

Fighting F.A.I.R. (Feelings of Alienation, Isolation, and Racism): Using Critical Race Theory to Deconstruct the Experiences of African American Male Doctoral Students

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This article uses the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine the experiences of African American male doctoral students attending predominantly White institutions (PWI). Qualitative interviews with 18 African American male doctoral students indicated experiences typified by marginality and racism. Using counter narratives, participants shared that racial microaggressions and stereotypes from White counterparts impacted their time in- and out-of-the classroom. Feelings of alienation, isolation and self-defeating beliefs held by African American male doctoral students are among the findings reported in this study. Collectively, the aforementioned challenges impacted their mindset as well as their doctoral educational experience. Recommendations are offered for making the racial climate more inclusive for African American male doctoral students attending a PWI.

INTRODUCTION

“[The students in our department] were having a football party and they wanted to know if I could get them [marijuana]. It was an assumption by some of the White students in the department, that I could find marijuana. I don’t smoke anything, never had, but it was assumed I did. When I told them I do not deal with that stuff, they were shocked.”

This remark represents the prejudgment, held by many Whites, that most African Americans have access to marijuana. This is an example of some of the stereotypical comments faced by numerous students of color attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs). This quote, provided by Jamal, a 39 year-old African American male doctoral student attending a PWI is an example of a racial microaggression. In this article, African American male doctoral students are studied as recipients of microaggressive behaviors and remarks. These microaggressions are part of the lived experiences of many African American male students. This study explores how African American male doctoral students experience racial microaggressions?

Over the past three decades, the number of African American male doctoral degree recipients increased approximately 1% while the number of African American female receiving terminal degrees more than doubled. National Council on Education Statistics (2007) reports that 1,253 (3.8 %) of all doctoral degrees awarded in the United States were earned by African Americans in 1976. Of that latter number, 766 (61%), African American men were those who make up the majority of African American doctoral degrees. Thirty years later, NCES reports that 3,122 (5.6 %) doctoral degrees earned in the United States were earned by African Americans in 2006. African American women were the majority recipients of African American degrees with 2,011 (62%). The low numbers of African American male doctorates should serve as an alarming reality for students, faculty, and administrators in higher education. If such pattern continues, the African American community will face a future of few role models with advanced degrees. Therefore, there is a need to explore ways of retaining the number of African American male doctoral degree students.

The present study examines the existence of microaggressions among African American male graduate students attending a PWI while using CRT as a framework. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), counter-storytelling is a method of telling the stories of the often untold experiences of underrepresented groups (such as people of color, women, and gay individuals). Using personal stories as a form of counter-storytelling, this study reports on how African American doctoral students experienced racial insults and discrimination. First, discussion of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in relation to the experiences of African American students in graduate education is presented. Next, findings about the impact of racial microaggressions on the psychosocial stability of 18 African American male doctoral students attending three PWIs are discussed. Finally, recommendations for those interested in improving the educational experiences of African American male doctoral students are included.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Racial Microaggressions

According to Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez and Wills (1978), racial microaggressions are “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of blacks by offenders” (p. 66). Sue, Capodilupo and Torino (2007) offered a taxonomy of racial microaggressions that includes microinvalidation (verbal or nonverbal behavior that invalidates the experience of being a person of color), microinsults (rude, inappropriate, demeaning nonverbal or verbal behavior), and microassaults (explicit, racial derogatory verbal or nonverbal attack). For instance, a White student asking an African American student “How did you get admitted into this university?” the underlying assumptions are: (1) students of color must have

gained admission through affirmative action or special admission program, (2) the African American is a student-athlete, (3) African Americans are not smart enough. In this scenario, the White student offers little consideration to the possibility that the African American student is intelligent and deserving of admission. The interpretation of racial reality is different for African Americans and White Americans. While African Americans can interpret the experience as being racism, White Americans may believe the same incident to be trivial.

While microaggressions may be understood to be minor and insignificant by the offender, it is not the case for the recipient. Research revealed that racial microaggressions can lead to depression, anxiety, loss of self esteem as well as drain the spiritual and physical energy for recipients (Sue, Capodilupo, & Torino, 2007). In fact, these occurrences impact the relationships between majority and underrepresented people (Sue, Capodilupo, & Torino, 2007). As such, microaggressions have become the contemporary existence of racism as well as being incorporated into the common language for many White Americans. Researchers pointed out that research on racial microaggressions and its effects are infrequently explored (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008).

This article defines racism as a complex ideology composed of beliefs that one race is superior and others are inferior (Jones, 1997). These beliefs are transpired through individual behaviors as well as institutional and societal policies. Through historical institutional practices, racism such as slavery and Jim Crow Laws were overtly part of early American culture. Lately, overt discrimination is often replaced with subtle forms of racism; such as racial microaggressions that exists in society, including institutions of higher education (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Racial Climate in Higher Education

In this article, racial climate is understood as the racial environment of the graduate institution. Such understanding informs the persistence and retention of African American doctoral students. According to educational researchers, African Americans perceive a graduate program as supportive when it includes: (1) presence of African American faculty members; (2) supportive student-faculty relationships; (3) academic and social integration of African American graduate students into their departments; (4) critical mass of students, faculty and staff of color; (5) and the ability of financial aid resources available (Bingman, 2003; Blackwell, 1987; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith, 2004; Tinto, 1993). These researchers suggest that when these components are not met, African American students may perceive their institutions as racially insensitive. Interpreting the campus as hostile and invalidating, African American students will limit their academic and social interactions within the institution (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2008). Such perceptions can cause these students to emotionally and physically withdraw themselves from the university.

According to Gay (2004), some African American graduate students have positive educational experiences however; this is not always the case. For example, she submitted that African American graduate students typically suffer from various forms of marginalizing experiences in higher education. All 36 collegiate African American male participants in Smith, Allen and Danley's (2007) study reported that the college environment was much more hostile and unwelcoming for them. Pierce (1995) and Carroll (1998) identified MEES or mundane extreme environmental stress as African American males' experiences in White spaces. They explained MEES as African American men's common everyday racial experiences (mundane);

its influence on their physiological, emotional, or cognitive and worldview (extreme); its connection to institutional, cultural, and policy practices geared against the presence of African American males; and the use of time as well as energy can be used for more productive purposes. In their narratives, African American males shared how racial encounters on PWIs led to feelings of not belonging, anger, distress and other painful psychological stress responses (Smith et al, 2007). To this end, they are often isolated on campus, not exposed to a diverse curriculum, and lack faculty mentorship. These experiences have led some African American doctoral students to suffer from “intellectual and scholarly abandonment” (Gay, 2004, p. 281). This abandonment may influence the visibility of graduate students of color. For example, many African American doctoral students refer to them being the underrepresented group in class as ‘one of few’ or ‘the only one’ in their department. To address this deficiency, Gay (2004) encouraged African American doctoral students to develop active local and national networks with other students and professors with similar research interests. Being the minority subjects African American men to generalization about their gender and race.

Stereotype Threat

Stereotypical images of African American men in society characterize them as criminals, irresponsible fathers, hypersexual, uneducated and violent (Anderson, 2008, Garfield, 2010; Harper, 2004). These negative perceptions of African American males leak into institutions of higher education. To understand how negative perceptions have previously hindered African Americans in educational settings, it is essential to address stereotyping and the effect it has on individuals when researching racial microaggressions. Steele and Aronson’s (1995) research has made a strong case that stereotypes have become part of American culture. Steele, Spencer and Aronson’s (2002) reported that performance can be impacted when negative stereotypes about a group’s identity are made evident. Their research suggested that African American students’ performance on standardized tests was poor when negative stereotypes of African Americans’ intelligence were made prominent. Conversely, when emphasis on race was made insignificant, African American students performed at comparable levels to their White counterparts. This suggests the “immediate situational threat that derives from the broad dissemination of negative stereotypes about one’s group” (Steele et al., 2002, p. 798).

Steele and Aronson (1995) have submitted that stereotype threat influenced members of the same group not to perpetuate negative beliefs or assumptions about themselves. When stereotypes are made explicit to African Americans students, their performance may be compromised. Stereotype threat is so widespread that it impacts other racial/ethnic and gender groups in addition to African Americans. For instance, research has shown that stereotype threat has impaired the academic ability of Latinos in school (Gonzales, Blanton, & Williams, 2002), students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Croizet & Claire, 1998), and females in mathematics (Good, Aronson, & Harder, 2008). Stereotype threat has negatively affected the mindsets of women in driving (Yeung & von Hippel, 2008), White men in sports (Stone, Lyncy, Sjomerling & Darley, 1999), and women in job negotiations (Kray, Galinsky & Thompson, 2002).

Such unfavorable outcomes warrant an investigation into the culture that exists within higher education. The effect of stereotypes and stereotype threats among African American male doctoral students are missing from the literature. With this absent foundation in mind, this article extends the impact of racial microaggressions to examine how African American male doctoral

students perceived their environments. Appropriately, Critical Race Theory is the paradigm which guides this examination of race and racism in education.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) began in the 1970s when social justice activists began to recognize that advancements made as a result of the Civil Rights Era were regressing (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993). Considering the racial hostilities that continue to plague the United States, CRT was needed to critically explain and analyze the presence of racism in American society. Scholars used CRT to examine race, racism and the notion of White supremacy (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993). Chaiison (2004) argued that “CRT recognizes the law itself as knowledge, as an instrument that constructs and reinforces ideas and understanding of race” (p. 345). Researchers have realized that racism is a fixture in American society; and that no institution, including education, was immune to its effects (Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993). More recently, other researchers have applied CRT in higher education (Chaiison, 2004; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998).

DeCuir and Dixson reported (2004) five tenets of CRT: permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest convergence, critique of liberalism, and counter-storytelling. Permanence of racism suggested that discrimination has played and will continue to play a dominant role in American society. Through CRT, they have argued that ‘Whiteness as property’ in that it can be possessed, transferred (to posterity), and use for the benefit of the beholder. Interest convergence is the notion that civil improvements for African Americans (and other people of color) will only occur when these interests converge with those of Whites. Critique of liberalism refers to CRTs critique of simplistic and overly abstract notions of equality (e.g., colorblindness, neutrality of the law, incremental change in society), for their perpetuation of more disparities.

This study explores counter-storytelling to address the complex relationship between racial microaggressions and campus climate. Counter storytelling is a methodological tool used to counter the privileges of the majority group while giving voice to the subordinate group (Aguirre, 2000). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) used counter-stories to illustrate the inequitable experiences of African Americans in educational settings. When counter-stories are put forth, those who have been victimized can hear their stories along with other suppressed individual’s stories. This allows the victimized to realize that they are not alone. Counter-storytelling is more than narratives; rather it is a method of sharing suppressed experiences in meaningful episodes (Richardson, 1990). It is “a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27). By employing counter-storytelling, the researcher will share the experiences of African American doctoral students at American universities and illuminate how everyday conversations with majority students and faculty were antagonistic.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative research design was employed so that the ‘lived experiences’ of 18 African American male doctoral students could be understood. A qualitative design was chosen method to allow the voices of those who are often marginalized to be heard. This study also employed a

phenomenological approach. According to Patton (2002), phenomenology is “the study of how people describe things and experience them through their senses” (p. 105). The researcher sought to learn how African American male doctoral students encounter and understand their educational experience. Trying to capture the spirit of human behavior, phenomenology allows entrance into the participant’s daily life (Patton, 2002), providing understanding of the participant’s points of view. Pertinent description about the sites, the participants, and issues of confidentiality and reliability are discussed in this section.

Sites

The study was conducted at three predominantly White, public, large, research universities. Two institutions are located in the Mid-Atlantic United States while the other site is situated in the North-Atlantic region of the country. The institutions were selected as a result of similarities in enrollment, size, age, and Carnegie’s classification of research universities: Stars and Stripes University, Scholastic University, and University of the Triumphant. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the institutions and participants. Institutional data reveal that African Americans were underrepresented in doctoral programs across the three sites. Of the 7,010 doctoral students at Stars and Stripes University, 268 were African American. Of the 6,124 doctoral students enrolled at Scholastic University, 176 were African American. Of the 10,157 doctoral students enrolled at University of the Triumphant, 814 were African American. The studied sites each are over 160 years old, enroll over 36,000 students, and award more than 50 doctoral degrees annually.

Sample

A homogeneous sampling technique was used in this study. Participants were considered based on membership in a subgroup that has several defining characteristics (i.e. African American, male, doctoral students) (Creswell, 2005). A letter was sent to academic deans at each institution requesting their assistance in this study. University officials and graduate school records were used to identify African American male students at each institution. The researcher sent correspondences to university email accounts and student organization’s (Black Graduate Student Organization) list serves to attract participants. The doctoral students in the study ranged in age from 24-44 years old, 13 participants were single, and five participants were fathers. All participants completed at least one year of doctoral studies. The mean GPA of the doctoral students at the time of the study was 3.71, with grades ranging from a 3.0–4.0. Thirteen participants came from two parent households, and the remaining five were raised in a single mother home. Ten participants in the study self-identified their socioeconomic status as working class, seven from middle-class, and one from a poor/low-income environment.

Participants

The researcher intentionally sampled individuals based on their membership as an African American male doctoral student attending a PWI (Creswell, 2005). The sample was drawn from a list of eligible African American male doctoral students currently enrolled in doctoral degree programs from the three universities. University officials and graduate school records were used to identify African American male doctoral students at each institution. The

sample was comprised of 18 full-time doctoral students attending PWIs at the time of data collection.

Data Collection

Participants completed a profile sheet which asked for background information, such as familial structure, educational history, and perception of their university. To increase reliability and validity, follow up interviews were conducted four months after initial interviews. Follow-up interviews allowed for the researcher to clarify any ambiguities and provided an opportunity for participants to review the preliminary findings. Accordingly, respondents were able to provide additional information and address concerns excluded in the original meeting. This helped strengthen the rapport between the participants and the researcher. A semi-structured interview format was important to use because it provided flexibility with the research questions and the emerging data. Interviews lasted approximately 90-minutes in length. The questions focused on African American male interactions with peer students, faculty, perception of their university's racial climate, as well as their experiences with stereotypes. Creswell (2005) recommended that qualitative researchers should record participant's responses on audiotapes. Thus, all interviews were audiotapes. After each interview session, field notes were reviewed and a summary of the interview was written. The audiotapes from each interview were transcribed.

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) detailed that under phenomenological data analysis, the researcher must eliminate preconceived notions about the experience in order to understand the experiences of participants in the study. Using actual examples from the participant's conversations, descriptions of what was experienced by students along with explanations of its significance (Moustakas, 1994) were drafted. Moustakas (1994) further explained that descriptions using text captures what happened within the experience. A description was created for each participant.

The next procedure required composing structural descriptions of the experiences, addressing 'how' the phenomenon was experienced. The researcher identified multiple scenarios; as such, seeking all possible meanings with the data, searched for different interpretations, changed the frame of reference about the phenomenon, and constructed a description of how the phenomenon was experienced (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

Finally, deductive and inductive reasoning were used to analyze how the data related to emergent theory (Ragin, 1994). Through inductive reasoning, analytical categories or themes emerged as similarities and differences in understanding the doctoral students' experiences were determined. Guided by the evolving themes and patterns, codes were assigned. A total of 12 codes emerged. After determining patterns in the coding, transcripts were reviewed to identify examples that addressed the concept of racial microaggressions. The themes are listed and discussed in the results section.

To ensure the participants' responses were accurate, member checking was employed. After transcribing the tapes, the researcher forwarded the transcriptions back to the participants and asked them to confirm the accuracy of the account (Creswell, 2005). The majority of the corrections made by participants consisted of clarifying proper names. Necessary changes were made in the transcripts. This procedure ensured that the dialogue captured was that of the participants, instead of the researcher's.

Limitations

There are two limitations associated with this study. First, this research does not include all types of institutions of higher education. There are well known HBCUs and PWIs that are not included in this study and are known for their contribution of African American doctorates. These institutions would be excellent sites for future research. Second, there were no part-time doctoral students included in the sample. The issues relevant to these doctoral students were not included.

RESULTS

In this section, the findings from interviews with participants are disclosed along with descriptions of how racial microaggressions impacted their educational experiences. Examples of racial microaggressions are presented by context of alienation, isolation and perception of racism. The responses were grouped into three broad categories: (1) feelings of alienation and isolation, (2) racial microaggressions in the classroom and (3) effects of racial microaggressions.

Feelings of Alienation and Isolation

The result abuse of racial microaggressions has the propensity to change the emotional stability of the recipient. For African American male doctoral students in higher education these incidences lead to feelings of alienation and isolating experiences. The small number of African Americans in programs made participants feel alienated. Nolan, an education major, reported:

I typically feel out of place when I walk around campus. I do not really see any other African American or Latino faces. We do have some racially ethnic minority students, but I think this campus is filled with a very White female and male population.

Coming from the suburban area of Washington, DC, Nolan missed being exposed to racial diversity. Therefore, he viewed the campus as a society with only one race. That is, it was evident that he attends a predominantly White campus. A routine walk to the graduate residence hall stirred feelings of not belonging for Nolan. Everett described his university as “very homogenous, very traditional, unwelcoming.” Xavier, a sociology doctoral student, described his experiences when he first arrived to his new surroundings. He explained:

When I came here I was driving around checking out the town and there were white people who would stare at me like they never seen an African American person before. Collegetown is not a very diverse town and one of the things that I heard is the northern headquarters of the KKK was within miles of campus. We don’t know how active they are or anything like that but like I won’t venture too far from the campus environment. If that is a climate that would accept or support that kind of organization then it may not be the friendliest place.

Another sociology doctoral student, Alex, reported similar reactions to the geographic surroundings, he said:

If I can help it I will not be traveling through Ivory County on my own. There are always precautionary tales because of the law that goes on in this space. I think the early 1900s the KKK had a political party here. They had high ranking officials like governors and judges, And at one point if you didn't have a Klan endorsement you couldn't get elected in this state.

These doctoral students also conveyed feelings of alienation and isolation in their daily routines beyond the classroom. The low numbers of African American male students on campus constantly reminded them of their minority status. Nolan, Everett, and Xavier felt like outsiders whenever they explored the area. The reactions from the Whites combined with the lack of diversity made it more difficult for them to feel comfortable. Thus, these men perceived the institution to be unreceptive, especially to African Americans. Because Alex is African American he could not venture too far from campus due to the conservative minds of the citizens from the surrounding town. Knowing this information kept him restricted to the campus community. Lack of diversity combined with racial microaggressions made the participants victims of racial insensitivity.

Racial Microaggressions in the Classroom

Occurrences of racial microaggressions in the classroom became part of the educational experiences for many study participants. Racial microaggressions exhibited towards African American male doctoral students' in academic settings were characterized as isolating, alienating and ultimately frustrating. Participants reported how other students believed African American male doctoral students entered into the University. Quniton, an education doctoral student, stated that from the onset many Whites believed African Americans were enrolled into the institution through affirmative action: "Some people will say African American men are here because of affirmative action." A geography student, Maurice, echoed his peer's comment with speculation that African American men were admitted as a result of special admissions policies. Further, Maurice reported, being told, "Here's another guy that got in here because of the agreement between [Historically African American College] and [PWI]; he may not be *Scholastic University* material." Such stereotypical beliefs are indicative of the assumptions that some majority students and faculty hold about African American male academic abilities. These perceptions informed the experiences that often occur within academic spaces.

Ten participants pointed out limited diversity in their classrooms or departments. At Scholastic University, Omar, a doctoral student in the psychology department stated:

There is one African American woman and another African American male in the clinical program, which is a total of three African American students in all of the cognizant, social, industrial, organizational, and clinical psychology department? That's how it is in most programs.

Brian, a communications major student, metaphorically described his classroom as "a sea of whiteness" to point out the absence of any students of color. Such isolation made participants feel singled out in the classroom. Being the only person of color in the program led to alienating experiences in the classroom when it came to scholarly discussions. Kareem, a doctoral student in educational psychology, expressed that "being one of the only African American students in

the classroom, if not the only African American in the entire program, made it difficult to engage in multicultural conversations.” Similar perspectives were shared by Brian when he told of his classroom experiences with diversity:

...like the work of African American rhetoric scholars, such as Molefi Asante, that are not acknowledged in Communications program; which is a program that deals with rhetoric. When I attempted to bring her name up my professor brushed my comment aside. Then when I said it again he gave me this look, like why are bringing up Molefi Asante? This is a rhetoric scholar who looks at rhetoric from an Afro-centric viewpoint. But they did not want to talk about that in class, which was just shocking to me.

Microaggressions can also occur nonverbally in the form of microinsults as in this situation. Surprised by a professor’s nonverbal microaggressions, students reported feeling as if their contributions were not warranted. Such conflict led them, at other times, to refrain from participating. However, some felt that had it not been for the student of color introducing diversity into the classroom, then no one would. Kareem explained:

..if [the class] is going to talk about any issue that may have something to do with race or ethnicity I am going to bring up those questions. I am going to bring up quotes, I am going to bring up comments, and after sometime, my classmates and professors may have expected that from me. They may have stereotyped me as the one who is going to have something to say about these things. At times I would say something and other times I would shut up!

Thus, participants often charged themselves with the responsibility of bringing in a multicultural perspective into the classroom, mainly because no one else would. To this end, students often become the voice on behalf of the entire African American race. One doctoral student state the following:

Being one of only two African Americans in our program, it’s interesting when I am sitting in class and I hear White and Eurocentric views of everything...and then there are times when I am STILL asked to speak, in a Ph.D. program, as the African American person in the room.

Such pressure of relaying African American experiences results in fatigue for these male doctoral students. Kareem stated, “I was tired of being the only one to bring [diversity] up. I was tired of that burden.” Participants also felt that being a member of an underrepresented group came with certain responsibilities. African American male doctoral students offered personal testimonies on how their input enhanced the classroom experience. As the ‘only one’ or ‘one of the few’ students of color in the class, their contributions to classroom discussion was often interpreted as the African American experience. Everett, majoring in political science, reported the experience that he and a fellow African American female student shared in class:

Everyone in the class was white except another African American female and me. We were discussing a book we had to read for class that day. The authors were King, Kline

and Zwirn and for some reason the professor would refer to the authors as KKK. He would say “KKK said this, and KKK said that”, me and the other African American female look at each other. You can tell she was bothered by it but we didn’t say anything. If it was intentional or not no one knew; but no one said anything. During the break I told the professor of his mistake and he said “Oh I’m sorry.” We returned to class and we continued our book discussion. Ten minutes into class, he begin again “KKK said” I couldn’t believe it. The African American female packed her belongings and left class early.

The explicit reference to the Klu Klux Klan supports the exchange of microaggression in the form of microassaults that occurred in higher education classrooms. The White professor mishap creates a hostile and unwelcoming learning environment for African American doctoral students. Although Everett persisted, not all students of color can sustain such disrespectful acts of racial microaggressions. The early departure by the frustrated African American female doctoral student could translate into poor academic performance for her.

Effects of Racial Microaggressions

The effects of racism in the form of racial microaggressions on African American male doctoral students have real consequences. Subjected to racial microaggressions, participants develop feelings of self-doubt, views of double standards and constantly wanted to dispel racial stereotypes. As a result, these challenges coupled with their academic responsibilities affected students in various ways (i.e., emotionally, psychologically). Students reported that racial microaggressions preoccupied them with thoughts of inferiority. They questioned their identities as intelligent doctoral students. A doctoral student in education reported:

I found myself having a lot of late nights. I was used to going to bed at 3 o’clock in the morning and getting right back up and doing it again. What I should have done is go to people and ask people who knew. But again, I was fighting that internal feeling that “Oh, now they are really going to find out that I am not supposed to be here.”

Similarly, an American studies doctoral student, Terrance stated: “Coming from a working class background, I didn’t think that this world was made for me.” Because of these personal situations, African American male doctoral students questioned their qualifications as intelligent individuals. Instead of recognizing that they had entered a new level of education, they often reported misinterpreting their challenges as personal weaknesses.

Being exposed to racial microaggressions led participants to realize that their racial minority status come with different standards. African American male doctoral students perceived they were held to a separate set of rules; in a way, they are not held to the same standards as their White counterparts. In this context, the participants were led to question if the treatment they were receiving from others was situational or based on their race. Doctoral student Kareem majoring in education psychology captured this double standards way of thinking and shared:

I am not held to the same standards as my classmates are, and that makes me work twice as hard to make sure my products are superior. That is what teaches me how to be

successful. For example, if a professor asks for a 20-page paper on a specific topic, I am going to write a 30-page paper, and that 30-page paper is going to be of such quality that the professor is going to have no choice but to give me an A.

Without anyone telling them to act in such a way, Kareem and other participants believe they had to conduct themselves by another set of rules that required more work on their behalf. In this example, Kareem believed that in addition to making sure his paper was free of errors, he would also have to exceed the required page limit to ensure the highest grade possible.

Fearful of other's perceptions; these men fought to maintain good academic standing while attempting to contradict stereotypes with which they were faced. Ten of the African American male doctoral students were under 30 years of age; therefore, they were not immediately recognized as doctoral students. As younger African American men enrolled in a PWI, they were faced with assumptions and stereotypes. A sociology doctoral student, Cortez, reported:

I am a big dude; I had braids, I had hair; I got stereotyped as being rough around the edges who happens to be smart. I guess I do not fit the build of what an African American academic should look like.

Another African American doctoral student shared:

I didn't want to perpetuate any stereotypes that [whites] had of me, of an African American male. Yes I'm tall. Yes, I played basketball. Yes, I like it. Yes, I like hip-hop but I prefer old school. I didn't want all those outside things to detract from the fact that I am an intelligent man.

Conscious of their situations, these men charged themselves with the task of deconstructing assumptions about African American men and portraying themselves in a positive and intelligent manner. Maurice indicated:

I can't say anyone has really brought [stereotypes] to my attention, but the perception is so strong in my mind that I am mindful as to what I say, including to the students I teach. I really want to put the best foot forward because they never had an African American male professor in this department. I am their first and last experience they are going to have in higher education. I wanted to put the best foot forward.

Institutional effect

From the findings it is concluded that racial microaggressions have impacted the institutional climate for these 18 African American male doctoral students. The men in this study are confronted with racism while struggling with feelings of alienation, isolation and self-doubt. Such incidents of insensitivity and discomfort contributed to the development of a negative institutional climate for these African American men. Hostile classroom interactions between African American students and White professors caused students to distance themselves from faculty. Accounting major Damon stated:

This professor has been very disrespectful to me in front of everybody in the class. I'm the only African American student in the class. So I noticed early on that for some reason she called on me a lot, A lot more than she called on the other students. She was asking people in the class something and when other people said they don't know, she moved on to the next person. That was not the case for me, when I said I don't know, her comment was "Didn't you do the readings?" The way she said it and the way she looked was very disrespectful. Why is it that everyone else she called on didn't know, it was not suspected that they didn't do the readings. Why would she ask me that? I got the feeling that she thought I was free riding in the class or I didn't belong there.

Such feeling of racism contributes to African American students separating themselves from the faculty member. The rapport between Damon and his professor has weakened which is problematic at the graduate level, when positive interactions with faculty are needed for student's development. Occurrences of racial microaggressions were not restricted to academic spaces. Another example of a racism experienced outside the classroom is offered by Brian:

Just last night, I was walking around campus and I noticed a group of white undergrad girls walking towards me. As we began to pass each other I noticed they were moving out of my path and one of the girls was clinching her purse as she walked by. There are [white] people from rural parts of [state] who are new to the experience of being around African American males.

As a result of this incident, Brian is reminded that he is still being viewed by others as the stereotypical criminal that society has depicted of most African American males. The college campus is compromised of highly intelligent individuals; Brian views the campus as a microcosm of the greater society. Thus, he is aware of how he is perceived and how others respond. Regardless of his educational accomplishments he is still being treated like a thief.

Discussion

Considering all that participants had to endure, the researcher introduces the term "*F.A.I.R.*" (Feelings of Alienation, Isolation and Racism) to describe the known obstacles they have to overcome. African American male doctoral students are forced to fight *F.A.I.R.* in order to succeed in universities. Prior to the Civil Rights Era through segregation and other racist practices, African Americans were made to feel less than equal when compared to White Americans. Acts of racism were so pervasive, less than 50 years ago, that it has not been totally eradicated from society. The experiences of high-achieving men at elite institutions of higher education confirms Solórzano's et al. (2000) research that inequality and discrimination still exist -- although in a subtle or covert format. Discrimination is not recognized like it was in older American history, but the modern practices is found in racial microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo, & Torino, 2007).

Participants indicated that that racial microaggressions during their educational experience caused them to feel invalidated and uncertain in their position as doctoral students (Sue, Capodilupo & Torino, 2007; Steel & Aronson, 1995). The men in this study have been subjected to feel alienated, isolated, and like an 'outsider' when interacting with White counterparts. Similar to the students in Lewis et al.'s (2004) research, the men in this study knew that they stood out. Solórzano's et al. (2000) confirmed that "these innocuous forms of racist behavior constitute racial microaggressions" (p. 61). In this study, racial microaggressions are

used by majority students and faculty to project racist beliefs on African American men at the highest level of education.

African American male doctoral students recognized that racism in the form of microaggressions exist on campus and off-campus. And through microassaults or microinsults, African American male doctoral students were victimized by White offenders (Sue, Cadulipo, & Torino, 2007). Participants introduced issues of diversity into the classroom in order to make learning relevant. In turn, much of the both verbal and nonverbal gestures by White faculty members, students and community residents made African American male doctoral students feel unwarranted. Whether intentional or with conscious these are the types of racial microaggressions that White Americans commit. Occurrences within academic spaces on campus as well as the surrounding campus community reminded participants of their minority status. African American male doctoral students who explored the campus felt like visitors in an unfamiliar territory. These hostile and inappropriate occurrences of racism were not limited to the classrooms. Diversity was further exacerbated once the participants explored campus and the surrounding off-campus community. For those African American doctoral students who explored the neighboring areas, they were restricted in their traveling due to the lingering racial hostility that exist off-campus.

Some men in this study explained that being an underrepresented student enrolled in a PWI positioned them to be perceived as representatives of their racial group. Findings from Steele and Aronson's (1995) research confirmed this assertion as "spokesperson pressure", a component of stereotype threat. Stereotype threat affects the academic performance of African American men in doctoral programs. Often consumed with thoughts of how they are perceived by their counterparts, these African American men were stressed. As such, their interaction with many majority students and faculty is uncomfortable. Racial microaggressions were routinely projected onto African American doctoral students.

Racism and discrimination, which are subjectively interpreted, did not impact the participants' success. Several of the participants encountered racism and discrimination during their doctoral education. However, because of their fortitude they did not succumb to the pressure. However, not all African American men achieve such educational accomplishment nor are willing to overcome such obstacles. Thus, the researcher offers recommendations to support African American male doctoral students enrolled at PWIs.

First, White educators are advised to consider their words and actions when interacting with students of color. Students who suffer from racial microaggressions are advised to confront their offenders with diplomacy. Participants in this study mentioned that they did not want to be perceived as the "angry Black man" therefore they need to be tactful in their approach. Equally, the offenders need to be receptive to those who address their victimization. Often times the offenders are not aware of the harm they have imposed on their victim.

Second, as participants pointed out that racism still exists in society and it is imperative that institutions of higher education positively respond. Colleges are encouraged to create supportive academic spaces (e.g. cultural centers, brown bag forums) to openly share and address issues of isolation by recognizing that others have similar experiences. Hearing strategies by those who have experienced such hostility will be beneficial to incoming students who feel they are the only one in this situation. Another suggestion is to use classroom time to discuss stereotyping and its implications. What better place than an academic setting to discuss current issues that affect Americans daily. African American male doctoral students reported that they

were confronted with individuals who should have had their assumptions challenged prior to enrolling into doctoral studies.

Third, providing educational experiences for students of color is not the problem of the student alone. Institutions of higher learning also have a responsibility in preparing future leaders. It is recommended that academic departments host orientation sessions that foster meaningful conversations on issues of diversity among incoming students.

CONCLUSION

Drawn from this study, racial microaggressions used by some majority students and faculty members caused African American male doctoral students to harbor feelings of doubt and incompetence. Consequently, these men are often confronted with feelings of alienation and isolation, combating racial microaggressions and fighting stereotypes while enrolled full-time in doctoral courses. Unfortunately, the effort spent by these men to contest racism (i.e. racial microaggressions, stereotypes) is needed to accomplish their goals in academia. On the contrary, most White students are using energy to focus solely on their academics. In essence, when compared to majority students, the experiences of African American male doctoral students suggest that they are working twice as hard.

The CRT framework is useful in understanding the institutional climate for 18 African American male doctoral students attending PWIs. From this research, based on the real or perceived, it has been concluded that not all forms of racism have been eliminated from higher education or American society. Over the years, significant strides have been made to increase the participation rates of students of color in higher education. Yet, having these students persist and be engaged are equally important as enrolling them into universities. The data from this article stress that there are additional strategies needed to ensure that college campuses are more inclusive. Additional research is suggested for the effects of racial microaggressions on students of color other than African Americans. Furthermore, the need to explore the experiences of students of color in various graduate programs and other types of educational institutions is needed. It appears that researchers and policymakers who are not familiar with the historical and cultural differences of students of color often define racism and provide solutions based on their personal experiences. As such, researchers of color are encouraged to expand this topical area.

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