending PWI's have found themselves engaging in activism to protest, bring awareness to and change the unfair and racist practices of the institutions they attend. While this can be an empowering and important aspect of their

experience and survival of being on a White and discriminatory campus, it can also be detrimental to their mental health (Hope, Velez, Bertrand, Keels, & Durkee, 2017). Students who challenge the status quo and racial injustices at PWI's often face retaliation and reprimand from their administration which can result in sanctioning, alienation, poor academic performance, exclusion, threats, expulsion, and even racial violence from peers (Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996; Pierce, 2012; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). These students often face silencing techniques from their universities and are frequently regarded as a nuisance, emotionally unstable and deviant. (Boren, 2001; Goodwin, Jasper, Polleta, 2004; Jones & Reddick, 2017).

Jones and Reddick (2017) explored the challenges of Black students who engage in social activism in a case study at a Southern PWI. Participants in this study reported that their engagement resulted in them facing further discrimination and marginalization from their institution, and also voiced recommendations for students regarding how to enact change within the university. Moving outside of racial organizations and clubs and into student government roles in order to increase the power of the Black community was noted as a powerful way to ensure that Black voices are heard. However, they mentioned that it is difficult to be in those spaces while being regarded as the "token Black student" and still facing resistance from White members when trying to facilitate change. Training other Black students within the Black organizations and clubs to "work within the system" and speak the language of White people was another method mentioned as a way to engage in activism without having to overtly engage in protests and rallies. This method, though helpful, was reported to have the negative side-effect of appearing as if one is "selling out" to their Black peers by conforming to Whiteness. Despite the efforts

of students, the institutions often did not attempt to make structural changes to increase the positive experiences of Black students, and often left it up to the students to resolve issues related to race. Students voiced frustration and feelings of defeat and resentment due to the administrations lack of genuine support. To add insult to injury, the same institutions who were unwilling to support Black students, reportedly took credit for “creating a more inclusive environment” based on the work students had done to improve race-relations (Jones & Reddick, 2017).

Despite the deleterious effects of racially charged incidents and discrimination at PWI’s research has noted ways in which Black students have been able to survive their experiences of racism. One protective factor associated with experiences of racism at a PWI resulting in negative psychological effects may lie within Black individuals’ ability to be resilient due to their constant experiences with racism in other contexts. Though the perception of a campus’ racial climate is important in allowing a Black student to feel comfortable and welcome, Pieterse et. al. (2010) found that a negative perception of racial campus climate alone was not linked to negative psychological effects. It is suggested that this may be due to the fact that Black people are socialized to expect negative interactions from White people and have developed “thick skin” so as not to make the reality of their experiences as damaging or traumatic (Bynum et. al., 2007).

In Reynolds and colleagues’ (2010) study of racism-related stress and motivation, institutional racism was related to lack of motivation for academic work and lack of extrinsic motivation leading students to question why they were in college and whether it was helpful for them to be there; however, several factors were also identified as protective and effective ways to cope with the racism they experienced. Self-motivation,

self-belief, and a well-developed academic self-concept attributed to resiliency and the ability to achieve academically (Cokley 2002; Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005; Griffin, 2006) as well as self-efficacy and social engagement (Reynolds et. al, 2010). Students who are more intrinsically motivated were shown to be less likely for negative interactions to deter them from their academic goals, and those who were more engaged academically by studying with other students and engaging with faculty were more likely to be able to handle the stressors of racism and general stressors associated with being in college (Reynolds et. al., 2010). Peer and family support has repeatedly been named as one of the largest protective factors and coping mechanisms for students of color experiencing racism and discrimination on campus, including counter-spaces such as organizations and clubs explicitly for Black students (Yasser & Suddler, 2014; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000; Gonzalez, 2006; Polanco-Roman et. al., 2016; Reynolds et. al., 2010; Jones & Reddick, 2017; Cokley et. al., 2017).

Summary

In this chapter, I provided a rationale for the utilization of Critical Race Theory as a framework for guiding my exploration of racial trauma in the Black community and a review of the literature as it relates to the historical marginalization of Black individuals through the criminal justice and education systems. I then reviewed the concepts of stress, race-related stress, trauma, racial trauma, and experiences of Black students attending predominately White institutions. As evidenced in the above literature review, experiences of racism and discrimination are tremendously detrimental to the mental health and physical well-being of Black individuals. This body of research shows the negative effects for students of color at PWI's, and also highlights the lack of literature

exploring the specific experiences of Black students pursuing a doctoral degree at a PWI. The literature reinforces the need for further exploration and empirical support in recognizing that racism can be experienced as traumatic injury, specifically as it relates to Black doctoral students attending a PWI.

In chapter three, I will present the rationale for using a qualitative phenomenological approach to this study, explain my role as a researcher, provide information related to data collection and analysis, and review the ethical considerations for the study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The purpose of this study is to understand how Black doctoral students' experiences of racism impact their psychological well-being. The focus of this study is the connection between racism and mental health among individuals who have reached the highest level of educational achievement, and therefore are likely to have transcended racism and discrimination in the educational realm for many years. There are several methods through which one could accomplish the task of understanding these experiences. For the purposes of this study, I chose phenomenology as it is the most appropriate approach to gaining a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

Rationale for a Qualitative Approach

Qualitative approaches have been widely critiqued by quantitative researchers for lacking the ability to meet positivistic criteria such as validity and reliability (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002), which is thought to be necessary in establishing “truth” or “proof” of research. However, unlike quantitative approaches, qualitative methodologies are not concerned with the generalizability of their findings. Rather, their focus is on the context that helps us understand the complexity of people’s experiences and perspectives; and looks at the meaning individuals assign to their social experiences and lived realities (Heppner et. al., 2016). This study utilizes a qualitative, hermeneutical phenomenological approach because it is the most efficient method to capture the voices and realities of people who are historically unheard.

Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework for this study reinforces the necessity of a qualitative methodology. As outlined in chapter two, one of the tenets of CRT is to recognize the experiential knowledge of people of color through the use of counter-storytelling by allotting a space in which those who have been silenced can express their truths and realities (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Matsuda et. al. 1993). Additionally, Creswell (2013) discusses the role of the researcher, specifically how one is never able to (and should not entirely) separate themselves from their research as they bring their assumptions, values and beliefs into the process. Given this, it would be inappropriate to utilize quantitative methods to explore a deeply personal and complex issue such as the *experiences* and impacts of racism. The use of a qualitative approach asserts that the participants of this study are in control of their own narratives and will be able to add nuanced perspectives to the understanding of this phenomenon.

Considering that there is much less structure and rigidity in conducting a qualitative inquiry, it is essential that the researcher is intentional about their methods and does not succumb to “sloppy” research. In her 2010 article, Sarah Tracy outlines eight criteria for developing a credible qualitative inquiry. The first criteria speaks to the choosing of a “worthy” research topic; one that is timely, significant, and interesting or evocative. The dehumanization, invalidation and constant discrimination faced by Black people has been shown to have deleterious effects on their mental and physical health. As the field of counseling psychology continues to progressively move forward in identifying and rectifying social injustices related to mental health, the topic of this study is indeed worthy as it is understudied and in dire need of better empirical support and general understanding. This also accounts for Tracy’s second criteria of ensuring that the

study will make a significant contribution to the field of research. Rich rigor is her third criteria, referring to high-quality qualitative research that is marked by a rich complexity of abundance. The fourth criteria, credibility, is the trustworthiness and plausibility of research findings, and the fifth criteria of sincerity refers to the authenticity of genuineness of the researcher in being transparent and honest about biases and goals. The last three criteria are resonance (researcher's ability to meaningfully affect the reader), ensuring that the study and its results are ethical, and developing a meaningfully coherent study that achieves the purpose of the study, using methods that align well with the topic and connect existing literature with current findings. Each of these criteria hold immense value and importance in the execution of any qualitative inquiry and will be used to guide the current study beginning with the identification of the topic, to the interpretation and write up of the results (Tracy, 2010).

The present study lends itself appropriately to a qualitative research approach because it strives to develop concepts that aid in the deep understanding of a natural phenomenon with emphasis on the meaning, experiences and views of the participants (Al-Busaidi, 2008). As opposed to a quantitative study, which standardizes answers to questions for respondents, a qualitative phenomenological approach provides a space for participants to share their experiences with racism and discrimination, and how these experiences have affected their psychological well-being.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a qualitative approach to research that explores the lived experience of a phenomenon and the meaning of the experience shared by several different individuals. Creswell (2013) states the purpose of phenomenology is “to reduce

individual experiences of a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 76). The researcher must identify a phenomenon and collect data from individuals who have experienced it to identify descriptions, similarities, and themes about the experience including “what” and “how” they experience it (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology allows the reader to experience a more meaningful connection to the essence of the lived experience through the narratives of the participants (Gliner, Morgan, & Leech, 2009).

Phenomenology has a strong philosophical component derived from German mathematician Edmond Husserl, and is especially popular among the social sciences, including psychology (Heppner, Wampold, Owen, Thompson, & Wang, 2016). There are four philosophical principles associated with phenomenology: 1) returning to the traditional tasks of philosophy – epoche – using philosophy without presuppositions (getting rid of judgements about what is “real”); 2) the intentionality of consciousness (consciousness is not always directed toward an object); 3) refusal of the subject-object dichotomy; and 4) inclusion of the phenomenological presuppositions of philosophy (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990). The defining features of phenomenology include emphasizing the study of a phenomenon, exploration of this phenomenon with a group of individuals who have experienced it, philosophical discussion about the basic ideas involved in conducting such a study and bracketing to make clear the researchers position and biases. Defining features related to data collection and analysis include data collection that typically involves interviewing; data analysis that goes from narrow units, to broader units, and eventually a description to summarize the two; and a descriptive passage that captures the essence of the experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

There are several types of phenomenology, the primary two being hermeneutical and transcendental. Transcendental does not focus so much on the interpretations of the researcher, but more on the description of the experience of participants. Hermeneutical phenomenology focuses on research being oriented toward the lived experience and interpretation of the “texts” of life by the researcher, (Creswell, 2013) which I will use for this study. One of the major differences between a hermeneutical approach and a transcendental approach is the concept of bracketing. Rather than taking researcher assumptions and biases and bracketing them out so as to separate them from the research, a hermeneutical approach allows researchers to engage in a more self-reflective process and encourages them to use their reactions and embed them in the interpretive process (Laverty, 2003). Throughout this study, I integrate my own assumptions, biases, and expectations of participant responses in an effort to allow the reader to have an understanding of how I as the author am interpreting the data provided by the participants, which has been seen in chapter one, and will continue in subsequent chapters.

Phenomenology utilizes participant pools ranging from 3-4 participants to 15-25 participants. Two criteria that are essential for participant selection are whether participants have experienced the phenomenon and whether they can articulate this experience (Heppner, et. al, 2016). Researchers collect data from participants using various methods such as interviews and analyzing existing archival data. Participants are asked broad questions (e.g., what are your experiences related to this phenomenon?), and then subsequent open-ended questions (Creswell, 2013).

Data analysis for phenomenology requires horizontalization, which is the process of reading data such as interviews and highlighting significant statements by participants that capture the essence of the phenomenon. The themes found in the horizontalization process are then used to write a description of the experience. This includes a description of how the context and setting influences participants' experiences, and how the lens through which the researcher interprets this information may influence how the experience is being re-told. The final step is the essential, invariant structure, which is the researcher writing a description that presents the essence of the experience and focuses on the common experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013, Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989).

Morse, Lewis-Black, Bryman, & Liao (2004) define theoretical saturation as the phase of qualitative data analysis where the continued sampling and analysis of the data reaches a point where no new data appear, and all concepts in the theory are well developed. The underlying concept of theoretical saturation is theoretical sensitivity, which assumes that data analysis is data driven. This means that no themes can emerge unless they are present in the data set (Glaser, 2002). When analyzing data, researchers must continue to sample the data until any new data fit into the categories or themes that have already been determined (Heppner, et. al., 2016).

Researcher Role and Subjectivity

Qualitative scholars discuss the importance of the researcher's role and the subjectivity they bring to their research (Creswell, 2013; Peshkin, 1988). It is strongly recommended that researchers acknowledge who they are within the topic of research, the biases they are undoubtedly bringing into the research, and their goals and

expectations in conducting such research (Creswell, 2013). Peshkin (1988) posited the concept of researchers outlining their “subjective I’s” which refers to the different parts of our identities shaped by experiences, values, beliefs, and group membership that are present within us. The saliency of these subjective I’s change depending on the environment or circumstances we find ourselves in and are important when evaluating our own understanding and interpretation of any given situation. Though researchers talk about “bracketing” our experiences in order to remain objective, I do not believe that it is possible for one to truly remain objective in research, regardless of methodology.

Rather than attempting to bracket or identify all of my biases as it relates to the process of conducting research and interpreting the results, I chose a hermeneutical approach to phenomenology in an effort to center my beliefs, values, and expectations related to both the phenomenon of experiencing racism in a doctoral program, and the responses of the participants. Peshkin (1988) mentions that subjectivity is present during the whole research process, and researchers should continue to identify, evaluate, and process the meaning of their subjectivity throughout the entirety of their study. I align with this view and will briefly identify the subjective I’s as they relate to this study.

The In-group I. I am a Black woman in a doctoral program attending a PWI, as are the subjects of my research. This is the “I” that is most important and salient to me as a person, and among the most influential for how I interpret the data produced by this study. Being Black in a doctoral program is a unique experience that many do not understand, which puts me in a position to empathize and hold a greater level of understanding about what participants have experienced in their programs. This is also an “I” that at times causes me to overidentify with participants due to the shared identities of

Blackness and pursuit of a doctorate. This is an “I” that was known to participants and may have influenced how they interacted with me throughout the research process. Most notably, it appeared to enable participants to be more open and willing to share their experiences without fear of judgement or invalidation.

The Social Justice Advocate I. As mentioned previously, I have an inherent understanding of the ways in which racism is embedded in the fabric of our society and how it works to ensure Black people remain second-class citizens in comparison to our White counterparts. I actively work against racism and the ignorance spread by individuals who knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate these systems of oppression. This is an “I” that was not known to my participants, and I avoided overtly articulating it to participants so as not to influence responses to their questions. However, given that I am conducting a study on racism it may have been clear to participants that I am someone who advocates for social justice.

The Militant I. Not only do I identify as a social justice advocate, but I am aware that I am prone to having strong reactions to perceptions of racism and discrimination and have zero tolerance for it. I hold an expectation for Black individuals to share this feeling of frustration and acknowledge that systemic and institutional structures are responsible for the lack of advancement of our people and have a tendency to react negatively when they do not meet this expectation. This is not an “I” that participants were aware of, though it is an incredibly important aspect of who I am that unavoidably influenced the collection, analysis, and interpretation of my data.

The Researcher I. This identity contrasts directly to the militant “I.” As a researcher, I am expected to be able to set aside my personal feelings (to a degree) in

order to “objectively” gather data and make “unbiased” inferences about what that data means. I have mentioned before that I do not believe that one can be entirely unbiased or objective, though it was helpful to have that “I” present to balance the potential reactivity of my other “I’s” as I flowed in and out of several roles throughout this process. This “I” also has the goal of exploring a topic with the intention of creating more opportunities for Black people to engage in therapy and be treated with the same respect, competency, and fairness as their White counterparts. To participants, I was identified as the researcher, and whatever assumptions come with this identification may have influenced several factors, such as their ability to trust me with their responses.

The Therapist-in-Training I. This refers to the skills and training I have received thus far in order to work with people specifically in emotionally laden situations. This “I” can be in direct opposition with the researcher “I” when it comes to a phenomenological approach and interviewing, as it is important to remain on task even when people may begin to have emotional reactions. As a therapist-in-training, my instincts and training are to probe about emotional responses (e.g., “I noticed you’re crying, what is coming up for you?”) and go into counseling sessions without a rigid agenda, allowing instead for the client to guide the session. The interviewing process proved challenging for me to control for this aspect of myself, as there were many experiences shared by participants that prompted my identity and training as a therapist to empathize, validate, and probe further into certain experiences that may not have been focused on the research questions. However, I was deliberate and intentional with each question and response, while still maintaining the balance of being human and creating a comfortable space in the room with participants.

In reviewing my current subjective I's, the awareness of who I am, the role I am in as a therapist, and my reactions to certain content and responses was imperative. There was no room for a "sloppy" or "lazy" research process, as there were far too many opportunities to influence the data and inadvertently recall another person's story in an inaccurate and misrepresentative way. To help keep track of my reactions and biases throughout this process, I utilized a research journal in order to document my reactions after conducting, transcribing, and coding every interview with the intent of being able to genuinely reflect on my own perception of participant responses. I consulted with my dissertation committee members about interviews where I found myself having a strong positive or negative reaction to participant responses or having difficulty identifying codes that felt true to the raw data and participant experience. Although I reject the notion of remaining completely objective in research, I believe that my utilization of committee members, journaling, and self-awareness allowed me to control for my own biases and perceptions that could negatively skew the data collection, analysis, and interpretation process.

Research Questions

The hermeneutical phenomenological approach was used to explore and gain an understanding of how racism is experienced among Black doctoral students within their respective programs, and the ways in which these experiences manifest as racial trauma or other psychological emotional injury. The overarching question which guided this inquiry was *How has the experience of racism impacted the mental well-being of Black doctoral students attending a PWI?* The following sub-questions were also explored (see Appendix E for interview protocol):

- How do Black doctoral students attending a PWI describe their experiences of racism within their program and on campus?
- How does their experience of racism in their program and on campus affect their mental well-being?
- How does the manifestation of racism influence their perception of their ability to succeed academically within their program?
- What are the ways that Black doctoral students have found to cope with racialized issues that may or may not have manifested as racial trauma?

Data Collection

Participant Selection and Recruitment. Participants had to be currently enrolled in a doctoral program within a specific state located in the southwestern region of the country, completed at least one year of their program, personally identified as Black or African American, and considered their Blackness to be one of their salient identities. These criteria were important in order to select participants who 1) could adequately speak to the interview questions by ensuring they were able to identify instances of racism and/or discrimination directly related to their Black identity, 2) have had enough time within their programs to experience some level of racism and/or discrimination, and 3) could articulate their experience of these events and subsequent reactions. The rationale behind only choosing Black doctoral students in a specific southwestern state lies within the fact that racial climates can differ significantly by state, and for the purpose of this study I determined that it was best to restrict the participant pool to one state in order to control for the presence of additional factors.

Six Black doctoral students were originally chosen for this study based on the inclusion criteria. During the course of the interviews, two participants denied experiencing racism in their doctoral program, thus their data were not used for analysis. This decision was made based on the fact that the purpose of the study was to specifically explore the phenomenon of Black doctoral students' experiences of racism in their doctoral program, and the subsequent mental health implications; because neither of these participants were able to speak to this directly, their data was unable to address the topic of the study or its research questions. The four doctoral students whose data was used for this study ranged in age from 30 to 40 years old. They were enrolled in a humanities or social sciences doctoral program, located in the same southwestern state, and endorsed experiences of racism in their program.

Participants were recruited through the use of an email with information detailing the purpose of the study, inclusion criteria, and compensation (See Appendix B). The email was distributed via listservs to department chairs, Black graduate affinity groups, and Black or cultural campus offices/programs across the state. Each participant – including the two whose data was excluded – received a \$50 Amazon gift card as compensation for participating in this study.

Interviews. Interviews are identified as one of the primary ways to collect data in phenomenology (Creswell, 2013); thus, they were the sole data collection method for this study. Prior to interviewing, participants were emailed a survey to gather demographic information (e.g., age, ethnic identity, gender, year in the program), which was associated with each participant in order to track additional factors that may have influenced their experiences (see Appendix C). Upon meeting criteria for the study and completing the

informed consent form (see Appendix D) participants and I engaged in two separate semi-structured interviews over the span of no longer than two months in between interviews, with each interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes (See Appendix E for interview protocol). I communicated to participants that they were under no obligation to answer all of the questions if they did not feel comfortable doing so and were able to withdraw from the study at any time if they so choose, which no participant did. Participants who lived in the same area as I met in person in an agreed upon quiet and isolated location to conduct the interviews, and participants who were not located in the same area were administered the interview via Skype. During video chats, participants and I engaged in the interview process in a quiet and isolated space, free of distraction. After the formal interviews, they were given my contact information in the event that they had any questions or concerns related to the study. Upon the completion of the interviews, participants were given their Amazon gift card.

The purpose of having two separate interviews was to ensure that this study demonstrates rich rigor (Tracy, 2010) by gathering a thick description of data to show a more complete picture of participant experiences. Racism and discrimination are phenomena that Black people are exposed to constantly throughout our lives, which would have been difficult to retell in one 60-90- minute interview. It was also essential to establish rapport with participants in order for them to feel comfortable relaying stories about deep emotional pain related to racism to a stranger. The first interview established a welcoming, relaxed and trustworthy environment for participants and me to get to know each other and begin to talk about their identity and their experiences with racism as Black people in the U.S., and to get an understanding of the expectations and barriers of

their program. The second interview more specifically asked about participants' experiences of racism on their campus and within their program, how they perceived those experiences to have affected them, and strategies they used to cope with these experiences. Both interviews took place in 2019 between the months of April and June.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the most difficult and critical aspect of qualitative research (Basit, 2003), yet there is no standardized or agreed upon way of analyzing data in qualitative research, and the process of data analysis often remains private and unclear to the audience (Lichtman, 2013; Anfara et. al., 2002). While several methods of analysis are possible in qualitative research, a thematic analysis was used to analyze the data for this study given its flexibility as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes from qualitative data such as interviews (Swartz, Mercier, & Curran, 2012). The goal of the thematic analysis is to provide a general description of the experiences of Black doctoral students and to identify common and meaningful themes among participants for how racism was experienced, what the mental health implications were, and how they have coped with these circumstances. When converting raw data into meaningful themes, Lichtman (2013) talks about the "Three C's" of coding, categorizing, and concepts; and offers six steps to help guide and structure the data analysis process.

The first step of horizontalization is the initial coding of the data, where the researcher must carefully read transcripts of interviews while identifying and marking words and small phrases that capture a general theme of the participant's response. The second step is revisiting initial coding where researchers narrow the broad number of themes and codes by collapsing and renaming the many themes that were identified in

step one. Once codes have been identified and narrowed, step three invites researchers to make categories to serve as an umbrella for the existing codes or themes. Some codes/themes may become categories, and some may only be subsets of categories. In step four researchers modify the initial list by continuing to identify clusters of meaning throughout interviewee responses while narrowing the codes/themes. In step five (similar to step four) researchers review the final categories and see if there are any redundancies that can be collapsed into another category or removed entirely and begin to identify critical elements of remaining categories. The sixth and final step is to identify key concepts that reflect the meaning the researcher has assigned to the data. In this step Lichtman recommends choosing a maximum of 5-7 concepts, and even fewer if at all possible, to accomplish a richer analysis of the data.

This six-step process though rather vague in its description, provided me with guidance and structure in analyzing the data for this study. Once data was collected, I personally transcribed each interview. I chose not to outsource this stage of the research process because transcription is where data analysis begins (Lapadat & Lindsey, 1999) and is critical as there are several decisions made regarding how to transcribe the data based on cultural contexts, assumptions, and goals of the transcriber. Before coding, I read and listened to each interview multiple times in an effort to understand the essence of each participant's experience; making mental note of changes in emotionality, tone and pauses in their retelling of their experiences. Upon completing the transcriptions, I followed the six-step process to identify the key concepts that encompassed the participants' experiences. I also drew on existing literature to help identify key concepts that I used for developing the final themes. Once these themes were identified I engaged

in member checking, the process of allowing participants to review the data and themes emerged in order to confirm, dispute, or add to the findings (Rossman & Rallis, 2011; Rager, 2005), by sending participants their completed narrative so that they had the opportunity to confirm that their experience was captured accurately. Once the data analysis was complete, I synthesized the major concepts and themes related to the impact of Black doctoral students' experiences of racism at a PWI to answer the research questions.

Ethical Considerations

The American Psychological Association Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (APA, 2010) outlines the ethical obligation of psychologists engaging in research with human subjects. Respect for People's Rights and Dignities is principle E of the ethics code, and states that psychologists respect the dignity, privacy, and rights of individuals as well as the cultural background of others. This was important to this study as research has historically used deceit and neglect to abuse and misuse information obtained within the Black community. This history made it essential for me to use transparency with participants and ensure the results of this study were used responsibly in order to benefit rather than exploit the community. Principle A of the ethics code is Beneficence and Non-Maleficence, which speaks to the psychologist's duty to do good, and to avoid doing harm. Although there was minimal harm associated with this study, the topic of racism and discrimination has potential to be triggering to members of the Black community. Negative emotions may have been associated with recounting racist behaviors directed toward an individual and has potential to cause psychological distress. Due to the fact that this study is phenomenological, and participants were asked to

recount potentially painful and emotionally harmful experiences, they were encouraged to communicate negative reactions to the interview questions to the me in the event that they experienced emotional distress that prevented them from completing the study. I also offered participants resources for counseling in the event that the interview process caused emotional distress that warranted additional support outside the scope of the study, though each participant declined the this offer during the debriefing/check-in that followed each interview.

The ethical considerations and potential ethical dilemmas that are associated with research are a major factor in this study. Rossman and Rallis (2010) argue that the researcher is the ultimate decision-maker about both the procedural and ethical matters of how to conduct a study, and there are moral dimensions for every decision in each step of the research process. With that, they posit that there are ethically defining moments that may or may not have been considered prior to the study that a researcher may have to address in-the-moment, requiring the researcher to reflect on the decisions they make and the ethical implications of these decisions. The idea of procedural versus everyday ethical considerations speaks to the fact that research often aims to address all potential ethical concerns that may arise in a study related to the population and procedures rather than the unforeseen ethical issues that could arise throughout the course of the research. Although the Institutional Review Board (IRB) is essential to the research process in reviewing procedural ethical concerns and potential harm that may befall participants in any given study, everyday ethics require the researcher to make quick decisions that may have just as great of an impact on participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2010).

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) discuss “ethically important moments,” the situations in which researchers are not presented with classic ethical dilemmas, rather they are faced with unpredictable, subtle, and difficult situations that require deep moral reasoning and respect for the ethical implications of their decisions while maintaining respect and autonomy for their participants. In order to make these decisions in a sound manner, they speak to the concept of researcher reflexivity – the ability for a researcher to critically reflect on the kind of knowledge produced from research and how this knowledge was generated (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). This aligns with the need for researchers to be self-reflective throughout the research process, and constantly evaluate their role as researcher, their intentions with the research, and the impact their decisions may have at any given moment. Many of the day-to-day ethical decisions (also called micro-ethics) one must make are not available or appropriate for IRB to review, as they are often unpredictable and unforeseen (Rossman & Rallis, 2010). Due to this, the role of the researcher and their ability to be reflexive in their research becomes increasingly important.

When thinking about micro-ethics and the potential to face unpredictable ethical decisions, I reflected heavily on my role as a psychologist-in-training. As mentioned above, the field of psychology has historically misused research in the Black community which has had negative effects on the community itself and has created distrust with researchers. An example of this is the role of mandated reporters, who tend to cause feelings of distrust within the Black community as there are often cultural, societal, and experiential gaps in understanding that cause mandated reporters to report Black people for things such as child or elder abuse and neglect without considering the cultural and

ethical implications of such reports. Though this study did not explore areas that were foreseen to venture into the realm of topics that may require mandated reporting, I was cognizant of the fact that it could possibly come up, though it did not. My utilization of hermeneutical phenomenology assisted in the ability to be reflexive and account for the implications of each decision I made during the research process. I explicitly communicated my role as a researcher and therapist, and mandated reporter to my participants, which was essential in order to provide my participants with transparency and allow them the autonomy to make an informed decision about their participation and the amount of information they disclosed. My decisions were informed by my aim to avoid replicating the abuse and mistreatment of Black people, especially considering the purpose of this study being to find ways to understand the effects of racism on Black people's psychological well-being in order to better serve the community.

Summary

In this chapter I provided a brief review of phenomenology as a qualitative research methodology and offered my rationale for why it was appropriate in answering the research question: *How has the experience of racism impacted the mental well-being of Black doctoral students attending a PWI?* I elaborated on my positionality first introduced in chapter one to include the role of subjectivity and its impact on the research process, and then outlined my procedural methods for this study. This chapter also provided guidelines for participant selection, data collection and data analysis in exploring the experiences of racism among Black doctoral students.

In chapter four, I present the data collected from the study participants by using textural descriptions which I refer to as profiles as well as themes identified from the data and the literature. I will then provide a synthesis of participant profiles.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This study describes and interprets how racism is experienced among Black doctoral students within their respective programs, and the ways in which these experiences manifest as racial trauma or other psychological emotional injury. The study was guided by the overarching research question: “*How has the experience of racism impacted the mental well-being of Black doctoral students attending a PWI?*” and the following four sub-questions:

- How do Black doctoral students attending a PWI describe their experiences of racism within their program and on campus?
- How does their experience of racism in their program and on campus affect their mental well-being?
- How does the manifestation of racism influence their perception of their ability to succeed academically within their program?
- What are the ways that Black doctoral students have found to cope with racialized issues that may or may not have manifested as racial trauma?

I conducted two individual interviews with each of the study’s four participants and used a hermeneutical phenomenological approach centering participant experiences, as well as my reactions and personhood as a Black woman in a doctoral program and a researcher, to address the research questions. The participants of this study were four Black doctoral students, three identifying as Black women, and one identifying as a

Black man. The ages of the participants range from 30 to 40 years old, and each was enrolled in a humanities or social sciences degree program.

This chapter is organized into two sections. In the first section I provide individual textural descriptions of each study participant which I refer to as profiles (Seidman, 1998). The profiles include the participants' actual words and my interpretations of their comments to depict their lived experiences. Five themes derived from the interviews and the literature capture the essence of each participants' experience. These themes are racial socialization, Black identity development, experiences of racism, impact of racism, and coping and protective factors. The first three themes – racial socialization, Black identity development, and experiences of racism – were identified through the use of horizontalization and coding of the data, where I identified themes based on commonalities of participant responses and information gathered from existing literature.

A person's ability to cope with general life stress – which factors into the psychological impact of such stress – is dependent on personal/individual characteristics, personal experiences with stressors, situational factors, and their predisposition to react to daily life stressors (Briathwaite & Taylor, 2001, Taylor, 1999). The distinguishing characteristics of a person's ability to cope with general life stress vs. racialized stress are racial socialization, racial identity development, and experiences of racism in addition to the aforementioned factors of general life stress (Truong & Museus, 2012). As I coded the data these three themes emerged as central to the narratives of each participant, how they came to understand their identity and how they came into their doctoral programs with this understanding, which has a direct impact on their understanding of racialized

experiences. The last two themes – impact of racism and coping and protective factors – were developed as a direct result of horizontalization and the coding of participant interviews, without the more overt influence of the literature.

Racial socialization is a term used to explain the process through which Black children assign meaning to and gain understanding of racial identities by way of messages they receive from parents and caregivers. (Brown, Blackman, Schumacher, Urbanski, 2012). This process is said to happen primarily in childhood and into adolescence and can sometimes include adulthood as well. For the purpose of this study, I have expanded the definition of racial socialization to include messages received from other outside sources, such as close relatives, peers, teachers, and other adult figures in each participants life. The purpose of expanding the definition for this study is due to the fact that each participant spoke to various influences outside of parents and caregivers that shaped their understanding of what it meant to be Black and the way that the world responds to Blackness.

Black identity development refers to each participants’ “journey into Blackness” and the ways in which their understanding of and pride in their own Black identity shows up for them specifically. *Experiences of racism* includes the negative racialized encounters and situations that have come up for each of participant during their time in their program. *Impact of racism* is referring to the mental, emotional, physical and/or interpersonal effects that have come as a direct result from negative racialized encounters in their program. *Coping and protective factors* is the way that each participant has been able to make sense of the racism they have encountered in the program, activities they engage in to cope, and any factors that serve as a buffer to the impacts of racism.

Following the participant profiles, I synthesize the themes to highlight the commonalities of their understanding of their identities with which they entered their respective doctoral programs, their subsequent experiences, and the effects of these experiences.

Participant Profiles

Tiphany

Tiphany is a 40-year-old Black woman who is completing her doctorate in Health and Behavioral Sciences.

Racial Socialization. Tiphany was born and raised in a predominantly White city that is known for being historically racist and liberal, located in the southwestern region of the country. Growing up in this environment provided its own challenges, especially when it came to her understanding of race relations as a Black person surrounded by Whiteness. Tiphany notes that she had some awareness of what it meant to be Black, but points to a specific instance when she was seven years old as her first experience of racism during a class discussion on Martin Luther King Jr. and his “I Have a Dream” speech.

And the way that the teacher my teacher, tried to explain discrimination was she said, okay, “Tiphany, come sit over here.” Of course, you know, it's like, 25 White kids and me. And she said, “This is discrimination. Everybody else is to go to recess but Tiphany does not.” And that's how she explained discrimination to this group of seven-year-olds.

Tiphany describes the emotional wound she felt after experiencing this, including crying and feeling isolated and confused by her teacher's actions. "I don't know, at seven that I really understood that like, on a cognitive level, but I started crying because it hurt. And I knew there was something very wrong about that." This experience served as a moment where Tiphany was aware that being Black was in some way something that she should be ashamed of and would be judged differently for. Following this experience, she recalls being taunted and bullied by her White peers; being called a "nigger" and other racist slurs which ended with her frequently going home and crying, experiencing sadness and isolation because of the way she was treated by her fellow classmates. She continued to receive this treatment until she was told by her mother to stand up for herself and not allow others to continue bullying her. "So, then I started to push back and became somewhat of a bully myself. Once I started asserting myself and being the bully then people kind of backed off of me." While in her adult mind she recognizes that this was not the healthiest response, it felt empowering and she finally began to feel good about her ability to regain her voice to circumvent the racism and discrimination that she had endured.

Black Identity Development. Despite her ability to offset bullying and racism, Tiphany often felt out of place, different, and weird. Not only was she Black, but she was Black in a predominately White area; meaning she had to understand and adapt to the rules of Whiteness in order to survive, and then adhere to the rules of Black culture – with which she was raised – when she was home and around other Black folks. This created a difficult dynamic characterized by feelings of insecurity and awkwardness in her Black identity as she tried to find her place in the world. Given that she was raised in

a predominantly White environment, she was not accepted by the White people around her, yet she also experienced levels of rejection from fellow Black people because she was not Black enough.

Because I grew up in [city] and I talk like I grew up in [city]. I don't talk like I grew up in Philly or the Bronx or... you know, any other place like that. It took me a while, like many, many years just to be okay with the fact that I am a Black woman. Yes, I love Blackness, and I'm proud. And I don't think I could live life as a white woman. But it took a while like I was in my 20s before I really started to own it and love it, and became comfortable with who I am, and how I speak and how I think. And not feeling like I wasn't Black enough.

Tiffany's journey into her Black identity was certainly not made easy by the normalcy of racism and disparaging perceptions held about Black people in this country. Tiffany describes the pain and disenfranchisement experienced when encountering many other forms of both overt and covert racism. She speaks to more common and subtle forms of racism such as White students looking to her to represent the "opinion of Black Americans" whenever an issue related to Black people is discussed in class, along with more overt and blatant displays of racism. While attending college, she was getting an A in her biology class but was routinely failing the accompanying lab. Naturally this did not make sense to her, and so she approached the person who taught the lab, in an effort to understand how she was receiving poor grades despite understanding the material. When she communicated her concern, the instructor responded by saying "You know, your

people are only good for cleaning houses. I don't even know why you're in this class.”

This encounter confirmed for Tiphany that she was being deliberately discriminated against and failed in a class for no reason other than the instructor’s racist belief that Black people did not belong in collegiate spaces. She describes these experiences as confirmation of the institutional and systemic nature of racism, the hatred that many have for her based on her identity, and the subsequent barriers that she would face in her attempts to navigate these systems in order to survive.

Experiences of Racism. Despite the barriers of systemic and institutionalized racism, Tiphany fought her way into a doctoral program and is in her fifth or sixth year (she is unsure of exactly how long it has been due to the chaotic nature of the program). During her time in the program, Tiphany’s father was diagnosed with dementia, and she became his caretaker while also working fulltime in order to afford living expenses. Although she was experiencing both mental and emotional distress along with the immense pressure of tending to a sick parent, Tiphany continued to attend all of her classes – with the exception of a few occasions when her father was in the ICU – and did not miss any assignments. Being a caretaker in addition to full-time employee is enough to make completing a doctoral program feel like an insurmountable goal, but for Tiphany what made this so difficult was the lack of empathy and judgment she received from the program faculty.

I've never felt like any of the faculty actually care whether or not I finished the program. And so, when my father got really sick, there wasn't a lot of support from the program around me... I kind of felt like judged for missing a class here

and there, because my dad was in the ICU.... it was really challenging. Definitely, made me not trust any of them. I still don't.

When Tiffany entered her doctoral program at the age of 35, she describes herself as having pride and appreciation in her Blackness having transcended racism for many years in academic, personal, and work environments. With the faculty's response to her father's diagnosis of dementia, she felt unable to pinpoint exactly why she received the treatment she did, saying, "I don't know if that was a race thing, or gender thing." Though she may not have felt certain about whether or not racism or sexism (or gendered racism specifically against her as a Black woman) was influencing the faculty's indifference to her personal struggles, several demonstrations of racism have been painfully obvious during her time in the program. She recalls two in particular.

...And so my best friend in my cohort, and I always did our homework together. And so, she would get 'A's' I would get 'B's,' it's the same stata code output. So, I'm like "how come we're not getting the same grade?" So, one day, we flipped the script, and I turned in her paper, and she turned in mine. She got an A, I got a B. So, I took those papers to this professor and said, "Can you explain this to me?" I'm like, "we do the same work. We do the code together, you know, its output outcome." And his answer to me was that her description of the output was more thorough than mine. And I said, "Really? Because this paper right here is the one that she did. And you gave me a B. So obviously, it's not about the descriptions." And I wish I had a picture of the look on his face for posterity

purposes. But I tell you, I didn't get a B on anything else for the rest of that semester.

Another incident was a different statistics professor and this person used SPSS. And we had an exam and it was open note, open book. So, one of the questions I literally copied verbatim from the textbook, and she wouldn't give me credit for it, because she said the answer was wrong, but could not explain to me why the answer was wrong. Even when I showed her that I copied it verbatim from the book. So, things like that definitely happen all the time.

As Tiphany mentioned, incidents like these happen all of the time and she talks about the sheer degradation and demoralization that result from these experiences. Even when she is working with other students to complete assignments, instructors have found ways to single her out and “downgrade” her in the program to make her feel as if she is not capable or worthy of performing in comparison to her White counterparts. After talking with and hearing the stories of other Black people in her program, she is aware that she is not alone in these experiences, and that others have faced similar racialized barriers. She details the events of a Black woman who had a wide breadth of experience, was prominent and well-established in her field, but who continued to fail her prospectus defense due to what was rumored to be interpersonal conflicts with and jealousy of one of her committee members. It was not until this woman changed her committee and the focus of her dissertation research that she was able to pass her defense. Tiphany notes,

“Who else do they do this to?” in reference to the fact that she has never heard of such things happening to White people in the program.

In order to complete her coursework and begin working on her prospectus, Tiphany had one last class to take in which the final paper was the start of her prospectus, and thus the start of her dissertation.

The professor actually gave me an F on a paper. And when I asked her why, she couldn't tell me why. And I came to find out later, it was because she got busy and just didn't read my paper and just gave me an F and an incomplete for the class, to give herself more time to read it and actually grade it appropriately. Like who else did that happen to? That didn't happen to anybody else in my class for that same paper, and I am not an F student. Never have been, even at my worst.

“Who else did that happen to?” Again, Tiphany questions what was happening and why. She emphasizes the significance of this paper, as it was the start of her prospectus – the start of her dissertation. She was completing her coursework, and this was the beginning of the next step, and somehow, she failed. She could not understand how she had “really screwed this up this bad.” She fought to gain perspective; to understand how she had done so poorly on something she had put so much effort into. She asked several people – including her boss from outside of her program – to read the paper and help her identify what went wrong, but no one could find the issue. Everyone around her agreed that this was a well-written paper. Tiphany received a failing grade on this paper in May, and it was not until October of the same year that she found out that

the professor did not make time to read her paper, and that she did not deserve a failing grade.

Tiphany continues to fight her way through the program, constantly going up against her committee members who have shown no support for her efforts to complete her dissertation. According to Tiphany, they continuously pushed back against her methods and her theory to the point where she was really doubting herself. It wasn't until she applied for a national grant and received a very high score that she felt her capabilities and work ethic were affirmed and she was praised for "how well-conceived and thought out" her project was. Still, Tiphany notes that this was a grant she applied to without her committee's support in order to fund her dissertation research.

Her committee members have created other barriers for her. These include not hearing anything from them for months at a time after sending time sensitive documents for their review and requiring her to increase the number of participants in her dissertation study from 100 to 150 although 100 would suffice. By contrast, none of her fellow students have been asked to increase their participants and some committees have even requested that students decrease their participant pool to make their studies more manageable. Tiphany notes that these students have all been White. Overall, Tiffany feels that she is seen as the angry Black woman, and that the faculty would be happy to get rid of her.

Impact of Racism. Tiphany expresses her disappointment with the shattering of her expectations in relation to what she thought getting this degree would be about.

I was so naive and thinking that they wanted me because I'm smart, and I'm talented and have passion. And really, that's not it... sure I checked the box for them. They have to let somebody in, and it just happened to be me. That's kind of how I feel. And I really thought it was going to be about the learning and the experience growing intellectually, and it's not.... They really try to break you. I feel like they really try to break you.

Receiving the 'F' on her final paper was a moment of immense pain. Despite later finding out the truth about the paper, the mental and emotional damage had already occurred. Riddled with shame and self-doubt, Tiphany found it too painful to work on her dissertation and did not touch it for the rest of the year.

I completely shut down. I completely retreated I stopped talking to everybody in my cohort.... I don't want to say my identity was wrapped up in it but something about my self-worth was wrapped up in it and I totally shut down... It really broke me.

The program has almost "broken" Tiphany in other ways. Summarizing the overall experience of pursuing her doctorate Tiphany says, "It's hard to put into words because it's the most degrading, humiliating, soul sucking experience you can go through." The failing of her prospectus paper and many other acts of aggression and racism have pushed her to the point of seriously considering dropping out of the program. She describes being in a severe depressive state in which she isolated herself from family

and friends and would not engage with anyone unless absolutely necessary. She recounts ending friendships and having to work hard to mend and repair them once she came out of her depression. She experiences bodily aches and pains, migraines, and intense self-doubt; wondering if she even deserves a seat at the table, which results in an inability to engage with work and has even made it difficult to get out of bed at times. What made her experiences feel even worse was the absence of consequences for any of the people that she has reported. This lack of response from the administration has reinforced for Tiphany the presence of systemic and institutional racism, and a blatant disregard for her hard work, personhood, and humanity.

Coping and Protective Factors. Despite the barriers of racism, Tiffany has continued to persevere in her program. She highlights an experience that felt incredibly influential when she attended a conference for people of color in her field and heard many stories of discrimination and pain similar to hers. These stories normalized her experiences of racism and she realized that she was not alone in the fight to finish her doctorate in a racist system. Stories of empowerment and resilience gave her the energy to push through her program and allowed her to believe in herself again. In addition to validation, she has developed a system of support from other professionals across the country through the connections she established at this conference, which she regards as the only reason she did not quit the summer after receiving the ‘F.’

Tiphany feels much gratitude for her ancestors and the ancestors of Black folk who have endured much worse pain in order for her to have the opportunity to be in a doctoral program. She talks with admiration about the resilience and toughness she embodies that her ancestors – including her parents – used to fight through an impossibly

racist and violent time. Her gratitude and pride in her identity allows her to take an indignant stance toward her program faculty. While she believes that they would be glad to see her gone she states, “I’m not going to give them that satisfaction.” She recognizes and appreciates the supports that she has received from her boss and church family, as well as her sisters and mother in particular and credits them for insisting that she cannot leave the program and that she must fight to finish. “I felt like everyone I talked to beat that message into me, like, ‘if you quit, they win. You can't let them win; we've come too far’.” Tiphany internalizes this message, but states that when she has completed the program, she never wants to hear from any of the faculty again.

Through her supports, Tiphany has been able to externalize the racism that she experiences, knowing inherently that there is nothing she can say or do to prevent racism from happening to her. Part of her motivation for completing her program and finishing strong is her desire to be a support to other people of color and Black people in particular that come after her. For example, she mentions a close and supportive relationship with a Black woman in the program who is a year ahead of her, and the encouragement of a staff member who is well-known for supporting students of color. Tiphany recognizes that she can also be a resource and place of refuge for others who struggle in similar ways. In fact, she feels that it is her responsibility to be there for other people who may find themselves in a similar position and lay the groundwork for other students of color to make it easier than it was for her.

Recognizing that self-preservation is essential for her to make it through the last stretch of her program, Tiphany outlines several factors that have enabled her to cope with racism and the mistreatment of the program faculty, including the social supports

that she has received from friends, and other professional relationships. She also recognizes the importance of her family and spending time with them. Teaching her nephew how to make cinnamon rolls, canning jams and jellies like her mom taught her, and going fishing like her dad taught her, all ground her and help to clear her mind. In addition to engaging in relationships that feel restorative, she also makes an effort to avoid things that feel disempowering or harmful, and therefore does not go to campus unless absolutely necessary, even making sure that she meets with her dissertation chair off campus to preserve herself.

Gwen

Gwen is a 30-year-old Black woman completing her doctorate in Ethnic studies at an institution in a predominantly White city known for being liberal and racist.

Racial Socialization. She was born and raised in the Western region of the country in a primarily Black and Latinx neighborhood, and at the age of 12 she moved to a predominantly White southwestern region of the country. Gwen mentions that she is “technically” Afro-Latina as her father is Latino and her mother is Black; however, she identifies as a Black woman saying “My whole identity is based on me being a Black woman, I was raised by Black woman to understand the Black community and to see the world as a Black woman.” Having her youth split into two very different environments, one constant that Gwen acknowledges was the presence of racism and anti-Blackness regardless of the demographics of her surroundings.

Living in a predominantly Black and Latinx neighborhood growing up, Gwen recalls an event in early childhood that stood out. When she was about five or six and on her way to get the mail out of the mailbox, she bumped into a tall darker skinned man.

He looked back and looked down on me, and then it's like his whole disposition just changed. Like I was just like, I wasn't a little girl who fell anymore. I was something gross to him.... So, he let go of my hand real quick. And he said, "I just hate you dirty little Black brats always running around and making us look bad," and just going off on a little rant using words that at the time I didn't understand.

She remembers feeling bad about herself and internalizing the interaction with the Black man. "I really do think it probably just stuck with me because he was Black. I really do think that if he was a White person, it probably wouldn't have impacted me as much as it did." Following this interaction, her mother helped her to understand the concept of internalized racism. While in this neighborhood Gwen talks about the inherent anti-Blackness among the Latinx folks in their community demonstrated by White Latinx children not being allowed to play with her because she was Black, and her father being rejected by the other Mexican families in the area because he was with a Black woman. Outside of her neighborhood, Gwen also faced racism in the classroom. She recounts being in the fifth grade and being placed in an English equivalence class based on the assumption that she did not speak "proper" English despite the fact that she was reading at a higher level than the other students in her class.

And she told me that the classes she put me in was for people who spoke only BEV. So - Black English Vernacular.... So basically, Ebonics. And I said, "but I

don't talk like that” because I didn’t. And I was just really confused. And she kept asserting that yes, I do. And that my poor scores in the class were because of that. But my poor scores were because she gave us too much homework, and I was bad at math.... She just made the assumptions that I was not intelligent or that I must be struggling because of my Blackness even though it was just because she gave us too much work. And I was not the only kid in that class that was struggling. We all were, but she only moved me and another Black girl who were in there to another classroom.

When Gwen was 12, her family moved to the southwestern region of the country to a predominantly White area, which changed the way she experienced racism. Rather than the anti-Blackness she received from Latinx folks, she began getting bullied and taunted by White students in ways that were more subtle – yet pervasive – than what she had experienced before. In addition to students, she also experienced racism with the Vice Principal of her high school who targeted her throughout her entire high school career. She explains how she became a target after she accidentally bumped into him when she was turning a corner.

And I was getting ready to apologize, and then he saw that my last name was [name] and started to speak really slow and loud, because he thought I didn't speak English. So, it offended me right away. And then I said: “I can speak English!” ... I humiliated him – because after that there was like this whole thing of “the vice principal needs sensitivity training,” etc., etc..... So, after that, he

found out my name, my class number and he made it his personal mission to make my life hell.

She details several instances in which the Vice Principal would single her out, calling her mother every day to say that she was absent from class when she wasn't, and also tormented her two Black friends, one of whom was a young man that was dating his White daughter. Gwen notes that while she had supports from the few Black people who attended school with her, their support was not enough to help her cope with the torment she experienced from the Vice Principal and her White classmates. She became severely depressed and began experiencing suicidal ideation and was self-harming by cutting "pretty regularly." Before she could complete her high school education, she felt that she could no longer tolerate the hatred and misery and dropped out of high school.

Black Identity Development. Gwen's Black identity is one that she has pride in, however this pride did not come easy for her. She felt she was "drowning in Whiteness" and began to internalize a lot of the racism she experienced. It took time and effort for her to unlearn this internalized racism, but she was able to do so by engaging in literature and teachings from Black authors – specifically Black women – which allowed her to embrace her Blackness regardless of the way the world reacts to it.

So, I was using these books in this literature to try to understand what was going on. And I started like realizing because all these books are saying this isn't you this is them... You don't need to focus on yourself or place the blame – this is all their fault.... And then I just started being like, you know, I like fried chicken and

all this other stuff that I kept hearing about Black people, like “rap is terrible they have a horrible diet. They're loud” and was I like, you know what, I like my diet... I like my music... sometimes I'm happy that I'm like a little loud... But I just really stopped like adhering to respectability politics and I was using them because I thought they would keep me safe. And they didn't. And it just took me a while to understand that if I'm going to have these attacks on me, I still have a right to be happy. And what did make me happy was just being myself. So, talking in slang dressing in African print clothing, liking what I like... And I just, I just really love everything about it. And I just really appreciate it.

Experiences of Racism. Gwen has had a tumultuous doctoral journey. She initially began pursuing her doctorate in sociology but found the program was “incredibly racist” and discriminatory against her as a Black woman. Her research in sociology was about the sex trafficking of Black women and she constantly received feedback that the topic was not legitimate. Several faculty members intimated that the research on Black women was oversaturated, and that there was enough research already done on “sex-workers,” with comments such as “What’s the point of studying sex trafficking of Black women? Everyone does prostitution work,” and “There's no use for a Black feminist sociological inquiry.” She justified her research and the work she did in her program by repeatedly explaining the distinction between sex work and sex trafficking only to be met with dismissive statements and a blatant disregard for her topic of study; displaying an overall degradation of her work and intellectual ability.

Gwen recalls that the program was “incredibly hostile to people of color.” She recalls several instances of racism and discrimination, such as racialized jokes and passive comments about her presence in the program being due to “affirmative action” rather than her being accepted based on her own merit. In addition to comments from students, she received racist comments from faculty members, such as one comparing her features to that of a dog and being praised for “not speaking slang.” Gwen recalls a faculty member speaking about the 2016 presidential election and mentioning that “they hoped when Trump was elected that they would finally do something about all these uppity brown people running around,” to which she expressed shock and disappointment given that the faculty member was originally someone she had regarded as pleasant. The faculty were dismissive of her attempts to report racist incidents from graduate students, and did not take her complaints and grievances seriously, dismissing them as “a disagreement among graduate students.” When she would attempt to report faculty for their racism, she faced similar issues with the burden of proof being on her, and the comments and acts of discrimination being “too subtle” for her to concretely define. Her cohort often received praise for being “very diverse” because several people of color were admitted into the program; however, she notes that there are only two student of color who remain out of the five who were originally a part of this cohort, due to racism and discrimination driving the others to drop out. Gwen herself opted to exit the program and finish with a master’s degree rather than endure several more years of racialized abuse.

Upon exiting the sociology program, Gwen was admitted into the ethnic studies program at the same university to continue the pursuit of her doctorate. While this

experience is certainly more positive than the sociology department, she still faces unique challenges connected to race and gender. In the ethnic studies department, there are more faculty of color and she credits the faculty with the willingness to be reflective when she points out comments that may be racist or prejudiced toward Black people, and to work with her to rectify these issues. However, there is still a lack of Black faculty, and she has come up against unique issues connected to her identity as a Black woman in particular. Believing that there is an “unintentional erasure of Black women” and the work of Black women in her department, she recalls a course on Black Lives Matter which was praised as innovative because “no one else had done this kind of work in the program,” despite the fact that she and another Black woman on the faculty have been doing the work.

And I love the professor who’s doing it. He’s fantastic. But the language around it was all, “nobody else in this department is talking about Black Lives Matter.”

And it’s like okay, so I am and then my advisor literally has a book coming out about it. And there’s just been some real, deliberate eraser of our works for some reason.

The intersections of gender and race continue to arise in her program as Gwen discusses the issue of having to continuously assert that being a Black woman presents its own challenges and that Blackness is experienced differently based on intersecting identities. She has received feedback from undergraduate Black female-identified students that they would like a course on Black womanism – as there are Latina, Asian and Chicana studies courses available – and when she attempted to advocate for this, she

was initially rejected due to a “lack of interest” in the course. When the class was finally developed, it was not well advertised – even though the Black Lives Matter course was heavily marketed – resulting in low enrollment.

But they advertised the heck out of that [Black Lives Matter] class. And it was just... it was literally everywhere. When I was there last semester when they're advertising the spring courses last semester, I didn't see anything for the womanism ones, not in my department.

This subtle erasure of Black women and Black women’s voices is pervasive in this department and makes for an exhausting experience.

...the handful of Black folks that are in my department are overwhelmingly men, and with the exception of my advisor and an instructor everyone else is a man. So, there's times we have to bring up that there's differences in gender and sexuality. That even within like talking broadly about Africana Studies, or just our experiences with discrimination, we have to actually pinpoint that a lot. So, I've actually been able to use [stories of discrimination from other Black women] just to say, we're not experiencing this the exact same way.

Though the degradation and invalidation of her work and focus on Black women is not as present as it was in the sociology program, Gwen still has to justify the legitimacy of her work when applying for grants at the university and departmental level

to receive funding for her research. She has received feedback from grant reviewers who have denied her proposal stating, “they don’t see the value in studying Black women,” and “Oh, we don't feel like there's anything really new to discover there.” During these processes, there has also been a blatant disregard for policies and procedures. Of the grant reviewers, Gwen reports:

And one of them actually said that – which is not something they're supposed to do, the school said that they were going to investigate it – but one of them said that “I know that the student is also Black, and I worry that, that would produce a biased research.” And they're not supposed to actually know us, we don't put anything about our research in there, the only thing we put on there is our department, our name and student ID and then whatever. So, unless they took the time to Google me, they must have actually personally known me and if they actually know me, they were not supposed to actually evaluate me, they’re supposed to send it off to someone else. We don't see who these reviewers are, we just get the results. But I’ve had that pop up a couple times the worry that because I'm Black, and I'm studying Black women, I can't be objective in my research, which is true. Part of my research is saying that I reject objectiveness because it's, it's a relic of Eugenics policies. I'm not using it. So, I've had that I had that happen a lot, like professionally and academically.

As Gwen recounts her experiences in both programs, she notes that she feels welcomed in her current program by certain faculty members and students. However, she

has felt used by some of the “decision makers” amongst the faculty, feeling that she is relevant to some faculty when they need her to do something for them such as teach a course, but is dismissed when she is unable to fulfill their requests. She also feels that there is an unequal distribution of work, resulting in her being assigned much more than her fellow students.

Impact of Racism. For Gwen, experiencing racism from faculty felt far worse than it did coming from other students because she held the belief that entering into fields such as sociology or ethnic studies would yield people who understood oppression and actively worked against it. However, after her first year in sociology she says that it felt the same no matter who it came from in that department. In ethnic studies, issues of racism and erasure that are unaddressed and dismissed hurt worse overall.

But there are times when I bring it up, and I get the exact opposite, sometimes doubling down so that... that actually hurts more, mainly because I believe – and I actually do still believe this – that they are better. But it just still hurts that there's still a time even when places I should be in a place of refuge that I still have to keep like doing triple, double, quadruple everything just for something else. And it just annoys me. So, when I do experience it... It does hurt more.

Gwen’s experience includes many layers of issues related to race and racism, as well as sexism, and the erasure of Black women which she has found exhausting. She mentions that she has to laugh about the ridiculous nature of the racism she experiences to prevent herself from crying. However, physiological issues that were either developed

or exacerbated during her first doctoral program, such as an eye tic that began in her first year as well as a gluten intolerance, have been worse by her program experiences.

Other problems, it was like the development of GERD, and that is a lot of acid in your stomach. And that's triggered mainly for me by stress. It can be food as well but for me it's just stress. So, whenever something is even really mildly stressful, I get that it's really painful. It's like fire in your stomach. So that's going to be there. And then the twitch and all the other stuff... But ever since I went to Sociology, it just triggered this weird chain reaction of pain and feelings that I was probably going to get anyway because everyone else in my family has it, but definitely sped up the process.

Gwen experiences depression and anxiety in response to racism and hardship presented by her program. She notes that she had always had anxiety, but her experience in sociology increased this significantly.

I didn't realize how much of it I was carrying. Until... he [therapist] like kept pushing me to explore this and was like, "but you keep saying you have anxiety and stress from this, where is that actually coming from?" and I had to just say it. And then until he told me I didn't realize how much I was minimizing it because I had to.

Although she does not experience anxiety or stress as strongly in the ethnic studies department, she still has residual anxiety, the eye tic, and twitchy hands as a result of her time in sociology that will “likely be there for the rest of my life.”

Coping and Protective Factors. Gwen is still on track to complete her program and finds herself able to finish the remaining years with indignance to racism and pride and empowerment through her identity. She believes she has much to offer her program as she has a unique lens with which to view research and various issues that are addressed in ethnic studies and has a passion for what she does that cannot be defeated by racism. She receives support from friends outside of the program and is able to be in spaces that foster critical thought and engagement with Black womanist literature. She describes having a system of support among fellow peers who have also experienced discrimination and racism which creates a sense of community to process through experiences and uplift one another. She no longer lives on campus, or even in the city in which the institution is located and limits her on-campus activity to an “as needed” basis. She has a therapist whom she began seeing to address issues separate from the program but was able to utilize this time to process through anxiety and depression related to the program. In addition to therapy and support from friends and peers, Gwen makes an effort to engage in things that will make her happy and that will make her laugh, such as whimsical movies, reading books and seeing movies.

Sarah

Sarah is a 37-year-old Black woman completing her doctorate in Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership.

Racial Socialization. Sarah was born and raised in a predominantly Black midwestern city in a neighborhood often regarded as impoverished and violent, which influenced the saliency of her Black identity and provided her with challenges when she entered predominantly White spaces in adulthood. While she grew up surrounded by Blackness, this did not shield her from experiences of racism. Sarah's mother is of a lighter complexion, while she shares her father's darker complexion. She recalls attending a predominantly White Catholic school at the age of four and being chastised after comparing her skin to that of a White or White skinned Latina who was her classmate.

But I remember it because I thought I was the same complexion as my mom.... I was like oh we're like the same complexion, I'm just like you. And they were like "Oh no." ... And someone was like "no, you're just Black. You're just a nigga."

Sarah felt uncomfortable at the school and begged her mother to allow her to leave. This resulted in her transition from a predominantly White private school to public schools with predominantly Black students and teachers in an effort to feel safer and more comfortable.

Another incident Sarah remembers is when she was taking the train from her mother's house to her father's house when she was about 12 years old. At the time, her mother still lived in the Black area of the city, while her father had moved to a more affluent and predominantly White neighborhood. She frequently rode the train with him

when she would go to his house but on this occasion had asked if she could ride the train by herself because she felt she was old enough to find her way there without him.

And I stayed on the train just to see what it would feel like to not be on the train with my dad. And maybe like two stops happened. And somebody said, “Are you going the wrong way?” and I was like “No, I’m just going to see my dad.” And they were like “Are you sure?” We're having this whole conversation about why I shouldn't be on the train. And I was like, “I'm sure. My dad lives on Howard. And they're like, “Oh, he must have a really good job then.” And I remember thinking about that conversation, because I was like, explaining to my dad that I was old enough to take the train... So, by the time I got there, I remember telling him that I didn't want to take the train by myself. Like, I feel uncomfortable because people don't think I belong there. And I remember thinking how weird that was.

Sarah credits these experiences as moments where she felt discomfort and confusion from the way that people reacted to her identity. As she moved through her education, she attended a predominantly White liberal arts college where she noted a resurgence of the discomfort she experienced at the Catholic school. She described never feeling like she belonged, and recalls being targeted and scrutinized by one of her instructors.

She just said “You write how you think. And it's just so bad.” And it's like... great. Awesome feedback. I can't change that.... And she failed me. Oh yeah.

And I remember, oh, yeah, I got an F in that class. She just told me I was a horrible writer. She consistently told me, and every feedback paper she gave me horrible. “You think how you write you need to fix that”. So, I failed, the class had to retake it with her a different time. And I rewrote every single assignment for her like six times the second time around. So that even the first time around, she was just like, “You suck as a writer.” The second time around, she just made me work like nobody's business. And I often think about that, because I'm like, “How the hell did I get a PhD if I couldn't write?”

As Sarah reflects on this interaction, she feels like part of her bewilderment at the poor treatment she received from this particular instructor and many others had to do with the fact that the predominantly Black neighborhood in which she grew up had “sheltered” her from White people and their constant mistreatment of Black people. Growing up in her neighborhood did not feel as exhausting as it was to be surrounded by Whiteness, which included having to come to the realization that “the world really doesn't like Black people.”

Moving to the southwestern region of the country to complete her doctorate brought other encounters with more subtle forms of racism that continued to challenge Sarah. She recounts various incidents where she is treated poorly in comparison to White patrons in restaurants, such as servers taking longer to take her order or acknowledge her presence, and being sat in isolated places within the restaurants, to which she attributes race as the primary cause.

Black Identity Development. Sarah speaks to the development of her Black identity and the positive factors that contributed to her understanding of and pride in Blackness. After transitioning to Black public schools, she experienced a deliberate focus on Black poetry and authorship that highlighted the beauty of Blackness and the resilience and power that Black people carry with them. She recalls having to memorize these poems, and in doing so she internalized the positive messages about what it means to be Black, which offset the racism and rejection she had experienced from White people.

So, our beautiful black schools made us read a lot of black poets and memorize Black poetry.... But I often think about like all these black poets, that were like, “You are the shit.” Nobody ever wrote that. But they were pretty much saying like, “Don't ever forget how amazing you are.” So, there are moments where like, I hear the creation poem in my head. And like, I remember like, “Oh, man, like, I'm amazing” The amount of poems that I remember and stood up on stages.... Yeah, like that teaches you pride. And it has never gone away.

Since moving to pursue her doctorate, Sarah has noticed that she has to be intentional about engaging with Blackness in order to feel like she is connected to and aware of what is happening in the Black community. Every day she listens to Black media outlets that discuss happenings in the Black community such as pop culture, issues related to social justice, and fellow Black listeners who call in and report on their wellbeing. This helps her feel grounded in her Black identity given the fact that she now

lives in a predominantly White area and does not have as many interactions with Black people.

Experiences of Racism. Sarah is in the third year of her doctoral program and acknowledges several experiences of racial microaggressions. As a Black woman with a name that is often assumed to be White, she explains that when people hear or read the name “Sarah” they assume that she is a White woman and therefore treat her amicably over email. However, when she meets them in person, they do not regard her in the same way, and appear to be shocked that she is the “Sarah” they were corresponding with. She has experienced issues at the library, where she recalls standing at the front desk and the librarians ignoring her presence – waiting for a student employee to be available to speak with her – as if she was not worth their time. When she had to use the InterLibrary Loan service to get access to articles for her comprehensive exams, one librarian in particular was obstructionist.

So, I literally have to go through everything for her, like every single article that I cannot find. So, for comps, I think I put in 15 requests. So, I knew she knew who I was. Like, I felt it in my spirit. Like every time I was sending, I'd be like, “Oh, here we go.” And it would take her like a couple of days, and then she would do it. So, then I walked in one day, and I was like, “Look, this article has no references. Like, that's, that's impossible. You cannot send me a whole article without references.” And she was like, “Well, yes, I can.” “Okay, lady. Articles all have references. So, where's this one?” She's like, “Let me think about it.” She was just annoyed; like how dare I question her looking up an article for me. Or if

it had references on that she was just really pissed off and I was like I'm gonna stand here until you go find the actual physical book that it came out of.

Sarah often has similar experiences. She sits on several different committees with faculty, graduate students, and staff members at the University, and her opinions are often dismissed by other committee members regardless of whether or not her ideas are valuable and speak to the issues at hand. She is not sure if it is solely her race that people are responding to and believes it may also be due to the fact that she appears to look younger than she is.

No, doubt, I look young. So, you can like downplay what you're saying to me, because you think I'm young. And you think I'm not as intelligent. But then you're angry because I am intelligent..., it's like, it's like this weird twist. Like, "Oh, she doesn't look like she's 37. So, she really doesn't know. She probably 25 she's not that smart. She just probably went straight through school anyway," like every assumption that you can make about me being a doctoral student is completely wrong.

While Sarah is unsure of the exact cause of the poor treatment she receives, she also notes that is likely the intersection of her identities and perceived youthfulness; as she does not believe any of the White women on the committees are treated this way. On one occasion, Sarah remembers experiencing overt racism in her program when a

particular professor – with whom she had several negative interactions – unnecessarily scrutinized a group project she was working on.

Like, we got to the point that she would be sitting in class. And we would split off into groups. And she would sit with our group, and literally tell us every sentence that she did not like.... Like we would give ideas in class and she'd be like, no, that's not right. Like, we have to do a pitch every week for that research, study and she was just rude every week. Yeah, every week. She's not there anymore. But she would like tear down my ideas in front of everybody.

This professor was part of the reason that one of her Black male peers chose to drop out of the program entirely, because he felt that the faculty were forcing him to “write Whiter.” Sarah agrees that this was the message coming from the professor – that their Black voices and Black perspective were not relevant or respected and therefore needed to be changed. After completing the paper that was required for this class, Sarah says that she has never looked at this paper again and will not publish it because of the hardship associated with it.

She recalls doing a group project with a White woman who berated and belittled her via text and verbally assaulted her in front of class members because she disagreed with Sarah’s choice of book for their project. Sarah worked at the Title IX office, and when she arrived at work one day, found that several White students who witnessed this woman yelling at her, made a report on her behalf. This level of support was shocking to Sarah, and she felt relieved that she was not the only one interpreting the behavior as

racist. While her fellow peers supported her in that moment, it was still exhausting and draining to go through the ordeal with this student in the first place.

Though Sarah regards her program fairly positively, she is aware of the lack of Black representation in her program, which results in her often being the only Black person – or one of three Black people – in a class. There is also a lack of Black faculty, as one of the few Black faculty members recently left the program. Overall, she feels that she is perceived as someone who is smart, talks too much, is overly emotional (when talking about issues related to race), and lacks grace; all of which she connects to her identity as a Black woman.

Impact of Racism. Sarah's experience in the program has not come without its mental and emotional wounds and she has engaged in therapy to help cope with the impact that being a Black woman in the program was having on her.

The first few months of the program I felt like I was fighting to survive... And the first session I had, I just cried. I talked about being a Black woman on campus, talked about being exhausted. I talked about procrastination, I talked about being anxious, like all of these things that I had never felt before. I work with all white people. My last job, it was 10,000 people at that big old school, and 10,000 people in town, and I never had the anxiety that I have here... And I really process what it meant for me to be a Black woman in our program, where I was building all of these alliances and these ways to protect myself while everybody else wasn't.

Sarah has felt exhausted and drained. She believes that she has to work harder and have more ambition than the White people in her program because she will not be afforded the same leniency if she falls short at any point. She makes an effort not to miss class, turns in assignments on time, and attempts to complete every assigned reading—even when her White counterparts do not feel the pressure to do so – in order to protect herself. The extra energy that she exerts to offset racism and mistreatment has resulted in her feeling burned out and drained. At times she is unable to keep up with her self-maintenance routines, such as getting her nails done, engaging in physical exercise, or listening to music, which she has regarded as helpful coping strategies. She has faced mental blocks that have prevented her from engaging with her work, resulting in severe procrastination and a build-up of impending assignments. On top of the energy that Sarah uses to survive in her program, the lack of access to Blackness and Black people in the city she lives in also begins to take its toll. Although she tries to stay tuned into to what is happening for Black people around the country, she believes that she will not be able to stay in this city, and feels like another looming professional question for her is whether or not she wants to be comfortable or be fairly compensated for her work.

I'm still processing that. Do I want to move to Atlanta, and be a Black woman with a PhD in Atlanta, where there's lots of Black people? And lots of PhD programs? Like, you know what I mean? That's a headache, cause then I won't get paid as much.... Do I want to be the only Black person in my department and be pissed about it all the time and get paid a whole lot of money?

These concerns continue to plague Sarah and increase her stress and anxiety as she moves through her doctoral program towards completion.

Protective Factors/Coping. Reflecting on the impact of issues Sarah has encountered thus far on her journey she feels empowered in her Black identity and her spirit of determination and indignance to complete her degree. She believes that she has had a better experience than other people of color in the program, but only because she has taken actions to circumvent the possibility of being mistreated or discriminated against. Sarah describes her personality as one that is “bubbly” and always happy, intentionally engaging with those around her to create bonds. This trait not only applies to the program but to her life outside of the program as well. She has adapted to making herself known and develops relationships with others as a means to help offset poor treatment.

Like I am constantly thinking, what do I need to do for people to not mistreat me.... So that's like my way of like dealing with “I don't want you to mistreat me.” So, if you know who I am, then you'd be less likely to mistreat me.

Her philosophy to finish her program has protected her from the racism and discrimination experienced by others in her program. She regards this a strength as well as a necessary skill.

And I have also been very intentional about developing alliances and very strong relationships with the faculty members, even if I don't like them. So... people are

bridges. And to get wherever I want to go, I need to walk across bridges, and get what they know. And then I'll walk back across it and walk away. So, I have such a different perspective. Like, if you ask another Black person in our program, do they feel welcome by the professors, they will probably be like, "no, they don't respect me" or something like that. No, I need all of their resources, every single one.

Sarah made the decision to engage in more alliance building throughout her program after witnessing the racism, discrimination and mistreatment of Black and people of color in her program. Through her alliance building, Sarah feels that she has support from other faculty members – particularly her advisor – as well as from other doctoral students.

Anthony

Anthony is a 32-year-old Black Ethiopian man completing the third year of his doctorate in critical studies in education.

Racial Socialization. At the age of seven, Anthony was adopted and raised in a predominantly White area in the western region of the U.S. Anthony states that he was raised in a colorblind and racist environment by his adoptive White family which affected his understanding of race relations and what it means to be a Black man. His exposure to Blackness growing up was limited – not recalling a Black person in his home aside from he and his biological brother for his entire childhood (ages 7-18). He has come to realize that the distance his family placed between themselves and Blackness was both

intentional and racist, and subsequently affected his ability to understand how race impacted his experiences.

And so being in that white culture, race - definitely not racism - was not talked about or even engaged whatsoever. It wasn't taught that "being a black man, having black skin as I emerged as an adult was going to bring certain things into my life that I could expect, like clockwork. And here is how to engage in that" I wasn't taught that.

Anthony felt out of place for a majority of his upbringing and acknowledges that he knew his race differentiated him from his White counterparts. In an effort to connect to his Black identity, he recalls being in grocery stores around the age of 6, and literally stopping in his tracks to stare at Black people with a longing and desire to be connected to them. He recognized at an early age that there was something wrong with this sense of disconnection and that a piece of him was missing. This realization caused him to feel even more displaced in his environment, particularly because of his lack of control over the situation as a child who was stuck surrounded by Whiteness. Anthony recalls a moment of his youth where he and his brother were playing basketball outside of his house, and several older White men – perhaps in their early twenties – drove up.

One of them said, "Oh there's some niggers next door," and I heard it, and I said, "What did you say?" And he's like, "I didn't say anything." That's how I knew,

because he knew who I was talking to. He's like, "I didn't say anything." But I didn't make it up. Like you just said it.

Anthony's uncle who had overheard the interaction in the house came outside and reprimanded Anthony for his role in the situation. At that moment it was confirmed that he was indeed not White, and that he could not trust White people. In addition to overt forms of racism, there were noticeable "othering" non-verbal behaviors from older White people in his environment, such as looks and stares that felt more than "generational dismissals" and were likely due to his Black identity.

Black Identity Development. While Anthony began to understand where he stood in predominantly White environments, Blackness still felt elusive. He had difficulty grasping what Blackness meant to him, how he needed to perform Blackness, and what aspects of this identity he was "allowed" to claim as his own. His journey was complicated by messages he received from fellow Black people telling him that certain aspects of him were not considered Blackness.

I learned early on that what I was considering my own Blackness wasn't actually Blackness. And that I should be on eggshells about it. That's how I feel. I feel on eggshells about it... when I say that I was specifically speaking to Black peers growing up or Black people I've encountered or been close with as adults who said, "You're not Black. This is Blackness, this is not you" and drawn the distinctions for me.

Anthony's identity as a Black man shapes who he is and how he navigates his daily life. He no longer goes to grocery stores and avoids taking elevators and public transportation in an effort to avoid being stared at or "accosted by people's gaze" in suspicion of his presence as a Black man. These are places that he has most often experienced microaggressions, and because he can plan for and predict them, he finds it best to avoid it all together. He notes being conscious of the way he dresses as well as the information he shares when speaking with White people, making an effort to be intentional about how he is communicating certain aspects of his life while keeping in mind the negative assumptions often made about Black men. Though he acknowledges having humanizing experiences with some White people, he has made concerted efforts in his adult life to avoid engaging with Whiteness.

Experiences of Racism. Anthony describes the racialized experiences in his program as more demonstrations of Whiteness than overt racist acts. He notes that these demonstrations of Whiteness are rooted in racism – and *are* racist; however, they are much more subtle and therefore more pervasive. Faculty and students in his program continuously engage in behaviors that contribute to the maintenance of the status quo which perpetuates Whiteness and White supremacy in the system; even when they are unaware that they are doing so. He has experienced racism throughout his academic career, noting that prior to his doctoral program other forms were more overt, such as White classmates making "bootstrapping" arguments to justify disparities for people of color. The same macroaggressions are made via arguments that perpetuate similar marginalizing ideologies, but because the language is more insidious and eloquent it is more difficult to call attention to.

...The more overt pushback is.... it's easier to feel it. It's... yes, it's the same because it's all leading towards the same end, I believe. But it's different, because you can actually identify it in a way that others can start to make sense of it. And you don't look as crazy. When it's so mystified – like it can be in this type of a program – you start to look even more crazy when you're the only one trying to highlight something that most people have no clue is going on, because they're all just like, “Oh, yeah, we're just like these amazing, you know, whatever.”... those more overt forms, I guess, are less crafty versions of the same message, which is “I as the person control this communication, I control this narrative. I'm the determiner of” whatever, whatever. So, the forms are more just forceful, I guess. Like “my dad did it. I don't understand why these people won't just do it themselves. Like, stop whining” type of shit. It's less catered, less dressed up. It's the same fucking turd. It's just not dressed up.

While some of these arguments are covert and ambiguous in nature, they are still a function of White supremacy, and contradict the values that the institution and program claim to uphold. He has experienced the fragility of faculty and students who identify themselves as advocates of social justice, inclusion and equity but are unwilling to engage in difficult conversations about how they contribute to the perpetuation of racism. Anthony's commitment to critical thought and dismantling of White systems is not typically well received by many faculty and students, largely because they are afraid of being labeled a racist when he challenges them. He believes that as a Black man, his

discourse and research interests are viewed as a threat, and he does not feel welcome by a majority of the people in his program. He experiences levels of rejection by way of walking into classrooms that subsequently fall silent upon his entry “enough times and with enough of a tension in the air that you know that it’s something.” At times he is labeled as aggressive when interacting with White students in class.

Once I was in a class and in a group of four other people who were talking about the text, and I’d asked the question... They’d started to speak about it but was diverting the topic. And I interrupted that person and I said, “Well, I’m curious what you think about my question.” And then another female said, “well, that’s patriarchy right there because you just cut her off.” I said, “Okay, I disagree. Because she’s not answering the question... and I’m curious because I think the question has value that’s why I asked it, because I’m wondering.” And then the same person went to continue, and then was ratcheting up, this blow back or push back for asking a question. And then was telling me that I had made these assertions when I had not made any assertion. I was merely asking questions.... I made no assertions. But the accusation was, I made... on some sort of derogatory basis some sort of assertion that I hadn’t made, merely as a way to discredit [me]. All these people who witnessed it, are not addressing that there was no assertion, these are fabricated attacks. Under the guise that I’m the attacker. And this happened many times.

These experiences have been both draining and exhausting. Anthony feels that he is often alone in his attempts to challenge his classmates to think more critically about course content, and specifically the ways in which they are facilitating the maintenance of White supremacy. He notes that professors are often dismissive of him and his presence in class and have discredited him in front of the classroom for no obvious reason. He believes that he received a B+ in a course in which he should have received an A, as retaliation to his discourse and the way he challenged the professor. Though these racist experiences occur with both faculty and students, it feels worse coming from faculty because they have more power in any given situation, and also embolden students to continue dismissing his thoughts and ideas while holding firm to the ideology of Whiteness as neutral. He is frustrated by the lack of support for his attempts to engage his colleagues and professors in meaningful conversations that forces them to address the presence of Whiteness in both course material and application of critical thought. Though he sees his role in the program as one that includes a responsibility to ask provocative questions in an effort to elicit meaningful conversations, and he acknowledges that he has to balance this with his own self-care.

And then it's just like, why, you know? Where's the professor? Where's the other colleague to jump in and support this discussion, and then you just feel too burdened and then it's like, you know, sometimes you just want to check out. But it's like picking and choosing, because it's like, I'm not going to *not* speak what I believe to be the truth. At the same time, I have to also balance that with my own need for well-being for myself, for my family.

As a Black man, Anthony does not have the luxury to speak on these issues in the same ways that people with more privileged identities do. He notices that White people who make assertions or ask more provocative questions are able to do so unabashedly and without as much opposition or consequence, which has not been the case for him.

Impact of Racism. Anthony's attempt to balance his authentic feelings, thoughts and way of being in the program have had an impact on his overall experience. He has struggled with interpersonal relationships with many of his peers and faculty, which puts him a difficult position of how and when to choose his battles.

...There's a daily choice to either turn my back on people and causes in myself that I believe in or walk around with a target on my back. And so, I think it's affected my networking ability, which affects... directly affects financial well-being. It affects social emotional aspects, as far as peer to peer connections. Before and after, during class, it affects how I engage with the course content, and how I can do that with peers, with colleagues or not. It affects how much my advisors dedicated to advising me, it affects therefore, her well-being. And since there's... I'm not going to put a bunch of extra work on her plate that affects my well-being. There are things and efforts that need to be made to clean up messes from fall outs, that take time, take energy. All that is added on to a typical doctoral load.

While in the program, there have been occasions where Anthony has wondered “when is the last time I felt joy?” relaying that the experiences of racism have affected his

ability to trust and be open with others, and has resulted in bitterness, anger and resentment. He has received a diagnosis of PTSD from his therapist, which is a result of both current and previous life experiences; but he notes that his time on campus has contributed to the experience of racialized trauma. Enrolling in this program was not a decision he made lightly, as he knew that it would affect interpersonal relationships outside of the program with not only his family and friends, but also for his partner and their family as well. Learning information about systems of oppression has allowed him to speak from a knowledgeable place about all of the “hunches” he had growing up about race, racism and White supremacy, which has caused people in his life to treat him like a “leper.”

Coping and Protective Factors. Despite the challenges, Anthony’s resilience and passion have served as a protective factor as he navigates the program. He refuses to allow the narratives that he brings forth to be silenced and does additional work to connect his thoughts and ideas to literature and scholarship. He identifies this as a “happy burden,” that allows him to be more engaged in the program and the coursework in a meaningful way. Although several faculty and students have made this journey more difficult, he has been able to cultivate affirming relationships with faculty and student in the program. He takes time to himself to engage in activities that are soothing to him, such as painting and creating art, finding downtime at home, reengaging with therapy after 14 years, and attempting to find quiet time “removed from society” as often as possible. He also finds it grounding to read scholarly works as a means to understand the presence and impact of systems of oppression. This helps him make sense of his

experiences and avoid the internalization of racism and know that he is not experiencing this alone.

Synthesis

All participants acknowledge that they have always been aware of their Black identity but highlight early experiences of racism – beginning between ages 4-7 –that taught them that being Black was in some way bad or something to be looked down upon. These interactions have resulted in the participants experiencing varying levels of pain, confusion, and discomfort as the first of many instances where they were treated negatively or blatantly discriminated against because of their Black skin. Sarah, Gwen and Tiphany each felt uncomfortable and/or hurt by these actions, while Anthony recognized that there was something wrong about him being Black in a predominantly White environment. While most of the participants point to specific instances of racism, they acknowledge that they knew that there was something wrong about what they were experiencing even without fully understanding the nuances of racism.

Each participants' Black identity is of high salience to them, and they express pride in being Black. However, Tiphany, Gwen and Anthony note that it felt difficult for them to fully internalize positive aspects of Blackness based on the White environments they were raised in and the subsequent negative messages they received about being Black. Tiphany and Anthony specifically recall receiving messages about how they do not fit into Blackness from other Black identified people, which made this process even more complex and painful. Sarah speaks to being raised in a predominantly Black environment and receiving more positive messages about Blackness which allowed her to develop a strong positive Black identity early on. Tiphany and Gwen mention that they

love Blackness and all that it encompasses despite the messages they have received. Anthony speak to how his awareness of his Black identity informs how he navigates his world, where he does and does not go, and how he presents himself to others. Sarah notes that she engages in daily behaviors to intentionally stay connected to Black people now that she is in a predominantly White environment.

The participants entered their doctoral programs with their respective understandings of Blackness, racism and their positive racial identity. The racism experienced in their program ranges from lack of representation from being one of few – if not the only – Black people in a classroom, to receiving failing grades for significant assignments. These experiences of racism vary in terms of severity and intensity. Several participants describe the frustration arising from faculty racism due to their lack of power in these interactions and the evaluative power faculty have over them. Additionally, faculty racism emboldens other (mainly White) students in their enactments of racism and discrimination. In most cases no action was taken in response to faculty and student discrimination and racism, reinforcing the presence of systemic racism within the institutions. Participants communicate being seen unfavorably by a majority of faculty and students in their programs based on their race and the ways in which they engage or do not engage with others.

While the experiences of racism vary the overall impact is similar across participants. Several report anxiety or symptoms of anxiety and depression or depressive symptoms. They experience interpersonal conflicts and strains; physiological manifestations of stress and anger; and in one case, dropping out of a program. Participants' various ways of coping with these racialized stressors include therapy,

social supports, making sense of their experience through literature and scholarly works, and grounding activities that are not associated with the program.

Summary

This chapter contained two sections. The first section contains individual profiles of the four participants by describing five themes that emerged from data analysis: racial socialization, Black identity development, experiences, of racism, impact of racism, and coping and protective factors. The second section contains a synthesis of the four participants' experiences.

Chapter 5 answers the research question and sub-questions, by exploring the ways in which the profiles support, extend, and refute the literature on the impact of racial experiences on mental and physiological wellbeing and coping and protective factors. Also, I share my personal reflections of the study, and discuss the study's implications, its limitations, and directions for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of four Black doctoral students attending predominantly white institutions (PWI). Using a phenomenological interviewing approach and the framework of Critical Race Theory, I explored their understanding of their own Black identities, their experiences of racism in their programs and on their campuses, and the subsequent impact on their mental health.

The study addressed the following questions:

1. How do Black doctoral students attending a PWI describe their experiences of racism within their program and on campus?
2. How does their experience of racism in their program and on campus affect their mental well-being?
3. How does the manifestation of racism influence their perception of their ability to succeed academically within their program?
4. What are the ways that Black doctoral students have found to cope with racialized issues that may or may not have manifested as racial trauma?

I analyzed the data using the methods described in chapter 3 and identified five central themes that were both derived from the literature and emerged from each interview that best describes the lived experiences of the participants. These themes are:

1. Racial socialization
2. Black identity development

3. Experiences of racism
4. Impact of racism
5. Coping and Protective factors

In this chapter I revisit these themes to address the aforementioned research questions. I also include the role of Critical Race Theory, implications of the study, limitations, suggestions for future research, and my final thought and reflections.

Research Questions

Research Question One: *How do Black doctoral students attending a PWI describe their experiences of racism within their program and on campus?*

Findings indicated an array of experiences of microaggressions, discrimination, and other racist acts across participants. This question is best answered using information gathered under the theme “experiences of racism,” under which several subthemes emerged and will be explored here.

Racial Isolation. Each participant is one of few, if not the only Black students in their program. Coupled with a lack of Black representation among faculty, this feature of their doctoral experience forced them to navigate predominantly White spaces without the protection or support of those with shared identities in the way that their White counterparts were able to do.

Racialized Comments and Insidious Messages. The participants experienced racialized comments and insidious messages from both students and faculty in passive and aggressive ways that communicated that they were not welcome or wanted in the program. Gwen was told that her presence in her program was due to affirmative action rather than her merit, implying that she was only granted acceptance based on a need to

fulfill a diversity requirement. She also mentioned several other macro and microaggressive comments made by faculty and students such as being told she looks like a dog, racist jokes about Black people, and a faculty member complaining about the “uppity Brown people” in the department, along with other racially aggressive comments made to her in private. While she did not speak to specific comments made to her directly, Tiphany also endorsed these insidious messages of Black people being unwanted in the program resulting in her feeling that she was only admitted in order to fulfill a diversity requirement, and that the faculty did not want her to succeed or complete her degree. Sarah also spoke to experiences of racism during committee meetings on campus where her ideas were challenged and/or dismissed entirely, implicitly communicating the lack of value of her contributions as a Black woman.

Coursework Discrimination. Anthony received a B instead of an A in a class based on his attempts to engage in the course material in a more critical way that challenged the professor, despite the fact that White students had done similar things without consequence. For Tiphany, this occurred multiple times with two different statistics professors penalizing her work without sufficient cause; in one case even blatantly giving her a lower grade than her White counterpart. Most notably, the more damaging demonstration of grade discrimination was the failing grade she received for the paper that was the start of her prospectus, due to the professor “not having time” to grade it appropriately. Similarly, Sarah noted her professor constantly tore down her ideas and unnecessarily critiqued her work for no apparent reason. Along with coursework discrimination, Tiphany experienced a marked increase in workload when

she was asked to increase her participant pool by 50 although it was unnecessary for her study, while White counterparts were not asked to do the same.

Gendered Racism and Misogynoir. Sarah, Gwen, and Tiphany experienced this in various ways. The more overt demonstrations of gendered racism were discussed by Gwen as she detailed the erasure of Black women and their work in her program by both White faculty and faculty of color. She also mentioned frequently needing to assert that Black women experience racism differently based on the intersections of their identities, because this consideration was constantly overlooked by faculty and students; as well as the heavy critique and dismissal of her research based on the topic of the sex-trafficking of Black women. Both Sarah and Tiphany spoke to more covert ways that gendered racism showed up for them, with the way they were perceived in the program being colored by stereotypes of Black women being, angry, loud, or overly emotional.

Neutrality of Whiteness. Anthony's experiences of racism in his program were best conceptualized using the rhetoric of CRT, and its position that racism is present, but often ambiguous and deeply ingrained in our systems and society (Cook & Dixson, 2013). He described his encounters with racism as perpetuations of Whiteness and White supremacy, which were embedded in the fabric of the institution and the program. Because he tried to challenge the status quo and the narrative of the neutrality of Whiteness, he was perceived as a threat and an aggressor. While he did not speak to more overt racist acts, racism was still a looming presence, making his program more difficult to navigate. Similar to Tiphany, many faculty and students did not want or value his presence in the program. Other participants relayed instances of racism that were experienced in this way as well. Gwen discussed the overwhelming presence of old,

White, male scholars and their theories being the foundation for her program and the lack of integration of theorists of color or even theories that address the role of culture more explicitly during her time in sociology. Overall, all of the aforementioned themes under which participants experienced racism in their doctoral programs show relics of Whiteness being regarded as neutral or “normal” while regarding anything other than White as a deviation from the norm. The lack of representation of Black students and faculty, racist comments and jokes, being discriminated against in the classroom or through research, the experience of misogynoir are experienced due to the casual ordinariness of racism and racial discrimination.

Racial socialization played a role in the participants’ experience and understanding of racism in this study. Gwen, Anthony, and Tiphany were all raised in predominantly White areas at some point in their childhood or adolescence, while Sarah was the only participant who was raised in a predominantly Black environment. Her experiences of racism were few and far between as she grew up, and she noted that she felt she was protected from racism (aside from the two experiences she shared) because she was raised around Black people. This may have resulted in Sarah not readily coding racist interactions as such, due to her lack of experience of more insidious forms of racism growing up. Gwen, Anthony and Tiphany’s exposure to Whiteness early on could have facilitated the development of an ability to detect and become familiar with more nuanced forms of racism that are were present in their program. Consequently, Sarah’s upbringing in a Black environment was evident in her Black identity development as she reported the internalization of Black pride early on, rather than the tumultuous journey of

having to unlearn the internalization of White racism as Gwen, Anthony, and Tiphany reported as part of their experience.

The participants' experiences align with Mackey and Scurfield's (2001) outline of the three ways racism can be experienced: single or repeated exposures that have a lasting and memorable impact; covert and subtle exposures to racism; and insidious exposure, which is chronic and pervasive exposures to racism. All of the reported instances of racism have had a lasting and memorable impact on the participants based on the fact that they were all readily able to recall these experiences and provide details without effort. Most of the experiences (aside from racialized jokes and blatantly racist comments) were more covert and subtle in nature, as these aggressions left space that would allow one to cite reasons other than race to justify participant experiences. As was demonstrated in each narrative, the participants' experiences of racism in their programs have been chronic and pervasive in that each participant spoke to these situations occurring "all of the time" or "very often."

As was mentioned in chapter two, one of the three types of racism that can lead to race-based traumatic stress injury was discriminatory harassment; an aversive and hostile racism involving thoughts, behaviors, policies, feelings, actions, or procedures that are intended to create distance from a racial group after a person from that non-dominant group has gained entry into an environment they were previously excluded from (Carter, 2007). The participants endorsed experiencing acts of racism that distanced them from their program and caused them to feel unwanted. This can be theorized as a relic of discriminatory harassment, given that Black people were historically kept out of White institutions, and still represent a small percentage of those pursuing doctoral degrees. The

presence of discriminatory harassment is made more evident when considering that most participants' reports of racism went unaddressed and the aggressors unpunished – indirectly communicating that their concerns were not valid or serious enough for administration to seriously consider.

Several of the experiences of racism participants reported in this study differ from what other studies have reported for doctoral students of color. Truong and Museus (2012) discussed experiences of racism such as students of color (including Black doctoral students) suppressing research topics and interests in an effort to please advisors, balancing the need to advocate for racial justice with maintaining relationships with advisors and faculty, enduring White peers gossiping about them, and code switching to appear less threatening. While this may also be the experience of the doctoral students in this study, they did not speak to these issues in their interviews, suggesting that additional research should be conducted about how racism appears in different doctoral programs.

Research Question Two: *How does their experience of racism in their program and on campus affect their mental well-being?*

Participants detailed the ways in which they have experienced racism, and its subsequent effects on their overall mental and physical health. When considering the role of racial trauma, this question is best answered using the information gathered under the theme “impact of racism,” as well as subthemes that are informed by various researchers' identification of the way racial trauma symptoms have been shown to manifest. The subthemes identified in the literature and used here, are *affective symptoms*, *relational symptoms*, *somatic symptoms*, and *spiritual symptoms*. (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Loo, Singh, Scurfield, & Kilauano, 1998).

Affective Symptoms. Sarah and Gwen explicitly communicated a marked increase in anxiety due to the racial stress of their program. Gwen noted that she had always had anxiety but it became more unmanageable as she continued to experience racial aggressions from her program; while Sarah shared that she had been in leadership positions working with White people before, yet she did not have the same levels of anxiety as she experienced in her program, constantly exhausted and drained by the experience. Tiphany experienced depression, characterized by low self-esteem, self-doubt, grief, anger, and an inability to get out of the bed. This was accompanied with cognitive and physical avoidance of her dissertation for almost a year as she was unable to engage with her work following the receipt of her failing grade. Anthony received a diagnosis of PTSD that he attributes in part to the racism he experienced and endorsed wondering “When was the last time I felt joy,” while primarily managing feelings of anger, bitterness, and resentment that were readily accessible.

Relational Symptoms. Relational symptoms include the distrust of the dominant group as a result of racism, as well as distrust of other people of color due to internalized racism. None of the participants expressed a distrust of people of color; however, Anthony and Tiphany both spoke to their lack of trust in the faculty and/or students in their program. This distrust came with interpersonal consequences such as an inability to network or build relationships that would have been beneficial among students and faculty members. Relational symptoms also refer to more general interpersonal difficulties that develop as a consequence of racialized stress and trauma. Tiphany noted she had disengaged from several personal relationships as a result of the racism she

experienced in her program and had to repair these relationships upon coming out of her depression.

Somatic Symptoms. Participants experienced a number of somatic symptoms. For example, Tiphany dealt with migraines and body aches while for Gwen, the development of an immune disorder, an eye tic, and twitchy hands are permanent relics of the program and its racism that may remain with her forever.

Spiritual Symptoms. Anthony was the only participants to mention spiritual symptoms arising from the program, stating that the racism and gas lighting he experienced challenge his faith in humanity and human decency, which made it difficult to engage with others in an open and honest way.

The subthemes used to answer this question were derived from the literature review and previous research. The most surprising manifestations of racial trauma that have been identified in the literature but were not reported by participants, are the cognitive symptoms of racism, where individuals have issues with concentration, remembering and focusing (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Loo, Singh, Scurfield, & Kilauano, 1998). Participants also shared a few sentiments that did not fit under the subthemes. They communicated feeling deep pain, and how the pain was made even worse when the aggressor was a faculty member due to the power differential and the fact that their racism enabled students to engage in racist and microaggressive behaviors as well. Participants also had to navigate their program and expend additional energy to make conscious decisions about how to respond to people, what to speak up about, and when to pick certain battles in an effort to preserve their own safety and sanity.

Severe stress responses to racism can have long-term effects on mental and physical health (Polanco-Roman, Danies & Anglin, 2016). This was the case with the participants in this study; especially when considering the prolonged exposure to and engagement with academic environments for several years in order to complete their degree. As mentioned in the literature, the three elements of trauma are: 1) an individual subjectively perceives the event as negative; 2) the event is experienced as occurring suddenly and unexpectedly; and 3) the event is perceived as out of the person's control (Taylor, 1997). The participants' experiences of racism met at least two of the three criteria; however, while they might have been able to predict some elements of racism in their program, they were still not in control of the racism, which negatively impacted their overall well-being. While this study cannot conclude whether or not participants were suffering from racial trauma as it is defined, their responses align with symptoms of racial trauma proposed by Carter (2007). One tenet of critical race theory is the fact that racism contributes to group (White) advantage and group (non-White) disadvantage (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Matsuda et al., 1993). Given the symptoms of racial trauma participants align with, there is clear evidence of the psychological and emotional disadvantage to the well-being of those who do not fit into White standards.

Research Question Three: *How does the manifestation of racism influence their perception of their ability to succeed academically within their program?*

The participants' description of racism served as a barrier to the completion of their degree. They were not only expected to execute the demanding requirements of the program but had to do so with the additional stressors and traumas of racism. The experience of racism and need to navigate the system to both negotiate safety and

complete their degree impeded their academic success. For example, Gwen identified racist exclusionary tactics that bred financial consequences that prevented her from receiving grants to fund her research. Their inability to connect with students and faculty affected networking opportunities and directly impacted financial opportunities that other students received in support of their academic and professional achievements in relation to their dissertation research – a requirement to complete their degree.

Participants described being “downgraded” in the program, receiving lower grades than what they deserved, and having to focus on completing the program rather than fighting for a deserved grade –barriers that they felt White peers did not face. For example, Gwen dropped out of her sociology program in response to the racism she experienced – while Tiphany almost dropped out. However, participants felt that their identities and research interests (which were often connected to Blackness) give them an advantage over their White peers citing a stronger intrinsic motivation to complete their degree.

Existing literature highlights the adverse impact of the imposter syndrome for Black students, and how this may be a higher predictor of academic success and achievement than perceived racism and discrimination (Smith, Bernard, Hurst, Jackson, Stone, Awosogba, Saucer, Bailey, & Roberts, 2017; Cokley et. al., 2013; Cokley et. al., 2017). Given this, it was surprising that participants did not speak to imposter feelings overtly – though there were instances questioning self-worth and experiencing low self-esteem that could possibly be characterized as imposter feelings. The lack of mention of imposter syndrome could be a result of the intrinsic motivation participants spoke to, and

the indignant attitude each of them adopted to ensure the completion of their degree despite the barriers of racism.

Research Question Four: *What are the ways that Black doctoral students have found to cope with racialized issues that may or may not have manifested as racial trauma?*

The ability to learn about and understand how participant's coped with racialized stress and trauma in their doctoral program is significant. Doctoral students have achieved the most advanced level of education, and doctoral students of color have been able to do so despite the barriers of racism and discrimination (Truong & Museus, 2012). Thus, it is invaluable to get a sense of how they navigated these environments and what coping and protective factors were instrumental in their success.

Three of the four participants received therapy to address the issues they experienced in their program, along with other life stressors that are compounded by racialized stress and trauma. Each participant engaged in personal activities outside of their program that they found soothing and grounding, such as watching movies and videos, creating art, canning jellies and jams, fishing, maintaining personal hygiene, and spending time with family and friends. Social and professional supports have been found to be a significant coping mechanism against racism and race-related stress (Hoggard, Byrd, & Sellers, 2012; Sanders, Thompson, 2006). Participants utilized social supports by engaging with others who were experiencing similar racialized stressors. They found these supports both healing and restorative, thereby decreasing the feeling of isolation and reminding them that the experience of racism was not unique to them. Collectively, participants created a sense of community with other people of color in their program as well as people of color from around the country who shared similar research interests and

built meaningful relationships with at least one faculty member to offset the impact of the program racism and provided energy in their ability to move forward.

Notably, Sarah was the only participant that did not experience as much discrimination or racism from the program as her Black peers, because she engaged in alliance building in an effort to avoid mistreatment by faculty and students. On the one hand, this could be interpreted as a coping strategy and a protective factor, as she did not view a majority of her interactions in the program as racist. On the other hand, this could also be interpreted as either her adhering to respectability politics (which could have additional deleterious effects on mental health) or attributing other causes to racist experiences (i.e., internalizing racism or engaging in self-blame due to the ineffectiveness of her alliance building). While she recognized this as an asset and a protective factor for her in her program, she also described negative mental and emotional implications of exerting this energy to protect herself. This led to feelings of exhaustion and an inability to engage in other coping strategies such as maintaining physical health through exercise and overall maintenance (i.e., manicures and pedicures, hair maintenance).

Anthony and Gwen engaged with literature written by Black authors that speak to the structures of racism and ways to dismantle racism within various systems, which provided a sense of community and served as a way to externalize their experiences. Tiphany and Gwen avoided the campus when they were able, as a means of self-preservation. Similar to coping strategies, there were protective factors that offset the impact of racism, described in the themes of racial socialization and Black identity development. Each participant entered the program with a comprehensive understanding of the way the world reacts to Black identified people through their previous experiences

of racism. With this prior knowledge they were able to identify acts of racism and learned to externalize these experiences rather than internalizing and engaging in self-blame; a coping mechanism identified in other studies of racialized stress among Black identified people (Brown, et. al., 2012; Brown & Tylka, 2011; Fischer & Shaw, 1999; Harris-Britt, Valrie, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2007; Neblett, White, Ford, Philip, Nguyen, & Sellers, 2008). While this was not always sufficient – as there were still experiences that led to extreme self-doubt and low self-esteem – the outcomes of their racist experiences may have been worse had it not been for their pride in their Black identity and their understanding of the prevalence of racism. Overall, each participant embodied an indignance to the racism in their program and barriers that impeded their academic progress. Their pride in their Black identity allowed them to maintain a level of engagement in their program to push through despite the adversity, in order to complete their degrees.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) centers race in critical analysis and names racism wherever it is present, while challenging the retelling of the stories of people of color by White scholars (Roithmayr, 1999; Solorzano, 1997, 1998; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). CRT insists that racism exists on an institutional and systemic level and uses the voices of marginalized groups to speak to the presence and impact of such racism (Cook & Dixson, 2013). I chose CRT as a framework because it is essential to conceptualize this study with the understanding that racism is endemic to life in the United States and presents itself in both subtle and blatant ways (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Matsuda et al., 1993). This was critical due to my choice to center the narratives of Black doctoral

students and allow them to tell their own stories. One of the tenets of CRT is to regard the experiences and stories of people of color as evidence of racism (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Matsuda et al., 1993), which was the case in this study's use of interviews as a primary means of data collection. With the recognition of racism as deeply engrained in this society, the assumption is that the experiences of the participants should not be questioned. Their perceptions of racism are accurate, and they are inherently disadvantaged in comparison to their White peers based on their racial identity; and the subsequent psychological effects are direct causes of the racism they have experienced.

Implications

The study's findings as it relates to the experiences of racism among Black doctoral students and the subsequent psychological harm has implications for Black people in the United States, doctoral programs, practicing clinicians, training programs and research.

Implications for Black People in the United States

The current climate of the U.S. is one of blatant and systemic racial violence. In the year 2020, we have seen a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in response to police brutality and White supremacy that has led to the deaths of Ahmed Aubrey, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tony McDade and countless other Black bodies. Global protests and rebellions demanding justice for the unnecessary and brutal slaughter of Black people continue to highlight the injustices in our criminal justice system. While the racist and violent treatment of Blacks by police and White nationalists is not new, we are seeing another wave of high media coverage by way of viral videos and stories of brutalization and injustice – similar to the coverage following the deaths of Michael

Brown in 2014, and Philando Castile and Alton Sterling in 2016 (among many, many others).

Racism has been more blatant, and those who hold racist ideals and beliefs have been more emboldened since the presidential election of Donald Trump and his undoubtedly racist and hateful rhetoric. Through tweets, press conferences and rallies, Trump has criminalized protestors for Black lives, while regarding White nationalists and White supremacists as “very fine people.” In addition to blatant racists, there are White people who play into racist ideals and actions – despite whether they intend to – that are equally as harmful to Black people. Janet Helms’ White Identity model (1990) outlines different stages that White people may generally go through to understand their racial identity and the privileges and power associated with it. One stage in particular “pseudo-independence” refers to the process of White people intellectualizing their commitment to their racial group while deceptively tolerating other racial groups. Many White Americans can be conceptualized as falling into this category, where they are not consciously aware of or intending to enact racist ideologies; but do so all the same. While there is division in the country regarding politics, human rights, and human decency, the constant exposure to various forms of racism has deleterious effects on Black people’s overall mental health and can manifest as racial trauma (Bor, Venkataramani, Williams, & Tsai, 2018; Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2006; Carter, 2007).

Black Americans must be aware of what witnessing constant violence and racism against other Black people can do to their mental health. It is essential to be able to recognize that depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, low self-worth, anger and bitterness are direct symptoms of racial trauma that are developed as a direct result of experiencing

personal and vicarious individual, systemic, and institutional racism (Carter, 2007). This study outlines the impact of racism and the symptoms of racial trauma, as well as helpful coping strategies and protective factors that people who have experienced varying levels of racism have employed to offset the impact of racism. A sense of pride in Black identity and an understanding of the ways in which racism is enacted both overtly and covertly serve as protective factors that may also buffer the psychological effects of racism. Engaging in social supports, therapy, grounding personal activities and literature that speaks to these phenomena are among several of potential coping mechanisms that are important for Black survival in the U.S.

Implications for Doctoral Programs

Centering this study around Black doctoral students and their experiences of racism has implications for doctoral programs, current Black doctoral students, and Black people considering enrolling in doctoral programs. First, faculty and staff must evaluate the racial climate of their programs to gauge the experience of their current students. This could be accomplished by administering an anonymous survey of the experiences of everyone in the program. The challenge with a survey, is the fact that there are often not many Black students or students of color enrolled in doctoral programs, thus anonymity may be difficult to maintain. However, it is essential that these programs are aware of the racialized challenges their students face that can and should be avoided and/or mended. It is important for faculty to be familiar with the issues and considerations for evaluating the climate of their campus and their programs. Scholars such as Shaun Harper and Kimberly Griffin have contributed to the work around campus racial climates for Black students in higher education and policy retention. Their work will be important to engage

in and can serve as a foundation for programs and faculty who are committed to ensuring and equitable and empowering experience for their Black students. Faculty should also engage in regular multicultural and anti-racism trainings to increase awareness of their own implicit biases, and the ways in which they may be engaging in racism against Black students and students of color.

Second, Black doctoral students can apply the findings of this study to normalize and validate their experiences. As was mentioned by participants, the knowledge that they are not alone in their experience of racism can serve as both a protective factor and a coping mechanism. Current students can identify different racist acts experienced by participants that they may have also encountered in their study or begin to code different interactions as racism rather than attributing them to other – or personal – causes. It is important for Black doctoral students to identify and externalize the racism they endure in an effort to preserve their psychological well-being.

Finally, Black people who are considering a doctoral program must be aware of what they may encounter and make an informed decision about whether they have the emotional and psychological willingness to engage in this endeavor. As was mentioned previously, obtaining a doctoral degree is accompanied by emotional and mental exhaustion, and the added stressor of racism is likely (though not certain) to occur as well. It is crucial for current and potential Black doctoral students to identify coping strategies that have worked for them in the past in response to various stressors – including racism – in an effort to minimize the psychological impact of experiencing racism in their program.

Implications for Clinical Practice

By focusing my research on Black experiences of racism and racial trauma, I hope to bring the participants' experiences to the awareness of clinicians working with Black clients. It is crucial for clinicians to assess the *whole* client before moving into diagnostics and treatment planning. As the participants noted, awareness of one's Black identity occurs early on and is often accompanied by a negative and/or racist aggression. This aggression teaches that there is something inherently wrong with Black skin, and that the world does not respond positively to Black people. Due to these messages occurring early in life, it is likely that Black people have levels of racial trauma that they have been battling for years before ever coming to therapy. Not only is racial trauma likely present and chronic, it may be outside of the clients' awareness. The Black experience does not by any means encompass only one way of experiencing and viewing the world; but – as we see from the participant profiles – Black people experience commonalities based on the way the world responds to their Blackness. Because of the ordinariness of racism (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Matsuda et al., 1993), many Black people may not code their experiences as “traumatic,” though it may manifest as such. Clinicians working with Black clients need to be aware of this reality, and curious about the ways in which their clients navigate their worlds given the context of their racialized identities.

Thus, clinicians should take a trauma-informed approach to their work with Black clients. This means that clinicians need to consider the possibility that each Black client could be suffering from racial trauma – or at the very least racialized stressors – in addition to their reported presenting concern. A trauma informed approach helps to offset

the possibility of clinicians providing stigmatizing diagnoses that pathologize clients and ultimately interfere with adequate and ethical mental health treatment. For example, a Black client may demonstrate a distrust of systems and authority, and rather than pathologizing this as “antisocial tendencies” (which occurs often), therapists should recognize it as a trauma reaction and the client’s attempt to create safer ways to navigate their lives.

Clinicians should provide an open and “safe” space for clients to unabashedly relay their experiences with racism and negative racialized encounters without criticism or skepticism from the mental health professional. As this study showed, the role of therapists can be significant in the healing and coping with racism as was the case for Anthony, Gwen and Sarah. This cannot be accomplished if the therapist is not willing to accept client’s narratives as truth, and instead questions the experiences by placing the responsibility of such experiences on the client.

Implications for Training

Training for mental health practitioners in courses for masters and doctoral level students should include a comprehensive understanding of the impact of racial trauma and race-based traumatic stress. Doing so would equip practitioners with the ability to identify and help clients process the effects of racism in an effort to externalize these concerns to prevent the internalization of such interactions. This internalization can lead to serious mental health implications such as the racial trauma symptoms outlined in the study (Mosley, Hargons, Meiller, Angyal, Wheeler, Davis, & Stevens-Watkins, 2020). Courses should be more nuanced than the standard “diversity courses” that are currently required of students in the mental health field that superficially “address” multiple

marginalized identities (i.e. focusing on the existence of oppression, rather than the nuanced mental health implications).

Clinicians biases tend to be apparent in therapy through the use of microaggressions, whether intentionally or unintentionally (Brown, et. al, 2012; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue et al., 2007), which inadvertently harms the client. Clinicians who approach cultural differences with clients by minimizing, avoiding, or having a general lack of understanding about racism and discrimination tend to disrupt the therapeutic alliance and harm Black clients more than any other person of color (Buser, 2009; Constantine, 2007; Sue & Sue, 2008; Thompson & Jenal, 1994). Therefore, training courses should focus on therapist bias and provide more intentional, thoughtful, and individualized ways to unpack and address how a therapist's bias presents itself in therapy.

There is not one prescribed way to address each individual clinician's bias as each therapist is different, and each client is different and will present with their own unique concerns; however, the masters and doctoral level courses must be more attuned to these realities to appropriately train clinicians. To avoid doing so is likely to result in more clinicians who are ill equipped to detect and understand their clients' racial trauma and are at risk of overpathologizing and/or implementing ineffective treatment plans. Clinicians have the ethical obligation to evaluate the role of race and culture when working with any client. To engage in diagnosing, treatment planning and therapeutic intervention without having considered the role of the client's culture is unethical.

Implications for Research

The use of qualitative methodology provided opportunities to understand participants lived experiences of racism and its psychological impact. The semi-structured format of the interview process allowed for participants to speak freely and generate their own responses without influence from the researcher. Utilization of more quantitative methods limits the understanding of how racism is experienced and the mental health implications due to the structured nature of surveys, scales and assessments where possible answers are predetermined. There is still much to be learned about racial trauma, and researchers moving forward can utilize more qualitative methods to capture a more holistic picture of this phenomenon.

Finally, it is my hope that this study contributes to the literature establishing racial trauma as a very real phenomenon that Black people (and other people of color) experience. The term “trauma” is rooted in a Eurocentric definition of the word, which excludes people of color and their experiences (Comas-Diaz, Hall, & Neville, 2019; Hernandez-Wolfe, 2013; Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2006; Hinton & Good, 2015; Hinton & Lewis-Fernandez, 2011). Thus, this contribution can facilitate in trauma being perceived from a culturally inclusive lens which allows racial trauma to be implemented as a DSM diagnosis, recognizing the impact of racism on the mental health of Black and non-Black people of color.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to consider for this study, and I will outline three of them here. First, the selection criterion for this study was students who were enrolled in institutions located in one predominantly White state in the southwestern region of the

United States. Racism is often experienced differently depending on the history of each state and its experience with race-relations and racialized issues. Racism in this state from which the participants were drawn is often of an insidious and ambiguous nature, rather than blatant demonstrations of racism that may be more common in different areas of the country. Focusing on one specific state limits the possibility of examining other ways that racism is experienced; how one codes interactions as racist; the impact of different types of racism (theorizing that more overt forms of racism can have different psychological effects); as well as both the ways one may employ coping mechanisms and the significance of these coping strategies.

Second, during the interview process I primarily asked about the experiences of racism as it was received from White individuals in participants' lives and their respective programs. While this was intentional at the conception of this study, it became apparent to me that negative racialized encounters have deleterious effects regardless of the identity of the aggressor. Throughout the interviews Gwen referenced negative racialized encounters from non-White individuals despite the focus on White racism, indicating that these events were just as significant to her and contributed to her understanding of racism. For example, she talked explicitly about the racialized issues in her program with the erasure of Black women and their work by Black male and non-Black people of color who were faculty members. While my intentions were informed by my definitions of racism (as outlined in chapter one under "Key Terminology") the focus on White racism potentially limited participants' narratives. In hindsight, it would have been useful and inclusive to allow participants to rely on their own interpretation of the questions rather than framing them in a way that focuses on the Black-White dichotomy.

Third, the study's purpose of centering participants' Black identity in order to understand their lived experiences of racism within their program does not address intersectionality and the ways in which racism and other forms of oppression are experienced differently based on *all* of the identities one holds. At some point during the interviews, Gwen, Tiphany and Sarah mentioned gendered stereotypes that they were either attempting to avoid or that they believed influenced the perception of them in their program (i.e., angry or loud Black woman). No other identities were referenced by participants, though that does not mean that they do not impact their experiences. The Black identity does not stand alone, and other identities such as gender identity and gender expression, sexuality, religion, and SES provide nuances that this study did not explore.

Future Research

This study revealed the need for further research to better understand how racism is experienced among Black doctoral students and the ensuing mental health implications and coping strategies. There are at least five possible directions to take this research.

First, there is a need for a body of literature that enhances the recognition and understanding of racial trauma as a diagnosable issue for Black individuals and other people of color. Future studies should expand the participant pool to include Black-identified doctoral students from across the United States to compare and contrast the experience and implications of racism across different regions.

Second, a mixed methods approach to this topic would facilitate the understanding of the implications of experiencing racism and mental health. Researchers can expand on this study's findings about the types of racism and impacts and

coping/protective factors by developing quantitative tools such as surveys to gather more specific data of Black doctoral students' experience. With this quantitative information, researchers could then use qualitative methods to gather other forms of data to gain a more nuanced perspective of these experiences and their effects.

Third, the literature identifies maladaptive coping strategies that people of color have developed in response to racism (Brody, Chen, Kogan, Smith, & Brown, 2010; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003; Metzger, Cooper, Ritchwood, Onyeuku, & Griffin, 2017) which this study did not find. This may have been because there were no explicit questions about these particular coping mechanisms. Thus, future research should investigate potential maladaptive coping strategies that can further the harm experienced as a result of racism and negative racialized encounters and compare these to more adaptive and useful coping strategies.

Fourth, doctoral students often experience mental and emotional challenges without the added stressors of racism. Thus, future research should include both Black and White students as well as other students of color, in order to control for the levels of distress experienced in any given program and compare and contrast the levels of stress due to the added stressor of racism.

Finally, future research should consider of the extent to which intersecting identities, specifically, oppressed or privileged identities, affect the way that racism is felt, and how it influences the manifestation of symptoms that align with racial trauma. This research would enhance the understanding of the impact of racial trauma among populations, outside of the academic realm.

Author's Reflections and Final Remarks

The topic of racial trauma among Black doctoral students is personal to me as I am also a Black doctoral student that has experienced racism that I believe to have manifested as trauma. In interviewing the participants, I noted the importance of keeping my expectations in check so as not to influence their responses. However, I recognized that there were experiences that I heavily identified with, which did influence the way I reacted to my participants. I recognized that my identity was crucial to the study, and there was a level of familiarity I shared with most participants. Sarah noted that she would not have participated in the study if I had not been a Black person, and we shared a laugh about how she knew I was Black due to the spelling of my name. On occasion participants and I would share a pained laugh – both understanding the implications of certain acts of racism and communicating these shared experiences. I allowed my participants to see me as more than a researcher; as a Black woman who understands their pain and has gone through it myself. During the early stages of this study, it seemed imperative to keep this part of me quiet and hidden, in an effort to not compromise the data. However, as I engaged with each participant it became apparent that this was neither possible nor a useful strategy.

My decision to take a hermeneutical phenomenological approach to the study fit well with my ultimate decision to be more open with participants, as I continued to integrate myself and my beliefs throughout the research process. In addition to being supported by my methodology, being more vulnerable with participants felt essential given that the topic of racial trauma is vulnerable. I asked the participants to share some of the most painful and humiliating exchanges in their lives and in their programs. The

familiarity and relatability felt necessary and helped guide my interviews in a way that created a more open and honest space. The specifics and nuances that were provided in each story may not have been gifted to me had I met my goal of being a blank slate that simply collected information with little emotion or connection. It felt important to show my Black identity to the participants in more ways than visibly being Black, but by expressing my understanding and validation of their experiences.

I noticed through the interview process that participants varied in their conceptualization of racism and the ways in which they relayed their experiences. For example, I expected each person to talk about specific interactions that were either overtly or covertly racist. Yet Anthony opted to talk more about the perpetuation of Whiteness as racism; specifically, how the resistance that he received for challenging the status quo was in itself racist. This approach prompted me to broaden my conceptualization of racism and allow participants to describe the multiple ways they experienced this phenomenon outside of the person to person individualized racism I expected them to speak to.

In analyzing the data, I strived to accurately communicate their stories, pain, triumphs, and resiliency. In the back of my mind was the knowledge of how the field of psychology has betrayed Black people through research, and through counseling (Brown, et. al., 2015; Rollock & Gordon, 2000; Terrell & Terrell, 1984) by exploiting Black experiences in an effort to justify our second-class citizenship. Recognizing this, I was intentional about asking the participants of this study who so graciously shared their lives to read their profiles and correct any inaccuracies or misrepresentations. Consequently, I feel confident that the profiles are an accurate reflection of what the participants shared,

and that my role as both researcher and Black woman were essential in gathering this data and furthering the topic of racial trauma.

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Appendix A: Key Word Terminology

Race

A social rather than biological construct, with perceived physical differences between racial groups that inform the way we think, behave, and react toward each other (Kinloch, 1974)

Ethnicity

Does not have any biological bearing, and refers to clusters of people who share common cultural traits such as language, geographic location, values, beliefs, traditions, food, religion, etc. (Jones, 1997).

Differentiation between Race and Ethnicity

Race refers to physical features of difference that cannot be changed, and it is socialized as a hierarchy; ethnicity/culture falls into a more malleable category, where one's attitudes and beliefs can change, and never should include physical features (Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

Racism

- The experience of oppressive acts that are either personal or systemic and include segregation or aggression due to the perception of racial differences (Lemburger & Lemburger-Truelove, 2016).
- Discriminatory treatment that results in the systematic deprivation of individual's equal access to opportunity (Oliver, 2001).
- It is overt or covert and can take three different forms: Individual, institutional, and systemic. Individual racism is defined as "overt acts by individuals that cause death, injury, destruction of property, or denial of services or opportunity". Institutional racism is defined as "more subtle but no less destructive. Institutional racism involves policies, practices, and procedures of institutions that have a disproportionately negative effect on racial minorities' access to and quality of goods, services, and opportunities". And systemic racism being "the basis of individual and institutional racism; it is the value system that is embedded in a society that supports and allows discrimination" (Randall, 2009).

White Supremacy

- The belief that the White race is superior to the Black race and should therefore dominate society (Alexander, 2010).
- Race and racism cannot be separated from the beliefs held within White Supremacy because they are evident in all aspects of society including socially, legally, and politically (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995).

White privilege

The positive consequence to Whites as a result of White Supremacy, in that they enjoy luxuries that other races do not. Though they have not earned these luxuries, they have been afforded them *because* of their Whiteness (Holladay, 2000).

Appendix B: Recruitment Information

SUBJECT: Invitation to Participate in a Research Study: Black Minds Matter: A Phenomenological Inquiry Examining the Prevalence of Racial Trauma Among Black Doctoral Students

Dear [Insert Name],

My name is Jazmyne Peters and I am a Ph.D. student from the University of Denver's Counseling Psychology program in the Morgridge College of Education. I am writing to invite you to participate in my dissertation research study about the experiences of racism among Black Doctoral students. You are being asked to participate in this research study because you can provide valuable information about your racialized experiences as a Black Doctoral student. This study is focused on understanding the experiences of racism as a Black individual pursuing a doctoral degree and the effects of negative racialized encounters. Your perspectives will help advance knowledge about how best to support the mental health of Black individuals.

I seek participants for this study who meet the following qualifications:

- Identify as Black or African American
- Consider your Black/African American identity to be one of high salience
- Currently enrolled in a doctoral program
- Have completed at least one year of your doctoral program
- Willing and able to reflect upon experiences of racism and/or racial discrimination and the impacts these experiences have had.

Participation in this study will include two face-to-face or video-conference, audio-recorded interviews. Each interview would last between 60-90 minutes and would focus on your experiences as a Black individual as well as a Black doctoral student, including discussion about the ways your racial/ethnic identity and racism and/or racial discrimination has factored into your educational experience and mental well-being. Data collected from these interviews will inform the findings of my dissertation study.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may decide to end your participation at any time. For your participation in the study, you will be entered into a raffle with a chance to receive a \$50 Amazon gift card after completion of the interviews.

If you would like to be involved in this study or have any questions, please email or contact me at Jazmyne.peters@du.edu or via phone at 720-324-1213. I will provide you with additional information on this study as well as relevant forms to complete.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Jazmyne Peters
PhD Candidate
Morgridge College of Education
Counseling Psychology
University of Denver

Appendix C: Demographic Survey

To be disseminated via Qualtrics

Please answer the following questions:

1. How would you identify your racial identity?
2. How would you identify your ethnic identity?
3. How would you identify/describe your gender identity?
4. In what region of the country/world were you raised?
5. What is your current age?
6. Have you had experiences of racism and/or discrimination in your lifetime?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
7. Have you had experiences of racism and/or racial discrimination on your current campus?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
8. Have you had experiences of racism and/or racial discrimination in your current doctoral program?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

Demographic information

1. At which institution are you pursuing your doctoral degree?
2. What program are you currently enrolled in?
3. What is the average length of your program (years)?
4. What year are you in your program?
5. What is your anticipated graduation date?

Solicitation for participation

1. Would you be interested in participating in a research study on your experiences as a Black individual pursuing a doctoral degree?
 - a. Yes, please provide contact information
 - i. Name
 - ii. Phone
 - iii. Email
 - b. No

Appendix D: Informed Consent

Title of Research Study: Black Minds Matter: A Phenomenological Inquiry Examining the Prevalence of Racial Trauma Among Black Doctoral Students

Researcher(s): Jazmyne Peters, PhD Candidate, University of Denver
Faculty Sponsor: Ruth Chu-Lien Chao, Department Chair and Associate Professor of Counseling Psychology at the University of Denver

Description: You are being asked to participate in this research study because you can provide valuable information about your racialized experiences as a Black Doctoral student. This study is focused on understanding the experiences of racism as a Black individual pursuing a doctoral degree and the effects of negative racialized encounters. This form provides you with information about the study. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

Procedures: If you agree to be part of the research study you will be asked to participate in two individual interviews. The interviews will include questions about your experiences with racism and/or racial discrimination as a Black individual pursuing a doctorate in the United States and is designed to elicit productive conversations about your experiences as they relate to your identity. Each interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes to complete.

Possible risks: Participation in this study is associated with minimal potential risk. Potential risks and/or discomforts of participation may include the emergence of negative or distressful feelings in answering interview questions. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to and may stop participating in the interview at any time. You may speak with Jazmyne Peters to discuss any distress or other issues related to study participation.

Compensation: For your participation, you will be entered into a raffle with the possibility of receiving a \$50 Amazon gift card for participating in this research project.

Audio-Recordings: You will be audio-recorded at each interview. The audio-recordings will be transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. After transcription, the audio files will be destroyed.

Voluntary Participation: Participating in this research study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and end at any time. You may choose not to answer any question or choose to end your participation with the study at any time for any reason without penalty. If you decide to withdraw early, the information or data you provided will be destroyed.

Questions: If you have any questions about this project or your participation, please feel free to ask questions now or contact **Jazmyne Peters** at **720-32-1213** or at **Jazmyne.peters@du.edu** at any time.

If you have any questions or concerns about your research participation or rights as a participant, you may contact the DU Human Research Protections Program by emailing IRBAdmin@du.edu or calling (303) 871-2121 to speak to someone other than the researchers.

The DU Human Research Protections Program has determined that this study is minimal risk and is exempt from full IRB oversight.

Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Participant Signature

Date

Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement

I _____ agree to hold all information contained on audio-recorded tapes/and in interviews received from Jazmyne Peters, Principal Investigator for the (name of dissertation and IRB #) in confidence with regard to the individuals involved in the research study. I understand that to violate this agreement would constitute a serious and unethical infringement on the informant's right to privacy.

Signature of Transcriptionist

Date

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Interview #1 Protocol

Program Specific experiences

1. Can you briefly explain what doctoral program you are in, and what requirements you must fulfill to complete your degree?
2. How would you describe the level of difficulty/rigor in completing your degree?
3. What are some factors that you feel have made it more or less difficult for you in your program? (i.e. family, finances, gender, sexuality, race, etc.)
 - a. Can you describe how you feel these factors have affected your experience in the program?

Black Identity and Past experiences with Racism

4. When is the first time you knew you were Black?
5. Can you please speak to the importance of your Black identity for you? How does it shape your day-to-day experiences?
6. How often do you interact with White Americans?
 - a. What are your experiences with White Americans like?
 - b. Do you feel you can be authentic in predominately White spaces? Why or Why not?
7. Tell me about the first time you remember experiencing discrimination from a White individual.
8. How did you feel about yourself after experiencing discrimination and/or racism?
9. How did you feel about White Americans after experiencing discrimination and/or racism?

Interview #2 Protocol

Review summary of previous interview – check in with participant and answer any questions or concerns. Ask follow-up questions if necessary.

1. Do you have any thoughts or reflections about our last conversation?
2. Did anything else come to mind for you after our interview ended?

Program and On-Campus Experiences

1. Have you experienced racism and/or racial discrimination on your campus (separate from your program)?
 - a. Can you describe one or two of these instances?
2. Have you experienced racism and/or racial discrimination in your program?
 - a. Can you describe one or two of these instances?
3. How do you feel your race affects the way you are perceived in your program?
 - a. Do you feel you are welcome and/or wanted in your program?
4. How have instances of racism and/or racial discrimination been experienced with students? Faculty? Staff?
5. Are there differences in the way you experience a racist or discriminatory event based on who the aggressor is (i.e. students vs. faculty vs. staff)? How so?
 - a. Do you feel that experiencing it from one group is worse than another?

Academic Effects of Racism

6. How do you think your race affects your experiences in a doctoral program?
7. What are ways you feel your experiences of racism have affected your academic success?
 - a. Have you ever felt that you are at a disadvantage compared to your White peers?

Symptoms and Coping with Racism

8. How do you feel your experiences of racism in your program and on campus have affected you emotionally? Mentally? Physically?
9. How have you been able to cope with racism and/or discrimination on campus? In your program?
10. Was there anything about these questions that made you apprehensive to answer? If so, what? If not, why not?