“My Black Womanness, She’s Fierce”: How Black Graduate Women Respond to and Cope with Gendered-Racial Microaggressions at a Historically White Institution

by Angel M. Jones

B.A. in Political Science, December 2008, Syracuse University
M. Ed. in School Counseling, May 2011, Georgia State University
Ed. S. in School Counseling, May 2014, Georgia State University

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Ashley Stone
Assistant Professor of Higher Education Administration

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Angel M. Jones

Dissertation Research Committee:

Ashley Nicole Stone, Assistant Professor of Higher Education Administration, Dissertation Director

Arshad I. Ali, Associate Professor of Research Methods, Committee Member

William A. Smith, Professor of Education, Culture, & Society, Committee Member

Dedication

First, this is dedicated to Black and Brown girls like my little sister, Isabella, who, when told by the world that she isn't good enough, will have proof of the contrary. She will know the greatness within her and believe with conviction that her future is limitless.

Second, this is for the Black and Brown women who paved the way for me to be where I am today. For women like,

Ana Jones (my mom) – the woman that gave birth to me literally and metaphorically, physically and mentally. The woman that taught me the meaning of hard work and what it meant to walk in my power as a proud Latina woman.

For Audre Lorde (poet/activist) - who helped me find my voice when she told me that my silence would not protect me and taught me to be deliberate and afraid of nothing.

For bell hooks (author) – who taught me how to talk back while moving from the margins and demanding my place in the center.

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For Dolores Huerta (civil rights activist) – the epitome of "si, se puede," who taught me what it means to serve nuestra comunidad and advocate for mi gente.

For Ellen Ochoa (engineer/astronaut) – who taught me how to shoot for the stars and live out my own mission.

For Frida Khalo (artist) -who taught me the power of being my own muse and identifying myself as the subject I want the world to get to know better.

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For Julia de Burgos (poet) - my boricua hermana who unapologetically fought for nuestra gente and taught me how to walk my own path.

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For Rosa Parks (civil rights activist) – who taught me the power of "NO!" and how to push back against disrespect and discrimination.

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For Yolanda Adams (singer) – who taught me that the Battle is not mine, and reminded me that God has my back as I have the back of my people.

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And last, but not least, lo hice pa' la Cultura.

I did it for the Culture.

Abstract

"My Black Womanness, She's Fierce": How Black Graduate Women Respond to and Cope with Gendered-Racial Microaggressions at a Historically White Institution

Although the number of Black women enrolled in historically White colleges and universities has grown in recent years, research has failed to adequately address the mental, social, and emotional well-being of these students (Green et al., 2018). While Black women seek higher education to gain upward mobility, they find themselves in a hostile environment that acts as a microcosm of the larger society where race, gender, and power relations are present. Research has shown that Black women are the most isolated group at historically White institutions, which is psychologically and emotionally taxing (Shavers& Moore, 2014). To address the neglected social and emotional needs of Black women, this study used Critical Race Theory to explore their experiences with racial-gendered microaggressions at a historically White institution (HWI). Specifically, it examined 4 questions: how do Black graduate women experience gendered-racial microaggressions? How do they respond? What factors influence their responses? And how do they cope with their experiences?

Findings showed that Black women experienced gendered-racial microaggressions on a consistent basis. Among these microaggressions were ones that made assumptions about their beauty, attempted to silence them, or depicted them as negative stereotypes of Black women. Their responses demonstrated their resiliency and demand for respect. Their experiences also showed the negative emotional, social, and psychological consequences of gendered-racial microaggressions as many of the women reported feeling anxious, depressed, or physically ill. Lastly, findings showed that the

women in the study employed coping strategies, which were influenced by the endemic nature of racism and often exacerbated their symptoms of racial battle fatigue.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

"The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman" (Malcom X, 1962).

Although the number of Black women enrolled in historically White colleges and universities has grown in recent years, research has failed to adequately address the mental, social, and emotional well-being of these students (Green et al., 2018). Green and colleagues (2018) argued that while Black women seek higher education to gain upward mobility, they find themselves in a hostile environment that acts as a microcosm of the larger society where race, gender, and power relations are present. Research has shown that Black women are the most isolated group at historically White institutions, which is psychologically and emotionally taxing (Ellis, 2001; Shavers, Jones, & Moore, 2014). As Green et al. (2018) stated:

> The reality is that a disproportionate amount of Black women are the most dissatisfied students at PWIs. Though academia is often portrayed as a field that combats inequities, many Black women find it as the field that actually reifies 'racial hierarchies' and gender-biases by marginalizing some groups and privileging others. Women of Color, particularly Black women, stand at the focal point where two influential and dominant systems of oppression meet: their race and gender (p. 306).

To address the neglected social and emotional needs of Black women, this study sought to explore their experiences with racial-gendered microaggressions at a historically White

institution (HWI). Specifically, this study used critical race theory (CRT) and counterstorytelling to share how they respond to, and cope with, these microaggressions.

Statement of the Problem

As Bell (1993) argued, "for over three centuries, this country has promised democracy and delivered discrimination and delusion" (p. 99). For example, despite the integration of schools 65 years ago, racial inequality is still incredibly prevalent within the educational system in the United States. Incidents of racial and ethnic discrimination on college campuses, especially historically White institutions (HWI), are becoming common occurrences. For example, nooses were found at three universities (Stanford, Auburn, & the University of Illinois) in 2019 (Badlwin, 2019; Beachum, 2019; Holcombe, 2019). Also in 2019, students at Syracuse University had a 15-day sit-in to protest the University's inaction with regards to hate crimes on campus (Randle, 2019). As Harper (2013) stated:

> Making sense of contemporary problems pertaining to race, stratification, and durable patterns of racial underrepresentation in higher education necessarily entails understanding ways in which various groups of people were excluded, the conditions under which they were eventually granted access, and myriad ways in which generations of them have been numerically and experientially minoritized. (p. 188)

Harper arguds that, in order to deal with the inequality and inequity that currently permeate institutions of higher education, we must do so within a context that accounts for history, culture, politics, and economics.

Similarly, Bonilla-Silva (1996) proposed that inequality be theorized by examining *racialized social systems,* which he defined as, "societies in which economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or race" (p. 469). Carnevale and Strohl (2013) argued that one such racialized social system, the postsecondary system, "is more and more complicit as a passive agent in the systemic reproduction of white racial privilege across generations" (p. 7). McIntosh (1989) described white privilege as an invisible knapsack with unearned assets. She stated that White people are: 1) carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, and 2) are not taught to see themselves as oppressors. She argued that, "the obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness of male advantage, is kept strongly enculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all" (pp. 5-6). Institutions of higher educations are microcosms of the racially hostile climate that Black people experience in the United States. In light of this, it is important, when examining the experiences of Black students at historically White institutions, to not only acknowledge academic factors, but the social context in which they exist as well.

Not only does White privilege advantage White students while disadvantaging Students of Color, the obliviousness McIntosh mentioned above adds an extra layer of emotional distress. For example, in her study of the experiences of Students of Color at a HWI, Zanolini-Morrison (2010) found that the overarching theme was related to awareness – both a heightened awareness by Students of Color as well as a lack of awareness by White students. The "lack of awareness on the part of the privileged frustrates those for whom racism is very much a part of an ever-present reality" (p. 1002).

The Students of Color in the study reported feeling like they were living in a separate reality from their White peers due to the differences in awareness between the two groups.

Racial Microaggressions

"One must not look for the gross and obvious. The subtle, cumulative miniassault is the substance of today's racism" (Pierce, 1974, p. 516).

Although you can turn on the television and see examples of overt racism (e.g. Black men shot by police; demonstrations by White supremacists), Pierce's contention, even 45 years later, still holds true today. Covert acts of racism, such as racial microaggressions, need to be examined and addressed. While the term "microaggression" was not used until 1970, Chester Pierce (1969) first described the subtle forms of racism experienced by Black people as "offensive mechanisms". He stated that:

> To be black in the United States today means to be socially minimized. For each day blacks are victims of white 'offensive mechanisms' which are designed to reduce, dilute, atomize, and encase the hapless into his 'place.' The incessant lesson the black must hear is that he is insignificant and irrelevant. (Pierce, 1969, p. 303)

He later extended the concept of "offensive mechanisms" to "microaggressions" which he described as, subtle and stunning blows that affect the victim to an "unimaginable magnitude" (p. 266). In 2000, Profit, Mino, and Pierce introduced "race-inspired microaggressions." They described these as:

> …automatic, subtle, stunning, seemingly innocuous messages, often non-verbal, which devaluate the blacks…Microaggressions, the major and inescapable expression of racism in the United States, take a cumulative toll on black individuals…What may be more important is that these cumulative, minor but incessant putdowns often remain as psychopollutants in the social environment. Their lingering intractability is a major contributor to the continuing traumatic stress suffered by blacks as individuals and as a group. (pp. 327–328)

Their description of racial microaggressions as psychopollutants has been supported by research which has found them to have significant social, emotional, and psychological consequences. For example, Sue et al. (2008) explored how Black Americans interpret and react to racial microaggressions, as well as the consequences of the experiences. Findings showed that experiencing racial microaggressions led to psychological distress in participants including feelings of sadness, guilt, anger, and frustration. Their investigation also found that the emotional turmoil associated with each experience persisted after the incident while they tried to interpret what happened. Participants also experienced additional emotional distress when retelling their stories, which included crying and stammering over words. This demonstrates that the emotional and psychological consequences of experiencing racial microaggressions go beyond the time of the incident. Students of Color are left carrying the pain of their racialized experiences, while still having to deal with the traditional stress associated with being a college student. To make matters worse, they carry these emotional burdens knowing that it will only be a matter of time before they are microaggressed again.

Also concerned with the psychological effects of racial microaggressions, Blume, Lovato, Thyken, and Denny (2012) investigated the relationship between microaggressions, anxiety, and alcohol use among ethnic minority students at an HWI. Results of the study showed that Students of Color experienced racial microaggressions at a significantly higher rate than White students. Results also showed that Students of Color who experienced a greater number of microaggressions were at a greater risk for anxiety and underage binge drinking. These findings emphasize the negative psychological and health consequences for Students of Color who experience racial microaggressions at an HWI. This study is also important because it calls attention to the maladaptive coping strategies being employed by Students of Color and the need to support these students by teaching them healthy ways to cope.

Another consequence of experiencing racial microaggressions is the negative effect it has on self-esteem, a relationship that was examined by Nadal et al. (2014). The results of the study showed that there was a significant negative correlation between racial microaggressions and self-esteem, which suggests that the more microaggressions one experiences, the lower their self-esteem will be. The results showed that microaggressions that are experienced in an educational setting, such as by a professor or classmate, are especially harmful to self-esteem. The study also found that Black participants reported significantly more experiences with being treated as inferior than White or Asian students and reported more experiences of being treated as a criminal than any other racial group.

In addition to affecting anxiety, alcohol use, and self-esteem, racial microaggressions also have an impact on depression and suicide ideation. O'Keefe et al.

(2015) investigated the relationship between racial microaggressions, depressive symptoms, and suicidal thoughts in ethnic minority young adults. The results showed that although all racial groups reported experiencing racial microaggressions, the rate at which they were experienced varied by racial group, with African American students reporting the greatest rate of frequency. The results also supported a positive relationship between racial microaggressions and depressive symptoms, which suggests that the more exposure one has to microaggressions, the greater chance they have of depressive symptoms. Additionally, the increase in depressive symptoms was associated with an increase in suicidal thoughts.

Racial Battle Fatigue

Profit, Mino, and Pierce (2000) stressed the fact that microaggressions, "take a cumulative toll on black individuals" and "their lingering intractability is a major contributor to the continuing traumatic stress suffered by blacks as individuals and as a group" (pp. 327–328). The lasting trauma caused by experiencing racial microaggressions is a topic that has been extended by the work of William A. Smith (2004). He identified this trauma as racial battle fatigue (RBF), a theoretical framework that "addresses the physiological and psychological strain exacted on racially marginalized groups and the amount of energy lost dedicated to coping with racial microaggressions and racism" (Smith et al., 2007, p. 555). The concept is informed by Pierce's work on microaggressions as well as literature on combat stress syndrome to help understand the effects of hostile environments. Combat stress syndrome occurs when military personnel suffer mental, physical, and emotional consequences from exposure to persistent, extreme risk (Smith et al., 2007). Similarly, for African American

students, racial battle fatigue is the result of constant exposure to racial microaggressions in racially hostile environments such as historically White institutions. Smith et al. (2007) argued that African American students are, "trying to transition into these historically White spaces and succeed, despite never knowing if or when they might be the targets of racial discrimination" (p. 556).

The symptoms of racial battle fatigue have been found to be both psychological and physiological (Smith, 2005). Physiological symptoms have included: tension headaches, elevated heart rate, upset stomach, high blood pressure, ulcers, and loss of appetite (Smith et al., 2007). Psychological symptoms have included: anxiety, nightmares, anger, frustration, hypervigilance, denial, and emotional and social withdrawal (Smith et al., 2007). Smith et al. (2007) argued that feelings of shock and anger are normal and expected when someone experiences a traumatic event. However, when it comes to Students of Color who experience racial battle fatigue, "these negative feelings or the associated collective memories seldom fade; instead, they become a part of a person's life history" (p. 555).

Sexism

As argued by Berg (2006), "although most women are not direct victims of brutal violence or sexist assault, all females live in an environment that distorts a woman's personality, limits her potential, and threatens her physical and psychological well-being" (p. 970). Most women experience a more subtle or covert form prejudice and discriminatory behavior known as *everyday sexism* (Swim et al., 2010). Everyday sexism refers to comments and behaviors that create hostile environments for women (Swim et

al., 2010). In her study on campus climate, Vaccaro (2010) found that female students, faculty, and staff described the campus as chilly, shallow, hostile, and discriminatory.

Landrine and Klonoff (1997) found that experiences of everyday sexism were better predictors of psychiatric symptoms than generic stressors. Hurst and Beesley (2013) posited that this is because sexist events, which they described as gender-specific, negative life stressors, are highly personal and targeted. Research found that gender-related discrimination can lead to psychological consequences such as increased anxiety, stress, and depression (Ayres, Friedman, & Leaper, 2009). For example, Berg (2006) examined the correlations between everyday sexism and the development of trauma symptoms in women. Results showed a strong relationship between experiencing everyday sexism and PTSD. Berg argued that everyday sexism alters a woman's brain and mind similar to the way violent assaults do. She stated that the cumulative effects of their experiences can cause women to be vulnerable to retraumatization, which further increases their chances of struggling with PTSD. This claim is supported by Hurt and Beesly (2013) who found that women experienced additional psychological distress when recalling recent (within the past year) or long-term (over a lifetime) experiences with everyday sexism.

Although the above mentioned studies sought to describe the experiences of women with everyday sexism, they did not speak to the experiences of Black women. For example, Hurst and Beesley (2013) examined psychological distress in college women, but only 2% of the participants were African American. Similarly, Ayres, Friedman, and Leaper (2009) studied the situational factors that contribute to if and how women respond to sexism, but only 1% of the participants were African American. Swim et al. (2010)

looked at how women self-silence as a response to sexism, but 92% of participants were White (there was no specific mention of how many were Black). The same limitation was found in Berg's 2006 study on everyday sexism and PTSD, where 88% of the participants were White.

Experiences of Black women

Although Black women do experience racism and sexism on a daily basis on college campuses, it is important to also address the gendered-racial microaggressions that they experience. Gendered-racial microaggressions have been defined by Lewis et al. (2012) as, "the subtle and everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one's race and gender" (p. 51). Just as racial microaggressions are rooted in deficit-based stereotypes about People of Color, gendered-racial microaggressions are motivated by negative stereotypes about the intersection of racial and gender identities – in this case, as Black women (Vaccaro, 2017). Jones-Thomas et al. (2004) argued that, "due to the legacy of slavery, particularly the requirements for heavy labor and sexual victimization, societal images of African American women differ from White women" (p. 428). They identify the three most prevalent stereotypes of Black women that were derived from slavery: Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel.

Mammy was often depicted as an overweight, dark-skinned woman, who worked in the house and often served as the maid, nanny, or whatever else the slavemasters wanted. She was expected to put her needs aside while prioritizing the needs and wants of White people. She was thought to "know her place" and express undying loyalty to the family she served. In her work on the experiences of Black women with gendered-racism,

Wingfield (2007) found the Mammy stereotype to be the most common one reported by participants. On the other hand, Black women who do not subscribe to the Mammy stereotype are labeled as the, "educated Black bitch," which Collins (2004) described a Black woman with "money, power, and good jobs (who) control their own bodies and sexuality" (p. 145).

The second stereotype, Sapphire, originated from Amos and Andy (racist tv show) and was portrayed as loud, argumentative, and emasculating (Thomas et al., 2004). This stereotype set the stage for what is now known as the "angry Black woman" (ABW). Ashley (2014) described the ABW stereotype as "pervasive and parasitic" because of the negative effect it has on the self-esteem of Black women, as well as how others perceive them (p. 28). In an attempt to avoid being labeled as an ABW, Black women hide and/or minimize their emotions which leads to isolation, anxiety, and self-hate (Ashley, 2014). Additionally, Corbin, Smith, and Roberto (2018) described how the process of self-filtering can result in symptoms of racial battle fatigue.

The third stereotype, the Jezebel, portrays Black women as promiscuous, hypersexualized, and unable to control her sexual desires (Thomas et al., 2004). Thomas et al., (2004) argued that this stereotype was created to justify the sexual exploitation and victimization of Black women during slavery. Wingfield (2007) found that Black women often felt uncomfortable because they were sexualized and exoticized by White colleagues. One of the participants described an incident where an older, White man kissed her on the cheek without her consent and then made a comment about missing the "good ol' days" in the South when Black people "knew their place" (p. 203). Similarly,

the participants in Lewis et al. (2010) reported often receiving sexualized comments about their bodies.

Another stereotype, one that has been argued to have both positive and negative outcomes, is the strong Black woman (SBW). The "strong Black woman" stereotype is built on the notion that since Black women constantly experience microaggressions, they are "liable to these insults and encroachments… (they) must become a tower of moral strength and by (their) reserve and dignified bearing defy and cower (their) aggressors" (Higginbotham, 1993, p. 193). Corbin, Smith, and Garcia (2018) argued that this reserve implies "superhuman strength to squelch human responses to indignities and discourage agentic action. This response, as a defense mechanism to misogynoir, is exhausting and stressful" (p. 629). Shavers and Moore (2014) argued that this notion of strength is what helped African Americans withstand and survive 300 years of slavery. However, while the notion of the SBW can contribute to increased resiliency in Black women, it also has negative consequences on their mental and emotional health (Shavers & Moore, 2014). Morgan (1999) explained that SBWs are silenced by the fear of appearing weak or vulnerable. As a result, Black women often suffer in silence when struggling mentally or emotionally.

Responding to Racism and Sexism

According to Pierce (1995), "the most baffling task for victims of racism and sexism is to defend against microaggressions. Knowing how and when to defend requires time and energy that oppressors cannot appreciate" (p. 282). However, despite the considerable amount of research on the psychological effects of experiencing racism and sexism, there is little that examines how Black students respond to racism and how Black

women respond to gendered-racism (Robinson-Wood, et al., 2015; Solórzano, 2000; Sue et al., 2008). Robinson-Wood, Balogun-Mwangi, and Matsumoto (2015) argued that a theoretical framework is needed that identifies strategies that help or hinder health among Black women with regard to their responses to discrimination. Similarly, Harwood et al. (2012) argued that research is needed that explores the way Students of Color respond to microaggressions in order to understand how they resist subtle forms of racism.

Although there is a dearth of research on how Black women respond to discrimination, Shorter-Gooden's (2004) examination of how African American women cope with racism and sexism revealed three strategies participants use to respond to gendered racism. She referred to the first response as *role reflexing*. This speaks to behaviors that are similar to code-switching or altering one's speech and behavior to fit in with the dominant group. The second response was *avoiding*. This refers to how the women in the study intentionally avoided certain people, places, and conversations that they thought might be racially charged. The final response, *standing up and fighting back*, refers to a refusal to role flex by directly challenging the racist behavior.

Coping with Microaggressions

There is limited research that focuses specifically on how Black people cope with racism, and even fewer studies that focus on how Black women cope with gendered racism (Lewis et al., 2012; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). To address this gap, Shorter-Gooden (2004) examined how African American women cope with racism and sexism. Her study found that Black women use various strategies to cope with different forms oppression. One set of coping strategies was identified by the author as *internal resources* and refers

to belief systems that shape how one feels about herself as well as defines her relationship with the world. One strategy used by the participants in this study was a reliance on their faith. Many of women reported using prayer to help them cope with the challenges of being a Black woman. Participants also talked about *standing on the shoulders* of their ancestors and those that fought for the opportunities they had. The third internal resource was *valuing oneself*. This coping strategy involved behaviors that were geared towards the development and nurturing of the women in the study. The participants also used external resources such as leaning on friends, significant others, and family members.

Lewis et al. (2012) explored how Black women cope with gendered racial microaggressions, which they defined as "the subtle and everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one's race and gender" (p. 51). The study was guided by two research questions: 1) what types of strategies do Black women use to cope with gendered racial microaggressions? 2) in what ways do these strategies represent resistance and resilience? Results of the study showed five coping strategies – *using one's voice as power*, *resisting Eurocentric standards of beauty*, *leaning on one's support network*, *becoming a Black superwoman*, and *becoming desensitized and escaping* - which were grouped together as one of three types of strategies – resistance, collective, and self-protective. The first resistance coping strategy, *using one's voice as power*, refers to challenging the perpetrator in the moment as a way to regain power. The second resistance coping strategy, *resisting Eurocentric standards of beauty*, refers to behavioral strategies that actively reject dominant ideologies that oppress Black women by privileging Eurocentric standards of beauty. Only one collective

coping strategy was identified, *leaning on one's support network*, and it refers to intentionally using her support network to help cope after experiencing a microaggression. The authors also identified two self-protective strategies: 1) *becoming a Black superwoman*, which refers to taking on multiple roles and responsibilities to demonstrate strength and resilience, and 2) *becoming desensitized and escaping*, which refers to desensitizing themselves to the severity of the experience.

The experiences of Black women with racial microaggressions was also examined by Robinson-Wood et al. (2015) who discussed how microaggressions may be worse than macroaggressions, or blatant racism. After analyzing the data, the authors identified five themes: 1*) mighty melanin tax*, 2) *the acrid academy*, 3) *underrating race*, 4) *coping as optimal resistance*, and 5) *armored coping*. The first theme, *mighty melanin tax*, refers to the physiological and psychological toll of experiencing chronic microaggressions (similar to racial battle fatigue). Some of the physiological and psychological symptoms described by participants included high blood pressure, heart palpitations, forced compliance, excessive alcohol use, and feelings of anger, sadness, and frustration. The second theme, *the acrid academy*, refers to having one's competence questioned and capabilities underestimated. The third theme, *underrating race*, refers to the minimization or invalidation of the role race plays in their experiences. The fourth theme was *coping as optimal resistance*. Examples of this coping strategy included therapy, praying, journaling, and exercising. The final theme was *armored coping*.

> This type of coping was themed as armored due to the protective psychological gear that women seemed to adorn at school/work in their efforts to confront

> doubts from others, as well as from within oneself, about their worth, capabilities, and legitimacy. (p. 232)

This study, as well as the previous study by Lewis et al. (2012), showed that Black women have had to develop coping strategies that protect themselves from the negative consequences of experiencing gendered racial microaggressions.

It is important to highlight that despite the various ways Black women are coping with gendered racism, there has been no mention of counseling. This should be of great concern given the negative psychological effects of experiencing microaggressions that were discussed earlier. This is consistent with research that shows an underutilization of mental health services by Students of Color. For example, Brownson et al. (2014) looked at suicidal experiences and help-seeking behavior in diverse college students. The study found that African American students had considerably lower help-seeking probabilities than the overall group mean. These findings support the work of Davidson, Yakushka, and Sanford-Martens (2004) who used an archival approach to examine the use of university counseling services by ethnic minority students. Their work found that minority students underutilized mental health services, with less than 8% of the students who received counseling services being ethnic minority students.

One of the reasons for underutilization of counseling services by Students of Color is related to both the cultural competence and diversity of the counseling staff. For example, Hayes et al. (2011) found that the ethnic makeup of counselors in university counseling centers was a predictor of utilization of services. They also found that among Students of Color, service utilization was predicted by greater psychological distress, less family support, and previous psychological problems. Examining this issue from a

critical race theory perspective allows us to acknowledge the role of racism. As mentioned earlier, the experiences of Students of Color is distinct from their White peers due to race-related stress. As such, counselors who do not, or cannot, acknowledge the impact of racism on their experience are doing a disservice to these students. As McGee and Stovall (2015) argued, it is necessary that we use interdisciplinary approaches that, "can help identify and foster strategies to support (Students of Color) in the project and process of healing from multiple forms of racialized trauma they experience within and beyond their educational encounters" (p. 491).

Although studies have examined the use of mental health service by Students of Color, there are few that focus specifically on Black women. The current study addressed this gap in the literature and found that most of the participants did not utilize mental health services or identify counseling as a coping strategy.

Purpose and Research Questions

The prevalence of both racism and sexism, as well as the negative stereotypes of Black women, highlight the need to explore their uniquely nuanced experiences (Thomas et al., 2004). In response to this need, the purpose of my dissertation was to explore how Black graduate women experience gendered-racial microaggressions at a historically White institution. I was especially interested in how students respond to the microaggressions because, as Pierce (1995) noted, "the most baffling task for victims of racism and sexism is to defend against microaggressions. Knowing how and when to defend requires time and energy that oppressors cannot appreciate" (p. 282). I was specifically interested in graduate women for two reasons. First, research showed that higher levels of educational attainment are associated with higher levels of race-related

stress as a result of experiencing racial microaggressions (Smith et al., 2011). Second, Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) argued for theoretical frameworks that focus on the individual and collective tenacity of young women, and Yosso et al. (2009) found that Black students often changed majors, dropped classes, or left their universities in order to avoid experiencing racial microaggressions. With this in mind, and motivated by critical race theory's emphasis on challenging deficit perspectives, I wanted to explore how Black graduate women were able to persevere to their current academic levels.

Research Questions

- How do Black graduate women experience gendered-racial microaggressions?
- How do Black graduate women respond to gendered-racial microaggressions?
- What factors influence the way Black graduate women respond to gendered-racial microaggressions?
- How do Black graduate women cope with gendered-racial microaggressions?

Statement of Potential Significance

This study was significant because:

1. It centered the voices of Black women while addressing the unique ways in which they experience gendered-racial microaggressions.
2. Research has shown that the impact of gender discrimination on women depends partly on how they respond. However, while studies have focused on how "women" respond, the participants have been predominantly White. This study allowed us to see if the same is true for how Black women respond to gendered-racial microaggressions.

3. It addressed the dearth of research on how Black women cope with gendered-racial microaggressions.
4. It emphasized the importance of using theoretical frameworks and methodologies that account for and address the intersecting identities of Black women.

Summary of Methodology

"If methodologies have been used to silence and marginalize People of Color, then methodologies can also give voice and turn the margins into places of transformative resistance,"

(Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 38).

Critical Race Methodology

The primary methodology that informed my research design was critical race methodology (CRM). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) defined CRM as:

> A theoretically grounded approach to research that (a) foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process. However, it also challenges the separate discourses on race, gender, and class by showing how these three elements intersect to affect the experiences of Students of Color; (b) challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of Students of Color; (c) offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, and class subordination; and (d) focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of Students of Color. Furthermore, it views these experiences as sources of strength and (e) uses the interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history,

> humanities, and the law to better understand the experiences of Students of Color. (p. 24)

In addition to being appropriate for my study because of its attention to race and racism, CRM also acknowledges the impact of intersectionality on the experiences of Black women. This methodology also encourages educational researchers to center the experiences of Students of Color at every part of the research process, from the development of research questions to the dissemination of findings, (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Furthermore, CRM is guided by the five tenets of critical race theory - racism is endemic, valuing experiential knowledge, challenging dominant ideologies, a commitment to social justice, and a transdisciplinary perspective. I was intentional about using each of the tenets to frame the design of the research study.

Counterstorytelling

Another methodology that I used was counterstorytelling, which Solórzano and Yosso (2002) defined as:

> A method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform. (p. 31)

I chose this methodology because it allowed me to challenge a majoritarian story (one that privileges Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference), by providing a platform for Black women to tell their stories in their own words (Solórzano & Yosso,

2002). Additionally, while a main goal of counterstorytelling is to tell nonmajoritarian stories, it "can also serve as a pedagogical tool that allows one to better understand and appreciate the unique experiences and responses of Students of Color through a deliberate, conscious, and open type of listening," (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 116). I wanted the participants' stories to be told in a deliberate manner that encourages others to not just hear them, but to listen to them intently. This was done with data collected from focus group interviews, journaling, and individual interviews.

Positionality

I identify as a Black and Puerto Rican, Afro Latina woman. I am a first-generation college student who was raised by a single mother in Brooklyn, NY. I was taught to be proud of my heritage and I consider my race and ethnicity to be central to my overall identity. Although I was raised by strong women, including my mother, aunts, and grandmother, my gender was never something I thought about growing up. Even now, while I am aware that my gender influences the way others see and treat me, it is not a salient part of my identity. However, my racialized-gender is incredibly important to me. I rarely think about being a woman, but I always think about being a Black woman. I am proud of my Black womanhood and will defend it when necessary.

I also identify as a Black graduate woman who attends a historically White institution. It is important to note that I do not identify as *just* a graduate student because it is impossible to separate my race and gender from my identity as a student. First, I am keenly aware of the fact that others see me as Black, a woman, or a Black woman long before they see me as a doctoral student. Even when on campus, the assumption is often that I am not a member of the academic community, because of the color of my skin.

Second, my status as a student is directly tied to me being a woman of color. I decided to get my doctorate degree because I wanted to explore how the experiences of Black and Brown students impact their mental health. The topic of this dissertation is the result of my own experiences as well as the research I have done over the course of my program.

Definition of Key Term

Counterstorytelling: a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Critical Race Feminism (CRF): a theoretical framework that stresses conscious consideration of the intersection of race, class, and gender by placing Women of Color at the center of the analysis and reveals the discriminatory and oppressive nature of their reality. Critical race feminists are concerned with practice, not just theory. They address actual needs and emphasize practical applications in an effort to bring about change and progress within society (Wing and Willis, 2009).

Critical Race Methodology (CRM): a theoretically grounded approach to research that (a) foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process; (b) challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of Students of Color; (c) offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, and class subordination; and (d) focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of Students of Color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Critical Race Theory (CRT): an explanatory framework that accounts for the role race and racism play in the experiences of People of Color and challenges all forms of oppression (Perez Huber & Solórzano, 2015).

Everyday Sexism: subtle or covert forms prejudice and discriminatory behavior that create hostile environments for women (Swim et al., 2010).

Gendered-racism: a form of oppression based on the simultaneous experience of racism and sexism (Essed, 1991).

Racial microaggressions: the subtle and everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one's race (Pierce, 1974).

Gendered-racial microaggressions: the subtle and everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one's race and gender (Lewis et al., 2012).

Racial Battle Fatigue: a theoretical framework that addresses the physiological and psychological strain exacted on racially marginalized groups and the amount of energy lost dedicated to coping with racial microaggressions and racism (Smith et al., 2007).

Racism: individual actions (both intentional and unconscious) that engender marginalization and inflict varying degrees of harm on minoritized persons; structures that determine and cyclically remanufacture racial inequity; and institutional norms that sustain White privilege and permit the ongoing subordination of minoritized people (Harper, 2012, p. 10).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

In Chapter 1, I gave a brief history of racial microaggressions with a focus on Chester Pierce's work (1969, 1970, 1980). The purpose of the first part of the current chapter is to review literature relevant to the experiences of Black women college students with gendered-racial microaggressions at HWIs. First, I provide an overview of how scholars have built upon Pierce's work to introduce new ways to conceptualize, analyze, and measure racial microaggressions. Second, I provide a similar overview of the literature on gendered-racial microaggressions. Next, I review several studies that demonstrate the negative effects of racial microaggressions on Students of Color, with an emphasis on those that address the experiences of Black students. Lastly, I review studies that examine the experiences of Black women with gendered-racial microaggressions.

The second section of this chapter focuses on the theoretical frameworks that guided my work - Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Feminism. I provide an overview of each framework as well as their application within the field of education. I also discuss their utility specifically when researching racial microaggressions. To do this, I review the work of several scholars who have used one or more of the frameworks to guide their studies.

Review of Relevant Literature

Taxonomy of Racial Microaggressions

Sue and colleagues (2007) proposed a taxonomy of racial microaggressions to provide a conceptual framework to investigate the impact of racial microaggressions. The authors argued:

> there is an urgent need to bring greater awareness and understanding of how microaggressions operate, their numerous manifestations in society, the type of impact they have on People of Color, the dynamic interaction between perpetrator and target, and the educational strategies to eliminate them. (p. 273)

A review of the literature and personal narratives resulted in an analytical framework which includes three forms of microaggressions (microassualt, microinsult, and microinvalidation) and nine themes (environmental microaggressions, ascription of intelligence, second class citizen, pathologizing cultural values/communication styles, assumption of criminal status, alien in own land, color blindness, myth of meritocracy, and denial of individual racism). These are discussed in detail below.

Types of racial microaggressions. The first type of racial microaggressions introduced by Sue et al. (2007) is *microassaults*. This type, unlike microinsults and microinvalidations, which tend to be more subtle and unintentional, are explicit racial attacks that can be verbal or nonverbal. An example of a verbal microassault is Donald Trump telling U.S. congress Women of Color to go back to the countries they came from (Rogers & Fandos, 2019). The message conveyed is that these women do not belong and are not welcome in the United States, which is reminiscent of the feelings of isolation and lack of belonging that are reported by many Black students at HWIs (Harwood, 2012; McCabe, 2008; Stone at al., 2018). An example of a nonverbal microassault is the

incident at Stanford University when a noose was hung on a tree near a residence hall housing with a majority of Students of Color (Holcombe, 2019). Both incidents occurred in 2019 and reaffirm the still urgent need to bring awareness to the impact of racial microaggressions.

The second type of racial microaggressions, *microinsults*, refers to subtle slights or snubs that insult or demean a person's racial identity. As with microassaults, microinsults can also be verbal or nonverbal. It is important to note that although microinsults are not as explicit as microassaults, they still convey a racially charged message to the recipient. An example of a verbal microinsult is asking a Black male student if he got into college on an athletic scholarship. This message being conveyed here is that the student was unable to be accepted on his academic merits. It also perpetuates the stereotype that all Black men are athletes. An example of a nonverbal microinsult is when a White professor actively listens when a White student speaks in class but does not provide the same level of engagement with Black students. The message here is that what the Black student has to contribute is of little to no value to the professor or the class.

The last type of racial microaggressions, *microinvalidations*, refers to the minimization or dismissal of the feelings and/or racialized experiences of Students of Color. An example of a microinvalidation is when a student reports a racialized experience and is accused of overreacting or being too sensitive. The message conveyed to the student is that her feelings are not valid. It also tells her that her experiences are inconsequential. In addition to experiences being invalidated, the same is possible with one's racial identity. A common example of this is when People of Color, especially

Asian American and Latin American students, are asked where they came from. The assumption that they are perpetual foreigners, despite being born in the United States, invalidates their American identity (Sue et al., 2007).

Categories of racial microaggressions. Sue et al. (2007) identified nine categories of racial microaggressions that they believed have distinct themes. I describe each of the categories below within the context of the type of microaggression to which it is related.

1) *Environmental microaggressions*: this category refers to microaggressions that manifest on a systemic or environmental level. An example of this is a lack of representation within the student body or faculty. This category is unique from the others for two reasons. First, it addresses the fact that microaggressions "are not limited to human encounters alone but may also be environmental in nature," (p. 273). This is important to acknowledge because it shows that Students of Color can experience racial microaggressions on campus without having to interact with anyone. The campus environment itself can be the aggressor. For example, having to take classes in buildings named "in honor" of racist historical figures. Second, this category is the only one that presents itself in any of the three forms of racial microaggressions discussed earlier (microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations).

The following four categories are presented by the authors as microinsults.

2) *Ascription of intelligence*: this refers to microaggressions that assume a person's level of intelligence based on their race. An example of this type of

microaggression is when a well-spoken Black student is told she is articulate. Although, at face value, it can be thought of as a compliment, that is not how it is received. The message behind the comment is that Black students are not expected to be articulate.

3) *Second class citizen*: this refers to instances when a White person is given preferential treatment over a Person of Color. A common example of this is when taxis drive by a Black person trying to hail a cab but will stop for a White customer. The message here is that the Black person's business is not wanted nor valued. There is also an assumption that the Black customer would be traveling to a dangerous part of the city.
4) *Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles*: this refers to microaggressions that assume that the dominant culture's values and ways of communicating are ideal. An example of this is when a Black woman is told she is too loud. The message delivered here is that her way of communicating is unacceptable and unpleasant to others. This particular message feeds into the "angry Black woman" stereotype, which is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.
5) *Assumption of criminal status*: this refers to comments and behaviors that imply or insinuate that People of Color are criminals. Many examples of this, such as a White woman holding her purse when she sees a Black man, are motivated by Black misandry, or the fear of Black men (Smith et al., 2007). Other examples can be seen via the social media hashtag, #livingwhileBlack, which documents the countless times a White person calls the police on a Black person for noncriminal

behaviors such as sleeping or walking through a corner store. The message here is that all Black people are criminals.

The remaining four categories are presented by the authors as microinvalidations.

6) *Alien in own land*: this refers to when Latinx American and Asian American people are assumed to be immigrants. Examples of this are when a Latina student is asked if she was born in Mexico or an Asian American student is applauded for speaking "good English." The message here is that these students could not possibly be citizens of the U.S., so they must be from another country and speak a different language.
7) *Color blindness*: this refers to comments that show a White person's unwillingness to acknowledge the existence and subsequent impact of race. An example of this is when a White teacher says something along the lines of, "I don't see race. I just see children." This way of thinking is common and problematic for a couple of reasons. First, it communicates to children of color that their race does not matter. Second, if race is not being acknowledged, its negative implications are also being ignored.
8) *Myth of meritocracy*: this refers to statements that claim that success is dependent solely on merit and not influenced by race or other social factors. An example of this is the "bootstrap" mentality that believes anyone can just pull themselves up by their bootstraps in order to succeed. This is another problematic perspective because it ignores the impact years of oppression has had on Communities of Color. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "it is a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he out to lift himself by his own bootstraps. Through centuries of denial,

centuries of neglect, and centuries of injustice many, many Negroes have been left bootless," (King Jr., 1968).

9) *Denial of individual racism*: this refers to statements by White people that deny their own racial biases. One of the most common examples of this is when a White person starts a sentence with the disclaimer, "I'm not racist," and often follows up with, "I have a Black friend." The message conveyed here is a sense of racist immunity by way of engaging with Black people.

Measuring racial microaggressions

Sue et al. (2007) provided us with a framework to help us conceptualize and analyze the impact of racial microaggressions on People of Color. Since then, several scholars have furthered our understanding with the development of microaggression scales. The following section will review the development and utility of two scales: the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS) and the Racial Microaggressions Scale (RMAS).

Nadal (2011) developed the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS) to provide researchers with a way to empirically support the presence of racial microaggressions in the lives of People of Color. He argued that although Harrel (2000) created the Daily Life Experiences (DLE), which also measured microaggressions, it did not have the subcategories necessary to address the different components of the microaggressions taxonomy described earlier. Informed by the framework presented by Sue et al. (2007), as well as subsequent studies on microaggressions (e.g. Rivera et al., 2010; Sue et al., 2009; Watkins et al., 2010), Nadal and his colleagues developed a 131-

item scale with six subscales – *assumption of inferiority*, *second-class citizen and assumption of criminality*, *microinvalidations*, *exoticization/assumptions of similarity*, *environmental microaggressions*, and *workplace and school microaggressions*. Although the REMS does a good job of measuring the frequency of microaggressions experienced by People of Color, which provides empirical support for the necessity of this type of research, it is limited by its inability to assess the psychological effects of racial microaggressions.

Also building upon the work of Sue et al. (2007), Torres, Andrade, and Diaz. (2012) developed the Racial Microaggressions Scale (RMAS), a quantitative scale that measures the experiences of racial microaggressions in People of Color. The RMAS, like the REMS, consists of six subscales (*invisibility*, *criminality*, *low achieving/undesirable culture*, *sexualization*, *foreigner/not belonging*, and *environmental invalidations*) that are influenced by the themes presented in the racial microaggressions taxonomy. However, unlike the REMS, the RMAS does not just measure frequency of microaggressions, it also measures their impact. If a participant indicates that they have experienced a particular microaggression, they are then asked to rate how bothersome or stressful the experience was. This is a key difference, which allows researchers and clinicians to get a better sense of the psychological effects racial microaggressions have on People of Color.

Taxonomy of gendered-racial microaggressions

The taxonomy developed by Sue et al. (2007) was extended by Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Browne Huntt (2016) who used the data from a study on Black college women to propose a new conceptual framework for examining gendered-

racial microaggressions. Their work addressed the intersection of race and gender that plays a pivotal role in how Black women experience microaggressions. They identified three themes and six subthemes that describe the types of gendered-racial microaggressions experienced by Black women at an HWI.

1) *Projected stereotypes:* this theme refers to gendered racial microaggressions that are informed by a specific stereotype that degrades Black women.
    a. *Expectation of the Jezebel:* this refers to the expectation that Black women are overly seductive and promiscuous. This stereotype also assumes that Black women are sexual deviants who cannot control their desires or impulses. Participants in the study shared experiences of being groped and/or spoken to with sexually derogatory language.
    b. *Expectation of the angry Black woman:* this refers to the expectation for Black women to be angry, aggressive, and hostile. This stereotype had a silencing effect on participants because they often did not respond to the gendered-racial microaggressions experienced out of fear of perpetuating it.
2) *Silenced and marginalized:* this refers to gendered-racial microaggressions that made Black women feel silenced, dismissed, or minimized.
    a. *Struggle for respect:* this refers to instances when their intellect or authority is questioned. Participants in the study shared often feeling not respected by their peers. One participant shared that White men tend to talk over her in conversations, even when she is more knowledgeable of the topic.

b. *Invisibility:* this refers to microaggressions that made participants feel ignored or marginalized by their peers. One participant shared that she felt invisible when walking across campus and also felt like she was expected to move out of the way when a White person was walking on the sidewalk.

3) *Assumptions about style and beauty*: this refers to microaggressions that made assumptions about their cultural ways of being a Black woman and reduced them to their communication styles or physical appearances.

   a. *Assumptions about communication styles:* this refers to assumptions about how Black women communicate and often made participants feel inferior. Participants shared that they were expected, by White people, to communicate in certain way based on the way Black women are often portrayed in the media (i.e. neck rolling or finger snapping).

   b. *Assumptions about aesthetics:* this refers to assumptions about Black women's physical appearance including their hair, body size, and facial features. One participant shared being questioned for not being as curvy as "regular" Black women (p. 772). Participants also shared messages they received about their natural hair being unprofessional or undesirable.

Measuring gendered racial microaggressions

Although the scales developed by Nadal (2011) and Torres et al. (2012) pushed the conversation about the impact of racial microaggressions forward, neither one addressed the unique experiences of Women of Color. As I discussed in chapter 1, the

experiences of Black women are not only impacted by their race or gender, but their racialized gender as well. As a result, an appropriate scale needs to reflect the intersectionality of their identity in order to accurately assess the impact of microaggressions on their lives. Lewis and Neville (2015) addressed this gap in the literature by developing the Gendered-Racial Microaggressions Scale (GRMS), which measures gendered-racial microaggressions and environmental expressions of oppression.

The GRMS was created by applying an intersectional framework to the racial microaggressions taxonomy presented by Sue et al. (2007) and Essed's (1991) theory of gendered racism. The result was a 32-item scale with four subscales. The first subscale, *assumptions of beauty and sexual objectification*, refers to standards of beauty or physical appearance. The second subscale, *silenced and marginalized*, refers to being silenced or marginalized at school or work. The third subscale, *strong Black woman stereotype*, refers to comments about a Black woman's level of assertiveness or independence. The last subscale, the *angry Black woman stereotype*, refers to instances when a Black woman is deemed angry when merely advocating for herself. The GRMS does a great job of calling attention to the gendered-racial microaggressions experienced by Black women that are not addressed by the previous two scales. This scale does this by accounting for both the frequency as well as the impact of the microaggressions they experience.

Effects of racial microaggressions

Using Sue et al. (2007) as a framework, Sue et al. (2008) explored how Black Americans interpret and react to racial microaggressions, as well as the consequences of the experiences. They found that experiencing racial microaggressions led to

psychological distress in participants including feelings of sadness, guilt, anger and frustration. Their investigation also found that the emotional turmoil associated with each experience persisted after the incident while they tried to interpret what happened. Participants also experienced additional emotional distress when retelling their stories, which included crying and stammering over words. This demonstrates that the emotional and psychological consequences of experiencing racial microaggressions go beyond the time of the incident. The final theme, *assumed superiority of White cultural values/communication styles*, refers to comments that devalue Black cultural values and communication styles. One of the participants described feeling unable to be her authentic self in professional settings out of fear of her communication style being deemed as unacceptable or unprofessional.

Also using Sue et al. (2007) as a framework, Harwood et al. (2012) explored the experiences of Students of Color with racial microaggressions at an HWI, with an emphasis on residence halls. Their study sought to answer two questions: 1) what are the interpersonal racial microaggressions experienced by Students of Color living in the residence halls? 2) how are these racial microaggressions manifested at the environmental level within residence halls? Study findings were divided into three themes: *racial jokes and verbal comments, racial slurs written in shared spaces*, and *segregated spaces and unequal treatment*. The first theme, *racial jokes and verbal comments*, refers to microaggressions, often in the form of microinvalidations, that were made on an interpersonal level by the participants' friends or roommates. These comments led to participants feeling like an outsider in a space that was supposed to be their home. The second theme, *racial slurs written in shared space*, refers to

microassaults that included racial slurs written on dorm room doors or elevators. A Black female student shared seeing the n-word on multiple students' doors. The message conveyed by these microaggressions was that Students of Color did not belong on campus and/or in the residence halls. The last theme, *segregated spaces and unequal treatment*, refers to environmental microaggressions. Examples of these microaggressions are "the informal spaces on campus that communicate the message to Students of Color that they do not belong there," (p. 167). These spaces included the residence halls and cafeterias. As a result of their experiences with racial microaggressions, the students in this study struggled with feelings of unbelonging as well as the emotional distress associated with trying to seek support from White staff members who often invalidated their concerns.

Also concerned with the psychological effects of racial microaggressions, Blume et al. (2012) investigated the relationship of microaggressions with anxiety and alcohol use among ethnic minority students at a historically White institution (HWI). Results of the study showed that Students of Color experienced racial microaggressions at a significantly higher rate than White students. Results also showed that Students of Color who experienced a greater number of microaggressions were at a greater risk for anxiety and underage binge drinking. These findings emphasize the negative psychological and health consequences for Students of Color who experience racial microaggressions at an HWI.

Another consequence of experiencing racial microaggressions is the negative effect it has on self-esteem, a relationship that was examined by Nadal et al. (2014). The purpose of their study was to:

> examine how individuals' encounters with racial microaggressions, or subtle forms of racial discrimination, may influence self-esteem, which in turn (may) be a risk or protective factor to the educational outcomes and psychological welfares of Students of Color (p. 464).

The results of the study showed that there was a significant negative correlation between racial microaggressions and self-esteem, which suggests that the more microaggressions one experiences, the lower their self-esteem will be. The results also showed that this correlation was most significant within two of the REMS subscales: 1) microaggressions when they are treated like a second-class citizen and 2) microaggressions that take place at school or work. The results showed that microaggressions that are experienced in an educational setting, such as by a professor or classmate, are especially harmful to self-esteem. The study also found that Black participants reported significantly more experiences with being treated as inferior than White or Asian students and reported more experiences of being treated as a criminal than any other racial groups.

The results also showed that although all racial groups reported experiencing racial microaggressions, the rate at which they were experienced varied by racial group. African American students reported the greatest rate of frequency, while American Indian/Alaska Native students reported the least amount of exposure. The results also supported a positive relationship between racial microaggressions and depressive symptoms, which suggests that the more exposure one has to microaggressions, the greater chances of the presence of depressive symptoms. Additionally, the increase in depressive symptoms was associated with an increase in suicidal thoughts.

The relationship between racial microaggressions and suicidal thoughts was also explored by Hollingworth et al. (2017). Specifically, they examined whether racial microaggressions were associated with increased suicide ideation through perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness among African American young adults. The authors defined burdensomeness as the "perception that one is ineffective in life and a burden on others," and thwarted belongingness as "feelings of social disconnection and isolation" (p. 105). Results showed that African American students who experience racial microaggressions have increased feelings of burdensomeness, which was also associated with an increase in suicidal thoughts. This was found to especially be the case when students experienced racial microaggressions that made them feel incompetent or dismissed. This supports the findings of the previous study, Nadal et al. (2014), which found that there was a greater decrease in self-esteem when students were treated as second-class citizens. It is clear that these types of microaggressions do not only lead to lowered self-esteem, but increased thoughts of suicide as well.

More recently, Lilly et al. (2018) examined the association between positive screening for depression, exposure to microaggressions, distress evoked by microaggressions, and subjective social status among high-achieving minorities. Subjective social status was defined as "a person's belief about his (or her) location in a status order" (p. 88). One of the most significant findings of the study was that almost all participants, 98.8%, reported recently experiencing microaggressions. The results also found that the frequency of exposure to microaggressions was associated with 2.46 times greater odds of experiencing depressive symptoms. Similarly, distress evoked by microaggressions was associated with 2.14 times greater odds of depression. As we have

seen with the previous studies, experiencing microaggressions leads to increased emotional destress and depressive symptoms.

Effects of Racial/Gender Microaggressions and Black Women

Although all of the previously mentioned studies consisted of Black female participants, none of them directly acknowledge nor account for the roles race *and* gender have on how Black women experience microaggressions. The following studies fill that gap.

McCabe (2009) examined racial and gender patterns in microaggressions experienced by Black, Latinx, and White undergraduate students at a PWI. Although her participants were not just Black women, I included her study in this section for two reasons: 1) this study was one of the first on microaggressions that was intentional about exploring gender related patterns and, 2) the findings were broken up by race and gender, allowing for some light to be shed specifically on the experiences of Black women students. The findings of the study were divided into four themes: 1) *Black men as threatening*, 2) *Latinas as sexually available and exotic*, 3) *the classroom as a setting for microaggressions experienced by Black women* and, 4) *male-dominated majors as a setting for microaggressions experienced by White women*. For this section, I only focus on the theme related to Black women. McCabe (2009) found that Black men, Latinas, and Black women all experienced microaggressions tied to their race and gender. However, the microaggressions experienced by Black women were not connected to specific stereotypes like with the other two groups. Instead, their experiences were connected to a location. The author mentioned that even though the other groups also

reported experiencing microaggressions in the classroom, the reports by Black women were more frequent. As with previous studies (e.g. Sue et al., 2008b), these students were often called upon by White professors to be the spokesperson for every member of the Black community. Black women participants also described feeling as if their contributions in the classroom were dismissed or minimized.

These findings are especially alarming given the negative psychological consequences of experiencing microaggressions in these particular ways. As discussed earlier, Nadal et al. (2014) found that microaggressions experienced in the classroom were particularly harmful to self-esteem. Additionally, Hollingsworth et al. (2017) found that microaggressions that caused Black students to feel dismissed or incompetent were directly tied to increased thoughts of suicide. This study emphasizes the need for studies that center the experiences of Black women with microaggressions.

Concerned with how Black women experience racial microaggressions, Donovan, et al. (2012) explored the prevalence of perceived racial macroaggressions (PRMa) and perceived racial microaggressions (PRMi) in the lives of Black women, as well as how microaggressions influence anxiety and depression in these women. They argued that most previous studies did not distinguish between macro and microaggressions, so their work attempted to address this gap. Results showed that participants reported more experiences with PRMi (96 %) than with PRMa (63%), which is consistent with other research that showed participants experience more microinsults and microinvalidations than microassaults (e.g. Sue et al., 2007). Results also showed that both PRMa and PRMi significantly contributed to increased depressive symptoms. Additionally, data showed that PRMa also contributed to increased feelings of anxiety. It is evident that experiences

with racial discrimination, whether overt incidences such as PRMa or covert ones such as PRMi, have negative effects on the mental health of Black women.

Also interested in the effects of racial microaggressions on the mental health of Black women, Moody and Lewis (2019) explored the relationship between gendered-racial microaggressions and traumatic stress symptoms in Black women. Study findings showed that a greater frequency of gendered-racial microaggressions was associated with greater symptoms of traumatic stress. This is consistent with Lewis et al. (2017) who found that gendered-racial microaggressions were a significant predictor of negative physical and mental health in Black women.

Theoretical Frameworks

Critical Race Theory

In order to understand race and racism as a condition of schooling, it is important to utilize a theoretical framework that acknowledges the role racism plays within the educational system in the United States. One such framework, which guides my research on the experiences of Black college students at historically White institutions (HWI), is critical race theory (CRT). CRT is an explanatory framework that accounts for the role race and racism play in the experiences of People of Color and challenges all forms of oppression (Perez-Huber & Solórzano, 2015). It originated in Critical Legal Studies (CLS), which is:

> …the work of progressive legal scholars of color who are attempting to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that works

> toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination. (Matsuda, 1991, p. 1331)

However, critical race scholars moved away from CLS because it failed to directly address issues of racial inequality and often underplayed the role of racism within the construction of the legal system (Parker & Lynn, 2002; Yosso, 2005). Additionally, critical race theorists believed that CLS neglected the histories and lived experiences of People of Color (Yosso, 2005).

Critical race theory was "borne out of a need for People of Color to begin to move discussions of race and racism from the realm of the experiential to the realm of the ideological," (Parker & Lynne, 2002, p. 8). Its main premise is that racism is ordinary, not aberrant, and is so engrained within the fabric of our society that it appears normal and natural (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2010). Also, Derrick Bell, a prominent CRT scholar, argued that racism should not be viewed as individual acts of prejudice that can be eradicated because, not only is racism endemic in the United States, it is permanent (Ladson-Billings, 2010; Parker & Lynne, 2002). Parker and Lynne (2002) identified three main goals of CRT: (a) to present storytelling and narratives as valid approaches through which to examine race and racism in the law and in society; (b) to argue for the eradication of racial subjugation while simultaneously recognizing that race is a social construct; and (c) to draw important relationships between race and other axes of domination.

Critical race theory in education. Although critical race theory emerged from critical legal studies, it has been adapted to apply to various disciplines including women's studies, sociology, and ethnic studies (Hughes & Giles, 2010; Solórzano, Ceja,

& Yosso, 2000). Among these disciplines is the field of education. A critical race theory approach is needed within educational research because it, "acknowledges the contradictory nature of education, wherein schools most often oppress and marginalize while they maintain the potential to emancipate and empower" (Yosso, 2005, p. 73). It also allows researchers to understand the centrality of racism in university settings (Parker, 1998). Solórzano (1998) defined critical race theory in education as "a framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural, cultural, and interpersonal aspects of education that maintain the subordination of scholars of color" (p. 123). He argued that:

> The critical race framework for education is different from other CRT frameworks because it simultaneously attempts to foreground race and racism in the research as well as challenge the traditional paradigms, methods, texts, and separate discourse on race, gender, and class by showing how these social constructs intersect to impact communities of color. (p. 63)

Critical race theory in education is guided by five tenets: 1) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; 2) challenging dominant ideologies and deficit perspectives; 3) the centrality of experiential knowledge; 4) interdisciplinary analyses; and 5) a commitment to social justice (Solórzano, 1998). The first tenet, the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, emphasizes that fact that racism is endemic and permanent. Additionally, while the acknowledgment of racism is at the core of CRT, it also addresses how racism intersects with other forms of oppression such as sexism and classism. The second tenet, challenging dominant ideologies and deficit perspectives, "challenges the traditional claims of the educational system and its institutions to

objectivity, meritocracy, color and gender blindness, race and gender neutrality, and equal opportunity" (Solórzano, 1998, p. 122). CRT scholars argued that traditional claims are used to deny the power, privilege, and self-interests of dominant groups. The third tenet, the centrality of experiential knowledge, refers to the recognition of the experiential knowledge of marginalized students as legitimate and crucial to the examination of the impact of racism in education. CRT centers the experiences of Students of Color using narrative methods such as storytelling, poetry, and parables. Parker (1998) argued that, "the use of narrative in critical race theory adds to the racial dimension and purpose of qualitative inquiry and ethnographic research in education" (p. 50). The fourth tenet, interdisciplinary analyses, refers to the use of interdisciplinary approaches that place racism within both historical and contemporary contexts. The last tenet, a commitment to social justice, refers to CRT's overall goal of eliminating racism (even though the first tenet emphasizes its permanence). CRT in education is specifically focused on social justice within the educational system. The tenets form a framework that serves to document the impact of racism on schools, colleges, and communities of color (Parker, 2015).

Critical Race Feminism

Over the years, critical race theory has expanded to address the racialized experiences of women and other marginalized groups (Parker & Lynn, 2002; Yosso, 2005). One theoretical framework that came out of CRT is critical race feminism (CRF), which was a response to criticism that CRT neglected the unique experiences of Women of Color. According to Wing and Willis (2009):

> Critical race feminism stresses conscious consideration of the intersection of race, class, and gender by placing Women of Color at the center of the analysis and reveals the discriminatory and oppressive nature of their reality. Critical race feminists are concerned with practice, not just theory. They address actual needs and emphasize practical applications in an effort to bring about change and progress within society. (p. 4)

In other words, CRF extends CRT by addressing questions of gender, class, and sexuality (Floyd, 2010). Another way CRF differs from CRT is its rejection of monolithic descriptions of race and gender. Wing (2007) contended that, "our anti-essentialist premise is that identity is not additive. In other words, Black women are not white women plus color, or Black men, plus gender" (p. 7). This is supported by Wing and Willis (2009) who described critical race feminists as scholars who "focus on the intersection of race and gender, emphasizing the anti-essentialist premise that Women of Color are not simply white women with the added factor of race or men of color with the added factor of gender" (p. 3).

As CRF is an extension of CRT, it is also guided by some the same tenets. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) have identified these tenets as: (a) race is socially constructed and is not objective, inherent, fixed, or necessarily biological; (b) individuals have potentially conflicting identities, loyalties, and allegiances; (c) the negotiation of intersectionality; and (d) minority status presumes a competence for minority writers and theorists to speak about race and the experiences of multiple oppressions without essentializing those experiences (Few 2007). Childers-McKee and Hytten add that CRF also shares a number of assumptions with CRT including belief in: the permanence of

racism in our society; the importance of narratives, storytelling, and counternarratives to disrupting normative views about the world; the need to critique liberalism for its individualistic and context-independent perspective on the world; interest convergence; and the importance of critical race praxis, or action to challenge the status quo.

Critical race feminism in education. Just as scholars such as Solórzano (1998) have highlighted the need for CRT specifically within an educational context, critical race feminists have done the same. For example, Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) stated that CRF provides academic strategies for studying and eradicating oppression related to race, class, and gender in educational settings. They argued that CRF in education is specifically beneficial in the investigation of educational issues that impact Black female students because:

- CRF as a theoretical lens and movement purports that Women of Color's experiences, thus perspectives, are different from the experiences of men of color and those of White women;
- CRF focuses on the lives of Women of Color who face multiple forms of discrimination, due to the intersections of race, class, and gender within a system of White male patriarchy and racist oppression;
- CRF asserts the multiple identities and consciousness of Women of Color (i.e., anti-essentialist);
- CRF is multidisciplinary in scope and breadth; and
- CRF calls for theories and practices that simultaneously study and combat gender and racial oppression (p. 20).

In addition to Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010), Childers-McKee and Hytten (2015) also encouraged the use of critical race feminism in educational research, especially with regards to school reform. Their central claim was that CRT:

> is a framework with which educators and teacher educators might begin to reconceptualize the meanings of change in school settings to deflect the deficit-based ideology found in many contemporary iterations of reform and to reflect a commitment to social justice (p. 394).

They stated that using a lens that highlights the importance of intersectionality leads to innovating curricula that accounts for and values diversity. They maintain that CRF can contribute to reform efforts by providing a systemic lens, centering dialogue, community, and coalition, and offering narrative of cultural wealth. They argued that when educational researchers are working with marginalized students, "we must listen to their experiences, understand their realities, and create partnerships to help meet their needs" (p. 402).

Critical race theory and critical race feminism served as frameworks that helped me account for the nuanced experiences of Black women. This was made possible by the fact that CRT:

> …names racist injuries and identifies their origins. When the ideology of racism and racist injuries are named, victims of racism can find their voice. Further, those injured by racism discover that they are not alone in their marginality. They become empowered participants, hearing their own stories and the stories of others, listening to how the arguments are framed, and learning to make the arguments themselves. (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 64)

Solórzano and colleagues allow us to see that not only is CRT a useful tool for examining experiences with racism, it can also be used to help empower those who choose to share their stories with us. I think it is important that researchers, especially those of us who explore the lived experiences of Students of Color, use a framework that pushes us to design studies that give back to participants, rather than just take from them. Additionally, Yosso et al. (2009) argued that the tenets of CRT in education present a unique approach to research in higher education because "they explicitly focus on how the social construct of race shapes university structures, practices, and discourses from the perspectives of those injured by and fighting against institutional racism," (p. 663).

Although I used Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Feminism to guide and inform this study, that does not mean that other theoretical frameworks would not have also been appropriate. For example, given the intersecting marginalized identities of Black women, I also considered using Intersectionality. This theory, similar to Critical Race Feminism, also accounts for the ways in which the intersection of race and gender impact the experiences of Black women (Crenshaw, 1991). However, I chose to use CRF instead of Intersectionality because of its connections to Critical Race Theory. Since the two frameworks share several tenets, the process of using them in conjunction was easier and more streamlined.

Chapter 3: Research Design

Epistemology

Carter and Little (2007) argued that:

> Epistemology influences the relationship between researcher and participant, the way in which quality of methods is demonstrated, and form, voice, and representation in the method. It determines how the researcher communicates with his or her audience and the conceptualization of the role of the audience, analyst, and participants of the work. (p. 1320)

The authors show us the importance and influence of epistemology on all elements of a research project. While I agree with all of their description, two parts really resonate with me. First is the relationship between the participants and myself. It is important to me that although I have designed a research *study*, I never want my participants to feel *studied*. I want them to feel heard, listened to, and valued. Along those same lines, the second thing that stood out to me was the idea of voice and representation. The purpose of my project was to center the voices of Black women and challenge dominant narratives that continue to misrepresent their stories. Our epistemologies are linked to our worldview and "the process of developing a worldview that differs from the dominant worldview requires intellectual work," (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 258). I believe the women that participated in my study (as well as all women) are worth that work.

I am motivated by what Delgado Bernal (2002) referred to as critical race-gendered epistemologies. She described these epistemologies as systems that "offer unique ways of knowing and understanding the world based on the various raced and gendered experiences of People of Color," and, "speak to culturally specific ways of

positioning between a raced epistemology that omits the influence of gender on knowledge production and a White feminist epistemology that does not account for race," (p. 107). Delgado Bernal also argued that critical race-gendered methodologies allow us to acknowledge and respect other forms of knowing and understanding. Guided by this epistemological stance, I centered Black women as the creators of knowledge.

Delgado Bernal believed that there is not just one critical race-gendered epistemology and I agree with her as I am influenced by several, including Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Feminist Standpoint Epistemology (FSE). One of the tenets of CRT is the value of experiential knowledge, specifically the experiences of marginalized people. "Unfortunately, knowledge of and by People of Color has been repressed, distorted, and denied by a Euro-American cultural logic," (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 268). It was my goal to disrupt that logic by centering the voices and experiences of Black women. Similarly, feminist standpoint scholars argued that, "building knowledge from women's actual, or concrete, life experiences is acutely important…if we hope to repair the historical trend of women's misrepresentation and exclusion from the dominant knowledge canons," (Brooks, 2011, p.4). Brooks (2011) contended that not only does FSE encourage us to center the experiences of women, it also challenges us to look at society through a woman's point of view. I am also drawn to FSE because, as Brooks explained, feminist standpoint scholars recognize "women hail from a diverse range of class, cultural, and racial backgrounds, inhabit many different social realities, and endure oppression and exploitation in many different shapes and forms," (p. 19). The experiences of Black women are unique, and they deserved to participate in a study that is guided by an epistemology that acknowledges and respects that. According to Pillow

(2000), "one cannot separate the epistemologies of feminist or race theory from their methodological and epistemological practices" (p. 23). In the next section, I demonstrate how my epistemological stance influenced my methodological practices.

Methodology

"If methodologies have been used to silence and marginalize People of Color, then methodologies can also give voice and turn the margins into places of transformative resistance,"

(Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 38).

According to Carter and Little (2007), decisions about methodology matter because they set the foundation for the study design including objectives, research questions, methods, and analysis. Guided by my epistemological and theoretical grounding in Critical Race Theory and feminist theories (including Critical Race Feminism and Feminist Standpoint Theory), I used a methodology that centers the voices and experiences of Black women. I also wanted to use a methodology that challenges the institutionalized racism that is embedded within mainstream educational research by disrupting dominant ideologies that privilege certain methodologies and attempt to determine who can study what and how (Dei, 2005). To thoughtfully share the experiences of Black women, it is important to use race- and gender-based methodologies because other "existing theoretical models and methodological discussions are insufficient to explain the complexity of racialized (and gendered) histories, lives, and communities," (Pillow 2003, p.
186). Additionally, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argued that methodologies that dismiss racism and its intersections distort the experiences of the marginalized

communities. Furthermore, not only are "traditional" methodologies inappropriate to share the lived experiences of marginalized communities, they also tend to promote White privilege and racism (Dei, 2005). Race-based methodologies work towards dismantling these racist theories and practices (Pillow, 2003).

Critical Race Methodology. The primary methodology that informed my research design was critical race methodology (CRM). Solórzano and Yosso defined CRM as:

> …a theoretically grounded approach to research that (a) foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process. However, it also challenges the separate discourses on race, gender, and class by showing how these three elements intersect to affect the experiences of Students of Color; (b) challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of Students of Color; (c) offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, and class subordination; and (d) focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of Students of Color. Furthermore, it views these experiences as sources of strength and (e) uses the interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, humanities, and the law to better understand the experiences of Students of Color. (p. 24)

In addition to being appropriate for my study because of its attention to race and racism, CRM also acknowledges the impact of intersectionality on the experiences of Black women. This methodology also encourages educational researchers to center the experiences of Students of Color at every part of the research process from the

development of research questions to the dissemination of findings (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Furthermore, as with CRT, CRM is also guided by the five tenets that were discussed earlier: racism is endemic, valuing experiential knowledge, challenging dominant ideologies, a commitment to social justice, and a transdisciplinary perspective. I was intentional about using each of the tenets to frame the design of the research study.

Counterstorytelling. One of the major components of critical race methodology is counterstorytelling. Counterstorytelling has been defined by Solórzano and Yosso (2002) as:

> …a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform. (p. 32)

I chose this methodology because it allowed me to challenge a majoritarian story (one that privileges Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference, Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) by providing a platform for Black women to tell their stories in their own words. Drawing upon the experiential knowledge of the participants, using counterstorytelling allowed me to "reveal the absurdity that lies within dominant narratives," (Green et al., 2016, p. 300). Additionally, while a main goal of counterstorytelling is to tell nonmajoritarian stories, it "can also serve as a pedagogical tool that allows one to better understand and appreciate the unique experiences and responses of Students of Color through a deliberate, conscious, and open type of listening," (Delgado Bernal,

2002, p. 116). I wanted the participants' stories to be told in a deliberate manner that encourages others to not just hear them, but to listen to them intently. Counterstorytelling is also important because it demonstrates how a phenomenon can be described in various ways depending on the storyteller (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

There are three types of counterstories – personal, biographical, and composite, (Smith et al., 2007; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). A personal counterstory is autobiographical in nature and usually involves the author sharing her own experiences. A biographical counterstory shares the experiences of another person. Lastly, a composite counterstory draws upon various forms of data including empirical and personal. For my dissertation, I created composite counterstories using the findings of the current study, literature on the experiences of Black women with racial and racial gendered microaggressions, and my personal experiences. I chose this type of counterstories for three reasons. First, I wanted to show the commonalities that exist within the ways Black women experience gendered racial microaggressions. Second, while I wanted to show our similarities, I also wanted to show that the experiences of Black women are not monolithic. Lastly, I chose this type of counterstory after a review of the literature in which other scholars have successfully used a similar approach (e.g. Aguirre Jr., 2000; Smith et al., 2007; Solórzano & Yosso, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Although composite counterstorytelling involves the creation of composite characters, it is not the same as fictional storytelling. "The 'composite' characters we develop are grounded in real-life experiences and actual empirical data and are contextualized in social situations that are also grounded in real life, not fiction," (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36).

Research Questions

As discussed in chapter two, more information is needed with regards to how Black women experience gendered-racial microaggressions, as well as how they respond to and cope with them. In addition to being motivated by the gap in the literature, the phrasing of the research questions below was informed by CRT. For example, I was intentional about asking *how* the participants experience racial and gendered racial microaggressions, not *if* they experience them. This is because, as is emphasized by the first tenet of CRT, racism is endemic, so there is no need to question *if* Black women experience microaggressions. The questions were also crafted using a transdisciplinary lens, another tenet of CRT. Using a sociological perspective that acknowledges the impact of societal factors on the experiences of marginalized populations, I included a question that examines the factors that influence how they respond to microaggressions. Additionally, thinking about their experiences psychologically, I also included a question about their coping strategies.

- RQ1: How do Black graduate women experience gendered-racial microaggressions?
- RQ2: How do Black graduate women respond to gendered-racial microaggressions?
- RQ3: What factors influence the way Black graduate women respond to gendered-racial microaggressions?
- RQ4: How do Black graduate women cope with gendered-racial microaggressions?

Participants

Since the purpose of this study was to center the experiences of Black women, specifically Black graduate women, the participants of this study were Black graduate women at a historically White institution (HWI) – George Washington University. A total of 11 women participated in the study. Seven of the participants were enrolled in master's programs and four were in doctoral programs. I chose to recruit both master's and doctoral students to see if there were any potential differences based on age and/or graduate level. The participants were in three different colleges within the university and were taking at least one class in-person, which was necessary for the study so that they could share their in-class experiences with gendered-racial microaggressions. Participants ranged in age from 23-45 and were from various parts of the United States including the South, the Midwest, and both the East and West coasts.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling based on the characteristics described above (identified as a Black woman, graduate student at GW, enrolled in at least one on-campus class). I posted the recruitment flyer (Appendix A) in a group chat for the Black Graduate Student Association and shared it with various professors and graduate students I knew from different colleges on campus. I also used snowball sampling by asking interested participants to refer other Black graduate women at GW. Snowball sampling was important to me because of the sensitive nature of the study. I believed having someone they had a previous relationship with would increase their level of comfort. Nine of the eleven participants knew at least one other woman in the study. Another strategy I used to help the participants feel as comfortable as possible was by offering them an opportunity to meet with me beforehand to ask any questions and get to

know each other. None of them took me up on my offer and communicated that they felt fine starting the study without the 1:1 meeting.

Methods

> *"Necesitatmos teorias (we need theories) that will rewrite history using race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries – new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods,"*
>
> (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xxv).

As Anzaldúa challenges us to do, I wanted to use methods that help to rewrite history by using race and gender as categories of analysis. This study used qualitative methods, which Sue et al. (2008) contended are appropriate for research with marginalized populations. Although there are not methods that are specifically deemed "feminist methods" or "critical race-gendered methods", methods can be considered "critical methods" when they are designed using critical theoretical frameworks. The methods I chose below were chosen because they allowed me to answer the research questions discussed above, but also because they allowed me to center the voices of the participants.

Focus Groups. I chose to begin the study with focus groups because they allow the participants to discover they are not alone and empower them by, "hearing their own stories and the stories of others, listening to how the arguments against them are framed, and learning to make arguments to defend themselves," (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 27). This was demonstrated by Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano (2009) whose study found that students realized they were not alone in experiencing racial microaggressions on campus. This sentiment was also echoed by the participants in a pilot study (which

had the same research design as the current study and explored the experiences of first-year Black women with racial microaggressions) I conducted before doing the current study. During the focus group, one of the participants said, "oh, so I'm not crazy. I really thought it was just me." The other participants agreed with her and mentioned feeling better knowing they were not alone. Focus groups have also been used by many other scholars for similar reasons, (e.g. Levin et al., 2003; McCabe, 2009; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; & Sue et al., 2002). Additionally, even though Nadal et al. (2014) used a quantitative approach to study the effect of racial microaggressions, the authors still noted that, "discussions about microaggressions with students can also help to normalize their experiences, which can promote healthier senses of self while preventing students from feeling isolated or alone," (p. 469). Lewis et al. (2012) also contend that due to the subtlety of microaggressions, focus groups allow participants to "share their experiences and receive validation from their peers about whether their experiences represent subtle forms of racism and sexism," (p. 57). I specifically chose to start the study with them because they offer the most comfortable environment for participants, especially those discussing sensitive topics (Levin et al., 2003). However, while the aforementioned research demonstrates the benefit of using focus groups, they also present potential challenges. For example, due to the group format, participants could censor their responses due to a lack of privacy. Additionally, the voices of more timid or quiet participants could be overshadowed by more verbally expressive participants. I addressed these potential challenges by including individual interviews within the data collection plan. This method, along with its benefits, is discussed further later on in this chapter.

Pillow (2003) reminds us that:

> Race-based methodologies acknowledge and understand that how we conduct research is intimately connected to the kinds of questions we ask, how we ask them, and for what purpose, and that the processes of doing research cannot be disconnected from epistemologies that guide our research(p. 187).

I kept this in mind when designing the interview guide for the focus group (Appendix B). The protocol was semi-structured and consists of questions that were informed by the study's research questions, the protocols used by Lewis et al. (2012) and Sue et al. (2007), as well as the tenets of CRT. At the beginning of the focus group, participants were reminded that they were allowed to refrain from answering any question they chose (they were originally informed of this in the consent form they signed prior to the start of the focus group). I was intentional about making this clear to them because as Dei (2005) reminds us, "anti-racist research also acknowledges and respects the rights of individuals and groups to withhold or withdraw information" (p. 13).

My original plan was to conduct two focus groups that separated the participants based on their degree level – one for master's students and one for doctoral students. Although all participants were going to be graduate students, I believed there would be some differences that existed between each group, so I wanted to create a space that allowed them to be with other women that are in similar places academically. Leavy (2011) shared that segmentation is a popular strategy used by feminist researchers because it allows them to, "maximize the benefits of homogeneity while building a comparative dimension into a project," (p. 29). For the most part, I was able to achieve this goal. Due to scheduling conflicts, I ended up conducting four focus groups instead of two. Two focus groups, with 3 participants in each, consisted of master's students. One

focus group, also with three participants, consisted of doctoral students. The final focus group had two participants – one master's student and one doctoral student. Each focus group lasted between 60-90 minutes and took place in private rooms located in the student center.

Journaling. After the focus groups, participants were asked to keep a journal for 30 days that documented their experiences with microaggressions on campus. This method was chosen to address a limitation mentioned in previous studies on microaggressions. Wong et al. (2013) reviewed racial microaggression research and found that a gap exists with regards to the immediate reaction phase of the microaggression process. There is a lack of literature that examines what occurs immediately after a student experiences a microaggression. The purpose for having participants keep a journal was to provide them with a place to describe their experiences immediately after they happened. This was also designed to help with another limitation often mentioned in studies with regards to memory recall. The journals allowed me to gather information that would not have come out during a focus group or individual interview. This was made evident during the individual interviews. When asking participants about specific incidents they described in their journals, several of them mentioned forgetting about them. Also, during the focus group, one of the participants mentioned that she experiences microaggressions frequently but often forgets them because she has a bad memory. The journals were submitted electronically by participants via email and/or a Google form that I created with prompts to help them process their experiences (Appendix C). Participants were only asked to journal when an incident occurred. Some participants submitted their journal entries after each incident,

while others submitted several entries at once (weekly or at the end of the 30 days). The number of entries also varied. For example, one participant submitted an entry every day. Conversely, another participant did not submit any entries. However, as I discuss in Chapter 4, a lack of entries does not signify a lack of incidents.

Individual Interviews. After the 30 days of journaling, the women participated in individual interviews. The main reason for choosing this method was to allow me to gain more information and understanding of the experiences they described in their journals. Truong and Mueus (2012), who explored how doctoral students respond to racism, stated that the use of individual interviews, specifically those that are semi-structured, are beneficial because they allow the researcher to ask follow-up questions. As with the protocol for the focus group, the protocol for the individual interviews (Appendix D) was informed by the study's research questions, the taxonomies of racial and racial-gendered microaggressions provided by Lewis et al. (2016) and Sue et al. (2007), as well as the tenets of CRT. In addition to using Lewis et al.'s taxonomy, I also used their Gendered-Racial Microaggressions Scale (GRMS). Although it is a quantitative measure, I used it during the individual interviews to help participants process and make sense of their experiences. During the focus group, some of the participants struggled with being able to understand the difference between racial and a gendered-racial microaggressions. As a result, they had experiences with GRMs that they did not share during the focus group. However, when showing them the scale during their individual interviews, participants reported experiencing most of the microaggressions but not mentioning them previously because they were unaware of what they were. Additionally, because memory recall is often an issue, using the scale helped participants, similar to the way the journals did.

Individual interviews were also used by other scholars who explored the experiences of Students of Color with racism and racial microaggressions (e.g. Gildersleeve et al, 2011; Levin et al., 2013; & McCabe, 2009 who used both focus groups and individual interviews). Interviews lasted between 45-90 minutes and took place in private rooms in the student center on campus.

Focus groups and individual interviews were audio recorded. I transcribed the focus groups first so that I could follow up with participants during their individual interviews. The audio recordings and transcriptions were kept on secure folders within GW Box. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, participants were given pseudonyms that they chose.

Analysis

As with previously discussed components of this research study, the data analysis process was also informed by CRT and its focus on centering the voices of the participants. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2012) six phase approach to thematic analysis, which they defined as:

> …a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set. Through focusing on meaning across a data set, thematic analysis allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences. (p. 57)

This was an appropriate method of analysis for my study because it allowed me to explore the shared experiences of Black women as well as identify themes across three forms of data collection – focus groups, journals, and individual interviews. I began with the first method of Braun and Clarke's approach, familiarizing myself with the data. I did

this in several ways. First, I listened to the each of the interviews once before attempting to transcribe them. I wanted to give myself an opportunity to just listen to their stories without trying to officially "analyze" them or make sense of them. Next, I transcribed each of the focus groups (and later followed the same process with the individual interviews). After transcribing the data, I took Moustakas' (1994) suggestion and read each transcript three times. It was really important for me to not just connect quotes to themes. Instead, I wanted to be able to read quotes and connect them to each participant and their story. Reading the transcripts three times, along with listening to the interviews before transcribing them, allowed me to get to a point where I could read a quote and automatically know which participant said it. Their experiences did not happen in a vacuum, so I did not want to remember their words that way.

The next phase of the approach is generating initial codes. I started this process by broadly coding the transcripts based on the four research questions. I initially coded parts of the data as either *RQ1, RQ2, RQ3,* or *RQ4*. Then, I began to create subcodes under each research question. For example, subcodes for *RQ1* (types of gendered-racial microaggressions) included *hair, body,* and *speech*. Subcodes for *RQ2* (responses) included *verbal, questioning,* and *silence*. Next, I proceeded to the second phase of the approach and searched for themes. Within the codes for each of the four questions, I identified themes that I believed provided answers to the questions. For example, for RQ3 (factors that influence responses), I initially identified the following themes: age, fear, and setting.

Before moving to the fourth phase of the approach, reviewing themes, I repeated phases 1-3 for the transcripts of the participants' journal entries. I wanted to begin the

triangulation process by identifying codes and themes that were present in both the focus groups and journals. Once I came up with preliminary themes, I used member checking during the individual interviews. I shared with participants what I gathered after reviewing the focus group transcripts and reading their journal entries because I wanted to get their input on whether or not they believed I was on the right track in terms of the themes I identified. I also wanted to give them an opportunity to clarify or further explain anything I interpreted from what they said to ensure that I was accurately sharing their story.

After the individual interviews, I used the first three phases of Braun and Clark's approach the way I did with the focus group transcripts and journal entries. After doing this, I continued the triangulation process by identifying themes that were present in all three forms of data – focus group transcripts, journal entries, and individual interview transcripts. I then moved onto the fourth phase of the approach, which involved reviewing each of the themes. This process required me to ask myself several questions, including: is this a theme or just a code? Does this code provide thick or thin descriptions? And, are there codes that I can collapse? Answering these questions allowed me to move to the fifth phase, defining and naming themes. During this process, I was able to collapse previously identified codes into three themes that answered each of the four research questions. When selecting these themes, I wanted to make sure they reflected the experiences of the majority of the participants. However, I did not want anyone's story to be left out, so, in the next chapter, I describe instances when some participants' experiences differed from the majority. The final phase of the approach is producing a report, which is reflected in Chapter 4 when I present the findings of the

study. Also, I relied heavily on journaling and memoing throughout the process to make sure I had a place to process my thoughts and feelings. Given the fact that I am also a Black graduate woman at GW, I wanted to keep track of if and how my own experiences were influencing my perception and interpretations throughout the study.

Human Participants and Ethics Precautions

This study was approved by the GW IRB. Below, I have included the section from my application that addressed the potential risks to participants, steps to minimize the risks, and additional precautions that were requested by the IRB.

13.1 Risk to subjects

- Since this study deals with microaggressions, it is possible that the process may bring about emotional reactions from the participants.

13.2 Steps taken to minimize risks and to protect subjects' welfare

- Participants were made aware of resources on campus that are geared towards supporting them mentally and emotionally. These resources include individual and group counseling.
- Findings presented as generally as possible as not to isolate or identify student participants
- Before the focus groups, students were reminded that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in a group setting. They were told that they should keep this in mind when sharing information with the group. They were told that they could opt out of any questions asked during focus groups or individual interviews.
- In order to protect the identity of participants and those accused of discrimination, no names, ranks, positions, or majors were included in findings or analysis.

- Also, all protocols requested that participants do not provide specific names or titles of anyone involved in incidents.

Chapter 4: Findings

For this study, I was fortunate enough to have eleven women agree to share their experiences with me. All of the participants identified as Black women and were graduate students at George Washington University. Seven of the women were in master's programs and four were in doctoral programs. This is important because, although all of the women had similar experiences, there were some differences between the master's and doctoral level participants. For example, the doctoral students tended to be more vocal with regards to responding to microaggressions while several of the master's students shared struggling with not knowing how to respond. Additionally, while Christina was enrolled in a master's program, this was her second graduate degree and her experiences often mirrored those of the doctoral students more than the other master's students. Similarly, although Renee was also a master's student, she was 31 years old and mentioned feeling like being older than her classmates (who were in their early 20s) contributed to why she often responded differently than they did.

Also important to the study was the fact that the majority of the participants worked on campus. Although the study was about Black graduate women, I chose not to limit the scope of it to their experiences as students only and also included their experiences as staff members. This was important because the women experienced just as many microaggressions in class as they did at work. Eight of the eleven participants had positions as either graduate assistants or fulltime staff. However, the differences in the types of positions did not have an obvious effect on their experiences. The table below, Figure 1, provides information on the participants including their graduate level and

whether or not they work on campus. I have also included their pseudonyms which I asked them to choose for themselves.

Figure 1

Pseudonym	Level	Works on Campus
Mariah	Master's	Yes
Audre	Master's	No
Christina	Master's	Yes
Giselle	Master's	Yes
Kelly	Master's	No
Angela	Master's	Yes
Reneé	Master's	No
Yoncé	Doctorate	Yes
Maria	Doctorate	Yes
Tatiana	Doctorate	Yes
Josie	Doctorate	Yes

Participants' demographic information

I decided to share the experiences of the women in this study by presenting the findings in two ways: via themes I identified to answer each of the four research

questions and through counterstories. The former is described in this chapter, while the latter are in Chapter 5. I separated them for two reasons. First, the presentation of the findings in this chapter is solely based on the words and experiences of the women in this study. On the other hand, the counterstories in Chapter 5 are composite in nature, which means they also include themes found in the literature as well as my own personal experiences. Second, part of the reason that I chose to use counterstorytelling was because of the way it challenges dominant narratives. As such, I did not want to include the counterstories in a chapter that presents findings in what can be considered a "traditional" or "standard" way. Although the themes presented in both chapters are in conversation with one another, I believe that the counterstories deserve to stand alone.

The findings shared below are separated based on the four research questions of the study. The questions included: what are the experiences of Black graduate women with gendered-racial microaggressions (subtle and everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one's race and gender) at a historically White institution? How do they respond to these microaggressions? What factors influence their responses? And, how do they cope with the microaggressions? The answers to each question are divided into themes and supported by direct quotes from participants. Since this study is informed by critical race theory, I was intentional about valuing the experiential knowledge of the participants and presenting the findings in a way that centered their voices as much as possible.

RQ1: What are the experiences of Black graduate women with gendered-racial microaggressions at a historically White institution?

Using the Gendered-Racial Microaggression Scale (GRMS) as an analytical framework, I divided the experiences of the participants with gendered-racial microaggressions into four categories: *assumptions of beauty and sexual objectification, silenced and marginalized, the strong Black woman stereotype*, and *the angry Black woman stereotype*. As mentioned in Chapter 3, although the GRMS is used as quantitative measure, I used it as a qualitative tool during the participants' individual interviews to help them identify and conceptualize their experiences with gendered-racial microaggressions. Each of the four factors of the GRMS has subfactors that describe specific experiences Black women have with gendered microaggressions (see figure 2). However, I chose not to divide the experiences of the participants into these specific subfactors because many of their experiences reflect several subfactors. Although every experience shared by each participant is not be shared below, all 11 participants reported having several experiences within each of the four factors of the scale.

Figure 2

Factor A: Assumptions of Beauty and Sexual Objectification
Unattractive because of size of butt
Negative comments about size of facial features
Imitated the way they think Black women speak
Someone made me feel unattractive
Negative comments about skin tone
Someone assumed I speak a certain way
Objectified me based on physical features
Someone assumed I have a certain body type (stress only)
Made a sexually inappropriate comment
Negative comments about my hair when natural
Assumed I was sexually promsicuous (frequency only)
Factor B: Silenced and Marginalized
I have felt unheard
My comments have been ignored
Someone challenged my authority
I have been disrespected in the workplace
Someone has tried to "put me in my place"
Felt excluded from networking opportunities
Assumed I did not have much to contribute to the conversation
Factor C: Strong Black Woman Stereotype
Someone assumed I was sassy and straightforward
I have been told that I am too independent
Someone made me feel exotic as a Black woman (stress only)
I have been told that I am too assertive
Assumed to be a strong Black woman
Factor D: Angry Black Woman Stereotype
Someone told me to calm down
Percetive to be "angry Black woman"
Someone accused me of being angry when speaking calm

Note. Factors of Gendered-Racial Microaggressions Scale

Factor A: Assumptions of Beauty and Sexual Objectification

The most reported subfactor within the category of *assumptions of beauty and sexual objectification* was related to comments about the participants' hair. Several of the women reported receiving negative comments about their hair when it was in its natural state. For example, Christina, who alternates between various hairstyles, decided to wear her hair natural to class one day. She shared, "I have definitely been talked about my hair by White people. Been asked, 'why do you change your hair?' Like when I went natural, they're like, 'are you upset? Are you okay?" For Christina, the implication was that she would only wear her natural if something was wrong. This was especially upsetting for her because she often talks about being proud of her Blackness and seeing her hair as an

extension of that. So, by questioning her hair, they were also questioning her identity as a Black woman.

Another participant, Audre, also reported receiving negative comments about her hair, this time from a professor who was indirectly talking about her to one of her classmates. She shared:

> She (her professor) said that if we're going to be in environments with (other people), we're supposed to be professional. We should really consider keeping our hair kept, and not in a frizzy way. So when she said frizzy, that's when I was like, it can't be for me because it's frizzy, that's not how you describe Black people's hair. So I was just like no, but I looked around the room, there were only three other girls in the room. They're White, but all their hair is straight and it goes down, and her (the professor) hair is straight and it goes down... So what the fuck? That moment was the 'what the fuck' moment for me.

Audre was upset by this experience for several reasons. First, she was upset that the professor was talking about her negatively to another student. She just happened to be sitting close enough to overhear the conversation. Second, she was offended by the comment itself because it implied that her hair was "unkept." Lastly, she was upset at the implication that her natural hair was not professional.

Similarly, while another participant, Mariah, had not received negative comments while her hair had been in its natural state, she had also received comments that implied that her natural hair was not professional. She shared that she had never received comments from classmates when her hair was natural, but went to class with her hair

straight one day and suddenly received several positive comments. Among the comments were, “Oh my gosh, Mariah, you look so beautiful. You look so professional. You look like a boss.” Since the only thing different about her on this day was her hair, she immediately knew what they were implying. When I asked her how it felt, she said:

> It hurts and it makes me not want to straighten my hair because I feel like inadvertently people are saying, oh, I feel more comfortable around you or because your hair looks more like ours now, we accept you or we appreciate it. But when I wear my hair just the way it naturally is, it feels like they're saying, oh, we don't normally like it that way or it's not beautiful.

Also regarding natural hair, participants reported that while they have not received outright negative comments, they have had experiences in which people made negative assumptions about their natural hair. For example, Tatiana shared, “I wear a clip on (hair extensions), but making assumptions just because I wear a clip on, they’re thinking, okay, underneath my hair looks like stitches. And it’s like, nah, it's to protect what's there, and to keep it growing…and even if it did, so what?” Likewise, Maria, who usually wears braids, also had experiences where classmates have made negative assumptions about her natural hair. She shared:

> I haven't necessarily had negative comments about my hair when natural but I've had comments about my hair so you know I wear my hair in braids often. So, when I take my braids out, when I have my curls out, it's always, oh, wow, your hair is so nice. Your curls are so cute. Like they don't expect my hair to be like

> this underneath the braids. So, it's not necessarily negative comment, but again it's the implications.

For both women, while they did not receive negative comments about their natural hair, the implication of the comments they did receive was that their natural hair was assumed to be unhealthy and unattractive. So, even though the comments themselves were not negative, they produced negative feelings which were internalized by them as Black women. When I asked Yoncé, a participant who had similar experiences, why she believed Black women internalize these comments as negative, she explained:

> I think we internalize comments about our hair so deeply, maybe I should start there, because it's a part of us... I think people will try to say, "why are you so attached?" It's not attached. It's deeper than attachment. It's who we are...And so I think when people make comments in general about our hair, you are impacting and shaping and shifting how we see ourselves, because that's what we see. And that's who we are.

Another subfactor that several participants reported was related to skin tone. For example, Kelly received negative comments about her dark skin. She shared an experience she had with a friend of hers who identifies as a Person of Color (other than Black). She shared:

> So we were walking and a Black man walks by us and says, “oh, hi dark and lovely.” And she goes, “Oh my gosh, he just called us dark and lovely. You're dark and I'm lovely…So I think it's just like this microaggression that she inherently thought that he was talking to her. Specifically mentioning beauty,

> when really “dark and lovely” is one term and he was looking at me. And when she said that, I was like, why is there this automatic assumption because I'm darker than you, that you're the pretty one?

Kelly went on to share that the experience made her feel unattractive. She explained that her friend does not understand colorism and did not realize the impact of her words. However, she chose not to say anything to her friend because she did not want to make her feel bad, even though it was clear that Kelly still felt very badly about the situation based on the emotions she expressed while sharing her story. I think her experience was especially powerful because, what could have been an uplifting and encouraging experience – being complimented on her beauty, was turned into something that caused her to feel the complete opposite. Even though she was able to acknowledge that the man’s comments were positive, she was unable to receive them fully over the negative implication of her friend’s comment.

Christina also reported hearing negative comments about her complexion, However, unlike Kelly, her experiences were due to the lightness of her skin. First, she shared a story about an encounter in class with a White, male student. She shared that the student said that light-skinned Black women did not experience racism because of how light their skin is. Christina was offended by his comment and said, “Now, in that very sentence, I'm experiencing it (racism) because you believe that you have somehow given me a pass.” She was upset because the student’s comments tried to minimize the struggles she faced as a Black woman. She also reported that her complexion had garnered negative comments from Black students as well. She shared:

> I was told by a Black woman that my Blackness was diluted because of how light I was. And she was very, like, you're here because you are diluted and they (White people) know that you're diluted until you open your mouth and they're like, oh, you're palatable. Your look is palatable.

Christina expressed how hurt she was because she felt like she constantly had to defend her Blackness, something that she is incredibly proud of, to both White people and other Black women.

Mariah, who is also light-skinned, reported experiencing colorism on campus from other Black students. She shared:

> I kind of feel like there's also a colorism issue at GW. I went to a few BGSA (Black Graduate Student Association) meetings and stuff and a lot of like micro aggressions actually came from Black students on campus rather than White students. And I wouldn't say I've experienced it more from them. But I think a lot of students will say to me, oh, what are your parents like? And I'm like, they're both Black. Really? Can I see a picture? I'm like, sure, do I have to prove that I'm Black too?

Mariah, like Christina, often felt like she had to prove her Blackness to other Black students. She shared that this made her feel alone because she felt like she did not have a place to belong or build community. This finding is important because it differs from the typical conversation about colorism, which often only addresses the discrimination experienced by dark-skinned people. However, the experiences of Mariah and Christina

demonstrate the fact that light-skinned Black women are not spared from the negative effects of colorism.

Factor B: Silenced and Marginalized

The *silence and marginalized* factor received the most visible and emotional reactions from participants as they read each of the subfactors. They also shared more experiences in this category than any of the other three. Audre was the most expressive and emotional with regards to how much she could relate to this factor. She shared:

> Silenced and marginalized - I feel like that's the one for me the most. Definitely that. That whole section, just highlight it. If you have us (participants) in portfolios, put that as my photo because it's always this. It's literally *always* this. It's always this. This is why I feel like I don't care anymore because I'm tired of feeling pushed to the side and I don't get why I'm being pushed to the side. I really don't get it...why is it in a class when everyone is able to have a voice, why is it that I'm always like ignored or my opinion is seen as like, "well. what proof do you have?" The fuck? Bitch, I'm your proof!

Audre explained that she constantly felt ignored by both her classmates as well as her professors. She expressed feeling especially frustrated by the way she was treated by professors because she was under the impression that she was accepted into the program because they believed in what she had to offer. However, she began to feel that not only did her opinion not matter, but *she* did not matter either.

Like Audre, other participants also reported feeling like the validity of their comments were questioned by their peers or coworkers. For example, Yoncé said:

> they're (White colleagues) like, 'Oh, how you know that?' They're questioning your expertise. They question your ability to do your job. And so for me, I take it personally. I think I take it more personally as a Black woman.

These experiences deeply affected Yoncé because she said that she sometimes internalized their comments and began to question her own abilities. Similarly, Mariah shared that she was constantly challenged by one of her White classmates. She said:

> Um, I think the biggest one is, I don't know if it's challenged my authority, or maybe it's my comments have been ignored, but one of the things I did journal about and sent to you is that a particular White girl in my class, everything I said, she had to look up in the book. Or she would say like, "*that's* not how I read that. I read it *this* way." And it would take a White student or a male student in the class to say, "oh, no, no, that's how I read it too, or that's how I interpreted it," for her to be like, "oh, okay."

Mariah was especially frustrated because this was just another example of her having to prove herself. First, she had to prove her Blackness because of her skin tone, now she had to prove her intelligence because of the same thing. Constantly being perceived as "not good enough" caused her to question her self-worth and was symptomatic of the racial battle fatigue that she and other participants were experiencing.

Additionally, Christina also reported being questioned and challenged by her coworkers. She shared:

> I said something in a meeting (about Black students feeling alone), and you would've thought I said, some ridiculous bullcrap, because they were like, "that

> doesn't make sense. You're making it up." And literally the next week, we had a student who talked about not wanting to be here anymore because of being Black.

Although Christina was proven to be right in the end, she was really upset about the experience. Not only were her comments disregarded, but her colleagues implied that she was a liar. In addition to feeling ignored, she also felt disrespected. Unfortunately, that was not the only time Christina was disrespected at her job. She described another incident with a White colleague who berated her at work. She shared:

> I had a White man, tell me how upset he was, basically how disgusted he was of me, because I was cheating on my husband. And he went off. I mean, he went off! And I'm sitting there and I'm like, at first, what is he talking about? And then I'm like, oh, he done mixed us (her and another Black woman) up. So, I'm letting him go and a White woman said, "Wrong Black girl. And he just looked, and he was like what? And she was like, that's the other one you're talking about. He was like, oh, and didn't even apologize until the next day.

Christina was upset for several reasons. First, she was upset that he confused her with the other Black woman in the office because they are extremely different. She also explained that this is something White people do to her often. Second, she was upset that her coworker felt like he had the right to disrespect her. Lastly, she was upset because, even though her White, female colleague corrected him in the moment, she felt like her boss should have had a discussion with him to reprimand him for being so disrespectful. Because the situation was ignored, Christina also felt ignored.

Another participant, Tatiana, also reported feeling disrespected and dismissed at work. She explained:

> So in one meeting in particular, there was an issue I think about funds or something, and I said, well, why can't you use it to buy something? And the woman was just, (while shoo'ing her away with her hand) “oh we're not doing and well Paul, what do *you* think?”

This made Tatiana feel very disrespected because the woman shooed her away as if she were a dog. She received the woman’s actions as a direct attack on her being a Black woman because the woman was willing to listen to Paul, a Black man, but not her.

Like Mariah, other participants also reported having their authority challenged by colleagues and peers. For example, one of the participants, Josie, is Chair of a diversity committee on campus. Although she in charge and highly qualified for the position, she was consistently challenged by the other committee members as if she did not know what she was talking about. She shared:

> There are times where I'm trying to raise issues within the committee and it's like, some of the faculty kind of get that White guilt, and are like, “but we don't have that problem here,” or “well, we've already done training or we've done it.” Okay, but you're clearly still missing the mark in a lot of ways. And so it's kind of like, part of it is they ignore me. Sometimes it's being dismissed, and then, part of it is not really respecting my authority in the position. I'm supposed to be the one who's running the committee.

Josie expressed frustration over the situation because it was a recurring problem in the meetings. She said that there had been times when White committee members would shut her down and try to take over the whole meeting. In addition to making her feel dismissed, it also made her feel like she was chosen as committee chair, not for her

qualifications, but as the "token Black girl." This added to the emotional strain she felt, another symptom of racial battle fatigue, because she was not even able to enjoy something that would normally be considered an accolade – being chosen to chair a committee as a student – because she was forced to question the motive behind her selection. So, even when participants know they are qualified for a position, they still have to deal with second-guessing themselves.

Within this category, the common theme shared by participants was how comfortable people felt disrespecting Black women. In their individual interviews, both Mariah and Maria described Black women as "being at the bottom of the totem pole." When I asked Christina why Black women are so disrespected, she attributed it to White privilege. However, she explained that when White people are challenged on their use of their privilege to disrespect Black women, they play the "victim role." She said:

> I feel like White privilege is an interesting thing. White privilege is something everybody wants, but no one wants to admit they have. So, it's one of those one of those things where you want to use it and be loud and voice it and things like that. But once someone's like, oh that's called White privilege, you're like, "Ah, the audacity! Because you're basically calling me a racist, and I've had to work for everything"...and it's like, no need to do oppression wars with a Black woman, you'll always lose. But thank you for playing.

Christina, like many of the other participants, was frustrated by the fact that not only are Black women disrespected regularly, but their experiences are either minimized or outright ignored. Her feelings of frustration and being ignored, which were shared by

many of the other participants, are additional symptoms of racial battle fatigue. This is important to highlight because, although participants may not be able to identify their symptoms and/or struggle with racial battle fatigue, their stories demonstrate the negative psychological consequences they have been experiencing. This is a theme that is present throughout the remaining findings discussed in this chapter.

Factor C: The Strong Black Woman Stereotype

As with the previous two factors, all participants reported experiencing at least one of the subfactors within the *strong Black woman stereotype* category. Similar to Audre and the *silenced and marginalized* category, Christina was the most vocal about her ability to relate to this factor. She shared:

> Strong Black woman - just check all them. Way too [much] independence. Way too assertive. Way too sassy and straightforward. And people will want to tell me their problems and I'm not here to. "I know I might look like your nanny, but I'm not that woman. I don't know who you grew up with, but I'm not her." And just them being like, "I'm gonna tell you".... I don't want to know. And some have taken it as an opportunity to challenge me and be like, "Well I want to be your friend and you don't want to be my friend." I don't wanna be your friend because of the way you came at me. I don't want to be your friend because you think that I'm supposed to help you find your independence or give you, "you is strong, you is important..." That's not what I'm here for.

At the end of Christina's quote, she references a scene in the movie, *The Help,* when the Black housekeeper tells the young, White girl, "you is smart, you is kind, you is

important." For Christina, this quote embodies the essence of how people perceive her – as the strong Black woman who is supposed to cater to White people and take care of their needs. However, she made it clear that that is not her job.

Similar to Christina, Mariah also had an emotional reaction to the *strong Black woman* category. When I asked her to take a look at the group of subfactors, she immediately sighed deeply and said:

> Oh the third group. (sigh). Definitely the sassy and straight forward. Because I think, for the most part, I can be pretty direct with my comments, especially in class. I always will say something or speak my mind about whatever and I always get comments like, "oh my gosh Mariah, you're just so real" or like, "you just tell it how it is and you're so like this, or that." And not that I think it's inherently negative, but I have noticed that the girl across from me talks all the time too and no one's ever said that to her, or no one's ever made comments like that and she's White. And I didn't really think about it until I started looking over the chart (the GRMS), and I was like wow, I do get those comments a lot.

For Mariah, she was frustrated by two things. One, she disliked the fact that her classmates perceived her as sassy and straightforward, even though they used different words to convey the same message. Two, she was annoyed that although she had been experiencing this from her classmates often, it was not until she saw the Gendered-Racial Microaggressions Scale that she realized that her experiences were directly related to her identity as a Black woman. This made the attacks feel more personal. This moment in her interview, which happened with several other participants, confirmed the utility of the

GRMS as a qualitative tool because it allowed Mariah to identify her experience as a gendered-racial microaggression, which she may not have been able to do without the scale.

Josie reported having similar experiences to Mariah in her classes. She shared:

> Someone assumed I was sassy and straightforward? Yeah, I get that a lot. But I don't feel like I'm very direct, but I have been told, "I just love like your sass. You're just so assertive and you just don't even care. You don't care what people think and I just love that about you." They make me sound like I'm a bulldozer plowing over people, like, dang.

Since there are other microaggressions that do not come off as inherently negative but can still have negative effects, I asked Josie how she interpreted her classmates' comments. She said, "I feel like it's a backhanded compliment. I think that they think that they're complimenting me. They think it's a compliment but it's not." Her experience emphasizes the fact that microaggressions do not need to be overtly "negative" in order to have negative emotional effects on the receiver.

A similar experience was shared by another participant, Reneé. She explained that she is always being accused of being too assertive or straightforward with her comments in class. For example, she shared:

> Um, I think the sassy and straightforward. Definitely, because I noticed that when I say something, they say, "Oh, well you know you kind of got (sassy)." Actually, I was just trying to let you know. I'm just clarifying…. But in some cases, I do

> feel like there are people who say, “Oh she's a strong Black woman. She doesn't understand. All she sees is the color.” And they assume that all the time.

Reneé believed that her classmates not only saw her as a strong Black woman, but they dismissed her comments because of it. It is their belief that she only advocates for race and gender because she is a Black woman, not because the topics are actually relevant to the conversation.

Factor D: Angry Black Woman (ABW) Stereotype

All participants reported either being perceived as the *angry Black woman stereotype* or engaging in intentional behaviors to prevent them from being perceived as such (the latter is discussed later in the chapter when the factors that affect responses is presented). For example, Christina shared that she is often referred to as an angry Black woman. She said:

> The angry Black woman - people call me that. And there have been times when people have said some really offensive things and I've not said anything. And later, they've come to me or another classmate, like “Do you think she's mad? Do you think she's angry about what I said?” And it's like, “do you think I'm angry because you're wrong? Or do you think I'm angry because I'm angry? And why do you think I'm the only one offended? Because it wasn't like, some of the comments were about Black women, but some weren’t about Black women. So, why do you think *I'm* angry?” There's a whole class of other people. There's a whole class of women that could have easily been as angry.

Christina was frustrated because even though she did not address the offensive comments made by her classmate, she was still being assumed to be the angry Black woman. She went on to share that her White classmates were not the only ones who saw her as an angry Black woman. She said that she had similar experiences with her Classmates of Color. She explained that her Classmates of Color, including other Black women, often sat next to her because they believed that she would protect them and intercept any racial microaggressions that might come their way. Christina shared that the two other Black women in her program said they had never experienced racism prior to coming to GW and were uncomfortable addressing microaggressions. One of them shared with her that she had played the "nice Black girl" role for so long that it was too late for her to stop now and start challenging their White classmates. Although Christina was emotionally affected by her classmates' perceptions of her, she also reached a point where she chose to express her anger despite the ABW label. She shared:

> I'm okay with all of you guys, including the People of Color, looking at me as angry and protective and whatever else because you guys also believe it too. Because that's why you sit next to me, right? You sit next to me for protection because you know there's enough of this anger to go around. Y'all can all get it.

Christina's experience is powerful for several reasons. First, it shows that the perception of Black women as "angry" is not reserved for White people. Additionally, not only did other People of Color see her that way, but other Black women did too. Second, while Christina identified her classmates' behavior as a portrayal of her as the "angry Black woman," this is exchange is so much more than that. It calls attention to something that is often not discussed in the literature which is this idea that certain Black people are used

as the “sacrificial lamb” that takes the initial hits of discrimination in order to soften the blow for others who come behind them. In this case, Christina is used as the racial shield that protects her Black classmates from the negative consequences of challenging their racial microaggressions. However, while they are “safe,” Christina is left fighting alone and experiencing racial battle fatigue as a result.

Josie also had experiences where she believed her classmates saw her as their protector or advocate, especially when interacting with the professor or teaching assistant. She shared:

> I didn't notice this one was on your list, but it’s almost like they want me to be the spokesperson. It's like, “*you* go, *you* speak. It's okay. They’re not going to challenge you but they would me. They're afraid of you, but not me,” or something. I don't know what the rationale is.

Josie genuinely does not understand why her classmates perceive her in this way. Although she is upset and frustrated with their assumptions, confusion is her primary emotion. She was also taken aback by their comments because their perception of her is so different from her perception of herself.

Also caught off guard by the perception of her as an angry Black woman was Yoncé. Her experience was with a colleague that she supervises (colleague A). While discussing an issue with colleague A, the colleague expressed that she felt uncomfortable with the power dynamic between them. When Yoncé first heard the comment, she did not perceive it to be a microaggression. However, after discussing the situation with another supervisee (colleague B), she began to see it differently. Colleague B told her that

colleague A stated that the power dynamic made her uncomfortable because Yoncé was aggressive and abrasive. When asked why she thought Yoncé was abrasive and aggressive, colleague A said that it was because she had her notebook out and was taking notes during their meeting. After the experience, Yoncé shared that the conversation:

> …made me reflect on kind of what I would have checked or labeled as normal reaction or normal interaction between me and the colleague initially, but as I reflected on it, there was definitely some things happening there that I don't think I labeled as a microaggression or labeled as something based on my identities, I based it on, oh, it's just a supervisory relationship here, but that confirmed that it was not. It's definitely bigger than that.

Similar to Mariah who was frustrated that she did not realize that her experiences were related to strong Black woman stereotype, Yoncé felt the same way about not originally identifying her experience as a gendered-racial microaggression motivated by the angry Black woman stereotype. Her experience is significant because it demonstrates the fact that reactions to gendered-racial microaggressions can be latent in nature. Yoncé did not immediately feel the negative consequences of her experience because she did not identify her employee's statement as a microaggression. In the moment, she did not understand the reason behind the comment, but did not initially believe that it was racially motivated. However, after speaking to her coworker, she recognized the gendered and racial implications of the interaction. As her confusion decreased, her level of discomfort increased because she began to realize what happened. Not only was she hurt because of the microaggression, she was also disheartened by her inability to identify it in the moment.

For Audre, while she was not surprised by being perceived as an angry Black woman, she did not believe the label is appropriate or accurate. She believed that the stereotype is predicated on the premise that the Black woman in question is overreacting and should not be angry. She shared:

> But it's just, it's deserved. And it's just like, I feel like it's so deserved and warranted. But in that moment, I don't see it as me being angry, as being an angry Black woman. I see other people seeing me as an angry Black woman, but I'm just replacing angry with passionate, because y'all (White people) are so triflin'. Like it's just so crazy. Do you ever just really just be in the corner, or just in your head, "why are y'all like this? Why are y'all like this?" And it makes no sense. I'm trying to find pieces but I ain't got the right puzzle cuz, they trippin'.

For Audre, the ABW label did not apply to her because her anger, or passion, is justified and necessary.

RQ2: How do Black graduate women respond to gendered-racial microaggressions at a historically White institution?

For this section, I divided the responses of the participants into three categories: *verbal, internal,* and *emotional*. The first category, *verbal*, refers to the participants' verbal responses to GRMs. The next category, *internal,* refers to the internal conversations participants had with themselves after experiencing a GRM. The final category, *emotional*, refers to the participants' emotional responses. The *verbal* and *internal* categories speak to the immediate responses of the participants, while the *emotional* category, describes their immediate and long-term emotional responses.

Verbal

While I believe all of the findings discussed in this chapter are important, I believe this one is especially significant because, when discussing the experiences of Black women with racial or gendered-racial microaggressions, researchers tend to focus solely on the negative aspects of their experiences. However, despite the fact that the participants have experienced microaggressions and the subsequent symptoms of racial battle fatigue, this, in no way, means that they are passive or docile. On the contrary, the women in this study demonstrate extreme strength and resilience. The common theme among the participants' verbal responses to the gendered-racial microaggressions they experienced was a demand for respect. As described earlier, the participants often shared that people felt comfortable disrespecting Black women. As a result, when participants chose to respond to microaggressions, it was motivated by the desire to advocate for themselves and demand the respect they deserved. For example, when discussing the *silenced and marginalized* factor of the GRMS, both Giselle and Tatiana expressed that they do not tolerate being ignored. Giselle shared:

> I also don't often let my comments be ignored if they're valid, because I also feel like I don't speak things that are not valid. I think a lot through every comment that I make for the most part. So, if I'm saying it, I mean it.

Similarly, Tatiana said, "I have not felt unheard because I make it known that you will hear me." For both participants, although they have experienced microaggressions that fall under the *silenced and marginalized* category, they are intentional about advocating

for their voices being heard. Just because others attempt to silence or marginalize them does not mean they are going to allow them to do so.

In addition to responding to gendered-racial microaggressions, Tatiana also described the proactive approach she takes make sure they do not happen again. She shared:

> It's, “this is the line. Don't cross it. If you do, just be prepared because what you put out, you're gonna get it back, and then some. You're gonna get embarrassed.” So I don't think I've had to embarrass anyone yet, but I've given a look where it was just, “what?” And I've actually said, “what?” And it was, (from the perpetrator) “Oh, oh, no, never mind.”And I said, “are you sure?” And it was, “yeah, yeah, never mind.” And after that, it was just kind of like okay, “go tell your friends that no, we don't do that here. Do it with somebody else but not with me. Thank you.”

Tatiana made it known that she expected to be respected and would demand it if necessary. She shared that she made her expectations known, both at work and at school, so that people did not mistake her kindness for weakness. She explained that when she experienced microaggressions before knowing what they were, she assumed people ignored her or disrespected her because they assumed she was too nice to fight back. However, once she realized that the disrespect was tied to her identity as a Black woman, she became a lot more vocal and began advocating for herself.

Several of the other participants also reported addressing and correcting discriminatory behavior because they refused to let people get away with disrespecting

them. For example, when I asked Maria what motivated her to call out microaggressions, she shared:

> I'm tired of people running over me in general. As I'm getting older, I'm becoming more of my own person, right? And I realize I need to be more assertive in my conversations with people. I need to be more clear with my communication. And I need to say what I want. And aside from that, I'm not gonna have this White woman tell me what to do.

Maria is referring to an incident where a member of a committee that she leads challenged her authority in the middle of the meeting. She was going over the protocol for the meeting when one of her White colleagues interrupted her and told her she was wrong. For her, part of her motivation for responding was being tired of being disrespected, in general, but especially by White women.

Audre expressed similar feelings when I asked her about her motivation for responding to microaggressions. Like Maria, she was also intentional about addressing microaggressions from White women specifically. She shared:

> I will forever not be afraid to stop White women. I feel like that's the only people that I don't trip about anymore. Because there's one too many that have been just sneaky to me, one too many times. There's just too many bad experiences. So those are people I'm always going to check, because it's just like, you need to be checked because y'all get away with so many things as a whole.

An important aspect of what Audre shared is the fact that she was not afraid to respond to White women. Her feelings speak to the notion that White women benefit from

Whiteness in a way that is often ignored or underestimated because the attention, when it comes to the discrimination of Black people, is often placed on White men. As a result, White women often "get away" with disrespecting Black people with little to no fear of consequences. Audre's comments are also significant because several of the participants identified fear as one of the major reasons they did not respond to microaggressions, particularly when they came from White men. This is discussed in greater detail later in the chapter when I describe the factors that affect the participants' responses.

While all the participants' responses were motivated by a demand for respect, Christina's response was tied to the *angry Black woman stereotype* category, as opposed to the *silenced and marginalized* category like the previous participants. When explaining why she challenged the microaggressions she received from White people, she shared:

> But because I'm the roaring, raging, loud Black woman who is very confident. And I spill over my Blackness because I appreciate it, and I love it, and it took so long to enjoy it the way I do, and accept it. I'm never going to calm down. I'm going to always be unapologetic about it. And I'm not yelling in your face, but I'm also not gonna sit there and let you say things you say.

For Christina, she is not deterred by the angry Black woman stereotype. Similar to Audre who shared earlier that her anger was "warranted" and her responses "deserved," Christina was also motivated to respond by the belief that her anger was justified. Christina was also motivated by her love and appreciation for her Blackness. She is proud to be a Black woman and was passionate about protecting her Black womanhood.

Internal

The *internal* category describes the internal conversation participants have with themselves immediately after experiencing a microaggression. These conversations often involved questioning the motivation or intention of the perpetrator, and ultimately determined whether or not the participant would respond to the microaggression. For example, Audre described the internal conversation as a "dance." She shared, "I feel like what annoys me the most is the whole dance between, is it you? Is it me? Is it you?" She explained that this dance typically resulted in her not responding to the microaggression. This type of internal questioning was also expressed by Tatiana. She shared, "I was taught you always ask why? Why are they doing this? Why are they saying this? So, I'm really just looking at myself to find the best response." However, even though Audre and Tatiana had similar internal conversations, Tatiana's typically resulted in her addressing the microaggression in the moment.

Mariah also shared that she often questioned the motivation behind microaggressions. Specifically, she questioned what type of microaggression it was that she was experiencing in the moment. She explained:

> I do find myself saying, "did they say that because I'm a woman? Did they say that because I'm Black? Did they say that because I'm a Black woman? All three?" I don't know. So, it's frustrating having that thought.

While some might assume that the type of microaggression is irrelevant since Mariah is still experiencing one regardless of the intention, for her, it definitely mattered. This is important because, as was shared by all of the participants, if and how they respond is dependent on whether they are experiencing a racial microaggression or a gendered-racial

microaggression. For most of the participants, this distinction is typically influenced by a sense of safety, or lack thereof, when their gender is part of the equation.

Another form of questioning that was shared by the participants was related to how the perpetrator will respond to their response. For example, Josie explained that as she has gotten older, she now assesses the risk of her response before deciding to respond to microaggressions. She described her internal conversation as:

> I have to make almost a calculated assessment or so. The trade off like, "how are you gonna react?" Do I actually think you're going to listen? Do I actually think that you're going to make it difficult or will it actually make a difference? Is it something really ignorant that you said? Is it something really problematic?

This quote demonstrates that not only does Josie assess the potential risk of the situation, she also assesses the severity of the microaggression. She explained that in order for her to respond, the risk needed to be worth it and the microaggression had to have a severe impact on her. However, regardless if Josie identified the impact of a microaggression as "severe" or not, she still suffered the negative psychological effects of it. Her internal dialogue, which was also had by the other participants, created a sense of emotional turmoil that is also symptomatic of racial battle fatigue.

Emotional

Given the research shared in chapters one and two about the negative psychological effects of experiencing racial and gendered-racial microaggressions, I wanted to make sure that I also shared the participants' emotional responses. I have broken down their responses into two subcategories: *defeated* and *regret/shame*.

Defeated

The *defeated* subcategory refers to the emotional taxation experienced by the participants. For example, Mariah described feeling mentally exhausted and tempted to give up. She shared:

> It's very tiring, I think I just sometimes have a mentality, to be honest, of, "I give up. Like this is just how it is. Nothing I say is gonna matter." …I've always felt like, as a Black woman, I'm at the bottom of the totem pole… and then to have these things that happen to you every single day that reinforce it, it's just exhausting.

This quote shows us that Mariah felt defeated, as well as hopeless with regards to the potential of things ever changing for her or other Black women. It was her feeling of hopelessness that often influenced her decision to not respond to the gendered-racial microaggressions she experienced.

Audre also described feelings of sadness and hopelessness. She shared:

> I really don't know how to make it pretty on the plate, but I just don't like being here. And it's like, "how do other people like it here?" Like seriously, "how?" And people will say find pockets of joy. My pockets are empty. It's just lint…. I feel like I'm waking up every day thinking, "is this how I want to spend my life?" but what are my other options? And, again, back to the sadness. Honestly, if they did a statistic here, I feel like 90% of the Black women on this campus probably have depression.

Out of all of the participants in the study, Audre was the most vocal about the emotional toll her experiences were having on her. In the above quote, she expressed feelings of sadness, depression, and hopelessness. At other times throughout the study, she also expressed feeling alone and isolated.

Giselle also expressed giving up, especially in classroom settings. For her, she described it as shutting down as a way to avoid experiencing GRMs, especially within the *angry Black woman* category. She shared:

> And so I feel like I don't get the angry Black woman stereotype literally because I just kind of get quiet and I shut down. I don't really have much to say about anything. Like, "what's your opinion?" I don't have one. I don't have one.

Although previous examples described above demonstrate Giselle's willingness and ability to respond to GRMs, there were still times where she shut down due to feeling emotionally taxed.

Similar sentiments were shared by Angela who, after sharing why she did not respond to most of the microaggressions she experienced, said, "I think that's why I'm just, I'm just over it." Kelly echoed this when she said, "I'm tired. I'm just tired. Like it's exhausting." When I followed up and asked her how she coped with her feelings, she said, "cry about it."

While all of the participants reported feeling defeated or hopeless, none of them allowed their White peers to know. For example, Audre shared:

> At this point I don't care because in my mind, I have that you're (White students) saying these things, so I just don't care. And when I go home, I'm gonna cry about it and be sad that y'all be doing this shit, but when I'm in front of you, I'm just gonna be like, please, leave me alone. I probably won't say please. It'll just be leave me alone.

For Audre, although she allowed herself to feel her feelings, she was intentional about not showing those feelings to her White peers. Although not in the room when Audre shared her feelings, Christina summed up her sentiments perfectly when she said, "this is why Women of Color are so strong. We cry, get mad, and then get to work."

Regret/Shame

This category refers specifically to the emotional response participants have when they do not respond to a microaggression. For a lot of them, that emotion is regret and/or shame.

For example, when I asked Josie whether she ever regretted not responding to microaggressions, she made it clear that, while she sometimes regretted not responding, she never regretted saying something. She shared:

> Um, I don't go home and regret not saying something or saying something. But I do reflect on it and I still think about it. Sometimes I do regret not saying something, especially if it's minor, because I feel like, people who are like, "oh, you're really pretty for Black girl" or "you're really smart for Black girl" and I'm just like, "okay." And then sometimes I'll walk away and be like, that was actually

> really problematic…I probably should have challenged them on that. So, yeah, I've never regretted saying something, but I have regretted not saying something.

In the moment, Josie does not respond because her immediate reaction is to identify the microaggressions as "minor." However, after thinking about it over time, she then identified it as "problematic" and acknowledged the impact it has on her. This initial minimization of microaggressions is a coping mechanism that is used by many of the participants and is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Similar to Josie, Mariah also described not responding to microaggressions in the moment but regretting it once she got home and processed the situation. She shared:

> I kind of identify with what you (another participant) said earlier. I'm kind of a person that I don't really react in the moment. I'll go home and process and talk to a friend or my mom or my dad or something like that, and then later, kind of be like, "oh, I should have said that, or I should have done that to it."

Mariah explained that part of why she does not react in the moment is because she sometimes does not identify certain comments or behaviors right away. It is not until she processes the experience afterwards with friends or family that she begins to see the racial and/or gendered implications of the situation. Mariah described similar experiences in which she did not respond to microaggressions because she did not identify them as such in the moment. She shared:

> I know for a fact like there have been times where people have said some off the wall shit in regards to my race or my gender and I haven't responded because

> either I didn't catch it and then felt like it was like too long of a period have gone by, or I just didn't feel comfortable. I know that for a fact.

In this quote, Maria also described why many other participants shared they do not respond after processing the experience at home – the feeling like the moment had passed and they lost their chance. Even though the moments themselves may pass, the mental and emotional impact is has on participants does not.

For the participants, along with feelings of regret come shame and self-doubt. For example, Angela, who very rarely responds to microaggressions shared:

> …and that's the thing. I can really kick myself because after I go home and I think about what's happened, you know, just think about my day, and it's like this every time, I'm like, "wow! Crazy shit happens, and I don't do anything." But it's just in that moment, I'm just over it. And then it takes me getting out of it and then I do the same thing again and it's like, "what do I need to do?" I need to change something about myself, apparently.

In both the focus group and interview, Angela often beat herself when describing situations where she did not respond to microaggressions. Every time she shared an experience and I asked her why she chose not to respond, I often had to follow it with, "please know that my question is not a judgement, at all. I am just asking because people choose not to respond for different reasons." I felt like I needed to constantly reassure her that there was nothing wrong with her. Below, is a snippet from part of her individual interview after she told me she does not respond to microaggressions that come from professors:

Angela: I just thought maybe, and I do know her, so I don't think she's coming from…man! I'm a punk! When I think about it.

Me: That was not punk at all.

Angela: No, I was saying how I react depends on how well I know somebody?

Me: But that makes sense because we're more comfortable in certain situations, right? Because there's less fear of consequences.

Angela: Yeah, right, that makes me a punk!

Me: I think it makes you protective of your space, of your job, of your schooling.

I ended up sharing instances when I chose not to respond to authority figures because of fear of consequences in an attempt to help her not feel alone. It helped a bit, but it was clear that she was still struggling with feeling like something was wrong with her.

Similar to Angela, Audre's emotional response to her experiences were deeper than just regret. She described the added emotional pain that was attached to the regret she felt when she did not respond to microaggressions. She shared:

> And I just got open wounds, and it's not going anywhere. And it's not healing up either. And that's what I feel about that situation. It was just, I want to be, I wish I was more vocal, and I wish I did become angry. And I feel like in those moments, I will end up regretting it. Probably when I go home, like, "why did I do that."

The way Audre described it, not only is she affected by the wounds that have been caused by her experiences, she is also affected by her decisions not to challenge those who caused the wounds in the first place.

RQ3: What factors influence the responses of Black graduate women to gendered-racial microaggressions at a historically White institution?

Although there were several factors that influenced if and how the women in this study responded to gendered-racial microaggressions, including: setting, age of the participant, and who the perpetrator was (e.g. boss vs. student), I focus on the three most mentioned factors that pertain specifically to their identities as Black women. These factors are: *safety*, *stereotype threat*, and *energy*. *Safety* refers to the participants' choice not to respond to the microaggression because they believed doing so might cause them physical harm. For the participants, the consideration of their safety was specifically related to interactions with White men. *Stereotype threat* refers to the participants' hesitation to respond due to the fear of perpetuating negative stereotypes of Black women (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Lastly, *energy* refers to their decision not to respond to the microaggressions because of the emotional energy it would require. Although research shows that energy is often cited as a reason Black people do not respond to microaggressions, I still identified it as a factor that pertains specifically to the participants' identities as Black women because they described being more emotionally drained by microaggressions that attacked their race *and* gender than microaggressions that only attacked their race. They explained that this was because: 1) they experience gendered-racial microaggressions with greater frequency and 2) gendered-racial microaggressions are more emotionally taxing because they attack two of their marginalized identities rather than just one.

Safety

Consideration for their safety was reported by all but one of the participants as a reason for why they do not respond to gendered-racial microaggressions from White men. When discussing their safety, participants specifically mentioned their *physical*

safety, instead of *social* safety which is typically discussed in the literature (e.g. fear of a low grade or getting fired). For example, when I asked Mariah why she was less likely to respond to gendered-racial microaggressions than racial microaggressions, she explained:

> Because when it's related to gender as well, most the times I just won't respond because it doesn't feel safe to respond when men make comments like that. I've read too many stories about a Black woman (who) told someone to leave her alone or stop talking to her and then she's hit or hurt or something like that. So just if it feels unsafe to respond. I definitely won't even regardless of what happened… I won't speak up because in the end I think being alive or being unharmed is more important in that moment.

Even though Mariah will challenge White women who disrespect her, she does not feel comfortable doing the same when it is a White man. Her safety was something that she mentioned several times during the focus group as well as her individual interview. For her, not only could responding cause her physical harm, she believed it was a life or death situation.

Josie had similar fears to Mariah that kept her responding to gendered-racial microaggressions that came from men. When I asked her why she chose not to respond to those types of microaggressions, she said:

> I'm not gonna challenge you (referring to a man), I already, why would I challenge you? I can't beat you or overpower (you) if this is what you decided you want to do. So I'd rather just leave, or remove myself, or not anger you, or put myself in harm's way.

For Josie, as with Mariah, not responding to microaggressions was how she protected herself. However, unlike Mariah who spoke of hearing stories about Black women being harmed, Josie experienced it firsthand. Although she did not go into details about the situation, she did share that she was a survivor of sexual assault.

Christina also shared that she often considers her safety when deciding how to handle experiencing gendered-racial microaggressions. However, while Mariah and Josie choose to protect themselves by not engaging, Christina takes a different approach. Because she is afraid of being harmed for being a Black woman, she believes that she has to be more assertive so that she is not physically taken advantage of. When I asked her which type of microaggressions she was more likely to respond to - racial or gendered-racial microaggressions – she shared:

> Maybe gender, just because I'm paranoid. Men are dangerous at times. So, sometimes I feel the need to be very firm, very quickly, because I don't want any mistakes...I feel like at times, it is my Black womanhood that is being attacked, that will be physically attacked, more than my Blackness. It's two different things, right? I can get shot by police (or) I can get raped *and* killed. There's all those things that can happen with just being a Black woman. So, I think about that as far as, which one's going to make me toss and turn at night, versus which one's going to take me out. And I feel like taking me out is always going to be more important to me. So, when it comes to men, I'm like, "here's a line. If you cross this line, I will feel not only offended, but the need to be aggressive, to protect myself."

As with Mariah and Josie, Christina also fears for her life. However, her fear motivates her to protect herself by being assertive and letting men know that she will fight back if necessary.

Stereotype Threat

This category describes how the women in this study consider how their responses to gendered-racial microaggressions can potentially perpetuate negative stereotypes of Black women (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The most common stereotype they are cautious of perpetuating is the angry Black woman stereotype. For example, earlier in this chapter when I described an incident shared by Tatiana in which she was shooed during a meeting by one of her White female colleagues. When I asked her why she chose not to respond, she said that it was out of respect for her boss, a Black man. She explained:

> I wouldn't want to embarrass him. With my role [as] his executive assistant, my thing was I represented him. So, whatever, I did, he would be judged. So, I had to make sure that I protected him. So even though we watched out for each other, I knew that what would be said about me, it would be more harsh, not just because I'm Black but also I'm a female. So, "oh here comes Paul with his guard dog. Oh, she's an angry Black woman. blah blah blah blah blah, rolling her neck," which I don't do that. But I was very careful in how I carried myself.

For Tatiana, although she often felt very comfortable advocating for herself and demanding the respect of others, in this situation, she chose not to respond because she

knew that portraying herself as the angry Black woman stereotype would not just reflect negatively on her, but on her boss as well.

Kelly was also influenced by ABW stereotype, but in a slightly different way. While other participants often refrained from responding to coworkers or people in authority positions, she refrained from challenging her friends when they made inappropriate comments about her race and/or gender. When I asked her why, she explained:

> So, looking back, it's just because you don't want to be thought of as assertive, sassy, or angry, you're more likely to not respond with your non-Black friends because you want to be like joking and laughing and you don't want to seem aggressive or attack them to make them feel like they're being racist or whatever.

For Kelly she did not want to be perceived as an angry Black woman, but she also did not want to offend the perpetrators. As we unpacked what she said, she began to realize that she was putting their feelings above her own. However, this was still a strategy that felt comfortable for her because she said she was non-confrontational.

Mariah was also influenced by the angry Black woman stereotype that manifested itself in a different way than Kelly. When I asked her if she responds to microaggressions in class, she said that she typically does not. However, later in the conversation, it came up that she always speaks up and advocates for marginalized communities of which she is a not a member . When I asked her why she advocates for other groups but not Black women, she explained:

> I think for me, when I do speak up for Black women or Black people, I get the angry Black woman or I just get tired of people not listening to me. But then I see White women or White men like stand up for rights in the community, and it gets heard. So, it feels like being an ally is really important, especially because I want people to ally for me and stand up for me. So, I think that's where that comes from for me.

Unlike Kelly, Mariah has no problem confronting social injustices. However, this is only the case when it does not relate to her own marginalized identities out of fear of being portrayed as an angry Black woman.

While most of the participants, including Audre, are impacted by the angry Black woman stereotype, she was also influenced by the stereotype that assumes Black women are sexually promiscuous – one of the subfactors in the *assumptions of beauty and sexual objectification* factor of the GRMS. When discussing the gendered-racial microaggressions scale, we talked about the fact that while some of the factors also apply to Black men (eg. skin tone and natural hair), they are not attacked for them the same way Black women are. Her response was:

> Hell yeah. And, a lot of these are these things that really do (affect Black women differently). I'm normally not thinking about it, that I really do police myself, based on microaggressions. Going down the list, actually looking at it, it's the feeling sexually promiscuous thing. I have guarded myself so much because, out of fear of being a certain label.

Labels, especially ones that she believed were inaccurate to who she was, really affected Audre. In the quote above, she avoided the "sexually promiscuous" label by policing herself. She also mentioned trying to avoid the angry Black woman label. She shared:

> I really do hate that I become that label (ABW). But it's like, I hate, I hate that I'm thinking that I become that label but I know with my heart I'm not that label, because that label doesn't exist. And that's why it's so hard for me but I'm always silencing myself, because other people silence me. So, even in rooms where I'll say how I feel, and it gets shut down, it prevents me from speaking up in other rooms where I don't even know whether or not I'll be shut down but because it's happened so many times.

Policing herself is something that Audre does on a consistent basis in order not to perpetuate the negative stereotypes of Black women. While protecting herself was important, she also felt compelled to protect the reputation of other Black women. Her collectivist mindset is common within the Black community and demonstrates our desire to take care of one another. However, in addition to being motivated by a want for solidarity, our protective nature is also influenced by a need for survival. Individualism is a privilege that Black women do not possess, especially in predominantly White, male spaces. We know that the "bad" we do will be seen as the norm for *all* Black women. while the "good" we do will be seen as an anomaly. This added pressure only exacerbates the negative psychological consequences that were discussed earlier.

Energy

Related to the emotional response of feeling defeated discussed earlier in this chapter, participants also described lacking the emotional energy required to respond to

gendered-racial microaggressions due to the frequency in which they occurred. For example, Christina, who often does respond to microaggressions, said that she eventually stops doing so once she experiences too many in one day. She explained:

> I don't know about you, but I turn off. After a certain number of microaggressions, even macroaggressions, I turn off. I'm like, "ok. I hit my five today. It's 10. Guess I'm ignoring everything else for today."

Christina described the process of having to turn off and on as emotionally taxing. Although she wants to be able to advocate for Black women, she explained that she could only handle so much in one day. This emphasizes the increased frequency of experiencing gendered-racial microaggressions that all of the other participants shared.

Similarly, Angela shared that the emotional fatigue she felt often played a role in whether or not she responded to the GRMs she experienced. She said, "Now I'm just tired. Honestly, I'm just tired. Just trying to get through this. That's how I navigated whether I should say something or not." Kelly echoed her feelings when she said, "it's too much work. Like. I'm trying to get my master's and have to do other things. I just don't have time right now to do all of that." Both women shared that expending their energy on addressing microaggressions would take it away from other things that were more important to them, like graduating.

Another source of the emotional taxation the participants felt was not just having to address the microaggressions, but also having to educate the perpetrator on why what they said was offensive and inappropriate. For example, Josie shared:

> I would say it depends on, one, the level of infraction, so to speak. Two, how much time I have and energy. Because sometimes I'm like, do I even have the

> time? But I don't even have the time to even go to explain to you why you're wrong on so many levels. I rather just not even let you mess up my energy for the day.

Josie shared that while she used to respond more frequently to microaggressions as an undergraduate, as graduate student, she has learned not to respond in an attempt to protect her energy and peace.

Yoncé also shared that her approach to responding to microaggressions changed since being an undergraduate student for the same reasons expressed by Josie. She explained:

> Yeah, they (her responses) got more tactful and intentional. Most definitely. In undergrad, I would pop off, but now I'm much more intentional about when, I still pop off, but it looks different. When I respond, because it's so exhausting to do…I think now I'm much more intentional that, 'aight, this is something that they will have to learn about themselves, or they are too far stretched for me even to educate them here. It's not my duty.

The source of emotional fatigue for both Josie and Yoncé was feeling like they had the added burden of having to educate their attackers. However, over time, they have become more intentional about protecting their energy and no longer feel compelled to respond to every microaggression they experience.

RQ4: How do Black graduate women cope with gendered-racial microaggressions at a historically White institution?

When it comes to coping with the gendered-racial microaggressions experienced by the participants, three main themes were present – *avoidance*, *normalization*, and

minimization. *Avoidance* refers to intentional behaviors that avoid people and/or situations. *Normalization* refers to the ways in which participants normalized their experiences, both consciously and subconsciously. Lastly, *minimization* refers to how participants minimized the severity of the microaggressions, also consciously as well as subconsciously, in order to minimize their negative impact.

Avoidance

While this category refers to the behaviors participants used to avoid experiencing microaggressions, for many participants, it was also about protecting their energy and mental and emotional well-being. For example, Maria talked about avoiding situations to prevent herself form having to perform and code-switch. She shared:

> I isolate myself because, like I said before, the energy that it takes to just be around people, converse with people, is energy that I don't have right now, especially with White people or people of different races I should say...nah, mostly White people. It's just too much energy, like I said, like I have to be a different version of myself, and I don't want to have to. I don't want to put the energy into, you know, cultivating a different person and looking in the mirror like “alright, Maria, you have to be Maria B today.” I don't. It's too much.

Maria avoided coming to campus whenever possible because she hated having to pretend to be someone else because she didn’t feel like she could be her authentic self and be accepted.

Unfortunately, she wasn’t the only participant who expressed these feelings. Christina shared feeling the exact same way. She said:

> I feel like I cannot be around anybody. I cannot purposely and authentically and willingly be around people that aren't gonna accept me for me. And part of me is my experiences. And part of me is my culture, and my Blackness, and all these other things.

Both Maria and Christina felt like since their experiences with gendered-racial microaggressions were related to their identities as Black women, they had two choices: either pretend to be a more "palatable" Black woman to make White people on campus feel more comfortable, or avoid interactions altogether. As we see from the quotes above, they often chose the latter.

Although Angela did not describe her avoidance as a way to protect her from having to perform, she did discuss avoiding interacting with White people on campus because she did not want to have to explain or justify her experiences. When I asked her how she is coping with her experiences, she said:

> Honestly, I'm dead ass, I'm barely coping. Honestly, it's like the end of last semester just took me out. I'm just over it. I'm honestly, I'm looking for ways to do my summer (classes) online and then switch over to online (classes in the fall), because it's just… I know I'm supposed to be here, but it's tough. It's really exhausting having to be Blacksplaining everything and people don't know that they're (being racist). It's a lot.

What Angela referred to as "Blacksplaining" is the idea of having to constantly explain the Black experience as well as explain why certain comments or behaviors are offensive to Black people. For her, she was not only frustrated by the experiences with

microaggressions that she was having, but she was also frustrated by having to justify her feelings to her White peers.

For Kelly, her behaviors were less about avoiding interactions altogether, and more about avoiding certain conversations. She explained that, as she has gotten older and transitioned from undergrad to graduate school, she has learned which topics and conversations to avoid. She shared:

> Now I'm kind of almost expecting it (microaggressions). So when it does happen, I know what to do. You know? I kind of think, I feel like I don't let conversations go there. Right? So, avoiding conversations with, I don't know, like sexuality or things about my hair. I don't really talk to people about it anymore like I used to in undergrad, which is probably why I got so many microaggressions in the past, because I used to be more open with it. But now I'm like, "no. I'm good." You know? The only people that I talk to those things about are other Black women specifically.

Kelly explained that she hated experiencing so many microaggressions as an undergraduate so she decided to be intentional about not letting the same things happen to her as a graduate student. For her, she did that by avoiding discussing personal topics related to being a Black woman with anyone other than Black women. Similarly, Tatiana shared that she also experienced a lot of microaggressions as an undergrad and saw graduate schools as a "do over."

Normalization

This category refers to the way the participants normalize their experiences with microaggressions on campus. For most of them, racism and microaggressions have become such a daily part of their lives that they do not realize they are having racialized experiences. For example, when I asked Audre if she experiences racial or gender-racial microaggressions more, she said:

> It's gendered and racialized. It does happen a lot more. I will say that those microaggressions happen a lot more. And it's weird because they happen so much and they literally do happen every day, they happen so much that it really becomes a part of your life.

Although normalizing her experiences was a coping mechanism for Audre, we can see from her previous comments that she was still struggling mentally and emotionally.

Yoncé also described the normalization of attacks on her Black womanness. When I asked her the same question I asked Audre, if she experiences more racial or gendered-racial microaggressions, she said:

> It is much more normalized for someone to attack my Black womanness, and for that reason, my reaction and my feelings just come off naturally. So, it's not like a big uproar. It's just like, "what the fuck? They're ignorant, XYZ. Let me just move on or let me address it indirectly."

I then asked her if she saw this normalization process as a coping mechanism. She replied:

> I think so. I think that's something that's subconscious, and I think it's something that I'm not even aware that that's coping. I think it's because it's just what I experience on a normal basis. I've just come to be able to deal.

For Yoncé, normalizing her experiences has become so innate for that she did not even realize that she was using it to cope. However, after we discussed it, she agreed that it was something she does automatically and has become second nature to her.

Like Yoncé, Josie did not identify normalizing her experiences as a coping mechanism. However, she did describe it as something she does. When I asked her how she copes with gendered-racial microaggressions, she said, "I don't really have like microaggression specific coping mechanisms. I think part of it is because like they just happen so frequently and I'm so used to it, that is normalized in a way." Josie has experienced microaggressions so often that it has become something that she expects. Her feelings were shared by both Kelly and Reneé. Kelly shared, "now I'm in the mindset where like, okay, 'I've been here long enough where I see this is just how some people are. This how y'all operate. Like this how y'all operate.' So it doesn't surprise me anymore." Similarly, Reneé said, "at this point, I've kind of realized that it's going to happen eventually." For all three women, normalizing their experiences and expecting them to happen was one of the ways they coped, whether they realized it or not.

Angela was slightly different from the other women because, although she saw her experiences as normal, she was beginning to question whether they were truly normal or not. When discussing her journal entries, she shared that she often struggled with

writing things down because she did not even realize what she was experiencing was a microaggression because of how used them she was. She explained:

> That's how mine was. I wasn't sure if it was an issue because I'm kind of used to it. But I'm like, I probably should write it down because this might not be normal, but it's kind of normal, you know what I mean?

Angela was struggling with coming to terms with the fact that, yes, microaggressions are normal for Black women, but they are not normal for everyone. She had similar thoughts when talking about how comfortable people are with disrespecting Black women. She shared:

> Why do they feel so comfortable? I don't understand why people feel, I mean I *do* understand, *obviously*, but how did we get to a point where y'all can just say whatever y'all want *about* Black people, *to* Black people, and disrespect them?

In this quote, Angela is acknowledging how normal it is for Black people to be disrespected, while also arguing that it should not be the case.

Minimization

This category refers to the ways in which the participants minimized or ignored the severity of the microaggressions and/or the effects they had on them. For example, when I asked Giselle how she copes with what happens to her, she said:

> But I think in my head, whenever things are kind of bad, I'm always like, "well, I'm not a slave and I'm not getting whipped. So let me just keep moving." Which to say is not always the best thought process to have.

We can see from this quote that Giselle coped with her experiences by comparing them to something she considered to be a lot more extreme, in this case, being whipped and

enslaved. Although she admitted that this is how she copes, she was also able to acknowledge that this is an unhealthy mindset. Even though most would argue that slavery and blatant racism are worse than microaggressions, that does not, and should not, detract from the negative effects of microaggressions that were discussed in previous chapters (e.g. depression, suicidal thoughts, and anxiety). This sentiment was shared by Angela in one of her journal entries where she said she would much rather deal with overt racism than microaggressions. When I asked her about it during her individual interview, she explained:

> If you don't like me, say you don't like me and let me be on my way. But if you don't like me and you're constantly making snide remarks and you're real shady with it, that gets in my head...And I can't really remove myself from it because I'm constantly trying to justifying it. Like, "oh, maybe they didn't mean that when they said that," you know? Or, "maybe I'm reading too much into things."

For Angela, it was the mental and emotional turmoil created by experiencing microaggressions that really frustrated her.

As with the normalization process, there were also participants who minimized the effects of their experiences without even realizing it. For example, Maria shared an experience where her authority was challenged by one of her colleagues. In the beginning of the story, she said that the situation made her, "feel some type of way." Then, as she continued to tell the story, she said, "I took that as something to consider, something to think about and I've held on to that because of the way that she said it." However, by the end of the story she said, "But yeah, it didn't bother me in an intense way, it's just something to note." From her first two comments, it was clear that the situation bothered

her because she said that it made her “feel some type of way” and it was something that she “held on to.” Yet, by the end, she acted as if she was completely unbothered by the interaction. It was as if she was telling herself she was ok in an effort to convince herself that she was.

Yoncé had a similar coping strategy in terms of minimizing her feelings about her experiences. After sharing several experiences with GRMs on campus, I asked her how she felt about them. She replied:

> I don't know, I feel fine. I don't feel any way. I just feel like, okay, I don't know, there's no real feeling. I think that's kind of who I would say I am. Unless something really gnaws at me, and I feel harmed by it...and what is big enough for me to feel harmed? I don't really know at this point… I think it has to be big enough for me to like react and respond. So someone calling me out of my name or something like that could also warrant my response if it really makes me feel uncomfortable, but those things or situations that I've just depicted hadn’t made me feel uncomfortable.

Although Yoncé said that the experiences that she shared had not made her feel uncomfortable, her body language and tone told a different story. When describing each incident, her face was visibly upset and the tone of her voice varied in terms of volume and intensity. Although there was disconnect between the way Maria and Yoncé said they felt and the way they may have actually felt, I am in no way implying that they were being untruthful. I believe that minimizing as a coping strategy has become such second nature to them that they may not even know how they are being emotionally impacted by their experiences.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to provide insight into how Black graduate women experience, respond to, and cope with gendered-racial microaggressions. The first set of findings showed that participants experienced GRMs that made assumptions about their beauty, caused them to feel silenced and marginalized, and portrayed them as both the "strong Black woman" and "angry Black woman" stereotypes. When responding to these microaggressions, participants tended to do so in three ways: verbally addressing their attacker, having an internal dialogue to navigate and negotiate the experience, and emotionally, which often presented as shame or regret. These responses were heavily influenced by fear of physical and sexual harm, emotional fatigue, and stereotype threat. Lastly, in order to cope with the negative effects of microaggressions, participants often normalized or minimized the impact of their experiences. Participants also coped by avoiding places and conversations altogether. A common theme throughout the findings centered on the negative social, emotional, and psychological consequences of their experiences, which are symptomatic of racial battle fatigue. This is significant because it emphasizes the need for more support for Black women at historically White institutions.

Chapter 5: Counterstory

The purpose of the current chapter is to share the experiences of the participants through counterstorytelling, which Solórzano and Yosso (2002) defined as:

> …a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform. (p. 31)

I chose this methodology because it allowed me to center the voice of the participants. I also believe counterstories are impactful because of the way they allow the reader to connect to the experiences of marginalized people on a more emotional level. Lastly, I believe counterstories present data in a way that is more accessible and allows the stories of participants to be shared with a larger audience.

There are three types of counterstories: autobiographical (about the author), biographical (about someone else), and composite (a combination of empirical data, literature, and personal stories). I created a composite counterstory to show the commonalities in the experiences of Black women at historically White institutions. Although we respond and cope in different ways, I think it is important to show that our experiences are not isolated events that only happen once in a while. Instead, they are frequent occurrences with long-lasting psychological and physiological consequences. While there are different ways I could have written the counterstory, I wrote it as a journal entry written by Maya, a composite character. I chose a journal for several reasons. First, it allows the reader to connect with Maya on an emotional level by getting

insight into her thoughts and feelings as she goes throughout her day. Second, it allows the reader to see the frequency in which Black women experience microaggressions in a single day. Lastly, I wanted to be able to show the cumulative effects of her experiences, which are all symptomatic of racial battle fatigue. As Maya is a composite character, she does not represent any particular participant in this study. Instead, her journal entry paints a composite picture of the experiences shared by all of the participants in this study along with literature and my own personal experiences as a Black graduate woman at GW.

Dear Diary,

I'm not sure how much longer I can take this. I feel like it's the same story every day and I am getting tired of reading it. I'm definitely getting tired of living it. I woke up with a pit in my stomach today. The same one that's always there on days I know I have to go to campus. Between work and class, I am always so anxious about what might happen. I'm always in my head thinking, "Who's going to say something slick to me today? Is my coworker going to try to come for me again? Is my professor gonna play me like I'm not even in the room? What am I gonna say? Am I finally going to pop off on someone? Do I even have the energy to fight back today?" Every day, the same pit, the same conversation, and today was no exception. The only thing that does change from day to day is the amount of fight I have left in me. And today, I was running on E. I was still recovering from all the nonsense I put up with in the beginning of the week and just didn't have the mental and emotional capacity to handle anything new. All I wanted to do was throw on a hoodie and a headtie and fade into the background so I could come back home as unphased as possible. But I'm a Black woman at a PWI which

means I am hypervisible (yet simultaneously ignored) and don't have the privilege of wearing whatever I want. These white girls can come to class in their leggings and messy buns and no one bats an eye. But let these thick thighs and curls try the same thing and watch how they clutch their pearls and question my professionalism. So, instead of just wearing whatever made me feel comfortable, I put on something from ma'sa's list of acceptable attire and forced myself out the door.

I stepped foot onto campus and it literally took less than 5 minutes for the nonsense to begin. I know it might seem small to other people, but one thing that drives me CRAZY is the way that white students act like they own the damn sidewalk. I feel like it's an unwritten rule that you move to the right when someone is walking towards you, but, as usual, it's like the rules don't apply to them. They NEVER move out of the way. It irks me because it's like they just expect me to be the one to move. Every, single, time. It makes me feel like they don't feel the need to make room for me on campus, literally or figuratively. There are definitely times I think about playing a game of chicken with them – just standing my ground and waiting to see who moves out of the way first. But today wasn't that day. I didn't have the energy, so I just shook my head and stepped to the side.

As I walked up the stairs to the building where I work, I took a deep breath and mentally prepared myself for whatever BS was waiting for me inside. I rarely feel welcome there because people always look at me like I don't belong. Like today. I walked towards the elevator and there was a white woman waiting for it. She

looked at me but didn't say anything at first. But, when the elevator came and I walked inside, she said, "can I help you find something?" A seemingly innocent question, that allowed her to act like she was trying to be helpful, was actually full of shade and disrespect. That woman had no desire to help me. What she was really asking was, "what are you doing here?" She assumed I was lost because there was no way someone who looks like me could possibly be in the right place. I wanted to snap on her, but I decided to check her nicely and let her know that I am a graduate assistant and I work in the building. I also made sure to let her know that I am a doctoral student, which is something I always feel like I have to lead with. I feel like if I let them know from jump who and what I am, it'll minimize the likelihood of them trying to come for me. It works sometimes, but I still get the strange looks and passive aggressive comments…even from people that I have seen in the building REPEATEDLY over the last three years. It really is crazy how I can stick out enough for them to question my presence, yet also be invisible enough for them to forget me every time. But today, I actually wanted to be invisible. I just wanted to sit at my desk and mind my business until it was time to go to class.

Although I normally like to be early to class, you know, to show the white folk that Black people aren't always late, today I came at the last second because I wasn't in the mood to perform and have any superficial conversations with my classmates before class started. So many of them are pseudo liberals who think they're woke yet still say the most outlandish things. I also wasn't in a rush to get to class because the topic of the day was health disparities in communities of

color and I just knew the conversation was gonna go left. I really didn't want to be right. But I was. At one point during the class, I started sharing facts about the differences in the rate at which doctors prescribe medication to Black people versus white people. Immediately, one of my white classmates interrupted me and said, "that doesn't sound right. How would you even know that anyway?" I didn't respond right away, but I know my face did. I gave her the, "I know this chick didn't just say that" look. Even though I was already emotionally drained, I REFUSED to let this woman think she could talk to me any kind of way and get away with it, so I checked her. I said, "actually, I'm a registered nurse with 10 years of experience. You should check my qualifications before you try to disrespect me again." The class got hella quiet, including the professor. They all looked shocked because I normally don't clap back in class, trying not to perpetuate the angry Black woman stereotype, but I was just so fed up today that I couldn't bite my tongue. And I don't regret it either. I bet she'll think twice before she tries to come for me again.

By the time I got home, I felt so defeated that I sat on the couch and just cried. I don't know if I was sad, angry, or just exhausted. Maybe all of the above. I was actually holding back tears all day but I'll be damned if I let these white people see how much they get to me. I may cry myself to sleep most nights, but they'll never know that. So while others are having sweet dreams, I'll be here preparing to head back into battle in the morning.

Mentally and emotionally fatigued,

The counterstory above provides us with insight into what a typical day is like for a Black woman at a PWI. Maya's story allowed us to see several of the findings that were presented in Chapter 4. First, we were able to see the psychological and physiological toll her experiences had on her. She described the physical pain she feels in her stomach every morning, which was similar to Audre's experience of throwing up every day. She also described the anxiety she feels due the fact that she knows she will end up having to deal with some form of microaggressions once she gets to campus. This speaks to the endemic nature of racism which acknowledges the fact that it is not a matter of *if* Black women will experience gendered-racial microaggressions, but *when* and *how often*.

Maya's experiences also demonstrated the frequency in which Black women are disrespected. She was disregarded on the sidewalk, questioned at work, and belittled in class. This was similar to several of the participants in the study who reported feeling silenced and marginalized at work and in class. Maya's experiences also demonstrated the various ways one woman can respond to microaggressions in the same day. With the first interaction with the student on the sidewalk, she chose not to respond because she did not feel like it was worth the energy it would take. With the woman on the elevator, she decided to respond, but chose to do so in a way that was tamer than she would have liked. Lastly, when it came to her in-class experience, we were able to see her advocate for herself and demand the respect she deserved, which was similar to several of the participants in this study. We were also able to see how resilient she was because she responded despite how emotionally fatigued she felt.

The most significant aspect of this counterstory is how much Maya is struggling with racial battle fatigue, which speaks to the mental, emotional, psychological, and physiological consequences of constantly experiencing racial microaggressions for a prolonged period of time. In the beginning of her journal entry, we were able to see the long-lasting effects of her experiences. She described being mentally and emotionally drained from the microaggressions she had experienced earlier in the week. However, despite questioning her ability to handle any further psychological harm, she knew she could not avoid going to campus. As she continued to share her day with us, we saw how each microaggression she experienced only exacerbated her symptoms of racial battle fatigue. By the time she got home, she broke down emotionally and began to cry. Her emotional response was similar to participants in the study who also reported exhibiting strength in public and crying in private. For example, Christina shared, "this is why Women of Color are so strong. We cry, get mad, and then get to work." Maya's story shared as a journal entry allowed us to do several things. First, it allowed us to see what she experienced on a daily basis. Second, we were able to get some insight into her thoughts and feelings around her experiences. This is important because, as we saw in her entry as well as learned from the women in this study, their outward responses do not always mirror their internal ones. Lastly, when seeing microaggressions as isolated events, I think it is easy for people to assume that they are minor and inconsequential. However, being able to see the whole picture demonstrates how the persistent and prolonged nature of their experiences leads to Racial Battle Fatigue. Furthermore, while the journal entry provides insight into how the daily experiences of Black women have negative psychological and physiological consequences on them, it only depicts one day

in their lives. The Black women in this study have had to endure countless days like this. Even more disheartening, their negative experiences will continue for the rest of their lives.

Chapter 6: Discussion, Implications, And Recommendations

Discussion

This study sought to answer four questions: what are the experiences of Black graduate women with gendered-racial microaggressions?; how do they respond to them?; what factors influence their responses? and how do they cope with their experiences? The findings presented in Chapter 4 provided answers to these questions and the following section discusses each of their contributions the literature. Overall, this study contributed to the literature in several ways. First, it helped address the gap in the literature that explores the experiences of Black women with gendered-racism (Lewis & Neville, 2015; Lewis et al., 2016; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). Second, it responded to the need for more research on how Black women cope with gendered-racial microaggressions (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015; Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2008). Lastly, the qualitative approach allowed for the exploration of the nuanced experiences of Black women with gendered-racial microaggressions to supplement the quantitative studies that have not been able to provide the same information (Clark et al., 2012; Donovan et al., 2012; Lewis et al., 2017; Taiyib-Moody & Lewis, 2019; Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2008).

Experiences with gendered-racial microaggressions

Using the Gendered-Racial Microaggressions Scale (GRMS) as a guide, I described the four categories of gendered-racial microaggressions that the Black women in this study experienced. First, I described their experiences with microaggressions within *the assumptions of beauty and sexual objectification* factor. Participants shared

that the subfactor they experienced the most was comments about their hair. These comments were made directly as well as indirectly, both of which were negatively internalized by the participants. For example, Audre shared that her professor referred to her natural hair as "frizzy" and "unkept." Similarly, Christina had an experience in which a classmate assumed that the only reason she was wearing her hair natural to class (instead of straight or with a weave) was because something was wrong with her. Both women expressed being hurt by these comments.

While some of the comments the women received about their hair were outright negative, participants also shared experiences when comments were presented as compliments but still brought about negative feelings. For example, Mariah described a time when she went to class with her hair straight and received a lot of compliments from her classmates, referring to her as "professional" and "a boss." This really affected her and caused her to question how her classmates perceived her on a typical day when her hair is curly. She said their comments made her feel unattractive and caused her to believe that they did not think that she was beautiful in her natural state. Yoncé shared similar experiences. She said that no one ever commented or complimented her hair when she wore it natural, but often received more attention when she wore it straight or with braids. She explained that Black women internalize comments about their hair, whether overtly negative or not, because they see it as an extension of themselves. Therefore, speaking negatively about their hair is received as speaking negatively about who they are as Black women. These findings support the work of Gildersleeve, Croom, and Vasquez (2011) who also found that participants internalized negative comments about their Black womanhood. These findings highlight the potential of *all* comments about a

Black woman's physical appearance, whether intended as offensive or not, to be negatively internalized by them due to the negative implications of the comments.

Next, I described the participants' experiences within the *silenced and marginalized* factor of the GRMS. This category represented the most commonly experienced gendered-racial microaggressions by the participants. They reported feeling silenced and marginalized in class as well as at their jobs on campus. For example, Audre shared that she felt pushed aside because her voice was often ignored and her opinion disregarded. She also expressed feeling like she had to constantly prove what she was saying when her peers did not. Her experiences were similar to those of other participants including Yoncé and Mariah. Yoncé shared that she has been asked to justify her comments and Mariah explained how she has been told by her classmates that her perspective was invalid. Similarly, Christina shared that, despite being right, she was accused by her coworkers of making no sense and lying about her statements. The participants' experiences are concerning because Nadal et al. (2014) found that microaggressions that occur in educational or work spaces are especially harmful to self-esteem. The harm to participants was exacerbated by the fact that they experienced gendered-racial microaggressions in both spaces – in class and at work. They were consistently caused to question their capabilities academically as well as professionally.

These findings are with consistent with several other studies. For example, both Torres, Driscoll, and Burrow (2010) and Stone et al. (2018) identified themes related to the GRMS factor of *silenced and marginalized*. Torres, Driscoll and Burrow (2010) identified the theme as the *underestimation of personal ability* and Stone et al. (2018) referred to it as *questioning intelligence*. Similarly, Holder et al. (2015) found that

participants reported feeling invisible and Gildersleeve et al. (2011) discussed the dismissal of the worldviews and personal and professional experiences of participants. However, while the aforementioned studies demonstrated the silencing and marginalizing impact of experiencing racial microaggressions, they all focused on the experiences of all Black graduate students, not just Black women. The findings of the current study contribute to the literature by providing insight into the specific ways Black women are made to feel silenced by experiencing gendered-racial microaggressions.

Participants also reported experiencing gendered-racial microaggressions in the *strong Black woman* category. This was specially the case with regards to the subfactor of being perceived as sassy and straightforward. Participants explained that this typically happened when expressing their opinions in class. For example, Mariah shared that she was often referred to as "real" or "telling it like it is" when speaking her mind. As with the comments about her hair, even though they were not inherently negative, she internalized them negatively because of their implications. Her sentiments were echoed by Josie who shared that her peers have commented on loving her "sass" and how she does not care about what people have to say. Ironically, she did care about their comments and was hurt by them because she felt that she was being portrayed as if she was "bulldozing over people."

These findings demonstrate how Black women experience the strong Black woman stereotype and are important because of the negative impact they can have on their lives and well-being. For example, Shavers and Moore (2014) argued that while the stereotype can sometimes increase resiliency and motivation in Black women, it can also "devastate the mental and emotional health of Black women" (p. 392). This is consistent

with the work of Donovan and West (2015) who found that experiencing the stereotype resulted in increased stress and depressive symptoms.

Like with the previous factors, all participants reported being affected by the *angry Black woman* stereotype. Christina was especially frustrated by the stereotype because she believed that she was perceived as an angry Black woman whether she spoke up or not. For example, she described an incident in her class where a classmate said something offensive, but she chose not to respond. However, she was still accused of being angry. Her frustration was exacerbated by the fact that this perception of her was also shared by her Classmates of Color. She explained that they often sat next to her in class for "protection" from negative comments by White students. Unfortunately, Christina was not the only participant who experienced this. Josie shared that she was encouraged to advocate for other students because they believed she would not be challenged by the professor. They implied that people were afraid of her, which deeply affected her because she did not believe she had ever said or done anything to give off that impression. Both women were frustrated because they would be perceived as angry Black women regardless of their behavior.

As with the findings on the strong Black woman stereotype, these findings are also important to the well-being of Black women as demonstrated by research that shows the negative psychological impact of being perceived as an angry Black woman. For example, Ashley (2014) referred to the stereotype as "pervasive and parasitic" due to its negative effects on the self-esteem of Black women (p. 437). This was consistent with the previous work of Thomas et al. (2004) who found a negative relationship between perceptions of the angry Black woman stereotype and self-esteem.

Responses

Pierce (1995) argued that, "the most baffling task for victims of racism and sexism is to defend against microaggressions. Knowing how and when to defend requires time and energy that oppressors cannot appreciate" (p. 282). In this quote, Pierce articulated some of the struggles that were shared by the Black women in this study with regards to responding to the gendered-racial microaggressions they experienced. In Chapter 4, I described three types of responses that were shared by the participants. The first category, *verbal*, refers to the decisions participants made to respond directly to the perpetrators. The second category, *internal*, refers to the conversation participants often had with themselves when determining if and how to respond. The last category, *emotional*, refers to the emotional responses participants had to the gendered-racial microaggressions they experienced.

The *verbal* theme describes the verbal responses participants gave when experiencing gendered-racial microaggressions. One common thread among all of their responses was a demand respect. For example, both Tatiana and Giselle shared that they did not allow themselves to be silenced or ignored and made it known to their peers that their voices would be heard. Similarly. Christina said that she sets her expectations early and lets her peers know what she will and will not tolerate. This is consistent with Robinson-Wood et al. (2015) who referred to this type of behavior as *armored coping* - the "protective psychological gear that women adorned at school and work" (p. 232). Participants in their study reported informing colleagues ahead of time of their competency.

In addition to proactively demanding respect, participants also reported advocating for themselves when experiencing gendered-racial microaggressions. For example, Maria shared that she was tired of people "running over" her so she learned how to be assertive and correct discriminatory behavior in the moment. Similarly, Audre also cited past negative experiences as her motivation for addressing microaggressions. She argued that White women too often get away with inappropriate behavior and she was not going to allow that to happen anymore. This was echoed by Christina who also shared that she refused to let her White classmates say whatever they felt like at the expense of Black women. These findings are consistent with several other studies. For example, Lewis et al. (2012) found that participants actively spoke up when experiencing microaggressions as a way to regain their power in the situation. She identified this as a form of resistance coping that she referred to as *using one's voice as power*. Similar findings were reported by Shorter-Gooden (2004), Thomas et al. (2008), and Truong and Museus (2012) whose participants all described standing up for themselves as a way to fight back against the perpetrators.

The next theme, *internal*, describes to the internal dialogue participants had with themselves as they assessed the situation and determined if and how they would respond. Audre referred to this process as a "dance" that caused her to question herself. Mariah also reported undergoing the questioning process but more so with regards to the intentions of the perpetrator. She often found herself trying to figure out if she was being attacked because she is Black, a woman, or a Black woman. A third form of questioning was described by Josie as a "calculated assessment" that caused her to consider how the perpetrator might react to her response and determine if the potential consequences were

worth it her. Although the exact questioning process differed a bit for each participant, all of them expressed that having to engage in it took an emotional and psychological toll on them.

These findings are consistent with other literature that speaks to the experiences of Black women with microaggressions. Similar to the way Audre referred to the questioning process as a "dance," Corbin, Smith, and Garcia (2018) described this process as "mental gymnastics" (p. 633). Similarly, Robinson-Wood et al. (2015) called it a "daunting, dual, and dueling process" in which the women in their study had to decide which indignities to respond to (p. 233). Also in agreement was Lewis et al. (2012) who found that participants had to make cognitive decisions about how to respond to gendered-racial microaggressions, which she called an "appraisal process" where the women had to pick and choose their battles.

In addition to having physical and mental responses, participants also shared emotional responses – primarily feelings of defeat, regret, or shame. For example, Mariah reported feeling mentally exhausted and tempted to give up because she felt like nothing she said to perpetrators would matter. She also shared that she believed that Black women are at the "bottom of the totem pole" and her daily experiences with gendered-racial microaggressions just confirmed those feelings for her, feelings that were echoed by Maria who also stated feeling like Black women were at the bottom of the totem pole. Their feelings of sadness and hopelessness were reinforced by Audre who said that not only was she feeling depressed, she believed that most, if not all, other Black women on campus were suffering from the same symptoms. She also shared the emotional toll her experiences were having on her and how she dreaded going to campus every day.

Participants also reported experiencing feelings of regret and shame when they did not respond to microaggressions. For example, Josie shared that when she reflected on her experiences, she often regretted not saying something in the moment. However, she also reported never having these feelings after choosing to respond. Her feelings were shared by Mariah and Maria who both reported regretting not responding to situations after processing the experiences later on. Similarly, Angela also shared feeling regret, but her feelings were accompanied by feelings of shame. She explained that she could kick herself for not responding and believed that she needed to change something about herself. Additionally, she referred to herself as a "punk" when she chose not to address the microaggressions she experienced. Although she did not blame herself for the experiences, she did blame herself for how she handled them. While the participants reported feelings of regret or shame as a result of not responding to microaggressions, this was never the case when their silence what motivated by a concern for their safety. It seemed that the participants believed that their responses were justified when prompted by the potential for physical harm, but not when influenced by stereotype threat or emotional fatigue.

The participants' emotional responses are consistent with Robinson-Wood et al. (2015) who called the impact the *mighty melanin tax*, which they described as, "the massive psychological toll that chronic microaggressions levied upon Black women" (p. 230). These findings, as well as those from the current study, are significant because they highlight the psychological harm gendered-racial microaggressions have on Black women. Their experiences are symptomatic of racial battle fatigue, which describes the negative physical, psychological, and physiological impact of experiencing

microaggressions consistently for an extended period of time (Smith et al., 2007). For example, not only did Audre report feeling depressed, she also reported vomiting on the mornings she had to go to campus. Similarly, Christina shared that she felt anxious, especially when knowing she would have to be in an environment where race would be discussed. Their experiences are consistent with literature the described the negative psychological effects of experiencing microaggressions, such as decreased self-esteem (Nadal et al., 2014), increased depressive symptoms (O'Keefe et al., 2015), increased anxiety (Lovato et al. 2012), and increased suicidal thoughts (O'Keefe et al., 2015).

Factors that influence responses

In addition to examining the ways in which Black women respond to gendered-racial microaggressions, the current study also addressed the need to consider the contextual factors that influence their responses (Lewis et al., 2012). Although several factors were identified by participants (e.g. location, age, and audience), the most prominent were safety and stereotype threat. All participants cited one or both factors as reasons for them choosing not to address microaggressions or challenge the perpetrator.

In addition to the negative effects of experiencing microaggressions on the mental health of the participants, one of the most concerning findings of this study was the fear some of the women expressed for their physical and sexual safety. For example, Mariah shared she has a tendency not to respond to gendered-racial microaggressions from men because of the many stories she has heard about Black women being physically harmed for trying to advocate for themselves. She said that being alive was more important to her than responding in the moment. Her feelings were echoed by Josie who explained that

her goal is to keep herself safe, so she does whatever it takes to remove herself from a potentially unsafe situation because she does not believe she could physically protect herself from an attacker. Additionally, Christina shared that, while being Black could get her killed, being a Black woman meant that she could be killed *and* raped.

These findings are the most significant contribution to the literature because they provide information on the experiences of Black women with gendered-racial microaggressions that has not been addressed sufficiently in the literature. Although research (e.g. Lewis et al., 2012) has described a fear of consequences, it has been related to academic or professional consequences such as a lowered grade or loss of job. Additionally, while some studies reported participants feeling unsafe (e.g. Ashley, 2014), the current study extends our knowledge in this area by providing insight into how a lack of physical and sexual safety contributes to Black women's decisions not to respond to gendered-racial microaggressions. This is important because of the likely negative psychological effects of not having to just worry about experiencing a gendered-racial microaggression, but also having to fear being physically violated for being a Black woman. Furthermore, while studies mentioned who the perpetrator is as a factor, this has typically referred to whether it was a peer or person of authority. The current study takes this a step further by demonstrating the fear participants felt specifically when the perpetrator was a White man, regardless of his position.

Another common reason for not responding to gendered-racial microaggressions was a fear of perpetuating negative stereotypes of Black women, also known as stereotype threat. The most commonly mentioned stereotype by the participants was the angry Black woman. For example, Tatiana explained the she often did not respond to the

microaggressions she experienced in meetings because she did not want to be perceived as her supervisor's "guard dog." Similarly, Mariah shared that she has no problem speaking up when other marginalized groups are disrespected but refrains from doing so when it comes to Black women out of fear of being portrayed as the angry Black woman. An interesting aspect of these findings was that although participants never identified the "strong Black woman" stereotype as being an influential factor for them, they often described the characteristics of the stereotype (as defined by the Gendered-Racial Microaggressions Scale), including sassy and straight forward, but considered them to be descriptive of the "angry Black woman" stereotype instead.

These findings are consistent with the work of Lewis et al. (2012) who found that the participants in her study also had a heightened awareness of the potential of perpetuating negative stereotypes about Black women. The experiences of their participants demonstrated the catch 22 Black women have in which responding to a microaggression can result in them experiencing another one. Similarly, Corbin, Smith, and Garcia (2018) explained that a Black woman has to "filter her responses through the controlling image of the angry Black woman and calculate the social cost of how her words would be received" (p. 633). Additionally, they argued that the constant need for hyper-vigilant self-policing, similar to what was described by Audre, creates a trap for Black women that exacerbates symptoms of racial battle fatigue.

Coping

Another significant contribution of the current study is its response to the dearth of literature on how Black women cope with gendered-racism (Lewis et al., 2012;

Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Thomas et al., 2008). Shorter-Gooden (2004) argued that, while there was research on coping mechanisms employed by African Americans, it was focused on general life stressors, not ones based on racial bias. Since then, more research has been done on how Black people cope with racism, but there remains a need for studies that specifically investigate the ways Black women cope with gendered-racism, which is necessary to help minimize the negative effects of this type of oppression (Lewis et al., 2016; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). The current study addressed this need by providing three forms of coping shared by the participants – *avoiding*, *minimizing*, and *normalizing*. *Avoiding* refers to the ways participants intentionally avoided places and conversations that could lead to them experiencing gendered-racial microaggressions. *Minimizing* refers to the way participants minimized the severity of their experiences and/or the negative effects they had on them. Lastly, *normalizing* refers to the ways their experiences with gendered-racism had become so engrained in their daily lives that they were unable to readily identify what was happening to them. These coping strategies are consistent with what Lewis et al. (2012) referred to as "self-protective coping" which they defined as:

> …inactive strategies used to minimize the stressful cumulative effect of experiencing gendered-racial microaggressions over a period of time. These strategies refer to cognitive and behavioral ways that Black women try to protect and shield themselves from the negative effects of gendered-racial microaggressions. (p. 63)

The current study contributes to the literature by responding to the lack of research on self-protective coping strategies (Lewis et al., 2012).

The most common form of coping identified by the participants was avoidance of places and spaces that had the potential to be racially hostile. For example, Mariah shared that she purposely isolates herself to avoid having to perform and code-switch. Maria echoed her sentiments and explained that she avoids coming to campus because does not like having to pretend to be someone other than herself. Similarly, Christina said she also avoided spaces that made her feel like her race, gender, and culture would not be accepted. In addition to avoiding places on campus, participants also avoided participating in conversations that had the potential to become racially charged. Angela shared that she often did this due to the mentally taxing impact of having to "Blacksplain" to her White peers why their comments were offensive and inappropriate.

These findings are consistent with the literature on how Black women cope with sexism and racism. For example, Thomas et al. (2008) and Truong and Mueseus (2012) both found that participants coped with their experiences by avoiding racist environments. Additionally, Gildersleeve et al. (2011) and Shorter-Gooden (2004) reported that participants coped by avoiding topics that could stir up racial bias. However, although Shorter-Gooden provided information on the coping mechanisms used by Black women, she identified one of the limitations of her study as a failure to directly ask participants about how they coped. She explained that her findings were gathered from indirect questions. The current study addressed this limitation by asking specific questions about how the participants coped with gendered-racism. Furthermore, the findings of the current study are significant because of the negative effects of using avoidance as a coping strategy (Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). This was emphasized by West et al. (2010) who found that avoidant coping exacerbated the negative effects of

racism. This was consistent with Williams and Lewis (2016) who found that increased experiences with gendered-racism led to increased avoidant coping, which ultimately led to increased depressive symptoms.

Another coping strategy used by participants was minimizing the situation and/or its impact. This strategy was not directly cited by participants as most of their behaviors were done subconsciously. For example, Giselle shared that when she has experiences with microaggressions, she tells herself that she is not a slave, so things could always be worse. She uses this strategy as a way to protect herself from the mental and emotional impact of her experiences. Additionally, both Yoncé and Mariah shared experiences they had with gendered-racial microaggressions but stated that they were unaffected or unbothered by them. However, after digging deeper, it was evident that their experiences brought about negative emotional feelings for both of them. These findings are consistent with Thomas et al. (2008) who also found that participants coped with gendered racism by minimizing the situation. They identified this behavior as cognitive emotional debriefing in which participants cope with environmental stressors by trying to forget or minimize their experiences.

As with minimizing, another coping strategy that seemed to be used subconsciously by participants was normalizing the situation. For example, Audre shared that she experienced gendered-racial microaggressions so often that they had become a part of her everyday life. Yoncé shared her feelings and said that she often did not respond to microaggressions because it was so normal for people to attack her Black womanhood. Although she did not originally identify her behavior as a coping mechanism, she eventually agreed that it is something she does subconsciously to help

her deal with her everyday experiences. Similarly, Josie also realized that she had never identified her normalization of her experiences as a coping strategy because of how second-nature it had become. These findings are supported by Lewis et al. (2012) who found that Black women often adapt to gendered-racial microaggressions as a way to make the stress more bearable.

Although I identified three different coping strategies, they are intertwined and should be examined using the lens of critical race theory, which acknowledges the endemic nature of racism in the United States. The fact that racism is an everyday occurrence has contributed to the often subconscious normalizing coping strategy used by the participants in this study. The participants reported not always identifying the racialized aspect of their experiences because of how "normal" they are. Similarly, because their experiences are so common, they often minimize the impact of the microaggressions by convincing themselves that things could always be worse. We saw this in Chapter 4 when Giselle shared, "at least I'm not a slave." Additionally, the frequency of experiencing microaggressions has led to participants using avoidance as a coping strategy. There were layered ways in which participants employed this strategy. First, the participants avoid spaces and conversations in order to protect themselves from experiencing microaggressions. Second, due to the belief that they have to "perform" in order to avoid microaggressions, they avoid spaces to avoid having to code-switch. This constant state of avoidance increases their feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Although the Black women in this study have used avoidance, minimization, and normalization as strategies to deal with the negative effects of their experiences, the research discussed above shows that these coping mechanisms bring with them additional

consequences including depression, isolation, and loneliness. Furthermore, utilizing strategies that don't acknowledge the negative impact of gendered-racial microaggressions decreases the likelihood of Black women receiving necessary mental health support for their psychological and physiological symptoms. This was highlighted by the work of Corbin et al. (2018) who found similar coping strategies exacerbates symptoms of Racial Battle Fatigue. Lastly, while the main purpose of the current study was not to assess the impact of age or graduate level on the effects of Racial Battle Fatigue, given the fact that RBF is the result of constant and consistent experiences with microaggressions, it is reasonable to assume that Black women who are older and/or further along in their educational journeys, will be at greater risk due to their increased and prolonged exposure. This emphasizes the need for work that centers the experiences of Black graduate women.

Implications for Practice

Although the implications below are supported by research, they are primarily informed by the experiences and recommendations of the women in this study. Specifically, they are inspired by the participants' responses to the following question: what advice would you give to a first-year Black woman, attending a historically White institution? The first implication is the need for education, specifically around gendered-racial microaggressions and other forms of racial trauma. Next, I discuss the importance of support networks. This implication addresses the need for counterspaces that are supportive and reaffirming for Black women. Lastly, I discuss meeting the mental health needs of Black women by providing culturally competent counseling.

Education

One of the most commonly identified implications of research on the experiences of Black students at HWIs is a need for diversity related training for students, staff, and faculty members. Although I believe this is integral to improving the experiences of Black students, these trainings are often designed for, and targeted to, White people. However, Black students, especially Black women, also need to be educated with regards to gendered-racial microaggressions and other forms of racial and gendered discrimination (Truong & Museus, 2012). This education should include, among other things, what microaggressions are, how to identify them, how to respond to them, and how to get support when dealing with them. As critical race theory highlights, racism is endemic and permanent, so it is inevitable that Black women will experience racial and gendered-racial microaggressions on a regular basis. As a result, it is our responsibility to be proactive in how we prepare them to handle their experiences and we can do that by creating counterspaces for them (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). Counterspaces, unlike safe spaces, go beyond simply providing a place for students to feel welcome and wanted. Instead, they are active spaces that equip Students of Color, in this case, Black women, with the tools they need to navigate sexist and racially hostile campuses.

The need for education and counterspaces was emphasized by several of the participants when describing their own experiences or providing advice to other Black women. For example, Tatiana shared that she often did not respond to microaggressions when she was an undergraduate student because she did not know what they were. She explained:

> In undergrad, it was not addressed, because I didn't know what they were. I had no clue what a microaggression was. I learned about it after I graduated…and then when it was described it was like, "oh, whoops." All that time, I never responded, because I didn't know what it was. And then once I learned what it was, I was like, "okay, it's this but how do I respond without getting upset?"

Tatiana's quote demonstrates the need for teaching students what microaggressions are as well as how to respond to them. This was echoed by Kelly who, when asked what advice she would give to younger Black women, said, "Learn how to respond. And don't be shocked when it does happen. Because if you're not shocked, then you know to respond better."

In addition to knowing *how* to respond to gendered-racial microaggressions, Black women also need to know how to navigate *when* to respond. However, when discussing this with students, it is crucial that it is made clear to them that there is no right or wrong way to respond, including choosing not to respond at all. The need for this was demonstrated in the previous chapter when I shared how often the participants felt regret or shame based on their responses. When Christina shared her advice for other Black women dealing microaggressions, she highlighted overcoming the guilt they sometimes feel when they do not respond. She said:

> You have to give yourself time and allow yourself passes, because I know that sometimes you can be like, "dang, I should have said something," or "dang, I wish I said." It can be really hurtful because you're trying to navigate the space and trying to tell yourself you should have known better when it's your first time.

> And you're not given the same chances as White people. So, I think that also plays a part in why we're so hard on ourselves, especially as Black women.

Josie shared Christina's sentiments when she explained the navigational process. She said:

> I would tell her to pick your battles. Because you're going to be a Black woman in predominantly White spaces for the rest of your life…learn how to be direct and then address issues when you feel like you need to, but don't address every single thing. One, because you're going to burn yourself out. There's going to be too many things. It's going to get tiring…Also, dealing with microaggressions and learning how to navigate that space and speak to it when necessary is a skill. It's a true skill set. So, you need to practice it.

Kelly, Tatiana, Christina, and Josie show us the need for education around gendered-racial microaggressions that does not just target the perpetrators, but the receivers as well.

Support Network

Another common piece of advice provided by the participants was the importance of building a support network with other Black women. For example, Mariah shared:

> Definitely, definitely, definitely find your support system. Find your community because I did not do that in my undergrad. And even now I'm still struggling with doing that. You know what I mean? Like I said, it takes a lot of energy for me to go out and build relationships with people….but those relationships are valuable

> and I think that it's important to find those relationships and put in the work to develop those relationships, especially with Staff of Color if you can find them.

Even though Maria did not build a support system in undergrad, and is struggling to do so now as a graduate student, she still acknowledged and stressed the need for one. Similarly, Reneé also described the need for community. She shared:

> Find a tribe. Definitely, find a tribe. I think that's what helped me survive undergrad. I don't think I would have gotten out of undergrad how I did. I think I probably would've left. Most people left…And I don't think I would have been able to navigate appropriately if it wasn't for the fact of having some support, somewhere I can go retreat… so I would definitely say find a support system of people that you truly trust. And when it's tough, go to them.

Audre also shared how vital a support network is when she shared how having one saved her life as an undergraduate. She explained:

> I feel like if it wasn't for the African American Studies department, I would not have made it. And I'm just telling you, be alive without them. Because it takes a toll on you when you're the only one…I was literally digging myself into a grave. I was throwing up every morning and even now, that happens. I stress myself out so much with the weight and the pressure of knowing that I can't quit.

For Audre, the support she received from the African American Studies department not only helped her academically, but also helped her mentally and emotionally with the symptoms of racial battle fatigue that she was experiencing including depression, stress, and vomiting. When she shared this, I instantly thought of my own experiences in

undergrad. I too found support from the staff and faculty in the African American Studies department. I also spent all of my free time in the Office of Multicultural Affairs and have said repeatedly that I do not think that I would have graduated had it not been for those two safe spaces.

While Renee, Audre, and I all highlight the important benefits of a having a support system, all of our experiences were in undergrad, which calls attention to another problem. Although multicultural centers on college campuses do great work with regards to creating community for Students of Color, their efforts are often targeted towards undergraduate students, not those of us in graduate programs. This is partly due to a lack of resources as well as a belief that graduate students may not need as much support. However, the findings of the current study demonstrate that the social and emotional needs of Black graduate women are not being met. As a result, practitioners should be intentional about creating programs geared towards building community for Black graduate women. This could take various forms including cohosting social events with student organizations (e.g. Black Graduate Students Association), facilitating workshops that address their unique needs (e.g. mental health and Black women), or creating a mentorship program that connects students with Black faculty members on campus. For so many of us, we are one of only a handful of Black women in our programs, which increases our feelings of loneliness and isolation. Practitioners can help support us by connecting us with Black women in other programs and colleges on campus.

Counseling

Unlike the two previous implications, counseling was only mentioned by two of the eleven participants, which is actually why I am including it. Mariah was the only participant that identified counseling as a coping mechanism and Audre identified it as a suggestion for other Black women dealing with microaggressions. However, given the negative psychological effects of experiencing microaggressions (e.g. decreased self-esteem, increased depression, and racial battle fatigue), the need for counseling is crucial to the well-being of Black women navigating sexist and racially hostile environments.

Although the other participants did not specifically mention counseling as one of their coping strategies, they did emphasize the need for positive identity development and self-reflection – two things that could be addressed with a counselor. For example, when I asked Angela what advice she would give to other Black women, she said:

> Right off the bat, be comfortable being you. And set yourself as a priority from the jump. Don't be scared to establish who you are from the beginning and stand up in your space. Don't be a punk. You don't have to feel obligated to anybody else's feelings or to protect anybody else's feelings. Just be comfortable in your space

Angela's advice was especially meaningful because she acknowledged that she had not yet learned how to do this herself. This demonstrates the need for programs that do not just support the development of undergraduate student Black women, but Black graduate women as well.

Yoncé echoed Angela's advice to make oneself a priority. She shared:

> One thing would be, take care of YOURself, YOUR. Thank yourself. And what I mean by that is take care of yourself, meaning respond or not respond, navigate those microaggressions in ways in which YOU feel is most beneficial for you. Because at the end of the day how you navigate those and how you respond is still going to have an impact on you.

Yoncé argued for the importance of self-care and taking care of oneself emotionally. She shared Christina's feelings described earlier concerning being kind to yourself and giving yourself a pass when not responding the way you believe you "should" have.

> Yoncé also stressed the importance of self-reflection. She shared:
>
> Another thing would be reflect, reflect, reflect, reflect. I think, as this interview has showed, we walk through our lives, and not unpacking our interactions, our experiences. And it shapes us in ways that some people don't know. And it's better to know how something is shaping you and impacting how you see the world than to not…so I would say reflect on your experiences with microaggressions. How did how did they actually impact you? Because they did.

I found Yoncé's advice to be particularly powerful given the way she often minimizes the impact experiencing gendered-racial microaggressions has on her. Although in chapter four I shared comments she made about having no feelings about experiencing microaggressions, we see here that she believed that they have an impact on Black women, whether they realize it or not. This disconnect highlights the need for counseling since it could not only help Black women acknowledge the impact of their experiences, but also deal with the emotions that are associated with them.

Although I believe that all counseling is important, there is a special need for culturally competent counselors. This was demonstrated by the negative impact of racism and sexism on the on the mental and emotional well-being of the Black women in this study. All of them reported experiencing one or more symptoms of racial battle fatigue and they would be most effectively supported by a mental health professional who could not only identify their symptoms but help provide appropriate treatment as well. Although George Washington University is progressing in this area, it still has a long way to go. Currently, the mental health clinic on campus has "walk-in" hours twice/week for Students of Color. While this is a step in the right direction, Students of Color should be able to go to the clinic on any day, at any time, with the confidence that they will be able to see a counselor who is qualified to help them. Furthermore, it is unclear whether or not the counselors available on these days are competent in the unique and nuanced experiences of Black women. A counselor's ability to acknowledge and address the impact of racism on a Black woman does not mean they are also competent in the effects of gendered-racism. As I discussed in Chapter 1, there is an underutilization of mental health services by Students of Color due to a lack of diverse and culturally competent counselors (Brownson et al., 2014; Hayes et al., 2011; McGee & Stovall, 2015). Addressing this issue would increase the number of students getting the psychological help they need. Lastly, since the Black women in the study reported being expected to perpetuate the strong Black woman stereotype, it is also important that student affairs professionals make intentional efforts to advertise and normalize the use of mental health services. One way this can be done is by having a Black female counselor host group counseling sessions that are geared specifically to the experiences of Black women on

campus. This would benefit Black graduate women in two ways. First, it would provide the women with appropriate support that meets their unique psychological needs. Second, it would help normalize their experiences by allowing them to hear the experiences of other Black graduate women on campus.

Although the previously mentioned implications – counterspaces, support networks, and counseling – are beneficial for supporting Black graduate women at historically White institutions, it is important to note that these are reactive strategies. These suggestions are responses to the negative consequences Black women experience after exposure to gendered-racial microaggressions. However, Black women deserve better. They deserve educational spaces that they do not have to be taught how to endure or cope with. Increasing the number of Black graduate women or faculty is irrelevant, and potentially dangerous, if they are being subjected to sexist and racially hostile campus environments. Instead, institutions need to be intentional about dismantling the sexist and racist structures that are embedded within the campus culture and contribute to the negative psychological consequences experienced by Black women. Black women deserve to more than an afterthought.

Recommendations for Future Research

As mentioned before, there are extreme negative psychological consequences for those who experience microaggressions. That has been confirmed by the participants of this study who demonstrated signs of depression, stress, decreased self-esteem, and racial battle fatigue. However, as we have also seen with this study, few of the participants have been seeking or receiving mental health services. Future research should examine the

mental health seeking behaviors of Black graduate women with regards to their experiences with gendered-racial microaggressions. Research should investigate why Black women choose not to seek counseling and what factors would increase the likelihood of them getting support. Additionally, future research should explore the impact of the different coping strategies on the mental health of Black women.

One thing that came up during data collection, but was outside the scope of the study, was the difference between how participants receive and respond to racial microaggressions versus gendered-racial microaggressions. All of the participants shared that they are the most hurt and offended by gendered-racial microaggressions but are more likely to respond to racial microaggressions. Future research should examine the factors that contribute to this disconnect as well as the differences in the psychological impact of experiencing racial microaggressions versus gendered-racial microaggressions. Furthermore, research should examine whether different supports are needed for Black women experiencing one type of microaggression versus the other.

Lastly, future researchers should do a similar study with Black women in different academic disciplines. Ten out of the eleven participants in the current study were in either the College of Education or the College of Public Health. Participants in both colleges believed that the fact that they were in "helping" fields may have affected the frequency in which they experienced gendered-racial microaggressions. Among the reasons why was the fact that both colleges tend to have more female students than male. Also, since the Black women in this study identified White men as a cause for their fear of responding to gendered-racial microaggressions, future research should explore the experiences of Black graduate women in academic disciplines that tend to consist

primarily of White male students. For example, as an undergraduate student, I majored in political science and was often the only Black woman in a room with predominantly White men. I experienced more racial and gendered-racial microaggressions in my political science classes than any other of my other classes. Other potential colleges for future studies include the School of Business and the Law School.

Conclusion

Informed by the tenets of critical race theory, this study demonstrated the endemic nature of racism through the way the participants normalized their experiences, challenged the dominant narrative that claims we live in a post-racial society by highlighting the everyday gendered-racism experienced by the participants, valued the experiential knowledge of Black women, and employed a transdisciplinary approach that explored the sociological and psychological impacts of their experiences. The last tenet, a commitment to social justice, is what I implore you to consider as you decide what to take away from what you have learned. Audre Lorde said:

> I have a duty to speak the truth as I see it and share not just my triumphs, not just the things that felt good, but the pain. The intense, often unmitigated pain. It is important to share how I know survival is survival and not just a walk through the rain.

The women in this study shared their pain and triumphs with me and allowed me to share them with you. We thank them by listening, but we honor them by doing.

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Appendix A

Appendix B

Focus Group Interview Guide

Introduction: The goal of this focus group is to learn more about your experiences as Students of Color here on campus. I am especially interested in your experience with racial and gendered-racial microaggressions. Microaggressions are defined as subtle, everyday insults, slights, or mistreatments (Blume et al. 2012). Racial microaggressions are microaggressions that are racially motivated and typically judge a person based on their perceived racial or ethnic identity. Gendered-racial microaggressions refer to the simultaneous experience of both racism and sexism.

**When discussing your experiences, please do not mention specific names of individuals involved.*

1. What does it feel like to be a Black student at GW?
2. What does it feel like to be a Black woman at GW?
3. What have your experiences been with racial microaggressions on campus?
4. What have your experiences been with gendered-racial microaggressions on campus?
5. How do you respond to microaggressions?
6. How do you cope with microaggressions?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix C

Prompts for Journal

Introduction: This journal is to provide you will a space to share your weekly experiences with racism and microaggressions on campus. Although I am asking that you write at least once/week, you are welcome to write as often as you would like. I would also like you to write about any experiences with microaggressions as soon after the incident as possible. This will allow me to gain greater insight into your immediate thoughts, feelings, and reactions.

For this study, microaggressions are defined as subtle, everyday insults, slights, or mistreatments. Racial microaggressions are microaggressions that are racially motivated and typically judge a person based on their perceived racial or ethnic identity. Gendered-racial microaggressions refer to the simultaneous experience of both racism and sexism.

**When mentioning who was involved in the incident, please do not include specific names or titles.*

1. Did you have any experiences with racial microaggressions this week? If so, please describe what happened. (In your description, please provide who was involved and where it took place).
    a. How did the(se) experience(s) make you feel?
    b. How are you coping with the(se) experience(s)?
    c. How did you handle the situation(s)?
2. Did you have any experiences with gendered-racial microaggressions this week? If so, please describe what happened. (In your description, please provide who was involved and where it took place).

a. How did the(se) experience(s) make you feel?

b. How are you coping with the(se) experience(s)?

c. How did you handle the situation(s)?

3. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix D

Individual Interview Guide

Introduction: the purpose of this interview is twofold. My first goal is to learn about your experiences with racial and gendered-racial microaggressions. I am especially interested in how you cope with these experiences. My second goal is to follow-up with you about your journal entries.

Before we begin, I want to remind you of the definitions I am using for microaggressions. Microaggressions are defined as subtle, everyday insults, slights, or mistreatments (Blume et al. 2012). Racial microaggressions are microaggressions that are racially motivated and typically judge a person based on their perceived racial or ethnic identity. Gendered-racial microaggressions refer to the simultaneous experience of both racism and sexism.

Also, please do not mention specific names of individuals when describing incidents or experiences on campus.

1. How have things been going for you since we met for the focus group?
2. How would you describe your overall experience as a Black woman at GW?
3. If it's ok with you, I would like to follow-up on the experiences you shared with me in your journal. On…., you wrote about …….. Would you please share more about that experience?
4. Please describe any experiences you've had with microaggressions that were not shared in your journal
    a. How did you respond?
    b. How did the experience make you feel?
    c. How did you cope with the experience?

5. What factors do you think affect if/how you respond to microaggressions?
6. What are some ways, if any, that the way you respond to microaggressions has changed as you've gotten older?
7. What are some of the ways that you cope with microaggressions?
8. How would you describe the effectiveness of your current coping strategies?
9. What are some ways, if any, that the way you cope with microaggressions has changed as you have gotten older?
10. What can the University do to help support you?
11. Is there anything else you would like to share?