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African American professionals in higher education: experiencing and coping with racial microaggressions

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ABSTRACT

Using a Critical Race Theory lens, we explored how African American professionals in both HBCUs and PWIs (4-year and 2-year institutions) experienced and coped with racial microaggressions. The participants in this study included fifteen African American instructors/professors and administrators. Despite the type of institution, the emerged themes from interviews indicated that participants experienced an array of racial microaggressions. In addition, many participants addressed race-related stress experienced in the workplace by engaging in both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. Implications are provided to discuss the impact that racial microaggressions has on African Americans in the higher education workplace.

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For decades, scholars have investigated higher education as a workplace context, identifying the various pressures employees face (Aguirre 2000). Among them, inclusivity and sense of belonging have been highlighted as top concerns due to the fact that faculty and administrators of color remain significantly underrepresented (Wolfe and Freeman 2013). Few studies, however, discuss the presence of racism in higher education workplaces. Instead, many studies minimize the impact of racism on institutional norms and People of Color (Harper 2012).

African Americans are at an increased risk for experiencing racism and racial discrimination in the higher education workplace (Offermann et al. 2014). These negative experiences significantly impact both their psychological and physiological health, requiring adaptive coping strategies to ensure healthy psychological functioning. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role racial microaggressions have played in the experiences of African American professors, administrators, and researchers in various higher education workplace contexts. Using their counterstories, through a critical race theory lens, we focus not only on their experiencing of racial microaggressions, but also the coping strategies they elect to challenge their negative experiences.

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Understanding racial microaggressions

According to Sue et al. (2007a), racial microaggressions are one of the 'new faces of racism', such as colorblind racism, and are defined as 'brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group' (p. 72). Reflecting an unconscious worldview of White supremacy (Sue et al. 2008), racial microaggressions are expressed in three forms: *microassaults, microinsults*, and *microinvalidations*. While microassaults are conscious and deliberate in nature (i.e. using racial slurs), other forms of racial microaggressions (microinsults and microinvalidations) are unconscious and subtle exchanges between perpetrators who are unaware of their hidden prejudices and biases, and how they impact People of Color (Constantine, 2007). Further, microinsults are verbal, nonverbal, or environmental actions that 'convey insensitivity, are rude, or directly demean a person's racial heritage or identity' (Sue et al. 2007b, 274), while microinvalidations are used to dismiss the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiences of People of Color (Sue et al. 2007a, 2007b). Attitudes and behaviors are considered 'micro' because of the 'quiet' form that they occur in compared to forms of overt racism. Despite their quiet nature, the impacts of racial microaggressions have large implications for the People of Color that receive them.

Racial microaggressions in higher education

Racism is a pertinent issue for People of Color and the experiencing of racial microaggressions is quite commonplace at the university level (Louis et al. 2016). Sadly, racial microaggressions that are experienced by People of Color in higher education are often perpetuated by White faculty, administrators, staff, and students who are unaware of the racist origins or implications of their actions (Constantine et al. 2008; Louis et al. 2016; Sue et al. 2011). Much of the work that has examined race in the higher education workplace centers on the experiences of African American faculty, particularly in 4-year, predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Dade et al. 2015; Louis et al. 2016; Ross and Edwards 2016; Stanley 2006).

There is, however, a shortage of literature on the experiences of African American faculty and administrators in other contexts. For instance, it is often assumed that HBCUs are not racialized because of the majority Black student body and large number of African American faculty and administrators. Contrarily, African Americans in academe are not immune to experiencing similar challenges at HBCUs, such as alienation and isolation, tokenism, and internalized oppression (Ricks 2012). In addition, research does suggest that racism and racial microaggressions are prevalent at the administrative level of the higher education landscape (Gardner, Barrett, and Pearson 2014; Jackson 2004; Patitu and Hinton 2003; Ramey 1995; Rolle, Davies, and Banning 2000).

Coping with racial microaggressions and racism in the workplace

In the workplace, African Americans experience various forms of physical, mental, and emotional fatigue and exhibit a variety of responses to survive in these situations (Holder, Jackson, & Poterotto, 2015; Utsey et al. 2008). In order to deal with race-related stressors in the workplace, individuals elect various adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms (Forsyth and Carter 2012; Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto 2015; Utsey et al. 2008).

Adaptive coping strategies, also known as engagement coping strategies, are the positive or healthy approaches to addressing stress. Utilizing these strategies allow individuals to more positively deal with instances of racism, often managing stressful situations or events through problem-solving behaviors, emotional support seeking, and cognitive reframing (Vassilliere, Holahan, and Holahan 2016). Adaptive coping strategies include, but are not limited to, engaging in communication or confronting racism (Forsyth and Carter 2012; Mellor 2004), forming professional networks (Harrell 2000), seeking mentorship (Hall, Everett, and Hamilton-Mason 2012), turning to religion/spirituality (Linnabery, Stuhlmacher, and Towler 2014; Thomas, Speight, & Witherspoon, 2008), armoring or setting boundaries, and engaging in self-care (Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto 2015; Franklin and Boyd-Franklin 2000).

Experiencing racial microaggressions can also cause individuals to elect maladaptive coping strategies. Maladaptive coping strategies, also known as disengagement coping strategies, are negative or unhealthy approaches that may, in fact, increase stress. Because this form of coping is defined by attempts to mentally, emotionally, and physically remove stressors, this form of coping can result in the following: the suppression or internalization of feelings (e.g. social withdrawal, self-criticism), physiological consequences (e.g. high blood pressure), feeling isolated, and refusing to directly confront the racism experienced (e.g. problem avoidance), among others. For instance, African Americans may deny that the race-related stressor exists in order to detach themselves from the problem (Mellor 2004; Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight 2008) or work harder to prove others wrong (Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto 2015; Utsey et al. 2008).

Coping mechanisms are independent of the institutional structure and are based upon an individual's personal resources or beliefs. Research studies have found that African American typically utilize emotional coping strategies (i.e. relying upon family, friends, church, other personal networks) when they are in distress. These strategies have been connected to African Americans experiencing high levels of discrimination such as what occurs in the higher education workplace (Vassilliere, Holahan, and Holahan 2016).

Critical race theory framework

In order to better understand how African American faculty, researchers, and administrators cope with racial microaggressions in the higher education context, it is critical that their voices are heard in an effort to validate their experiences. Critical Race Theory is a useful tool to help analyze the experiences of African Americans, particularly in the higher education system (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Lynn and Dixson 2013). Critical Race Theory (CRT) focuses on race, racism, and power in order to challenge the hegemonic system of White supremacy. A foundation of CRT is *racial realism*, or the *permanence of racism*, which highlights the fact that racism is normal and ordinary (Bell 1992; Peller 1990). According to Bell (1992), racism is an 'integral, permanent and indestructible component of this society' (p. ix). Further, racism is systemic and institutionalized throughout all political, economic, social, and education systems. Because of this, African Americans occupy a permanent subordinate status that is based upon racism and White privilege. Also central to CRT is *counter-storytelling*, which is rooted in the belief that it is necessary to give power to marginalized groups who have been historically marginalized by racism.

Giving voice to their experiences provides an alternative viewpoint of the narratives that have historically been accepted and held as truth by the White majority (DeCuir and Dixson 2004; Ladson-Billings 1998). We utilized CRT as a medium by which to contextualize the stories of African Americans in the higher education workplace in an effort to understand the impact that race and racism has on their experiences.

CRT in higher education

In higher education, CRT challenges the practice of assuming the experiences of White students, faculty, and staff as the norm on college and university campuses while legitimizing People of Color's experiences through counter-storytelling (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Dixson, Rousseau, and Donner 2016; McCoy and Rodricks 2015; Taylor, 2009). CRT has been used to both examine race and racism in university settings (Hiraldo 2010) and inform college student development theory (Patton et al. 2007). It is important to note that most of the CRT work in higher education has concentrated on the experiences of students and faculty, and less has focused on the experiences of staff (McCoy and Rodricks 2015). While over 20 years of scholarship has explored CRT in the higher education context, there is still ample room for continued research, particularly as it relates to racial microaggressions.

CRT and racial microaggressions

Yosso et al. (2009) assert that 'CRT challenges us to name racist injuries and identify their origins' (p.680). Thus, examining racial microaggressions is an essential means of analysis within the CRT framework because it allows us to appropriately identify everyday forms of racism. As suggested by Pérez Huber and Solórzano (2015), examining racial microaggressions from a CRT perspective enables researchers to evaluate how racial microaggressions grow out of institutional racism (structural racism), which is informed by racial macroaggressions (the ideological foundation of White Supremacy). Racial microaggressions function as an extension of racial realism or the *permanence of racism* in the United States, the idea that racism is normal or ordinary, and is, consequently, embedded within the institutional structures of society (Bell 1992).

Methods

The study examined the personal experiences of African American educational professionals in the higher education workplace context. We specifically explored the following research questions:

(1) What are African American education professionals' experiences with racial microaggressions in the higher education workplace context?
(2) How do African American education professionals cope with experiences with racial microaggressions in the higher education workplace context?

Context/participants

The participants included 15 African American instructors/professors and administrators, specifically 10 women and 5 men. They worked in a variety of higher education contexts including predominantly White community colleges or 2-year institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and predominately White 4-year institutions (PWIs) across the Southeastern region of the United States (see Table 1). We used purposive sampling for this study in that the 15 participants were recruited based upon their affiliations with higher education work contexts. Because all of the researchers in this study are affiliated with various higher education organizations and contexts, participants were recruited using a variety of personal contacts. All names and places have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Data sources/collection procedures

The participants agreed to share their stories regarding race and racism within the workplace and were subsequently interviewed one-on-one, with each interview lasting 30 minutes to over an hour. Research team members conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant via telephone or in person in order to capture their experiences (Rubin and Rubin 2011). The semi-structured interviews included probing questions and focused on racial microaggressions, coping, and workplace satisfaction. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis procedures

The research team analyzed the data using a five-step process. The first step was the creation of a codebook. With the hope of establishing greater consistency among coders, we created a detailed codebook that was structured to include a category, code name, brief definition of each code, full definition of each code, and raw data examples of each code (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, and McCulloch 2011). Once the codebook was created, we began the second step, open coding, where we examined the raw data by 'breaking data apart and delineating concepts' (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 195). Through open coding we explored the ideas and meaning contained in our

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Participant	Gender	Position	Type of Institution	Microaggressions Discussed
Tracey	Female	Senior Researcher	Public, 4-year PWI	4
Tamara	Female	Lower level Administrator	Public, 2-year PWI	5
Stacey	Female	Junior Faculty	Private, 4 year PWI	10
Peter	Male	Executive Administrator	Private, 4-year HBCU	7
Michael	Male	Executive Administrator	Public, 2-year PWI	9
Jamie	Female	Lower level Administrator	Public, 2-year PWI	14
Jamal	Male	Lower level Administrator	Public, 2-year PWI	5
Jacqueline	Female	Executive Administrator	Public, 2-year PWI	28
Evelyn	Female	Junior Faculty	Public, 4-year PWI	8
Destiny	Female	Junior Faculty	Public, 4-year HBCU	20
Desmond	Male	Lower level Administrator	Public, 4-year HBCU	1
Damon	Male	Lower level Administrator	Public, 4-year PWI	27
Crystal	Female	Junior Faculty	Public, 4-year HBCU	7
Carmen	Female	Lower level Administrator	Public, 4-year HBCU	2
Cara	Female	Lower level Administrator	Public, 4-year PWI	2

raw data, which lead to the creation of our codes. We used Dedoose 7.5.16 software to code and organize all of the raw data. After the data was coded, the next step was axial coding, the process of identifying connections between codes. Within Dedoose, we utilized the Qualitative Charts component which allowed us to determine the frequency of codes that were applied to the data. Last, we connected the themes to the broader research literature (Wolcott 1994), including the larger racial microaggressions and coping research literatures. Using the analysis of narratives approach (Polkinghorne 1995), we focused on common themes across the participants' stories and portrayed a collection of thematic counterstories by institution type.

Credibility/trustworthiness

The research team utilized a variety of strategies in order to establish credibility and trustworthiness. First, we used a team-based approach to create a codebook. Utilizing a codebook allows for the more systematic coding of data. In addition, we utilized multiple coders in order to help establish consistency in the interpretation of the data (Golafshani 2003); therefore, we initially established an 85% inter-rater reliability. Discrepancies in the coding occurred when applying multiple codes to the data. All discrepancies were discussed until 100% agreement was reached. Next, while interviewing, we probed the participants in order to make sure that they were consistent with their responses. Last, we also provided thick, rich descriptions in our analyses order to best demonstrate any claims that we made regarding the data.

Findings

In analyzing our data, we found the participants experienced numerous racial microaggressions within the workplace context and although participants worked in various higher education environments (e.g. PWIs and HBCUs), experiences were similar. The ten participants at the PWIs mentioned 112 instances of racial microaggressions while the five participants at the HBCUs discussed only 37 instances. While some participants experienced various microinvalidations, the participants primarily experienced microinsults (i.e. ascription of intelligence, criminality assumptions, and pathologizing cultural values/communication styles) (Sue et al, 2007b). In an effort to cope with race-related stress, particularly from microinsults, participants engaged in a variety of adaptive coping strategies (e.g. confronting racism through open communication, establishing personal and professional support networks, engaging in self-care, setting boundaries) and maladaptive coping strategies (e.g. using avoidance techniques, working harder).

Experiencing racial microaggressions at PWIs

Participants at PWIs often experienced being treated as if they were *second-class citizens* (Sue et al, 2007b), a theme that describes being treated as a lesser person or group. One message communicated by this type of microinsult was being perceived as incapable of occupying high-status positions. For instance, Stacey, a faculty member at a private

PWI, discussed a time when she was presumed to be a temporary staff member rather than a tenure track faculty member:

> When I initially got my ID and I went to HR, the woman said, "Are you temporary staff?" And I said, "No, I'm tenure track." And she said, "Well, you must be temporary staff," and I said, "No, I'm tenure track." It was kind of frustrating that she didn't believe that I could be a full-time tenure track professor.

Another theme, the *criminality/assumption of criminal status* (Sue et al, 2007b), manifested in the participants' collective experiences working in higher education, especially in predominantly White workplace contexts. Michael, a community college administrator, recalled several instances where White employees in the workplace eschewed him and his minority counterparts:

> I had two instances where it was one time me and another Black guy. Someone was getting on an elevator and they stopped and backed away and acted like they forgot something. Another time, another person stopped, backed away, and the only reason they got on is because a Black girl came up behind him and said, "Hey, how you doing?" She kind of got him on the elevator, you know? And when that person got off the elevator, all of us, all three of us – the Latino guy and the Black girl – were like, "Did you see that crap?" We used different words, of course, but that's pretty much what we said. It was very evident.

Engaging in adaptive coping strategies to address racial microaggressions at PWIs

Despite consistently experiencing racial microaggressions, many participants used various adaptive coping strategies to help alleviate some of the race-related stress they experienced in the higher education workplace. Specifically, participants used four different adaptive strategies when they experienced race-related stress at work: (1) confronting racism through open communication; (2) establishing personal and professional networks; (3) engaging in self-care; and (4) setting boundaries.

Confronting racism through open communication

Participants found their ability to confront racism through open dialogue with their microaggressors – a form of approach coping – significantly reduced their levels of stress. Jacqueline, an administrator at a PWI, shared, 'If I believe that I have been disrespected and that disrespect definitely I know that it is based on the color of my skin, then I am going to let you know that.'

Michael, on the other hand, confronted the racism he experienced in the workplace by engaging his perpetrators in an open dialogue about the experiences unique to both the Black and White communities, while also offering them the opportunity to consider the perspectives of Black people, a method he felt has been mutually beneficial for both him and his White colleagues. He shared:

> I bring it up, and I do because one thing I've been able to do in the past couple of years is have open discussions with my colleagues about the difference between Black and White and how and why we feel like we do. I will say that they've appreciated it, too, and one thing they expressed from the conversation from the dialogue is that they appreciate it.

Personal and professional support networks

Establishing personal and professional support networks was also a productive way of coping with race-related stress at work for many participants. While some found their stress levels to be reduced through communication with family and friends, others found that it was the support they received from professionals who were in similar positions or worked in similar contexts that helped them to successfully navigate the higher education workplace contexts in which they were employed. For instance, Damon, an administrator at a public PWI, found it essential to have regular informal conversations with several of his friends who hailed from different parts of the country using the GroupMe application on his phone. It was these conversations, he declared, that have helped him to avoid engaging in aggressive behavior:

> I have peers who are doing the work that I do at different institutions…We keep an informal GroupMe and we talk about issues and talk about…"My boss just did this, said this." We may do a little call-in or we do group support via GroupMe, and it helps. It really does help because sometimes you just want to throw a chair.

Tamara, a community college administrator, found that her relationships with her vice president, an African American woman, were crucial in helping her to navigate the terrains of her workplace context. She asserted:

> I have been blessed to have… we have one vice-president here who is an African American woman and the majority of her team are Black. And so, while I'm not under her division, she has helped me, to help protect me from a lot of things and taught me about the ways to navigate our college, to try to find the path of least resistance.

Setting boundaries

Finally, many participants at PWIs believed in the necessity of setting boundaries by separating their work life from their home life in an effort to relieve themselves of the stress they experienced in the workplace. These participants used various methods to maintain these boundaries. Cara, an administrator at a public PWI, for example, believed that it is important to disconnect the emails that feed through to her personal phone when she left work:

> Work can stress you out, but I try to not take it home with me. When I leave, I will do my other stuff. So I learned from North Central University, do not connect my emails to my personal phone, because I ain't dealing with that crap. When I leave that office, that's it. It stays there. Outside of work, working with student groups, that'll mess you up when you leave there because you can't turn that off. But other than that, that work-work, I'm turning that off.

Damon also believed it is important to leave 'work' at work. He stated, 'If it happened at work, when I walked out that door, I would leave it here.' Similarly, Tracey, a researcher at a PWI, has found it necessary to always make time for her personal life. She maintained: 'I've learned that you have to carve your time or it'll be this never-ending monster that's trying to consume you, and y'all not getting ready to kill me'.

Engaging in maladaptive coping strategies at PWIs

While many participants engaged in adaptive coping, several of the participants at PWIs engaged in maladaptive coping strategies in an effort to help alleviate some of the race-

related stress they experienced in the higher education workplace. Participants used two types of maladaptive forms of coping when they experienced race-related stress at work: (1) using avoidance techniques, and (2) working harder.

Using avoidance techniques

Evelyn, a faculty member at a public PWI, who was painstakingly aware of the hierarchy of power in her predominantly White workplace context, avoided addressing the racism she perceived in her workplace for fear of potentially offending one of her perpetrators and facing the risk of being penalized for her actions. She argued:

> It's a tricky…It's a power dynamic there. How do you tell someone? What are the consequences of telling someone that? It could go seamlessly, as they could apologize and move on, and never happen again, but academics get interesting in their personalities. You never know what the consequences are of addressing it more outright.

Jamal, a community college administrator, shared a similar viewpoint. However, because he believes that the racism he has experienced is not going to go away, he did not feel as if he needed to address the race-related issues in the workplace. He shared:

> I kind of swept it under the rug. Probably because I felt like it was nothing that could be done and I also had to be mindful of who I am and my response to certain things because I may not be perceived as a concerned employee as opposed to a problem.

Stacey found it extremely stressful to navigate the everyday racism she has experienced. To this end, she has intentionally avoided specific people. She lamented:

> It's stressful, you know? There are times where I just want to go home and sleep. I just don't want to deal with it. I have avoided people; I see them and turn the other way, because I just don't want to deal with the fakeness.

Working harder

Several participants discussed a sense of urgency in trying to be 'twice as good' or 'work twice as hard' as their White counterparts for fear of impending consequences, such as reproaching, questioning, or dismissal. Jacqueline, for instance, looked back on her experiences as an African American woman in higher education and maintained:

> I had to prove that, as a person of color, when you walk into a position, you always have to prove – especially in a predominantly White setting – that you are worthy, and that you can get the job done. And that you are competent, you are capable. So proving on that particular level that I can do it. And you always feel that you have to be twice as good and you have to work twice as hard and yes, you do, and actually when you move into those positions you already. In most instances, you're going to be better credentialed, you'll probably have more experience than your White counterpart, but you're not looking at that because you have, in many ways, been reared to believe that you have to be twice as good.

Similarly, Tamara recalled feeling as though she had to overcompensate in the workplace due to her race. This often meant not taking a lunch break or not making additional time in her schedule to engage in self-care strategies like exercising and healthy eating:

> I'm very conscious about the way that I work and I like to do my best work, but sometimes I overcompensate by working too much and that leaves no time for exercise or healthy eating. At my last job I never left my desk. I didn't take lunch.

Recalling his own experiences serving as an administrator in higher education, Michael identified several consequences unique to African Americans working in higher education at PWIs and HBCUs: 'Achieve or you know even twice as smart…Got to work twice as hard, you got to stay long hours. You can't be as happy.'

Experiencing microaggressions at HBCUs

Despite the belief that racial microaggressions may only occur among faculty and staff at PWIs, many experiences with racism occurred among faculty and staff at HBCUs, which further demonstrates the permanence of racism and its impact on both types of institutions. Participants found their respective higher education contexts to be racially hostile. They often experienced racial microaggressions, particularly microinsults. One common theme was the *ascription of intelligence* (Sue et al, 2007b) in that the participants often felt as if their intellect was being questioned or challenged. Crystal, a faculty member at a public HBCU, explained how racism has impacted her fellow colleagues' perceptions of her level of expertise in her field:

> I think it's difficult is kind of how you summarize it, in that people don't often trust that you really know what you're talking about. Even though you have the same degree as any other expert would and you have experience, they don't trust that your say-so is good enough so they're always going to ask someone else. Whereas, another colleague that looks a little different says something that they know nothing about in your research area and they trust that person over you, even though you have the degree.

Similarly, Peter, a faculty member at a public HBCU, described being questioned by a White colleague about his ability to teach history courses beyond those dedicated to the Black experience:

> We had discussions – about eight of us that were Fellows at the time – and we had these weekly discussions on our research, what we were doing, what we were doing in our professional careers. I was talking that I taught European History, and I taught Colonial Early American History – those are my areas of interest – and had another colleague – another Fellow – that told me how did I feel that I could teach those correctly seeing that I was not European and not White, and why wasn't I just teaching African American History or, as he said, "colored history".

Another common theme, *pathologizing cultural values/communication styles* (Sue et al, 2007b), emerged that communicated the notion that the values of People of Color are abnormal. Public HBCU administrator, Desmond, for example, recalled a time when a White female colleague referred to the students at their predominantly African American campus as 'inherently lazy':

> I have, through the years, heard comments. I remember one particular female colleague – a Caucasian colleague in a different department – not mine, here at Northern Agricultural Technical State University, nonetheless…describe our students, meaning Northern Agricultural Technical State University students, as lazy…It's a hard word to swallow because

> I wonder if that same word would be used for students at another institution. I followed up by saying, "There are lazy students everywhere." She said it kind of specific to our students here.

Engaging in adaptive coping strategies to address racial microaggressions at HBCUs

Similar to participants at PWIs, African American professionals at HBCUs utilized adaptive coping strategies to alleviate race-related stress they experienced in the workplace. Destiny, a faculty member at a public HBCU, for instance, found it necessary to 'call people out' when she witnessed or experienced racism in the workplace:

> I just speak up. I try to call people out on it. I try to call people out on it and let them know that this is unacceptable. You're not going to treat me like this. You're not going to treat our students like this.

Engaging in self-care and working harder

Some participants discussed engaging in self-care strategies as an effective healing agent to the pain and stress of the racism they often experience on the job. Peter, for instance, found solace in reading biographies about African Americans in the past that overcame significant adversities. He shared:

> I make sure that I take down time and I read. I read Black biographies. I like reading them because it instills a level of pride. I look and see how these people could do all of these things facing what they faced, so maybe I can do it, too.

On the other hand, laughing and watching television is a stress reliever for many of the participants. Destiny similarly described how she was able to focus on her well-being by relaxing. She explained:

> I like to laugh. So that's it. I like to laugh and TV is probably my favorite thing because I get to just be still. I just relax my body, relax my mind, and that's that. That's probably my favorite way to decompress, is just to veg out and watch TV.

Crystal also acknowledged the level of stress she has experienced over the years due to this perceived need to be 'flawless' in her role for fear of being discredited. Her experience is not unique to professionals at HBCUs, its experienced by all African American professionals in higher education:

> You work twice as hard when you have to make a presentation or you have to discuss something because you want to make sure it's flawless because they will find any reason to discredit you and that can be really stressful.

Discussion

CRT reminds us that higher education is still very racially homogenous; therefore, the integration of African American faculty and administrators into this realm has not been without subtle forms of racism, including racial microaggressions. The overarching goal of this investigation was to explore the racial microaggressions experienced by African Americans within the higher education workplace context. There are several viable conclusions that can be drawn from the findings of this study.

First, our data suggest that racism is both permanent and prevalent across the higher education spectrum, a finding that is aligned with a central tenet of CRT – permanence of racism. Specifically, there is evidence of racism saturating various types of higher education environments: from two-year institutions to four-year institutions, from PWIs to HBCUs. The participants in this study demonstrated a strong awareness of the low number of African American faculty or the processes that positioned White males in the upper tiers of leadership. This ubiquitous nature of racism, specifically in the form of covert microaggressions, lends credence to its systemic influence.

Second, our findings reveal that African Americans experience microinsults within both the PWI and HBCU institutional context. Participants who work within the PWI setting primarily experienced microinsults in the forms of being viewed as a second-class citizen or a criminal. Conversely, those within the HBCU setting typically experienced ascriptions of intelligence and pathologizing cultural values/communication styles. Furthermore, HBCU participants discussed far less microaggression experiences than PWI participants. This can be attributed to the cultural aspects of HBCUs (Gasman 2007). Despite the type of context, these African American higher education employees experienced forms of institutional racism and macroracism (Huber & Solórzano, 2014).

Third, the findings indicate that participants at PWIs and HBCUs often employed a variety of both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. In terms of adaptive strategies, this included confronting racism through communication, establishing boundaries, and forging professional and/or personal networks. These approaches helped to reduce the level of race-related stress in the higher education workplace context. While the utilization of the aforementioned adaptive coping strategies alleviated race-related stress, many participants reported employing maladaptive coping strategies when positioned in the face of racism including avoidance and working harder. It is important to note, however, that many participants who elected avoidance techniques when experiencing racial microaggressions may not have viewed their responses to the race-related stress they experienced as maladaptive, but rather protective. For instance, several participants noted that choosing to 'avoid' race-related incidents rather than directly addressing the issue would lessen the likelihood that they may be subjected to the consequences of speaking out against their perpetrators. While research suggests such adaptive coping strategies tend to alleviate psychological stress and frustration associated with the experiencing of racial microaggressions in the workplace (e.g. Forsyth and Carter 2012; Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto 2015; Utsey et al. 2008), it fails to consider the unique role systemic racism plays in creating hostile work environments that prevent People of Color from experiencing safe spaces where their voices are heard and their experiences are embraced, as opposed to being denied or condemned.

Implications for future research and practice

At the core of Critical Race Theory are the strategic activities that facilitate social justice and radical change (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). Our findings send a call to action to educational researchers, higher education policymakers, and African American higher education faculty/administration/staff as structural racism is manifested at the higher education level.

Future directions for research on racial microaggressions in higher education

While researchers have contributed to a growing body of research related to the experiences of African Americans in higher education workplaces, our findings indicate that it is critical for scholars to investigate specific interactions between individuals that contribute to these hostile work spaces, interventions that will help individuals to better cope with and navigate their way through these environments and the institutional culture that perpetuate a racialized work climate.

Although the present study primarily focused on the experiences of African Americans who work within higher education, our findings indicate that, from a systemic perspective, we must consider the influences these experiences may have on others. According to Truong, Museus, and McGuire (2016), people may vicariously experience racism due to the racism experienced by those they are connected to, which is referred to as trickle-down racism. When African American faculty, staff, or administrators are directly affected by racism (i.e. leave the institution due to racism) the students that they mentor, advise, or teach are also impacted. This is particularly concerning when the students impacted are African American students within a PWI, as it is already difficult to find African American mentors on their campuses. If faculty who leave institutions have only learned how to maladaptively cope with racism, then the emotional trauma will only follow them to their next destination; therefore, individuals within those settings may indirectly experience the impact of the past, reinforcing the vestiges of macroracism (Perez, Huber &, Solórzano, 2016).

Recommendations for higher education policy and racial microaggressions

In order to help create change, we recommend that institutional leadership of all levels institute activities that catalyze more positive interactions between faculty and staff. Many of the participants in our study shared that their interactions with White colleagues were sometimes strained or loaded with microaggressions. We suggest a series of trainings, created by diversity experts in higher education, that make employees aware of how unconscious remarks or behaviors impact their African American colleagues. However, we do realize that diversity training alone is not sufficient; structural policy changes must accompany any bias training (Noon 2018). Moreover, we encourage the establishment of safe communication spaces, potentially facilitated by mediators, that allow African Americans to confront racism through communication with their perpetrators. While establishing these forums may not initially be warm or collegial, with consistency of practice they should facilitate meaningful conversations that ultimately results in better interactions amongst individuals.

Health implications for African American higher education faculty/ administration/staff

Of considerable note, our findings emphasize the need for higher education counseling centers to establish programs and/or workshops that will help African Americans better cope with race-related stress. Many of the participants handled their microaggressive experiences by employing maladaptive strategies which only resulted in an internalization of the experience, stress, and unpleasant emotions. To this end, as more African

Americans in these contexts utilize maladaptive strategies, the outcome will become a serious public health issue. Race-based stress has been directly linked to frequent occurrences of the common cold (Kwate et al. 2003), negative cardiovascular conditions (Levy et al. 2016), and uterine fibroids and preterm births (Giscombé and Lobel 2005). Thus, we make the recommendation for scholars to investigate the impact that race-related stress has on the overall health of African Americans in the higher education workplace so that empirically grounded programs and interventions may be designed.

Conclusion

Racial microaggressions are prevalent and impact the daily lives of African Americans in higher education. The findings from this study send the message that the higher education system and institutions within it are not immune or devoid of racism simply because there is an African American presence within the faculty and staff makeup. As such, it is imperative that African Americans utilize appropriate coping strategies in order to avoid race-related stress.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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