

Microaggressions, Intersectional Assumptions, and the Unnoticed Burdens of Racialized College Life for Brown and Black Students at a PWI

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Abstract

While American education is often considered a meritocratic institution, race acts as a structuring agent (Delgado and Stefancic 2001), creating palpably different race-based experiences and outcomes. Not only is it important to uncover the complicated ways in which race and racism are manifested in educational settings, but it is also necessary to understand the varied and disregarded effects that nuanced forms of racism have on brown and black students. Using Critical Race Theory Methodology and relying on the counter-narratives of 31 students of color at a white university in the US Southeast, this study finds that respondents are emotionally, academically, and socially affected by microaggressions, or subtle and overlooked forms of racism and gendered racism in various campus settings. Through subtle cues, brown and black students are reminded constantly that their race matters, and that it is a cue for countless academic and behavioral assumptions that they must continually work to disprove. Respondents discuss social and cognitive burdens associated with navigating through white spaces as brown and black people while whites are privileged to act in and experience college as “just students.” Findings indicate a need for effective awareness efforts to replace superficial ones that reinforce inequities.

Keywords: Microaggressions, Intersectionality, Racism, Education, Stereotypes, Critical Race Theory

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Introduction

Race and racism are endemic to American society, and they have always worked to structure everyday interactions, as well as large-scale institutionalized patterns (Martinot 2010; Combs 2018). But racism is commonly misunderstood, as it is often simplified and conceptualized as overt and obvious (Harris and Lieberman 2015; Martinot 2010; Combs 2018). Although some manifestations of racism are blatant and obvious, much modern racism is covert, subtle, and overlooked. Further, racism is complicated and works with other forms of oppression to create experiences and outcomes that vary by race, sex, class, and other statuses (Minikel-Lacocque 2013). This

points to the intersectionality of oppressions that creates varied experiences based on one’s race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, age, nation, and other statuses (Collins 1998).

Racism is so commonplace that it is a normalized part of everyday American culture, interactions, and institutions (Lynn and Parker 2006; Harris and Lieberman 2015; Martinot 2010; Combs 2018), including the US university. Although it is often overlooked, subtle forms of racism, such as racialized microaggressions, affect the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of brown and black students (Nadal 2008; Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Hunt 2013). Racialized and other microaggressions are

slight and brief exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because of their race and/or other marginalized statuses (Sue et al. 2007; Nadal 2008). Because microaggressions are sometimes unintentional, usually seem benign, and are usually overlooked, these attacks are easy to deny, adding to the frustration for those who experience them (Nadal 2008; Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Huntt 2013). Further, sexism, classism, nativity, and other forms of oppression intersect with race to create expectations and treatment of individuals in the university that can affect their daily and overall experiences, as well as their social, emotional, and academic well-being (Lewis et al. 2013; Collins 2009). Therefore, understanding racism is not enough. It is also necessary to better understand some of the intersecting oppressions that work alongside race to create particular experiences for brown and black students.

Purpose of the Study

This research set out to explore if and how race is emphasized in campus settings, as well as how racism and gendered racism affect college life for students of color. Extant research shows that race affects the college experience for black and brown students (Nadal 2008; Bentley-Edwards and Chapman-Hillard 2015), but the current study emphasizes that the issue is larger and more complex. This project provides a more detailed examination of the racism experienced by black and brown students based on the intersection of race and gender, showing that racism looks and feels different based on this intersection of statuses. Specifically, this project uses existing frameworks of microaggressions (Sue et al. 2007; Nadal 2011) to explore these oppressions through the words of the students themselves.

Using these students' own words, this research shows that these students feel extremely visible in campus settings, which is a unique finding compared to the studies that report that brown and black students feel invisible and overlooked at predominantly white institutions (PWI's). The participants also reported being highlighted and used in-class lectures, as teaching tools, when the lecture topic was race-related. This type of hyper-visibility, which this paper calls "instrumental visibility," is not discussed in detail in much literature on microaggressions in the classroom. The participants described how race and intersectional expectations are revealed to them through verbal and behavioral microaggressions. They discussed experiences with gendered racism expressed through hyper-surveillance and extreme visibility that express expectations of violence, inappropriate communication styles, dishonesty, among others. This study also contributes to the paucity of research on

how students contend with both academic and non-academic expectations in various settings- both on and off-campus and how these expectations affect them emotionally and behaviorally.

Learning more about how subtle forms of racism work as part of a system of intersectional oppression will be useful in equity efforts in the institution, including programs to expose racism and its insidiousness and subtleness. Educators, administrators, and staff could benefit from this research, as many are not aware of how they contribute to this type of oppression. Commensurate with the social justice goal of Critical Race Theory, the current project also advances efforts to understand the complexities of, and to fight, intersectional oppressions of all manifestations in all arenas.

Literature Review

Racial Microaggressions and PWI's

It is generally assumed that contemporary American education works as an equalizer, promoting equality and compensating for past discrimination (Nadal et al. 2014; McNamee 2018). But contrary to this meritocratic ideal, the institution of higher education in the US is ridden with inequalities associated with race and other status characteristics (Marable 2008; Collins 2009; McNamee 2018). For instance, there are racial differences in measures commonly associated with student success such as GPA, college acceptance rates, and college completion rates. (McNamee 2018; Marable 2008). For example, about a third (34%) of blacks and Hispanics between the ages of 18-24 were enrolled in college in 2013, compared to forty-two percent of whites (Musu-Gillette, Robinson, McFarland, KewalRamani, Zhang, and Wilkinson-Flicker 2016). Further, nearly three-fourths (72%) of white students earn a BA degree within six years, while far fewer blacks and Hispanics do (46% and 56%, respectively) (Shapiro, Dundar, Huie, Wakhungu, Yuan, Nathan, and Bhimdiwali 2017).

Many of the inequities facing students of color stem from often overlooked, subtle, and sometimes unintentional racist attacks, also known as racial microaggressions. Racial microaggressions have been defined as commonplace, everyday exchanges that send demeaning and belittling messages to people of color because of their membership in a minority racial group (Sue et al. 2007). Although many perpetrators are not aware of their transgressions, microaggressions can have significant effects on the targets (Williams 2019; Lewis et al. 2013).

Studies on microaggressions in higher education show that many brown and black students in white institutions see themselves as targets of racism in the form of microaggressions regularly. Some

microaggressions are related to academic ability and they send messages to the target that they are expected to be less capable academically, less articulate, or will not complete college (Nadal 2011; Sue et al. 2007). Other microaggressions are not academic-related, such as those that convey the assumption that the target is criminal, holds pathological values, is exotic/perpetually different, among others (Nadal et al. 2014; Sue et al. 2007). Both academic and non-academic microaggressions can affect academic achievement and attainment (Nadal et al. 2014; Sue et al. 2007). Some brown and black students consider dropping out of school, and they explain that this is not due to academic pressures, but rather due to feeling isolated by microaggressions from peers (Minikel-Lacocque 2013).

Some racial microaggressions are also gendered, sending particular messages to the target based on the intersection of their race and gender (Lewis et al. 2013; Lewis, Williams, Moody, Peppers, and Gadson 2018). For instance, many brown and black males learn that they are feared (Collins 2009; Sue 2010), and black and brown females learn that they are expected to be loud, dirty, unattractive, angry (Lewis et al. 2013), fiery, and sexually promiscuous (Harris et al. 2019). The current study utilizes two racial microaggression typologies to examine participants' experiences with racism and gendered racism, and they are discussed below.

Useful Racial Microaggression Typologies

This research draws from Sue et al. (2007)'s typology of ten types of racial microaggressions, as well as Nadal's (2011) six components of microaggressions from his Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale, to analyze microaggressions from faculty, staff, and students.

While Nadal's (2011) conceptualization contains some additions and revisions to Sue's (2007) typology, there are some similarities among the two conceptualizations. For instance, each conceptualization describes ability-related microaggressions, which tell the target that because of their race, they are not expected to be academically capable or intelligent. Nadal (2011) refers to these attacks as Assumptions of Inferiority microaggressions, and Sue et al. (2007) label them as the Ascription of Intelligence microaggressions. Sometimes, the offender intends to compliment the target, such as exclaiming that the target is articulate; but the target recognizes this as a racist insult, and as an indication that because of their race, they are not expected to be articulate (Sue et al. 2007; Nadal 2011). Another overlap in these conceptualizations is the type of microaggressions that lets the target know that because of their race, and typically the intersection of

their status as male and black or brown, they are considered violent, dangerous, or otherwise criminal. This kind of microaggression is often behavioral, such as moving away from the target (Sue et al. 2007; Nadal 2011), and the perpetrator might not be aware of their offense (McCabe 2009).

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) grounded this study's exploration of self-identified students of colors' perspectives of race and racism at their predominantly white university. Critical Race Theory (CRT) has its roots in Critical Legal Studies (CLS), which was founded in the 1970s to emphasize objectivity, neutrality, and truth in legal practice, and to specifically challenge traditional ideas about the neutrality of the law that has historically oppressed minority groups in the US (Wing 2003). CRT is now employed in many areas of research, including studies of racism in education (Patton 2016; Saloojee and Saloojee 2018).

Stemming from the views of Derrick Bell (1992), several tenets have come to define Critical Race Theory (CRT) and to guide its research and scholarship. Many of these tenets are relevant to this study. First, CRT recognizes that racism is endemic to life in the US, and it recognizes that race is an identity marker that is so embedded in American life that it is habitually overlooked as a significant structuring agent (Dixson and Rousseau 2006; Ladson-Billings 2013).

Critical Race Theory is highly skeptical of dominant ideologies, such as those of meritocracy, objectivity, and colorblindness, and it challenges dominant racist stories that support these ideologies (Dixson and Rousseau 2006; Hiraldo 2010). CRT also values the experiential knowledge of people of color (Yosso 2013; Saloojee and Saloojee 2018). Therefore, many CRT researchers use storytelling, or relying on counternarratives of those directly affected by oppression, in data collection. This enables those who are marginalized to counter the majoritarian stories that often reinforce the dominant and biased narratives about race (Ladson-Billings 2013; Dixson and Rousseau 2006).

Further, CRT emphasizes praxis to advance its ultimate goal of social justice. It is insufficient to merely point out and to name racism, as CRT seeks to eliminate racial oppression as part of the broader goal of eradicating all forms of oppression (Minikel-Lacocque 2013).

Critical Race Theory also values an Intersectionality approach, as it recognizes that race is not the only vector of oppression and that multiple status characteristics operate simultaneously to affect lived experiences (Nadal 2011; Minikel-Lacocque

2013). Accordingly, CRT analyzes how white, heteronormative, male privilege is maintained through interactional, institutional, structural, and ideological inequities (Ladson-Billings 2013). The intersection of race and gender are significant concepts explored in the current study.

While experiences of students of color at predominantly white universities have been quantitatively researched (Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja, and Sue 2013; Reynolds and Mayweather 2017), the participants' words and conversations are our primary sources of data. Because this research seeks to understand the participants' meanings and interpretations (Morgan 2010), CRT's use of storytelling supports the choice of data collection in this study.

Research Design

This study broadly seeks to understand how race is manifested, and how racism feels to black and brown students at a PWI in North Carolina. In line with Critical Race Theory, which privileges experiences of marginalized individuals to counter-majoritarian stories, this research relies on counternarratives of 31 self-identified students of color gathered through nine focus group meetings in the Spring of 2014. The focus group is a particularly effective method of data collection due to its emphasis on the agency of participants in focusing and guiding the developing data. All participants have in common the status of being racial minority students in white spaces. This shared characteristic encourages communication and participation, maximizing interaction and enhancing research data (Stewart and Shamdasani 2014).

While extant studies of experiences of students of color in PWIs utilize focus group methodology, the setting for this study is especially interesting. This university, and the town in which it is situated, is well-known known for its "whiteness," both demographically and culturally. At the time of this study, both the university and the town were about 80% white (University website 2014).

The participants joked about the "whiteness" of the university and recalled some of the nicknames the university has received based on its racial homogeneity and potential racism they might face there and around town. The town in which the university is located is plagued by a history of well-documented overt racism (Hosfeld 2005), which caused some students to deliberate extensively before choosing to attend the university. Also, around the time of the research, there was a publicized act of overt racism in which five white males in a pick-up truck threatened the life of a black track athlete while he was working out on the university's track. As recently as 2017, the university's publication reported that faculty

and students of color feel "uncomfortable" at this university due to its issues with racism and its lack of racial diversity (McAnarney 2017). While overt racism is troubling, the participants argued that more covert racism, such as behavioral and verbal microaggressions, creates a frustrating environment, as well as cognitive and social burdens that add to the considerations inherent to college life. This research adds to extant research on racism at PWIs by focusing on the nuanced, often unrecognized ways in which racism works on campus, and within a town, known for racist incidents and ideology. These nuanced forms of oppression can be best examined through the counternarratives of the participants, as they add a richness and depth to research on racism. This study also contributes to the literature on the intersectionality of oppression, namely research on gendered racism in the form of microaggressions.

Sampling

Both purposive and snowball sampling were used in this research. Participants were recruited through emails circulated by department chairs, which were extended to students by professors. The coordinators for the university's organizations for black students, Hispanic students, and sexual minority students posted recruitment messages on their organization's Facebook pages, and they posted fliers in their organization's offices. Interested students were encouraged to ask other students to participate.

Criteria for participation included self-identification as "student of color" and current enrollment at the university. In total, 31 students participated in the study, with an average of 5 present at each of nine focus group meetings. Before each participant's first focus group meeting, they were asked to complete a self-identification demographic questionnaire that requested their self-identified race, ethnicity, sex, gender, social class, nation of origin, age, and sexual orientation. These questions were left open to allow them to identify as they felt appropriate.

The racial breakdown of participants is as follows: self-identified black (16), self-identified multiracial (9), self-identified Hispanic (4), and self-identified Native American (2). Twenty participants identified as female and eleven identified as male. There were no other gender identities represented. Eighteen participants self-identified as middle-class, nine as lower middle class or poor, one as upwardly mobile, one as middle to upper class, and one did not respond to this item. Most of the participants (28 of 31) self-identified as heterosexual. Of the three participants who reported another identity, one identified as a bisexual black woman, another as a bisexual/asexual/heterosexual Mexican woman, and another as a homosexual black man.

Data Collection

IRB approval was obtained before the research began. The focus group meetings were conducted during the Spring of 2014 at a predominantly white university on the coast of North Carolina. Before each student's first focus group meeting, they were read aloud and asked to sign the informed consent form. This form explained that the conversations would be audio-recorded and that their identification, responses, and other information would remain anonymous and confidential. Each student provided a pseudonym if they elected to do so. Each student also completed a self-identification demographic questionnaire, as discussed above.

Meetings were recorded using three audio recorders. Hand-written notes were also used to capture non-verbal communication, environmental factors, any notable changes in observable mood, or other interesting dynamics among participants. The focus group facilitator began each meeting with a general question of whether or not race is visible on campus, and the participants' interpretations and responses to this question guided the rest of the conversations. This allowed the researchers to uncover what the students felt was important, as opposed to using a more structured interview method. If the facilitator desired more details or clarification on a topic or situation that was mentioned, she asked follow-up questions to guide the conversation towards that information.

Data Analysis

While educational researchers can use one or many tenets of CRT in their research methodology, several of these principles were employed in this research, from data collection to data analysis. Consistent with CRT methodology, race and racism are foregrounded in every aspect of the current research. This research also includes an intersectionality focus, as it challenges the separate discourses on race and gender by revealing how these elements intersect to affect the experiences of students of color. Also consistent with CRT methodology, this research privileges and relies on the experiential knowledge of people of color in understanding, examining, and teaching about racial and social justice. Towards this, counternarratives developed through focus group conversations, which are useful in challenging traditional discourse surrounding racism and experiences of students of color (Reynolds and Mayweather 2017; Vaccaro 2017).

The data were analyzed to identify core themes and to establish connections and similarities among responses and explanations from participants. The data were also coded for explanations of how race and

racism are manifested and affect participants, how participants simultaneously experience race-based and gendered oppression, and any strategies these students use to deal with oppression.

The authors first carefully read through each transcript, line-by-line, to explore each theme. They then drew connections and overlaps between themes. This analysis relied on open coding (using a line-by-line analysis) to identify dimensions and to develop fundamental categories that help describe the dimensions discussed above. Mapping, which involves creating a visual representation of these categories and their interconnections, was also used. Finally, the analysis used axial coding, which involves a reassessment of the interconnections, and making any additional connections between categories (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Ward 2005).

The main categories that emerged were several types of academic-related and non-academic-related assumptions about the participants, which are associated with various types of microaggressions that conveyed racialized and other oppressive messages to these students. The researchers found it useful to apply the microaggression conceptualizations of Sue et al. (2007) and the components of Nadal's (2011)'s Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS) in their analysis of the data.

RESULTS

The main themes that emerged from the data were categorized as either academic or non-academic assumptions about the participants, based on race and the intersection of race and gender. The researchers found it important to report both academic and non-academic expectations, for a few reasons. For one, the prevalence of non-academic expectations in various campus settings, and their palpable effects on targets, reveals that the institution is not immune to racism that pervades the rest of US society. The authors discuss ways in which racist, sexist, and ethnocentric ideology that are effective in structuring larger society also structure lives in the supposedly meritocratic and colorblind institution of US education. It was also found that both academic and non-academic expectations contribute to a college experience that is qualitatively different for black and brown students than it is for whites.

The main academic-related assumption revealed assumes that the black or brown students are academically inferior. The paper also discusses the assumption that students of color hold experiential and racialized knowledge that whites do not hold, and they are often used as teaching tools. This is termed "instrumental visibility," as these students are excessively visible in class if the lecture surrounds

race or race-related issues. The non-academic-related assumptions discussed are expectations of criminality and pathological values and communication styles, and these expectations have an intersectional component. Some of these apply specifically to black and brown men and some of them apply specifically to black and brown women. Quotes are provided from participants to demonstrate their experiences with various types of microaggressions that convey these assumptions. Participants explained how they feel about, contend with, and are affected by, these experiences, which draws attention to some of the overlooked ways in which college life is racialized and gendered, and how navigating through the university is more complicated and demanding for some students than for others.

Academic Assumptions

Assumed academic inferiority

“People, you’ll see them, they are surprised, like oh, you’re that educated, you’re that intellectual like I wasn’t really expecting that....”

-Mikayla (20-year-old black-Dominican female)

The participants reported encountering various types of microaggressions that conveyed to them that because of their race, they are expected to be less academically capable and that they do not care about academics. Such ideas are conveyed through Assumptions of Inferiority microaggressions (Nadal 2011; Sue et al. 2008). Closely related are the Ascription of Intelligence (Sue et al. 2007) attacks that let the target know that they are expected to be less intelligent and less capable due to their race. Sometimes these attacks are intended to compliment the target, as seen in Mikayla’s example above. This obliviousness by the offender is frustrating to the targets. Many of these microaggressions are overlooked because they are behavioral, as Ne’Dra (21-year-old black female) explained. She is usually met with surprised looks when others find out that she is a tutor and a teaching assistant, which she knows means they do not expect her to be academically successful.

These looks are behavioral microaggressions and are often unintentional and covert. But not all microaggressions are as subtle, as Bri (19-year-old black female) revealed below.

I went to a meeting for pre-health students.....and we had to go around the room and say what our major was, and I was, of course, the only minority, and I said mine

was Nursing. And a (white) girl two seats away from me was like, ‘She’s black- she’s not getting into Nursing School. It’s ridiculous- she’s too dumb.’ And I didn’t say anything. I was like whatever. I am not gonna deal with it.

Some participants reported taking measures to avoid fulfilling expectations of academic inferiority. For instance, Keisha (23-year-old black female) explained below that she and the only other black student in the class devised a strategy to show that they care about their work.

There are two African American people in one of my senior-level classes....and we text each other every day to make sure we’re going to class. Cause since there’s only two of us, neither one of us wants to be missing. Or if we’re both missing, we don’t want that to be seen. And I don’t think that most (white) people think about that.

Keisha explained that she feels that due to her minority status, her behaviors are more noticeable. In fact, she referred to students of color at this university as “extreme minorities,” and said that they are excessively visible to their professors and others. And as Alicia (21-year-old black female) described, whites get “free passes,” since they, and their behaviors, are not as visible, while students of color must monitor their behaviors more than whites. This feeling of being extremely visible on campus has been reported in other studies about racialized experiences in academic settings (Andrews 2012; Harwood, Mendenhall, Lee, Riopelle, and Hunt 2018). Andrews (2012) refers to this process whereby black students are made to feel more visible by whites when they do not wish to be as racial spotlighting. This theme of hyper-visibility and the subsequent need to monitor behaviors were discussed consistently during the data collection.

“Instrumental visibility” in the classroom

Some participants described that their minority status not only made them more visible in and around campus but was also highlighted and utilized in-class lecture when the professor found it useful. That is, they also felt hyper-visible in the classroom when their presence was beneficial to the professor. At these times, the minority aspect of these students’ identity is made part of the classroom experience for all students when they were assumed to have special knowledge on the topic because of their perceived race and/or ethnicity. The researchers’ term this “instrumental visibility,” as the student is utilized as an instrument or tool of teaching. The student’s presence is

highlighted to explain an issue or topic about which the professor assumes they would have special, racialized knowledge due to their racial minority status. Most times, this assumption is tied to racist cultural stereotypes or the assumption that all black or brown people perceive and experience life in the same way.

For example, Amber (20-year-old black female) recalled a particularly embarrassing lecture in which her professor was discussing single-parent households, and asked her in front of the class what that type of upbringing was like.

...if there were stereotypes about black people, such as having a one-parent home, she would ask me, 'Amber, what do you think about that?', assuming that I'm from a one-parent home, and just assuming a lot of other things; that happened multiple times across the course. And it definitely made me more aware that I was the only black person in the class, and that I was definitely a minority in that school. You shouldn't really stereotype me in this way, and you shouldn't always spotlight me in this way, because it definitely made me feel- I don't want to say 'outcasted,' but I was just aware of it..."

This stereotyping by her professor made Amber feel marginalized and stigmatized, as she commented that she would rather be able to simply exist in class than serve as a racialized example and a source of knowledge for white students. This assumption that all black students are from a single-parent home is an example of Nadal (2011)'s Assumptions of Similarity microaggression, which sends the message that all people of a particular minority racial group have significant characteristics in common and that they experience life in the same way (Nadal 2011). On the other hand, Amber stated that none of the white students were ever made to represent their race in class, as they were seen as non-raced individuals with diverse individual perspectives.

A few of the black students expressed frustration when remembering occasions when their white professors turned to them, as the token blacks in the class, when discussing racism, American slavery, and Black History Month. This type of tokenism is annoying to many of the students, including Tomasina (22-year-old black female), who explained that whites tend to think she should know everything about blacks and black history. She explained that, "..... people are more surprised if I don't know something, specifically about black people and black culture- I get that a lot."

Furthermore, it is not as if tokenized students are consistently asked to express their views, as they are usually only asked to speak on matters which whites might not understand, and in a way that fosters superficial multiculturalism. White professors sometimes ask a student of color to contribute in a non-threatening and arbitrary way, and in a way in which the classroom dynamic will not be upset. This exchange gives the impression of inclusion and genuine interest, which may be the case for some, however, it is often the case that after a student of color contributes to the discussion, their views are co-opted and ignored since their role of the token has been served (Robinson 2012).

As described above, the participants reported academic-related assumptions based on their race. They also experienced non-academic-related assumptions on and off-campus, which tended to have more intersectional components, based on the intersections of race and gender. These assumptions are discussed below.

Non-Academic Assumptions

Assumptions of criminality

"If I'm walking down Chancellor's (a main, busy street on campus) or something, I try not to like walk up on people or not to get too close to people, cause like people will really freak out, like I don't get it."

- Matt (20-year-old black male)

A common cultural stereotype, and example of gendered racism, that finds its way into various settings of the academy is the assumption that black and brown males are dangerous (Smith et al. 2016). This criminalizing of black males is reflective of images and ideology pervasive throughout broader society (Monroe 2005), which paint them as violent, aggressive, and dangerous (Ferguson 2001; Collins 2004; Smith et al. 2007). Media and scholarly depictions of black life typically emphasize cultures of drugs, gangs, violence, and other social deficiencies, so threatening and criminal archetypes tend to define this group (Monroe 2005).

These intersectional expectations are commonly conveyed to males of color through microaggressions that Sue et al. (2007) has identified as Assumption of Criminal Status microaggression, while Nadal (2011) calls them Assumption of Criminality microaggressions. Typical examples of these microaggressions are walking quickly away from (male) students of color, watching and/or following them (as if they are expected to steal or cheat), and so on.

The participants are aware of this stereotype, as expectations of dangerous and/or criminal behavior are conveyed to them routinely in a host of campus spaces. For instance, several of the black males reported that, especially at night, white students walk cautiously near them, or even avoid them, as if they are afraid. To these targets, this behavioral microaggression is as effective as the verbal type.

Such responses to black males make life more demanding at the university. In light of the assumptions of criminality males of color, these students monitor and strategically adjust their behaviors and appearances to reduce whites' fears. For instance, Matt (a 20-year-old black male) is aware that he creates fear in others just by being out late. But because he does not want to make others fearful, he tries to accommodate others by adjusting his behaviors. He takes care to walk more slowly and to make eye contact with others so they will not see him as threatening.

John (27-year-old black male) learned that his new white roommate is afraid of him by behavioral microaggressions of avoidance when he is near. John remembered a typical interaction between the two:

I was washing my clothes, and he (new white suitemate) was in the bathroom, and he left his door open, and I open my door, and I'm walking to the laundry room, which is like in front of his door, and I hear him come out of the bathroom, and... closes the door, and locked the door. And, I'm like, "What? Are you serious?"

Matt (20-year-old black male) also recalled a situation that was reflective of how whites often react to his presence on campus:

One time I was trying to get on the elevator, and some people were already coming out, and the elevator opened, and they got big-eyed and surprised as I don't know what, and they were like, "oh you can come in, come in" and I was like, "you guys can get out, cause like I need the elevator and you guys don't." Like, they're trying to wave me on so they can get away from me, and I'm just like, I'm trying to get on the elevator."

Matt went on to describe another typical occurrence on the elevator:

...if there's a white woman on there (an elevator on campus), and she has her purse on this shoulder, on my side, she'll switch it to this side.... some people might be doing it

just to spite us for whatever reason, they don't like me, or and some people honestly are scared that I could snatch their purse....

The people avoiding Matt on the elevator, the white woman moving her purse away from him, and John's roommate trying to avoid him are examples of the Assumptions of Criminality microaggression, letting them know that their race and sex result in their fear of them.

Kyle (20-year-old black and Puerto-Rican male) shared that some microaggressions are less obvious, but he is fully aware of the message.

...when you're walking on campus or something, or if you go like open doors, usually like white people will say "sorry" for no reason, or if you're like waiting in line. I experience this all the time like I'll be at Wag (dining hall) to get my cup and fill my drink up, and I'll turn back around, and they'll be like, sorry, but like what are you saying sorry for? They say sorry like I'm going to like push them out my way and like choke then and like snap their neck cause I'm this (black guy) Funny.

Hyper-surveillance of students of color

While some extant research suggests that students of color in PWIs often feel invisible and ignored on campus, especially in the classroom (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000), this theme of invisibility is not as prevalent in the current research. Because of their criminalization (Monroe 2005), brown and black students tend to be watched more closely and to be noticed more than whites (Collins 2009), subjecting them to tighter surveillance, higher likelihood of detection of offenses, and stricter punishments for offenses. This excessive watching is a form of microaggression that students are often afraid to confront, but that they face in various settings.

Matt (20-year-old black male) recalled learning that he was expected to cheat on a test through a criminalizing microaggression of hyper-surveillance. For this test, students were to walk around the classroom and identify body parts at each station, but Matt was distracted due to his professor's constant monitoring during the test. He described:

In my Anatomy class...I was doing my test, and she (black female classmate) was doing hers, and I noticed the teacher kept following us around the classroom....making sure we weren't cheating or something. At first, I was like, she's just walking around the whole class, but I noticed as I was looking up to look

at the time or something... I noticed she was like right behind me.....

Mike (30-year-old black male) described close monitoring by campus officials while he drives through school grounds. He explained, "DWB (driving while black). All-day. I've been hit with that a few times, and I know a lot of people on campus have been hit with that, on campus grounds." Like many microaggressions, this hyper-surveillance is especially difficult to prove, making combating it very tricky.

These students are faced with negative expectations outside of the university grounds, as well, making this differential treatment inescapable. John (a 27-year-old black male) explained:

Yeah... like you don't want to like walk in the dark alley behind somebody in an all-black hoodie, or like go into a store...look like sketchy...you to go out in public and you try and like not be as sketchy as possible I guess. Cause like others will be like, son, are you stealing? And they feel you up, you know. "What you been doing?" Or whatever, you know, so you wanna like, I guess you try to dodge that, I guess.

This strict surveillance racializes these students, letting them know that race is a major identity marker. And for Matt, being black signals that he is untrustworthy, a cheater. Mike learned that due to his race, he will likely do something deviant, even while driving. John learns that he is feared, even in his dorm suite. These students are brown and black males, so race and gender intersect to provide for them a particular set of damaging and frustrating stereotypes. These students are reminded that they are black or brown during such encounters because that is how the rest of the world sees them (Tatum 1997), and being male adds yet another scrutinizing dimension to the generalized expectations others have of them (Collins 2009).

Another common intersectional microaggression is related to how students interact and communicate, and typically reveals cultural expectations of brown and black women. This type of microaggression is discussed below.

Assumptions of Pathologized Cultural Values and Communication Styles

".....they (whites) look at me like all frightened or confused, or they think I'm coming at them some type of way, but it's just the way I'm talking."

-Michelle (24-year-old black female)

Students of color must often contend with others viewing their behaviors, communication styles, and interactions as pathological. This makes everyday communication and interactions with others trickier than for whites. For students of color, interacting with others requires a substantial amount of consideration, and necessitates a complicated and burdensome process of emotion and social management as they navigate through the institution (Manning, Baruth, and Lee 2017).

Pathologization of minority students' behaviors and values are commonly conveyed through Sue et al.'s (2007) *Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles* microaggressions. Examples of this type of microaggression include asking these students to "calm down," or appearing afraid or annoyed. These messages can impact brown and black students in ways not often recognized, such as when the fear of fulfilling pathologized stereotypes about their group prevents them from speaking up or being honest about their feelings (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000).

Several of the participants explained that they spend energy trying not to conform to racial and cultural stereotypes, and the constant need to consider the interpretations of whites to avoid being seen in a threatening or otherwise negative way. Ne'Dra (21-year-old black female) explained, "I do think self-awareness is important because a lot of minorities have stereotypes already, and being self-aware, you try to not live up to those stereotypes."

Some examples of misinterpretations of students of color by white instructors include the tendency for overlapping speech to be seen as disrespect, pretend to fight as aggression, and ritualized humor as literal insults (Monroe 2005). This emphasis on stereotypical "white" normative standards of expressions and communications is due to and reinforced by the limited racial and related cultural diversity in educational settings, and the prevailing stereotypes concerning students of color that are left unchallenged (Monroe 2005).

On the other hand, if whites interact or behave in ways consistent with some of the stereotypes associated with people of color, they typically do not face judgment associated with matching a racialized stereotype. This is because they do not live their lives defined by their race; they are, in effect, non-raced beings (Jones 2005). And if stereotypical behaviors are noticed, they are commonly considered temporary behaviors of the individual, not manifestations of what it means to be of their group (Monroe 2005).

Michelle (24-year-old black female) described below how this extra burden of monitoring her

behavior is unfair, and she described that this is a clear manifestation of white privilege.

I'm loud enough for you to hear me. I'm being respectful. I mean, and they come off thinking it's something else, and it's not. And I feel like, why do they feel that way? Why do they feel like us, as blacks, that we come off as aggressive, or we have an issue with them if we stand up for ourselves, or we say something to them, like a comment? And I just, I don't think it's right.

The most common intersectional stereotype that many of the students reported trying to avoid fulfilling is the "angry black woman" stereotype. For example, Michelle (24-year-old black female) indicated that even though she sometimes presents herself in a manner consistent with negative cultural stereotypes of black women, this should not negate her actions or intentions. When she is annoyed or upset, and she expresses herself as such, her concerns are often overshadowed by the reactions to her style of expression. The mode of expression and interaction minimizes her feelings, which is frustrating and unfair to Michelle. She explained that she lived with three white girls who consistently accused her of evading her share of chores, and when she confronted the girls about her feelings, she first had to consider how they might respond to or interpret what she would say to them, as a black woman, whose behaviors would be interpreted as a factor of her race and sex. And, they often responded to her mode of expression, not her actual concern, with a pathologizing of communication style microaggression.

Sand (49-year-old black female) said that when confronted with racial microaggressions, such as whites backing away from her when she appears upset, she is unsure of how to respond. She described the times when she does not want to speak up about it because she, "... didn't want him to say, 'well, that's one angry black woman there! Really mad black woman!'" This deliberation on whether or not to confront the perpetrator is common among students, adding to the burden of being a brown or black student in a white university.

Tomasina (22-year-old black female) agreed: "I have to change sometimes little pieces of me so that I don't come off a certain way, or play into a certain stereotype, and it's just a lot to think about."

Alicia (21-year-old black female) added that she feels that because she is black, whites are often uncomfortable around her, that they seem unsure how to interact with her. This makes her aware of the importance placed on her race, and this bothers her.

I feel like sometimes people get uncomfortable around me....I mean I know you can see that I'm black....don't ONLY see me as being black, you know, I'm still like another student, I'm still young, you know same age group, we probably have some similar experiences, so I would like to not ONLY be black to some people.

Most of the Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles targeted black women, as they rely on the "angry black woman" trope or the expectation that these women are loud and uncontrollable. But, John (27-year-old black male) said that whites also make him aware of the pathologized communication style associated with black men through an interesting and common type of microaggression that many overlook. He finds that white students tend to respond to him differently than they respond to whites because they assume that his communication style will be stereotypically "black." He said that whites, usually males, will adapt the words they choose to use, their body language, and their facial expressions, to mimic the stereotypical style they assume John, as a black man, would use and understand.

White students' belief in black and brown students' use of a stereotypical, racialized, pathologized communication style certainly makes them feel othered and marginalized, underscoring that race defines and guides much of his interactions with whites. And what seems to make this an especially troubling type of microaggression is that contesting it risks confirming the assumptions underlying the microaggression.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of students of color at a predominantly white university in a predominantly white town on the Southern East Coast. It relied on Critical Race Theory and its privileging of persons of color to understand how race and racism work on campus by relying on brown and black students' counternarratives about race. An intersectional framework was also used to explore how gendered racism, mainly expressed through microaggressions, affected these students' experiences and behaviors.

This study extends the research literature on racial and intersectional microaggressions in four important ways: 1) It highlights the participants' perceptions of their extreme visibility on campus, which differs from most extant research that suggest that students of color feel invisible at PWIs; 2) It includes a discussion of what we term "instrumental visibility" in the classroom, in which students of color are called on to

contribute to lectures due to their assumed expertise in race-related issues, but are otherwise not called on specifically in class; 3) It highlights the intersectional nature of two common types of microaggressions—those that assume criminality, and those that assume pathologized communication styles; and 4) It explores the strategies these students use to make whites more comfortable and/or to avoid fulfilling negative stereotypes about their race and/or the intersection of their race and gender.

As discussed in the Findings, most of the participants indicated feeling extra visible on campus due to their numerical minority status. Interestingly, this perception differs from much existing research indicating that brown and black students at PWIs feel isolated, invisible, excluded, and marginalized on campus (Nadal 2008; Solórzano et al. 2000; Ricks 2014).

The participants' extreme visibility on campus meant that their behaviors were noticed easily. They found this problematic since any infractions might have been seen as evidence for the validity of race-based or intersectional stereotypes. Therefore, and as is consistent with extant research (Lewis et al. 2013; Minikel-Lococque 2013; Clark and Mitchell 2018), the participants in this study were deliberate about their behaviors and often modified how they interacted in certain situations.

This was a heavy burden, as many participants expressed frustration with the cognitive and emotional energy that they spent considering the messages they were sending, while white students were able to blend in more easily. Their behaviors were not as noticeable, and when they were noticed, they were attributed to the individual, not to their race.

Much extant research on racial microaggression at PWIs finds that black and brown students often feel invisible in the classroom (Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, and Pollio 2004; McCabe 2009; Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000). For instance, some female black college students reported feeling isolated and expressed the concern that their contributions to discussions in the classroom would never be acknowledged (McCabe 2009) or that they would be ignored by instructors and others on campus (Davis et al. 2004). On the other hand, the participants in the present study reported that they felt hyper-visible in the classroom setting when their racial status was beneficial to classroom material and discussion. Because this involved using these students as teaching tools, we referred to this extreme visibility as "instrumental visibility." Our participants recalled being utilized by the instructors to speak for their race about certain stereotypically black or brown experiences, and/or they were expected to have unique knowledge about certain topics because of their

perceived race or ethnicity. This tokenism of students of color added an extra burden of being a sort of teaching tool to the academic experience of black and brown students that was not experienced by their white peers.

Gendered racism was a common theme revealed through intersectional microaggressions. The brown and black males received criminalizing assaults, typically from behavioral cues, like clutching the purse or walking away from them, that let them know they were feared and expected to be dangerous. And because they were considered dangerous and/or morally deviant, they were often met with hyper-surveillance, a type of criminalizing microaggression, in all campus settings. This intersectional microaggression was common on college campuses (Smith et al. 2016; Smith et al. 2007; Morales 2014), such as when they were watched during a test, followed by campus security, monitored during a basketball game, and so on. Because they knew they were feared and/or considered deviant in some way, these males also found themselves trying to make others around them more comfortable, such as walking slowly at night with their backpack visible. This constant watching has been found to affect the psychological well-being of targets, as well as their self-esteem and academic performance (Smith et al. 2016).

Other intersectional microaggressions were those that pathologize communication styles of black and brown females as loud, angry, and uncontrollable, and men of color as "cool" or "hip." The targets of these aggressions found themselves deliberating whether or not to speak up against and contest this oppression, but, and as other research has shown (Minikel-Lococque 2013; Lewis et al. 2013; Hughey, Rees, Goss, Rosino, and Lesser 2017; Laughter 2014) they feared the consequences of doing so. Minikel-Lococque (2013) termed the kind of microaggression contested by the target a contested microaggression and explained that speaking up after an assault can leave the target at risk of experiencing more microaggressions and/or reinforcing the expectations embedded in the microaggression. This adds to the emotional toll that racism and gendered racism imposes on students.

The deliberation of whether or not to speak up after an attack was most evident in the discussions of the "angry black woman" stereotype revealed through microaggressions of pathologizing cultural values and communication styles. This reveals the "double jeopardy," as Crenshaw put it (1989) that black women face in white spaces, and that can have adverse psychological effects (Lewis et al. 2013). This cultural interpretation of black women's emotions as angry, and the lack of recognized justification for expressing

anger, make for a particular experience for black women in the US (Crenshaw 1989; Lewis et al. 2013), again, adding to the emotional toll that gendered racism takes on black and brown female students in white universities.

It is important to note some overlap among the types of microaggressions students described. For instance, Matt's professor's expectation of him cheating revealed that he was expected to be deviant, so this seems to serve as criminalizing microaggressions. But this expectation also expressed Matt's professor's assumption of his academic inferiority, so it could be considered an Ascription of Intelligence or Assumptions of Inferiority microaggression. Another overlap we found important to mention occurs with the Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles (Sue et al. 2007) and Nadal's (2011) Exoticization/Assumptions of Similarity microaggressions. In effect, both types let the target know that they were assumed to be different from the normative standard, and similar to others in their group/race.

The extreme visibility, hyper-surveillance, and other forms of racism and gendered racism that our participants faced in all campus settings constantly let them know that they were considered to be less academically-capable, dangerous, angry, and otherwise deviant. These expectations came in the form of behavioral and verbal microaggressions, some even in the form of supposed compliments. The participants were very aware that if they responded to these microaggressions by naming them as racist and/or sexist, they risk reinforcing stereotypes, escalating the situation, and/or being met with denial from the offender. Therefore, the participants in this study commonly devised strategies to avoid fulfilling stereotypes, to accommodate what they considered white normative standards, or to avoid making whites uncomfortable. These cognitive processes, careful deliberations, behavioral modifications, and the frustrations associated with being racialized, stereotyped, and treated differently in all campus settings made for markedly different daily and overall experiences for students of color compared to whites. So in addition to the trials of college life, these students faced layers of oppression that were often ignored, overlooked, and denied, making them even more problematic for the targets.

Although it is important to recognize that racism creates racialized and troubling experiences for brown and black students in white spaces, it is also important to recognize that understanding how racism (including microaggressions) works is not enough. Recognizing that even non-academic expectations affect academic life is crucial and being aware of the subtle and subconscious ways in which negative expectations are

conveyed to brown and black students is important. And the intersectional component to many of the participants' experiences, makes understanding inequalities facing students of color at PWIs even more complicated, but significant if we are to work towards CRT's emphasis on social justice.

Understanding the complexity of the issue, recognizing the diversity of student experiences, and acknowledging the often painstaking and draining burdens imposed on these students by even well-meaning professors, students, and staff, are crucial in working towards a more equitable college experience for all students. Research such as this study, which uses the voices and experiences of those affected by racism and gendered racism, and that reveal the many diverse ways in which others contribute to unequal experiences in all settings on campus is significant and should be read by faculty, staff, and all students so that they can recognize their role in these processes, and to make deliberate efforts to avoid contributing to racialized and gendered experiences. And brown and black students, who often feel invalidated, should know that their voices are heard and important, and are useful in combating racism in college.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study provides important information on black and brown students' experiences at a PWI, it is important to mention its limitations. First, there are limitations inherent in focus group methodology. Outspoken participants can take over the conversations and dominate the sessions (Leung and Savithiri 2009). This happened a couple of times during our meetings. Also, some of the participants were friends before coming to the sessions, and they seemed to affect one another's responses at times. For instance, one of the participants told the facilitator, after one of the sessions, that she did not speak as candidly about her experiences as she would have if her friend was not at the meeting. While the researchers do not believe that this prompted any significant issues in data collection, they must recognize the bias which using pre-existing groups might have created. Finally, there was some concern before data collection began that the black and brown students might not be comfortable sharing their experiences with racism with a white facilitator in the room. But this did not seem to be problematic, as everyone appeared comfortable and eager to express themselves freely.

Further, the results of this study do not necessarily generalize to all college students of color or even all college students of color at PWIs. Findings might have differed if the university were located in a town with a different racial history, with a different demographic composition, or other factors. Context matters in

examining microaggressions (Sue et al. 2007), so it would be important to explore the processes and phenomena examined at this university at other universities in diverse locations and contexts.

There are a few directions for future research that emerged from this study. First, as mentioned above, it would be important to examine microaggressions at a majority-minority university to explore if race and gendered racism are experienced by brown and black students in a context in which whites are the numerical minority, and where the town in which the university is situated is not overwhelmingly white. The authors would also like to explore the concept of contested microaggressions (Minikel-Lacocque 2013), which are microaggressions that are named and contested by the target. The deliberation of whether or not to confront the perpetrator, and to name the racism, were consistent themes of the focus group conversations. The participants reported that they often wanted to confront the perpetrator, especially if they felt that the slight was intentional, but they were aware of the potential for further microaggressions or other negative consequences if they were to speak up. The cognitive and emotional processes and burdens of contested microaggressions can be considerable, and extant research reports a need to examine them further (Minikel-Lococque 2013; Hughey et al. 2017; Laughter 2014).

Conclusion

In summary, this study explored the subtle and overlooked forms of racism and gendered racism, namely conveyed through microaggression, facing students of color at a PWI, and that contributes to an overall qualitatively different experience for brown and black students as compared to white students. Academic-related and non-academic expectations each require students to modify their behaviors to avoid making whites uncomfortable and to avoid fulfilling stereotypes about their race and/or race and gender. These findings are unique in that they highlight that these students feel extremely visibility in all campus settings, which differs from most research, which finds that students of color tend to feel invisible at PWIs. This study also reveals the intersectional component to some of these expectations and the strategies used to contend with them. Because much of the racism and gendered racism these students experience is unintentional, these findings underscore the importance of helping bring awareness to the various ways in which faculty, staff, and students contribute to these inequitable experiences.

The nuanced, subtle and often seeming benign nature of these assaults makes them easy to ignore and deny, therefore more dangerous and frustrating for

targets. And because many of the microaggressions facing these students are also found throughout larger US society (Sue et al. 2007; Nadal 2011), this study adds to the literature that asserts that US education is not an equalizer, that the dominant ideologies of merit and colorblindness in US education are not accurate, that they are in fact myths (McNamee 2018; Zirkel and Pollack 2016). In line with CRT, the researchers see the importance of using our research to inform change. These findings can be utilized to help inform educator trainings to help instructors learn to be aware of how they might be contributing to inequitable experiences of students based on their race and their intersection of their race and gender.

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