

# “I Know it [Racism] Still Exists Here:” African American Males at a Predominantly White Institution

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*This qualitative study examines the experiences of African American males at a PWI (Predominantly White Institution). The focus on African American males is deliberate because, as a group, they have the highest attrition rate of any college demographic. Utilizing in-depth interview data from 12 African American males at a PWI, this project delineates the precarious station of black males who experience racism and racial microaggressions in a purportedly post-racial, colorblind society. Qualitative analysis of the data reveals the following two themes: (1) Racism and Racial Microaggressions and (2) The African American experience is not important to faculty and the university. Recommendations for how PWIs can foster the academic success of black males will be provided.*

**Keywords:** black male, college students, Critical Race Theory, microaggressions, PWI

This qualitative study examines the influence of racial microaggressions on collegiate racial climate, prospects for academic success, and overall adjustment for 12 African American<sup>1</sup> males attending a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the South. This topic is important for four reasons. First, the number of African Americans that currently attend college in the nation warrants an examination of their experiences. Case in point: African Americans represent 12 percent of college students in the United States (Strayhorn 2014) and approximately 85 percent of these students attend PWIs (Hoston, Graves, and Fleming-Randle 2010; Strayhorn 2014). Second, the graduation rate for African American students is behind that of white students. To support this, blacks graduate at a rate of 39.5 percent within a six-

year period (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 2012), while whites graduate at a rate of 61.5 percent (Hoston et al. 2010; *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 2012; Robertson 2012). Third, when compared to black women, the graduation rate for black men is especially precarious. To put this in perspective, black women not only outnumber black males in college by a ratio of two to one, but black women graduate from college (47 percent) at a higher rate than black men (36 percent) (Endelin-Freeman 2004; Robertson and Mason 2008). Finally, since black males have the highest attrition rate of any college demographic, racist experiences at PWIs may be especially detrimental to the academic success of these men (Booker 2007; Simms, Knight, and Dawes 1993; Singer 2005; Smedley, Myers, and Harrell 1993; Strayhorn 2014). Taken together, these realities necessitate that scholars better understand the

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “African American” and “black” will be used interchangeably in this manuscript.

effects of racial microaggressions on the African American male students at PWIs.

Racial microaggressions have been found to have a deleterious effect on the experiences of African American students attending PWIs (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Yosso et al. 2009). Racial microaggressions are unconscious and subtle forms of racism that often go unnoticed when juxtaposed with more visceral, overt expressions of racial animus (Delgado and Stefancic 1992; Yosso et al. 2009). Moreover, Pierce et al. (1978:66) asserted racial microaggressions are "putdowns of blacks by offenders" and Solorzano et al. (2000:61) posited that microaggressions can consist of comments made to African American students like "You're different," "If only there were more of them [black people] like you [a black person]," and "I don't think of you as black." Since the black male collegiate may navigate in an environment where subtle forms of verbal and non-verbal racism may decrease the likelihood that he will graduate (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 2012; Robertson and Mason 2008), the goals of this study are significant for understanding the collegiate racial climate, prospects for academic success, and overall adjustment for African American males.

In the section that follows, we discuss relevant literature on this topic. We begin by discussing the problem of racism at PWIs and the stigmatization that accompanies it. After this, we highlight racism that emerges specifically in classroom settings. Then, we delve into the importance of money in terms of being able to take care of school-related expenses and matriculation of black students along with tapping into racism in the larger campus milieu.

### **Review of Literature**

This study extends the work of previous scholars that have generally found the experiences of black students at PWIs to be categorically more academically and socially challenging than those of white students (Ancis,

Sedlacek, and Mohr 2000; Cuyjet 1997; Guiffrida and Douthit 2010; Jones, Castellanos, and Cole 2002; Kuh and Love 2000; Robertson, Mitra and Van Delinder 2005; Rodgers and Summers 2008; Schwitzer et al. 1999; Sedlacek 1999; Solorzano et al. 2000). In this section, we highlight relevant empirical literature, with an emphasis on key literature related to the stigmatization of black men, racism in the classroom, money, racism in the larger campus milieu, and the value of extracurricular activities. After this, we will discuss the theoretical framework on which the current study was built.

#### *Racism at PWIs: Avoiding the Process of Niggerization*

Harper (2009:700) contends that African American males at PWIs, which are extensions of the larger society, constantly endure a process of dehumanization called niggerization. This process entails a perpetual and less than edifying "reinforcement of racist stereotypes that stigmatize them as dumb jocks, black male criminals from the local community who do not belong on campus, affirmative action beneficiaries who were undeserving of admission, and at-risk students who all emerge from low income families and urban ghettos." Moreover, black males that continuously experience this level of stigmatization in the white college milieu are especially prone to academic failure (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Flowers 2006; Robertson 2012).

Several scholars have examined low rates of black male college success (Feagin 1998; Feagin, Hernan, and Imani 1996; Robertson 2012; Solorzano et al. 2000; Yosso et al. 2009) and a variety of explanations have been proffered to delineate their intellectual station at PWIs. Such explanations include, but are not limited to, a lack of financial resources, inadequate socialization, lack of substantial participation in campus activities, and academic under-preparedness for college (Bush and Bush 2010; Hoston et al. 2010; McClure 2006; Pascarella and Smart 1991; Patitu

2007). The aforementioned reasons are valid and emphasize the importance of examining the matriculation of black male students at PWIs.



Black males attending PWIs encounter psychological stressors associated with racism and the stress of these experiences may result in less than optimal adjustment experiences (Robertson et al. 2005; Rodgers and Summers 2008). A possible starting point for understanding the dismal record of black male matriculation at PWIs could be their negative experiences in the K-12 education system. To support this, Bonner and Bailey (2006) elucidated how a lack of positive reinforcement from teachers in primary and secondary school results in low expectations that follow black males to college. Sadly, the lack of positive affirmation from teachers can contribute to what Kunjufu (1986) characterizes as “failure syndrome.” Failure syndrome suggests that when black students, particularly males, are viewed in stereotypical ways (i.e., black males are stupid,

academically incapable, and thugs) in educational settings, there is a possibility they will internalize those negative caricatures and underperform academically. The low expectations for African American male college students may partly explain why these men have the lowest success rate of any collegiate demographic (Flowers 2006; Harper 2009; Hoston et al. 2010).

### *Racism and the Classroom*

While the majority of African American students attend PWIs, a substantial number of these students graduate from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Allen, Epps, and Haniff 1991; Robertson 2012). HBCUs represent just three percent of the nation’s institutions of higher learning, yet they graduate nearly 20 percent of African Americans who earn undergraduate degrees (Thurgood Marshall College Fund 2012). Discrepancies in the number of black males that graduate from PWIs and HBCUs suggest that the classroom atmosphere at the PWI may hinder the academic success of these men. Consequently, the impact of race, the classroom environment, and the interactions between black males and white faculty members becomes paramount (Guiffrida 2005a; 2005b; Guiffrida and Douthit, 2010; Hamilton 2006).

Scholars have found the academic success of black students is heightened when classroom content specifically reflects their interests and concerns (Bush and Bush 2010; Hopkins 1997; Robertson 2012; Sedlacek 1983; Thompson and Louque 2005). This means that courses and academic subject matter should include discussions of prominent African Americans and address topics that members of this group generally consider important, such as racism and discrimination (Davis et al. 2004; Guiffrida and Douthit 2010; Solorzano et al. 2000). The relationship between black males and white professors is especially important since the PWI

professor is the arbiter of intellectual content, discussion, and flow within the classroom.

Unfortunately, black males at PWIs generally perform lower than their female counterparts, which may be due in part to the perception of them being intellectually deficient and criminally prone (Strayhorn 2014). Such realities lead to the slow yet steady exodus of these men from the PWI (Kuh and Love 2000; Tinto 1993) or them developing and/or availing themselves of intellectual and social counterspaces at the PWI to buffer racial microaggressions and encourage academic achievement (Solorzano et al. 2000; Yosso et al. 2009). The aforesaid challenges Tinto’s (1993) minority student interactional model, which suggests that more minority students focus on assimilation, the greater their prospects for academic success.

### *Money*

A major determinant of African American male collegiate success is their financial situation (Bush and Bush 2010; Furr and Elling 2002). Money is especially important for the low-income black student who must pay for courses, books, food, housing, and participation in campus social activities (e.g., attending sporting events, parties, etc.). Not surprisingly, African American students in general, and African American male students in particular, are disproportionately more likely than their white counterparts to hail from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which makes finances a real priority (Patitu 2007).

There are two reasons why financial concerns for African American male college students may hinder their success in the PWI environment. First, since African American males are disproportionately more likely than whites to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, they are less likely to have prior exposure to educational milieus similar to the PWI, which makes social adjustment and academic success at PWIs more tenuous (Bush and Bush 2010; Edelin-Freeman 2004). Secondly, since African

American males are more likely than whites to emerge from blighted urban communities, they are more likely to attend a two-year college. However, even if they attend a four year institution, they are more likely to work more than the number of hours suggested for optimal academic achievement (Bush and Bush 2010; Charles, Dinwiddie, and Massey 2004). Thus, since black males are disproportionately more likely than their white counterparts to grow up in residentially-segregated neighborhoods, which are more likely to possess negative social networks (e.g., criminal and/or gang activity), host poor schools, and provide limited academic preparedness for college; unfortunately, these realities coalesce to undermine chances for optimal academic performance for these men (Charles et al. 2004).

### *Racism in the Larger Campus Milieu*

Since black males at the PWI are treated in stereotypical and dehumanizing ways (Feagin 1998; Harper 2009), the ability to successfully navigate potentially hostile racial terrain is crucial to the matriculation of these men (Lett and Wright 2003; Rodgers and Summers 2008). The aforementioned is of paramount importance because, as previously mentioned, black men have higher attrition rates than their minority counterparts (Robertson 2012).

Since the impact of campus racism on black males can be attenuated by a strong racial identity (Eccles, Wong, and Peck 2006; Feagin et al. 1996; Robertson et al. 2005; Robertson 2012), establishing relationships with key black adults may foster the adjustment and academic success of these men. Thus, by hiring more African American faculty, administrators, and staff who could provide these students with a large network of effective role models and mentors, the PWI would create a more racially hospitable milieu for black male students (Gallien and Peterson 2005; Thompson and Louque 2005). The addition of more African American faculty often results in more courses that speak to the concerns

and interests of African Americans, which in turn, contributes to an optimal education experience and decreases racial tensions on campus (Guiffrida and Douthit 2010; Rodgers and Summers 2008).

Not surprisingly, research has shown that black professors can serve as valuable mentors who aid in retention and graduation rates for black students in general, and black males specifically (Harper 2009; Robertson et al. 2016). Unfortunately, African Americans are woefully underrepresented among the professoriate (Galien and Peterson 2005). For instance, Pittman (2012), in her study of racial microaggressions and the narratives of African American professors at PWIs, affirmed that black professors often serve as effective mentors for black students and do not account for a large proportion of the professoriate.

National Center for Educational Statistics data reveals that only 4.9 percent of full-time, tenure-track faculty are African American. Despite the reality that Pittman (2012) does not cite specific data on black male faculty, one can posit that African American male faculty are needed very badly in collegiate classrooms, since African American males have the lowest levels of graduation than any collegiate demographic. Moreover, both Jones and Slate (2014) and Brooks and Steen (2012) provide valuable insight into the dearth of black faculty representation. Jones and Slate (2014) examined black faculty representation in thirty-five universities from the 2005 through the 2011 academic years and discovered that the median percentage of black professors was 4 percent. As well, Brooks and Steen, in their study of the absence of black male professors in counseling education programs, found black males to comprise less than 5 percent of faculty members.

#### *Extracurricular Activities*

When offered at PWIs, culturally-based campus activities and organizations, such as fraternities/sororities and black student

associations, assist student social adjustment and academic success (McClure 2006; Pascarella and Smart 1991). Moreover, black student associations often serve as catalysts for many positive student outcomes. Particularly, these culturally-grounded student organizations serve as conduits for socioeconomic upward mobility by aiding in the establishment of critical social networks/social capital, facilitating community enhancement via organizational community service, and assisting in the creation of tension-reducing counterspaces (Guiffrida 2003). Conversely, the aforementioned must be put in perspective, because in her seminal work on black college students, Jacqueline Fleming (1984) emphasized that too much involvement in campus activities can be detrimental to students' prospects for academic success.

Consequently, extra-curricular activities on PWI campuses can serve as "safe havens" for black students. These student organizations, fraternities, and culturally-engaging spaces can serve to mitigate the alienating impact of race and racism at PWIs (Flowers 2004; Guiffrida and Douthit 2010).

#### *Critical Race Theory*

In his classic book, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, the late esteemed legal scholar Derrick Bell (1992) developed Critical Race Theory (CRT). According to Bell (1992), "writing in critical race theory stresses that oppressors are neither neatly divorceable from one another nor amenable to strict categorization" (pp.144-145) In essence, CRT recognizes the lived experiences of people of color in a white-dominated society as well as how various contexts, such as the PWI environment, may be a site of oppression for black males.

Aguirre (2010) highlighted the utility of CRT in the present study when he stated, "one innovative feature of critical race theory is the use of narratives or counter stories to give voice to minority persons. By introducing their lived experience into discourses about social processes

and institutional practices, minority persons challenge the dominant social reality; that is, the 'stock story' the dominant group uses to justify its alter ego" (p. 763). In their study of the utilization of CRT in education, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) suggested this framework rests on the following tenets: (1) race continues to be significant in the United States, (2) U.S. society is based on property rights as opposed to human rights, and (3) the intersections of race and property create an analytical tool for understanding inequity. An example of how CRT can inform subjective perspectives on the efficacy of educational policies was presented by Crenshaw (1988) as cited in Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995:56):

The civil rights community, however, must come to terms with the fact that antidiscrimination discourse is fundamentally ambiguous and can accommodate conservative as well as liberal views of race and equality. This dilemma suggests that the civil rights constituency cannot afford to view antidiscrimination doctrine as a permanent pronouncement of society's commitment to ending racial subordination. Rather, antidiscrimination law represents an ongoing ideological struggle in which occasional winners harness the moral, coercive, consensual power of law. Nonetheless, the victories it offers can be ephemeral and the risks of engagement substantial (Crenshaw 1988:1335).

Further, CRT is applicable to the present study not only because it challenges the status quo, but also because of its utility in cogent examinations of race in a myriad of contexts, such as the ideologies and norms that too frequently are embedded within legal and educational institutions (Aguirre 2000; Bell 1992; Crenshaw 1988, 2011; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Solorzano and Villalpando 1998).

As aforementioned, CRT is uniquely positioned to engage the dilemmas encountered

by oppressed persons. Not surprisingly, institutions of higher learning, since their creation, have regularly marginalized non-majority group members. As a result, CRT has commonly been utilized as a theoretical lens to support methodological approaches to explore the circumstances of powerless groups (Solorzano et al. 2000; Yosso et al. 2009).

### **Methodology**

This study utilized semi-structured interviews to examine factors that were central to the plight of students of color at PWIs and are associated with a positive campus environment and academic experience. An ideal racial climate for students of color in general, and African American males at PWIs, contributes to academic success by emphasizing the following: (a) retention of students, faculty, and administrators of color; (b) course offerings and academic programs inclusive of the historical and contemporary experiences of people of color; (c) programs to recruit students of color; (d) a mission that acknowledges the importance of diversity; and (e) the primacy of campus racism and racial microaggressions as inhibitors to positive adjustment (Carroll 1998; Robertson and Mason 2008; Suarez-Balcazar et al. 2003; Solorzano et al. 2000; Yosso et al. 2009). Therefore, qualitative interviews were necessary to facilitate an enhanced understanding of the students' experiences at PWIs.

### *Subjects*

Interviews were conducted with 12 African American male students at a mid-sized regional university in the South from August 2012 through September 2013. However, 7 of the 12 participants provided responses that were directly related to racism and racial microaggressions. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes, were audiotaped, and then transcribed to determine the most salient themes. Respondents ranged in age

from 18 to 23 years of age and were primarily from middle class socioeconomic backgrounds (5 participants had annual household incomes in the 40-65K range), with the rest identifying as coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (7 participants had incomes in the 20-39K range). The identities of all participants were protected via pseudonyms.

In regards to classification, two students were freshmen, three students were sophomores, three students were juniors, and four students were seniors. Students represented the following majors: Psychology (1 student), Education (1 student), Criminal Justice (6 students), Exercise Science (2 students), Education (1 student), and Communication (1 student). Student grade point averages ranged from 2.2 to 4.00. Three students (25 percent) had a grade point average of 3.0 or higher, four students (33.3 percent) had a grade point average less than 2.5, and the remaining 5 students (41.6 percent) had a grade point average between 2.6 and 3.0.

Snowball or convenience sampling was used to recruit participants. This procedure was a cost-efficient way to secure a sample that met the basic criteria for inclusion using a minimum amount of time, money, and effort (Cohen and Arieli 2011; Noy 2008; Sadler et al. 2010). Respondents were solicited by posting flyers across campus residence halls, placing announcements in the student union, and the university dining hall. To establish rapport with the target population, the first author frequently attended and participated in student organization meetings and frequented the student center which was a “social hub” for the students. This approach built trust between potential participants and the researcher (Sadler et al. 2010), increased the likelihood that these men would participate in the study, and made it possible for the researchers to ask deep, probing questions during the interview. Since students of color who reside in the South are generally more reluctant than students from other geographic regions to volunteer personal information due to the risk of social or other discriminatory

repercussions (Carter 2013), this methodology was ideal for studying the unique experiences of this population.

In the upcoming section of the manuscript, the setting in which the study was conducted will be outlined.

### *Setting*

The interviews were conducted in a university library study room because it was relatively quiet, semi-private, and easily accessible for students. Furthermore, since this room was open every day of the week, this made it easier to schedule interviews that fit within the schedules of the students.

### *Data Analysis*

CRT was used to discern thematic categories and understand how African American males managed racism, racial microaggressions, and dealt with the exigencies of the PWI environment. Solorzano et al. (2000) delineated the usefulness of CRT in the current study when they wrote:

Critical race theory offers insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogies that guide our efforts to identify, analyze, and transform the structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom. (P.63)

We used content analysis to analyze the narratives (Berg 2007; Strauss and Corbin 1990) which necessitated that we immerse ourselves in the data and determine thematic patterns and themes (Berg 2007; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Since latent content analysis is “the most obvious way to analyze interview data” (Berg 2007:134), we relied on this form of analysis to discern the “deep structural meaning conveyed by the message” from respondents’ answers to interview questions (Berg 2007:308).

Words and phrases were the units of analysis and were used to extrapolate abstract themes from the interview transcripts. The coding process entailed examining all responses, keeping track of emergent themes, and determining how the ideas were indicative of racism and racial microaggressions. Due to the inherent difficulty of deciphering whether the participant believed the incident was "overt" or "subtle," racism and racial microaggressions were collapsed into one theme. Since racial microaggressions entail racially assaultive remarks as well as subtle and innocuous statements (Robertson, Bravo, and Chaney 2016; Solorzano and Villalpando 1998), it stands to reason that some remarks might be viewed as slight by some black men yet highly distasteful by others. To illustrate: If a black male college student was told "You are not like the rest of them, you are different" some African Americans would perceive this comment as a subtle microaggression while others would perceive this as an overt microaggression (Solorzano et al. 2000: 61). The discrepancy in interpretation may be explained by the fact that each person must learn how to recognize microaggressions and decide how and/or if they will act when they receive them. In addition, how a microaggression is perceived by the person of color largely depends on the extent to which the recipient has knowledge of racism, and has internalized, pervasive societal racial stereotypes (Steele and Aronson 1995).

To establish reliability, an outside coder reviewed the list of responses, emergent themes, and definitions. The outside coder was selected because of their extensive experience with qualitative research; in particular, coding and analyzing narratives. After a 98 percent coding reliability rate was established between the authors, it was determined that a feasible coding system had been established. In order to accurately control for reliability, an outside coder was selected to code and analyze the narrative data after the initial coding reliability had been established between the authors. The reliability

established between the authors and the outside coder was 97 percent.

## Results

Qualitative analysis of the narratives provided by the 12 African American men were related to how these students negotiated the academic terrain of the PWI, and focused on two themes. The first theme, *Racism and Racial Microaggressions*, was related to the verbal assaults experienced by African American male students. Further, this theme entailed a minimization of the culture and heritage of African American male students that was accompanied by the potential psychological, academic, and social impact that these assaults have on African American male students. In the section that follows, we present the impact of such instances and the different types of racial microaggressions that occurred within the PWI milieu. The second theme, *the African American experience is not important to faculty and the university*, was related to the following: 1) the university not offering African American Studies courses, 2) professors not regularly and critically engaging issues of relevance to African Americans in classes, and 3) faculty not prioritizing mentoring black male students.

### *Racism and Racial Microaggressions*

Nine of the twelve participants (75 percent of the participants) experienced the influence of racism and racial microaggressions. Six of the twelve (50 percent of the participants) described the experience as negative while three of the twelve participants (25 percent of the participants) furnished responses where a negative consequence/effect on them could not be clearly discerned. The responses which most prominently exhibited the impact of racism and racial microaggressions are presented. Likewise, replies that revealed blatant racism and were too "overt" to be characterized as "microaggressions" were offered because these



experiences negatively impact student adjustment as well as black men's prospects for academic success. Hence, this was the rationale for collapsing the responses into the single theme "Racism and Racial Microaggressions." As previously mentioned, all of the students who experienced racism and racial microaggressions did not characterize these encounters in a negative way. The inclusion of "less than negative" experiences regarding race allowed a peek into how these students were able to successfully navigate the intellectual and social terrain of the PWI under study.

Moreover, the comments provided by Lewis, Andre, and Ezekiel are indicative of both the racism and the racial microaggressions faced by African Americans far too often in PWI settings. The students were asked questions concerning their perceptions of the overall campus milieu, social spaces, and comments publicly made to them that were derogatory in nature. Lewis, a 22 year old senior majoring in Finance, expressed himself in this way:



*I was in the library taking part in a study group and I was the only black in a group of four students. We were studying for an accounting class and during the session one of the students said: "We have never been around a black person this friendly." I just laughed. I really did not feel anything. I hear it all the time. The first time I heard it I was 16 and in a driver's education class and one of the white students said: "I could hang with you, you are not intimidating to me."*

Andre, a 22-year-old senior majoring in Criminal Justice, shared:

*I received a ride from a teammate when I played football and he turned on the radio and said "What radio station do ya'll listen to?"*

Ezekiel, a 19-year old sophomore Education major, said:

*It has not happened to me, yet I know it still exists here.*

Lewis, the first respondent, was told by cohorts in a study session that he was "friendly" compared to other African Americans. This is a classic example of a racial microaggression

because it involved a subtle putdown. At that moment, Lewis was notified that whites generally perceive African Americans as unfriendly and intimidating, and he represented an exception to that norm. Lewis' encounter could also be characterized as a

microinsult because it was an inconsiderate comment regarding Lewis' racial/ethnic heritage which inferred that blacks incite negative feelings in whites (Sue et al. 2007).

Like Lewis, Andre also experienced a racial microaggression. When his white teammate asked him about the type of music that he listened to, he essentially "othered" Andre because he automatically assumed that, due to his being a black male, he listened to music different from the music whites listen to. Sadly, Andre's experience is typical of the marginalization that is commonplace for African American males at

PWIs (Harper 2009; Robertson and Mason 2008).

Although Lewis and Andre did not specifically mention race, Ezekiel did. In fact, his comments revealed that although “it [racism] still exists here,” or is part of the PWI milieu, he did not cite a specific instance where race personally impacted him. As highlighted in the scholarly literature, Ezekiel’s 3.4 grade point average may have fostered his high level of adjustment and successful navigation in the PWI setting (Hoston et al. 2010; Robertson 2012). Although Ezekiel (who came from a middle class background) did not mention cultural capital explicitly, he did allude to the fact that he attended, in his own words, a “racially mixed high school.” Thus, it can be inferred that his high school experience equipped him with the cultural cache to navigate the social terrain of a PWI successfully, which is supported in the literature (Green et al. 2016).

Pierce (1974), who can arguably be considered the father of racial microaggressions, stresses that each recipient of a racial microaggression must be skilled at identifying them and traversing the environment in which they occur. Based on the successful journey of the respondents who encountered microaggressions, whether recognized or not, it can be gleaned from their responses that some of these black men perceived microaggressions (i.e., racial slights) as something that just “comes with the territory,” did not recognize them when they occurred, or just perceived them as harmless. For instance, Ezekiel’s mention that he has not faced a microaggression but “know[s] it [racism] still exists here,” suggests two things. For one, since Ezekiel admitted that he has not suffered microaggressions, yet knows “they are still here,” is indicative to a prior understanding of his previous school environment. Secondly, Ezekiel’s general discernment that the collegiate climate provides fertile soil for racial insults and his ability to adjust well in spite of this (based on his impressive grade point average) demonstrates grit in a setting that is less than welcoming. Finally, a similar sentiment can be drawn from

Andre’s interaction with his white teammate when the teammate asked, “What music do y’all listen to?” Instead of becoming angry, Andre utilized a method that has been used by many African Americans, namely, to respond to a microaggression in a non-reactionary manner (Strayhorn 2014). Thus, by consciously de-escalating racial unease rather than heightening it, Andre and other African Americans are better able to cope with similar circumstances in the PWI environment (Strayhorn 2014).

The responses of the three highlighted students, Lewis, Andre, and Ezekiel, are amenable to analysis using CRT. Chiefly, Solorzano et al. (2000), in their use of CRT as a lens to make sense of the experiences of African American students at a PWI, proffer that “CRT provides insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogies [...] to analyze, and transform the aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions” (p. 63). Thus, CRT can be utilized to understand each of their statements in a cogent manner. First, when Lewis laughed off the not so subtle slight in the library, he provided poignant insight into how black males (and other students of color) frequently deflect the sting of an insult in order to maintain a degree of sanity in the white college setting (Brooms 2016). Moreover, when Andre did not reify the comment of his teammate by responding in a confrontational manner and when Ezekiel mentions that he knows that racism is presumably “ever-present,” both are engaging, albeit in their own ways, in transforming aspects of their plight as members of a subordinated group in an institution of higher education that can be hostile to them. Thus, this suggests that these black men are displaying different forms of determination and drive to succeed in college (Strayhorn 2014).

*The African American Experience is Not Important to the Faculty and the University*

Nine of the twelve students (75 percent of participants) made statements that fit this theme.

The comments provided by the students that fit this theme were based on the following criteria: (1) beliefs that faculty did not mentor or work with black students outside of class or did not infuse information relevant to the African American experience (e.g., information about black history, racism, discrimination, and inequality) into class discussions and assignments; (2) beliefs that lamented the lack of course offerings regarding race/ethnicity and African American studies at the university; and (3) beliefs that faculty did not have positive interactions with black students and black students are not being taught by black professors. Additionally, a component of the third criterion (i.e., having black faculty on campus and concomitant positive interactions), was perceived as not important to the university because there is a dearth of black professors on campus and their presence is correlated with black student retention and academic success (Hamilton 2006; Love 2008; Patton and Catching 2009).

In general, the observations provided by these men were related to the lack of importance the PWI placed on the African American. Two of the three observations represented the most frequent response provided by the students and one (Johnny) represented a more positive assessment of the faculty.

Johnny, a 20-year old sophomore Communication major offered:

*Are faculty members involved in the development of black students? I know that some professors are not always the nicest. So I learn how to deal with them from speaking with friends. I always make sure to interact with my professors so they will understand me better. I interact with them via email or face to face. I feel like every faculty member is here to develop every student. It is not just based on race or anything. They are just doing their job preparing us for the real world. But there are some that do not care as much as others. Some of them are just*

*assholes. They do not care. They come to work, give the lecture, and that is it. No elaboration at all. They just suck. There are some that really do not care.*

*Do you feel your professors infuse information that is relevant to African Americans in your classes? They do. They just always do. People would think that professors really do not care about black people. There are a lot that do. Around black history time a portion of the class we will talk about black history.*

*Does your university offer classes that focus on the experiences of African Americans (e.g., black history, black studies courses)? Not that I am aware of. Why not? I have just never heard of anything. I heard of African American Literature. Some people do not care. The higher ups that make those decisions do not care and do not feel that it will be beneficial and helpful to us.*

Steve, a 20-year old sophomore Communication major added:

*Are faculty members involved in the development of black male students? Not too many. Only Dr. X (a black education professor). Basically, I do not see faculty members involved with black students, because I think most of the faculty are white and they do not want to deal with us. They do not see us as changing. The freshmen who come, they are ignorant to things and the faculty see this and they do not want to help. Students tend to stand around talking mess, cursing, not doing anything productive.*

*Do you feel your professors infuse information that is relevant to African Americans in your classes? No. I believe they would feel uncomfortable because they would not want to offend blacks or other students that are in the classroom.*

Does your university offer classes that focus on the experiences of African Americans (e.g., black history, black studies courses)? *Not that I know of. I really do not know. I never heard of the university offering a class that talks about any specific race. Two reasons. One, they would like to keep it fair with the students. They would not want to push any buttons. They do not want to show favoritism to any particular race. Two, the population of the university. It is a small school. The population of each culture is not large enough to have its own specific course.*

Finally, David, a 23-year old senior Criminal Justice major expressed himself via the following words:

Are faculty members involved in the development of black male students? *For the most part I have not seen too many faculty members that are involved with the black male students. Here there are not many African American professors. I guess the white professors just do their job and go on. I have never seen any white professors show up at the organizational fairs.*

Do you feel your professors include information that is relevant to African Americans in your classes? *No, they do not just discuss one group. They try to include every group in the conversation.*

Does your university offer classes that focus on the experiences of African Americans (e.g., black history, black studies courses)? *No, not really. There is an African American Literature class. Why not? Because this is not a black university. I guess they do not feel that it falls in line with any of the course curricula.*

Johnny offered a contradictory portrait of professors. Initially, he suggested that some professors are not the “nicest” which necessitates

that a student “learn how to deal with them.” Conversely, he said “he interacts with them” and “every faculty member is on campus to develop a student.” He continued to speak about professors in a complimentary manner when he responded to a query into their willingness to infuse information relevant to the African American experience into classroom discussions and persisted by sharing “there are a lot (professors) that do” care (about black people). He ended by stating he only knew of one course devoted to the concerns/plight of African Americans (e.g., African American Literature) and the administration, which he described as the “higher-ups” did not appear to be interested in increasing the number of black faculty at the university. Lastly, the remarks of Johnny were the most positive (in a relative sense) regarding the connection between black male students and white faculty members. His comments were consistent with those of scholars who found black students adjust and perform better at PWIs when the course content reflects their interests and portrays them in a favorable light (Bush and Bush 2010).

The reaction of Steve supported most of the responses provided by black male students. Steve surmised that most university faculty are white and have no desire to be immersed in the training of black students. Interestingly, Steve absolved the predominantly white faculty of culpability for not mentoring black undergraduates when he said “they do not see us changing.” In that moment, Steve engaged in self-deprecating talk when he emphasized that because black freshman males “stand around talking mess,” “cursing,” and “not doing anything productive,” they are not perceived as serious collegians by white faculty members. When questioned about the infusion of topics germane to African Americans in class, Steve posited white professors are not willing to do so because it could be unfair to “blacks or other students.” Moreover, Steve believed that if the university taught courses on the black experience (e.g., African American History or African American

Studies courses) it would not be fair to non-black students and that the university is too small to offer classes which focus on “a particular culture.” To support the salience of black course content, when examining the results from a nationally representative sample of black male students, Flowers (2004) found positive class experiences to be especially important for black students (particularly males) because they promote optimal student development and increase the likelihood of retention.

In a similar vein, the thoughts conveyed by Steve revealed that faculty, and possibly university administrators, are not deeply rooted in the literature regarding black students at PWIs. Scholarship in the area of academic mentoring suggests that when university faculty mentor African American male students, integrate class discussions and assignments relevant to their history and experiences, and make it a priority to recruit and hire black faculty and black administrators, black males flourish (Dancy II and Hotchkins 2015; Feagin 2014; Rodgers and Summers 2008; Thompson and Louque 2005).

All in all, David offered the most pessimistic assessment of the highlighted interview accounts. He contended that white faculty are just not an integral part of the cultivation of black male students and directly associated the lack of empathy for black students at the PWI with the scarcity of black faculty on campus. Since black students generally leave racially-salient networks when they attend the PWI (Guiffrida 2005a; Herndon and Hirt 2004; Hines et al. 2014), it is especially important that these racially-marginalized students associate with adults who are truly concerned about them and invested in their success. Guiffrida (2005a) referred to compassionate attitudes displayed by black professors as a form of parenting, which would inevitably bolster the academic success of African American students. However, David included a constructive comment when he shared that professors “do not focus on one group,” they try to include “every group in the conversation.” However, since they are a historically

marginalized group, black men and their multi-racial college peers would inherently benefit if the PWI actively understood their experiences within a broad, socio-historical context (Karenga 2010).

As a final point, David offered a proclamation that supported white supremacist inspired courses at the PWI. According to David, university administration at the PWI does not have a responsibility to incorporate African American course offerings into the university curricula. Such a view is unfortunate because the incorporation of course content, experiences, and views of black students into the course is associated with greater academic success for Black males and other students of color (Robertson 2012). However, within the context of CRT, the opinions of the young men are instructive. All three of the responses suggest these Black men perceive faculty to be less than sincere in their efforts to mentor and cultivate the talents of students like themselves. To make this point clear, Johnny proclaims administrative disregard is the primary reason why information relevant to black Americans is not presented. More specifically, their views augment how CRT emphasized the need for members of marginalized groups to have their historical voices heard (and thus validated) in order to make sense of a less than sanguine reality (Yosso et al. 2009).

## Discussion

This qualitative study examined the experiences of 12 African American male students at a PWI in the South to understand how they negotiated racism and racial microaggressions. To understand how black males managed the exigencies of the PWI, we relied on CRT to examine the insights, realities, and experiences of African American males who, as a group, are in a racially-subordinate position at the PWI (Aguirre 2000; Bell 1992; Crenshaw 1988, 2011; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995;

Solorzano and Villalpando 1998; Solorzano et al. 2000).

In spite of the racism and racial microaggressions they encountered, these black male collegians generally adjusted well to the PWI setting. While their academic resilience may be partially explained by their socioeconomic backgrounds (most came from middle or working-class families) and average to high grade point averages, another contributing factor may be their willingness to "always make sure to interact" with their professors in order to be better understood by them. Since this level of student initiative toward professors may invariably be easier for some black males than others, it is equally important that professors interact with black males as doing so is consistent with the university's mission to increase and validate diversity (Van Vught 2008). However, in spite of the initiative that some black males take to interact with white faculty, it would be illogical to assume that these black men are completely immune to the effects of racism. For instance, when Lewis was told "We have never been around a black person this friendly" on campus by a white classmate, he simply responded "I hear it all the time." And when Andre was asked by a white teammate "What radio station do y'all listen to?" he chose to remain silent. However, it is important to recognize that merely brushing off or deciding not to respond to a microaggression does not necessarily mean that the black male student is not psychologically and emotionally affected by it.

Research has shown that students of color frequently use fraternities, sororities, classrooms, and relationships with professors as counterspaces (i.e., areas carved out for themselves) to preserve their culture, create a sense of belonging, and navigate the academic terrain (Saenz, Ngai, and Hurtado 2007). Surprisingly, none of these men mentioned specific areas on campus in which they could meet, discuss important issues, or relax and connect with other African American males.

However, Ezekiel (19-year-old sophomore) and Johnny (20-year-old junior), offered some insight into some of the counterspaces utilized by other black males. Ezekiel mentioned the presence of historically black Greek-lettered organizations as a source of African American student interaction when he said "I do not know much about them (black Greek-lettered organizations), but they (African American males) get together and do things on campus. Similarly, Johnny (20-year-old sophomore) points to a counterspace, the "SC" (Student Center), that black students utilize to interact. Specifically, he asserted:

*It (the campus) is very segregated. For example the "SC" has a lot of segregation. The white students stay near the front of the center and the black students are in the middle. Personally, I think it is communication. The white students do not understand us.*

Yosso et al. (2009) points out the importance of counterspaces, such as a student center, as a place of refuge for students of color in an alienating PWI environment. Counterspaces allow students of color to preserve a sense of home and culture in a white college environment. Although it is illogical to believe these men have not availed themselves of contexts that would affirm their racial marginality at the PWI, it is important that faculty of all races recognize the inherent difficulties of black males, take the initiative to become "involved with" the values of these men, and demonstrate this through incorporating racially relevant interests and concerns in the classroom (Bush and Bush 2010; Hopkins 1997; Robertson 2012; Sedlacek 1983; Thompson and Louque 2005).

Similarly, a few respondents reported connections that could be interpreted as collegial with non-black faculty. While this experience has been highlighted by previous scholars (e.g., Crisp and Nora 2010; Hoston et al. 2010), surprisingly, only one male described a faculty member of

color as a mentor. When questioned about faculty member involvement in the development of black students, Steve delineated that *one* black education professor frequently engaged black



male students. This is an unfortunate commentary on the lack of faculty involvement of multi-racial faculty with black males. Furthermore, it is important to note that although many black males may be more comfortable interacting with black faculty, this does not mean that white faculty have no responsibility to black males and cannot be effective mentors. Since strong, empathetic, and supportive mentorship is more important than the shared race of the individuals that interact with one another (Gallien and Peterson 2005; Priest et al. 2014), the PWI, and the faculty within it, must take seriously their active responsibility “to develop every student.”

Since most of these men expressed their college experience lacked courses or class discussions that emphasized the historical, intellectual, and cultural accomplishments of persons of African descent, the PWI should strategically evaluate how such discussions could take place. While one student acknowledged the willingness of white faculty to incorporate African American issues into course content “around black History time,” ideally, regular and systematic discussions of race at the PWI would decrease the general discomfort many

individuals have when discussing issues related to race and would create a more welcoming campus environment (Bolgatz 2005; Tatum 1992). In addition, if more white (and black) faculty at the PWI ‘showed up at organizational fairs’ (or other public events where black male congregate), this would publicly demonstrate to these students that white (and black) faculty members are truly interested and invested in their academic success.

The marginalization and inequitable treatment that the males encountered in this study can be more clearly discerned via the lens of CRT. In their noted study on the utility of CRT to delineate the dilemmas of students of color in educational settings, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) posited racism experienced by non-white students in their educational endeavors is merely an extension of the racism that is endemic and deeply ingrained in the fabric of American life. Even more useful is the fact that Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explicated that a major theme of CRT is that this framework enables members of “othered” groups to construct their own reality that extends beyond the structures of the dominant group. The aforementioned is seen in the numerous instances the young men deal with, situations that one would think would “break their will,” yet they press on undeterred. Case in point: When Lewis explained how, when studying with his White counterparts in the library for an accounting class, one of them said “We have never been around a black person this friendly.” Instead of becoming angry or combative, Lewis reacted by laughing and commenting, “I hear it all the time.” On the surface, this reaction may appear strange; however, when viewed through the CRT perspective, it seems that this black male consciously crafted a “positive organic reality” out of a microaggression in order to psychologically preserve himself in a hostile

environment. This is just one of the many ways that black students in white college settings survive in these bastions of racism and white supremacy (Patton 2016).

*Recommendations for Fostering Black Male Collegiate Success at the PWI*

To support the findings offered by scholars (Bush and Bush 2010; Cross and Slater 2004; Davis et al. 2004; Gallien and Peterson 2005; Guiffrida 2005b), there are several ways that PWIs can increase the social adjustment and academic success of black males.

First, it is important that PWIs actively recruit, hire, and maintain African American faculty. This recommendation is connected to the value that black faculty have regarding issues that are of importance to African Americans and perceiving black males positively and as highly capable of academic matriculation (Robertson 2012). Second, it is important that PWIs develop programs and/or workshops to instruct African American males on how to acquire university resources that are correlated with increased retention (e.g., financial aid, mentoring, tutoring). This recommendation is related to the literature which posits finances and proper mentoring are important components of African American male retention and graduation (Bush and Bush 2010; Gallien and Peterson 2005). Third, it is important that PWIs offer courses that are relevant to the African American experience (e.g., Black Studies or Africana/African-American Studies courses). This recommendation emphasizes the importance of class environment and faculty involvement (Guiffrida and Douthit 2010; Rodgers and Summers 2008), and when African American contributions are infused into class content, black students feel better about the university and the university (e.g., faculty, staff, and administrators) is more likely to feel better about them (Campbell and Fleming 2000; Robertson and Mason 2008). Fourth, it is important that PWIs create a strong African American student

pipeline by partnering with local communities and school districts before these students enter college. This recommendation strongly correlates with literature that has revealed that when African American students engage in a pre-college or preparatory program, they are more likely to perform well at the PWI (Gallien and Peterson 2005). Finally, the PWI should establish strategies and processes to annually examine admissions to determine if race is a mediating factor at their college or university (Flowers 2007). This will help in the more effective recruitment and retention of African American males.

*Limitations of the Current Study*

In spite of this study's extension of scholarship related to black male experiences at the PWI (Ancis et al. 2000; Cuyet 1997; Guiffrida and Douthit 2010; Jones et al. 2002; Kuh and Love 2000; Robertson et al. 2005; Rodgers and Summers 2008; Schwitzer et al. 1999; Sedlacek 1999; Solorzano et al. 2000), the present study had several limitations. First, since none of the participants were female, we are unable to translate our findings to black females on the PWI campus under study or similar institutions in other parts of the United States. Second, the study would have been strengthened by using a larger and random sample of African American males thus making the findings generalizable to the larger population of black male college students who attend PWIs. Last, the study would have been enhanced by including random samples of African American males attending PWIs in different geographical regions across the United States of different campus populations (Maxfield and Babbie 2015). The aforementioned is particularly important because the South has been traditionally known as a region in which more contentious race relations exist in the United States (Feagin 2014).



### *Directions for Future Research*

There are three ways that future studies can expand upon the findings that have been presented here. First, future research should seek the perspectives of a more diverse group of black male students. Through exploring the perceptions of black collegiate males from different institutions of higher learning in the South and other geographic regions of the country, future research may reveal differences in how racism and racial microaggressions are experienced. Second, future scholars should qualitatively examine the collegiate experiences of black males that are at-risk for dropping out of the PWI. Also not to be ignored are black males that may have already dropped out of college. While on the surface this suggestion may have little scholarly merit, future work in this area may identify ways that at-risk black collegiate males at the PWI may receive needed support and, in the best case scenario, encourage those black men that have left college to return and subsequently graduate from the PWI. Last, future studies should examine the effects of racism and racial microaggressions over time. In other words, longitudinal study designs may determine how these realities are experienced by black males during their tenure at the PWI, and whether they believe these instances increase, decrease, or remain the same over time. Research in this area could pinpoint times when black males are more vulnerable to the effects of racism and racial microaggressions as well as the external factors that may minimize these threats.

### **Conclusion**

Given the increasing number of African American college students that attend PWIs (Hoston et al. 2010; Strayhorn 2014), it is imperative that these institutions of higher learning provide institutional support and create a more inclusive environment for these students. A major contribution of this research was that it provided an example of a small case study of

black males, a group that has traditionally been underrepresented in higher education, who performed very well academically in a PWI environment that was at times less than ideal. The study included a cohort of high-performing black males which is significant because black males are both underrepresented among college students and generally perform less well than black females (Cross and Slater 2004; Robertson 2012; Smith, Allen, and Danley 2007). The prevailing literature is replete with examples of black males being marginalized, stereotyped, and maligned in higher educational settings (Strayhorn 2009). Thus, the present study provided a portrait of black student academic success in general, and black male success in particular, which is a welcomed and much needed addition to the prevailing literature.

The findings in this qualitative study provide evidence that, regardless of whether they are based on student interactions, faculty interactions, or institutional decisions related to course content, racism and racial microaggressions are noticed by black men. At this point, we recall the words provided by 19-year old Ezekiel: "It has not happened to me, yet I know it [racism] still exists here." However, in spite of this acknowledgement, Ezekiel and his black male contemporaries successfully navigated the terrain of the PWI. Since African American male graduation rates must improve (Harper 2009; Strayhorn and DeVita 2010), PWIs that are truly committed to diversity and inclusiveness must demonstrate that they value these students by creating and developing a climate wherein the history, culture, and heritage of these students is inherently accepted, respected, and valued. As we close, the men in this study are a sterling example of the tenacity (i.e., grit) demonstrated by black males (Strayhorn 2014) who, in the face of subtle and overt racism, racial microaggressions, and the devaluation of their race-related course content, are able to successfully adjust, maintain good grades, and survive in the PWI environment.

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