Black Voices in White Spaces: Learning to Listen to the Voices of Students of Color at Predominantly White Institutions.

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Abstract

African American students who attend Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) likely have very different experiences than the students in the majority white population, but their experiences are not well-researched. This qualitative study uses a Critical Race Theory lens to investigate how black students describe their time at PWIs. Interview data yielded several common experiences of participants that we grouped into three main categories: fitting in, safety, and coping strategies. The results mirror current literature on the subject but also extend knowledge in two distinct areas. The information gathered from the students strongly suggests that PWIs need to listen to their students' narrative accounts of their experiences and effectively address issues of racism. Further research is needed to articulate fully how universities can proactively address issues and reduce the impacts of racism and social ostracism on students who are in the minority.

1.Introduction

Based on data from the United States Census Bureau (2012), college enrollment of black students has increased significantly in recent years. In 1980 total enrollment for black students was 1,163,000. This

increased to 2,889,000 in 2009. Most of these students do not attend historically black colleges. African American students are choosing more and more to forgo the familiarity of attending a historically black college or institution (HBCU) in favor of attending a predominantly white institution (PWI). A PWI is a college or university where at least 50% or more of the student body are white (Brown & Dancy, 2010). This study explored what happens when black students attend colleges that have primarily white student bodies.

1.1 The Question

As colleges and universities are working towards having more diversity in students, faculty, and staff problems arise that are unique to that dynamic. There is a push towards diversity training for everyone and a desire to create safe spaces for all who live, work, and learn at these institutions. The two universities where my study took place were liberal arts universities. These universities officially value diversity. Each had a specific office to deal with diversity, inclusion, and equality. Each had designated diversity staff who were prominent members of the university organization. Both had well written diversity and inclusion mission statements. Both were clearly in the designation of Predominantly White Institutions. They both had done some good work and have taken the good steps to work towards inclusion that many when organizations do when they realize there is a racism problem within the organization. Yet in my work in both universities, it became clear that all the good efforts were important yet did not change the negative outcomes for many of the students of color. I decided to try to understand the phenomenon of being black at majority white institutions. To get beyond the rhetoric and programming and to hear firsthand, if possible, about the experiences of actual people in these settings. The central research question explored is "what is the experience of African American Students at a Predominantly White Institutions in the rural Northeastern United States?"

1.2 Positionality

I work as a clinical social worker and focus mainly on mental illness and mental wellness in my work with clients. When I came to the first university in this study, I worked as a mental health counselor in the university counseling center. This was my first experience in student affairs at the university setting. I was assigned a staff mentor, who was the associate director in the University's diversity office. While I was being mentored and helped to understand my role in the counseling center and in student affairs, the topic of diversity came up in frequent conversations. In this setting we often realized that we have two client populations. The university and the students. We only provided mental health services to the students but the university expected us to assist the overall university in a variety of ways. My mentor helped me to understand that many of the students came to staff who were frequently in the diversity center, felt that they were uniquely isolated from many aspects of the university. The one closest to my heart was that many of the students came to staff in the diversity center for an array of problems, many of which were mental health concerns. The staff person often referred them to the counseling center to get professional help but were often told that they did not feel comfortable going to the counseling center because all the counselors were white. This was the impetus for my staff mentor and I to devise a way to informally introduce a counselor to the students who frequented the diversity office. When I would have a break from scheduled sessions, I would go and hang out in the office and got to know many students. I often attended diversity events and once participated in a "die in" which was initiated by students in protest of recent killings of Black People by police. I was initially interested in examining why Black students did not want to use counseling services but realized there was a bigger issue that was not being addressed. One day my mentor told me about a very common experience for Black Students on campus. She told me that one of the students told her that she felt she was invisible and that no one ever made eye contact with her when she walked across campus. This eventually led to this current study. At the second university I was a doctoral student and adjunct professor. My role with the participants there was less well known but my association with that university's diversity staff member helped to facilitate student's feeling comfortable and willing to talk about their experiences. Since my role with participants was more informal yet official, but the study had no official mandate, I was able to be part of the university but not in a role to influence outcomes.

2.Theoretical Framework

Racism is a part of everyday society. This is a core element of the theoretical framework of the study Critical Race Theory (UCLA School of Public Affairs, 2014). CRT began in legal studies as a means of analyzing race and racism. CRT accepts that racism is part of every aspect of American society. Institutional racism is extremely visible in the dominant society. CRT examines the influence that power has in society's structure. According to CRT, this power is based on the concept of white privilege, which contributes to people of color becoming marginalized in the dominant society. CRT examines the experiences of people of color through the lens of their own narratives (UCLA School of Public Affairs, 2014).

The creator of CRT was Derrick Bell a professor of law at Harvard University, who believed that race is socially constructed and is constantly being changed to maintain the privilege of the dominant white race (Bell, 2014). Bell utilized fictional stories to facilitate discussions on racism. He stated, "I prefer using stories as a means of communicating views to those who hold very different views on the emotionally charged subject of race. People will listen to stories and will often suspend their beliefs, listen to the story, and then compare their views not with mine, but with those expressed in the story" (Bell, 2014, para.5).

Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) applied CRT to an academic setting to study how the climate of race impacts African American college students. They did this by conducting focus groups with African American students at three universities classified as PWIs. Critical Race Theory derives from legal studies (Bell, 1980), but has been adapted to education as well. Developed by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), CRT in education has as central tenets the assumptions that 1) racism is a key component of life in the United States, woven into the very fabric of our society and 2) power is a key factor of racism. Further, it incorporates the use of narrative accounts, which Delgado (1989) argues are an important way of giving voice to marginalized people.

Studies exploring Black students' experiences in higher education have identified that students are likely to experience racism at PWIs; students report being exposed to racial microaggressions (Bourke, 2010). Black students described these small and sometimes subtle racist statements and acts as including incomplete or incorrect racial information in the curriculum; white counterparts assuming Black students had gotten into the university due only to affirmative action (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000); white students insisting that racism no longer exists in the US (Morrison, 2010); being expected to act as spokespersons for their entire racial group (Simmons, Lowery-Hart, Wahl, and McBride, 2013); and hearing negative stereotypes (Glenn and Johnson, 2012) and racist jokes (Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, and Lewis, 2012) in and out of the classroom. Students reported that they feel pressure to counter the negative stereotypes (Shavers and Moore, 2014), or even to begin to doubt themselves and their abilities (Morrison, 2010).

For many students, the college experience extends outside of the classroom, where racial difference exerts influence as well. Ray (2013) found differences in the ways that fraternities interacted with campus communities. White fraternities could blend in and use their discretion about when to show their fraternal affiliation. The houses for these fraternities were also very large, which added a sensed of power to their status. Black fraternities, on the other hand, were often smaller in membership and lacked the ability to limit the exposure of their group identity. Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, and Lewis (2012) also found that students felt segregated within certain dorms. Other students reported that even when they participated in campus activities like teams and clubs, there was an unspoken understanding of white as the norm and all other races as somehow deviant (Bourke, 2010). Students also reported feeling that they were "hyper-visible" on campus due to their appearance (McCoy, p.165; see also Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

These types of experiences often lead to what some call racial battle fatigue, which Smith (cited in Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015) identifies as the distress caused by being subjected to racism on a frequent basis. Chao, Mallinckrodt, and Wei (2012) investigated African American students who presented to counseling centers with psychological problems and distress that arose from suffering racial discrimination. The data showed that there were common reports of incidents connected to a perception of discrimination and prejudice based on race. This is called perceived racial discrimination distress or PRDD. One out of four participants in the study reported that PRDD was high, and participants with a high incidence of PRDD

also presented with higher levels of anxiety, depression, future uncertainty, stress, overall sleep health, worry over finances, and struggling with academic work. Our study paints a picture of the impact of racial identity on Black students' overall experiences at PWIs. It is not hard to understand why these students might experience less academic success in such situations.

3. Literature

The current literature on this topic is limited. Much of the literature is specific to certain narrow aspects of the experience of African American students. Hotchkins and Dancy (2015) looked at the experiences of African American males in leadership positions on PWI campuses. Some studies looked more broadly at students of color, incorporating participants who were not specifically African American (Daniel, 2007; Morrison, 2010). Others looked at the impact of the social climate, relational experiences, and how different cultural spaces affected African Americans' overall college experiences (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Simmons, Lowery-Hart, Wahl, & McBride, 2013; Burke, 2010). Some of the research focused on how the experience at the PWI affected outcomes for African American students, such as degree completion and impact on the sense of self (Henfield, Woo, & Washington, 2013; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Palmer, Maramba, &Dancy, 2011). Some of the current research focused on the impact of race, racism, and microaggressions on the experience of African American students (Ray, 2013; Smith, Hung, &Franklin, 2011; Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2011). Some of the current research looked at other issues related to a bad experience such as the development of psychological distress in response to racism, how experiencing trauma affects staying in school, and ideas about seeking help or support (Williams and Justice, 2010; Chao, Mallinckrodt, & Wei, 2012; Cheng, Kwan, & Sevig, 2013; Boyraz, Horne, &Owens, 2013). Others focused on whether belonging to a black sorority or being part of the black community on campus affected experiences of students (Lewis and McKissic, 2010; Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014).

Although some public figures like to assert that the United States entered a "post-racial" era with the election of President Barack Obama, nearly two decades of study suggest that racism exists on a subconscious level in much of the US population (Dasgupta, McGhee, Greenwald, and Banaji, 2000). The United States has had a Black president, but the majority of Black students attend hyper-segregated K-12 schools, and they are more likely than their white peers to attend high-poverty schools (United States Government Accountability Office, 2016). Similarly, the average white family has 13 times the wealth of the average Black family (Kochhar and Fry, 2014). The US prison population over-represents people of color (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2017) and Black students are more likely to be suspended from school during their K-12 years (see, e.g., Losen, Martinez, and Gillespie, 2012). CRT posits, and these facts support, the idea that race is still highly significant in education, as well as society at large, in the United States. Our study takes these foundational ideas and asks how, against this larger cultural backdrop, we can understand what Black students experience on primarily white college campuses.

4. Methods

Due to my specific roles and knowing about and participating in significant efforts to help make safe inclusive spaces for all students and realizing over time that that was not the case for many despite all the good efforts, I chose to approach this study using a phenomenological approach. Creswell (2013) defines phenomenology as the process of describing how a specific group of people experience a distinct phenomenon. The purpose is to explore the universal concepts of the group with the specific phenomenon: being Black on an all-white campus. This approach is appropriate given the theoretical approach based on Critical Race Theory and allowed me to explore whatever themes emerged organically from the data. The interview protocol consisted of general questions based on previous research findings and designed to elicit participants' perceptions of the role – if any – played by race in their experiences in their undergraduate studies, as well as their feelings about those experiences.

I employed a convenience sample at two campuses where we had connections with students and/or staff, starting with targeted emails recruiting Black students to participate.

Some student participants referred friends to the study once they had been interviewed themselves, giving a snowball effect to our sampling as well. Ultimately, 21 students participated. Our 21 interviews represent about 10 percent of the overall approximately 150-200 Black students who attend these universities.

The interviews were semi-structured and follow-up questions varied depending on students' responses. Moustakas, cited in Creswell (2013), recommends asking a general question that will uncover the participant's experience with the phenomenon, followed by a follow-up question regarding elements of the experience that influenced how they felt. For this reason, the interviews began with two general questions followed by a series of sub-questions. First: what has been your experience attending a PWI as an African American? Second: what specific situations or contexts have impacted your experience as an African American on a PWI?

I took field notes following each interview. Cresswell (2013) recommends writing the notes as soon as possible after the interview was finished. These notes were compared to the transcribed interview to check for congruence. The next step was to reread each interview question with all the responses and pick out significant statements made by participants to code using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I used the NVIVO 11 Pro program to help categorize common ideas from the interviews. Each new piece of information was compared to existing categories and placed in the appropriate one until all pieces were categorized. As I picked out these statements, I made nodes in NVIVO to organize these statements into categories of similar statements, coding them with descriptive titles. Nodes are merely files in the program to store pieces of data that belong together. I arrived at a total of 37 nodes that contained similar groupings of significant statements. After reviewing these nodes, I arrived at six themes that I grouped into two overarching categories: challenges the participants identified and their responses. Once the codes were identified, the data was compiled and organized into larger, overarching themes, which was then connected to existing literature.

5. Results/Conclusions

Interview data yielded several common experiences of participants that we grouped into three main categories: fitting in, safety, and coping strategies. The participants have used a fictitious name of their own choosing for the purpose of the interview.

Fitting In. Consistent with existing literature, students in our study stated they perceived themselves as having extreme visibility, being or seeming different from the majority culture on campus; some felt excluded from campus life. This was demonstrated by many significant statements made by students in the interviews. Several students talked about how they were aware that their identity was very different than perceived expectations. Brandon, a first-year student stated, "I feel as if maybe like I may be talking to someone and they're actually a little surprised that I'm not acting in the way they thought I would act." Another student remarked that he was very aware that the way he might react to a situation at home was very different than how he does it here. He tries to be very careful to not react in anger because of how it would be perceived. He stated further that he needed to make sure that the way he reacts to things does not reflect poorly on his family. This highlighted his comments about identity, "I think it's been a lot of issues with identity and who I think I am, and who I am supposed to be on campus, compared to what people assume I am, or what teachers might assume I am, or even among my peers." Jennifer, a first-year student, spoke about how she is constantly aware of the perception of her based on her race, "because I'm constantly aware of how my blackness, and how black I am, the hair, everything, I tend to modify my behaviors and what I say when I say things…"

Participants were aware of their difference when people underestimated them. James, a first-year student, remarked, "they kind of like count me out a little bit. Like in my classes, in my major, they don't expect me to be as smart because of the background I come from but, in reality, I really am that smart." He spoke more about a situation in a pre-calculus class, and he was offering help to some other students, and one remarked to him, "Wow. I didn't know you understood this that well." And I was like, "Yeah. You just can't assume off of what you see. You gotta get to know me first." Jennifer, a first-year student, had a similar experience in a chemistry class. As the group of students was discussing how to do a problem, they did not listen to her as she told them what she knew. It was not until the teaching assistant pointed out that they needed to

do it her way, that they responded. John, a fifth-year senior, also spoke about how in some classes people assume he is different than he is. His perception is that they are surprised by how he communicates, "I've actually had some look at me like, [the teachers] Oh Wow! You actually speak intelligently. I was like, did you really think anything other than that?" Tight, a senior, viewed how he was perceived was evident in his comment, "because everybody has a preconceived notion of what a black student is supposed to operate or how they're supposed to act, so I think trying to break those molds…"

The participant statements revealed that students at both universities feel they stick out on campus. James, a first-year student, talked about walking on campus at night when it is cold and wearing his hood up. He noticed that this seemed to scare other students: "One time this girl was walking on the other side of me, just me and her on the sidewalk and she decided to walk all the way around on the grass and then get back on the sidewalk." In this encounter, nothing was said, but he perceived this to be because of how he was dressed and how she responded. John, a fifth-year senior at school B, also discussed this phenomenon. "You kind of stick out like a sore thumb because there's really not that many people here with my color skin." One night, he and two roommates were stopped by campus security. A security guard asked the typical questions about where they were going and what they were doing as if they were not students and had no business being there. He commented, "do I actually have to pull out my ID to show that I go here? You can't just take it at face value? I'm sure if there was someone else that wasn't threatening to you, you probably wouldn't have stopped them at all."

For many of the participants, the perception of how different they were came from experiences in classes or groups where they were the only person of color. The impact of this perception played out in several ways. Ann, a junior, reported that she is often the only black student in many of her classes: "I've been here for three years, and I've never been in the classroom with another black person." This situation resulted in her feeling that she got picked on in class because everyone knew her name. Charlotte, a senior, had an experience in a class where another student presented on rap music from a very negative viewpoint. She stated that the class had focused all semester on issues of race and other intersections. The presentation was biased and as she stated, "since I was the only black kid in the class, I always had to bring it up, and she was like, so offensive. And the teacher didn't call her on it." She stated further, "when you're a black kid alone in a class, and you have to call out something that's racist or something, it's very, very hard because you already know you're separate from the class but vocalizing it makes that separation pronounced." Chika, a sophomore, discussed this as well when she encountered bias in one of her classes: "It's awkward when I have to feel like I have to correct people about certain racial ideologies…the fact that you're the only black person in the class makes it even harder to point out the discrimination."

Participants also felt that they were expected to be knowledgeable about certain subjects in class discussions Melissa, a sophomore, also commented on this kind of situation,

> I feel like when certain topics come along where you talk about black people and things like that, the attention is on you… I feel like all eyes are on me now and since I'm the only minority in the class, it's a discomfort feeling because now, she's black, so she better have, like, say something. And I'm like, now, everybody is on me, and I don't feel comfortable talking about this.

Trevor, a senior at School A, talked about stereotypes and how they have a different impact. He stated, "If I wasn't a tall black man who is kind of athletic and who can dance and this stuff, like when you're not that on a college campus, you're kind of perceived as an Other." He spoke about another student he knows who is always concerned when he does not know the latest dance moves because he does not dance. He said this student then feels excluded. He also stated that at the same party there might be white guys who also do not know how to dance, but there is a group of 50 of them, and they do not stand out like the one black guy in the room who is not dancing. These statements make it clear that the students are very aware of how they are perceived even if there are no overt situation so discrimination or bias. The significance of this is in the actual narrative account of how each person experienced this perception.

Several participants noticed that their difference made them feel less than welcome on campus. Bev, a first-year student, was aware of this at an assembly during one of her first visits to campus. She noted, "they brought up a white person to sing the national… anthem, and I feel as though, right then and there, I was

like, maybe they don't take as many African Americans to do stuff like that, and they want a certain face for it." James, a first-year student, noticed that when he attempted to attend parties on campus, he was not allowed to enter. He would walk to the door and ask to enter. He was told that he needed to be part of a team or other group and therefore could not come in. Then he noticed this, "I'll turn around and see somebody else who is Caucasian but has the same background that I do, he's not a part of this team or nothing, but they let him in. So, it's just confusing as to why he gets to go in, and I don't." This unwelcome feeling also extended beyond the campus setting. Tight, a senior, talked about venturing off campus and noticing how he was perceived, "you'll walk down the street or walk down to Weis and Walmart and everybody's head's turning at you cuz it's like the first time possibly seen a black person in a year."

Charlotte, a senior, elaborated more by stating that she felt a sense of isolation from the larger campus community. The exhaustion is felt by other students as well, and Charlotte mentioned this is why people from specific racial groups tend to stay together and do things together. Trying to explain this to others is tiring as well, "especially when it's extremely tiring and emotionally draining to have to do so all the time. I don't want to have to explain to this white person why I'm exhausted at like 5:00 and still had a full night of sleep."

The impact is often felt significantly when certain topics come up. For many, the level of connection on campus had a lot to do with the quality of their experience while attending the PWI. Charlotte, a senior at School A, does not believe she is the typical student she stated, "a typical student here is automatically white. Once you're someone different, you're immediately atypical." Jennifer, a first-year student, felt a disconnect due to her background before college. She stated, "I don't feel like I represent a typical student at the University just because, based on my economic and my social background, it's not the same as nearly all of the people that I've gotten to know or talk to." Nay, a sophomore, reported feeling she was not like other students: "it's kinda hard to feel like a typical student when you're such an outcast on the campus. To be a typical student, you should feel comfortable. You should be able to call [your school] your second home, and I don't."

Some noted that they had not necessarily wanted to attend these particular PWIs, having felt forced into attend for financial reasons. More than one student noted recruiting materials portrayed a more diverse campus than what they found when they arrived, which led to a feeling of having been duped. Ann, a junior, mentioned that she was told her campus was very diverse only to learn when she got there that it was not. Sometimes the timing of a student's visit to campus can impact what they know about how diverse it is. Dudley, a first-year student, commented that he visited during midterms or finals and "I didn't really know what the campus was like. If I would have known before, I probably would have changed my decision." Franco, a senior, also commented that the level of diversity was not clear to him, "I know one tactic that I think we use pictures on the website and even on the calendars and it's like, this kid graduated like six years ago, you know, or they don't go here anymore". He said this to point out that sometimes the promotional material is misleading in how it portrays the level of diversity.

5.1 Safety. Responses we coded in this category, which included perceptions of both physical and emotional wellbeing, included students experiencing racial microaggressions and feeling that peers and professors had low expectations of their abilities, both of which mirror previous research findings. Alarmingly, some also noted having seen or heard about negative or threatening symbols around campus (swastikas, nooses), and feeling especially vulnerable in the current US political atmosphere. This theme clearly presents itself through students' statements about the impacts of racism on them. The significant statements revealed that many of these encounters left lasting scars that directly influenced how the students made sense of their lived experience at the PWIs. But what is the impact on the individual student who experiences these kinds of things on a regular basis? Charlotte, a senior, had a lot to say on this topic:

> I feel like a lot of the time my interaction with people here leaves me drained and dehumanized. My boundaries aren't respected like they would respect someone else's boundary. White girls asking me to teach them how to twerk, like all I do is spend my days twerking and not studying. Making me feel like I'm just like a thing for their enjoyment instead of like someone who's here to learn, get their degree as well, who's going through things as well.

Charlotte, a senior, also speaks about the longer-term impact. She stated that since there may not be someone in her face yelling the "N" word that it might be hard to understand the impact. "But there's always an overall thing just looming over my back, like Dude, can I trust this white person…it's like that overarching sense of unease and being on guard."

This includes microaggressions that the students faced, which created a significant challenge for them. Microaggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p.271). Sue and colleagues (2007) identified three levels of microaggressions which are: "microassault," "microinsult," and "microinvalidation" (p. 274). Charlotte, a senior, spoke about a conversation with another student during her first year at the college. She felt that they were friends and even thought he was cute. She told me that she did not remember the specifics of this conversation, but at one point he said to her, "you only got all that money because you are black." He was referring to how she could pay for college. She brushed it off but wanted to respond this way, "I laughed it off -- as if my scholarships were not GPA based and I got money the state because I lived here. So, there was just that making me feel like I wasn't supposed to be here." She also spoke about another situation at a party where again she was interacting socially, and a guy came up to her and said, 'I got jungle fever': and I was like, Yikes! That's too much."

Jennifer, a first-year student, talked about being in class and a white student asking her if she had lotion. The following interchange occurred between them, "'Wow, you don't have lotion? My pasty ass always has lotion.' I was like, okay, first of all, if you're trying to call me ashy, I don't take that at all. That was just rude." Some of the microinsults were subtle but still clearly biased. Max, a senior at School A, spoke about things that happen during her first year when people would say things like, "'Oh my God, look at your hair! Why does it look like that?' I was I was like, 'What?'"

Percy, a first-year student, talked about an incident in the college bookstore where he and a black female friend were doing some shopping. They noticed that wherever they went in the store, two white female staff members seemed to follow them. The decided to try something to see what they would do, so they split up, and sure enough, the staff followed him. He had this to say about the experience: "it bothered me a little bit because I just thought that they knew I went to this school but they still probably had this fear that I was probably going to steal something and that was the only time something like that bothered me or something like that happened."

Some students spoke about symbols that have shown up on campus. The students did not use the word "symbols," but when I was analyzing the data from the interviews, it became clear that they were talking about symbols related to racism and microaggressions. African American students in my study encountered symbols on their campuses that sent a message. Franco, a senior, talked about how racist events have impacted how he feels on campus. He recalled, "I know that someone had put a noose and hung it from a tree outside their house, and that seemed to be a pretty clear signal you know…that made it really difficult to feel safe on campus as well as to even wanting to make an effort to be a part of our community as a whole." Max, a senior, spoke about a discussion about some current events involving a police shooting, "there was a ROTC guy who completely sided with the killer! And I was like, I don't understand. We all try to respond by giving him all the facts and everything, and he just wouldn't change his mind, and it really hurt me." Another student, Nay, a sophomore, mentioned how she felt when there were political posters all over campus, and she has noticed an increase in swastikas and flags in rooms, "It makes me uncomfortable…but I'm even more uncomfortable knowing that there are people on this campus who believe that…they [the university] try to make it seem like we're welcoming, we don't have any of those problems. Yet they do, and they try to cover it up." Other students spoke about bias-related incidents that they attribute to the new political environments and believe that they are happening more frequently. Melissa, a sophomore, noted that "I feel like people have been more comfortable saying the 'N' word and things like that." Nay, a sophomore, noted, "there have been a lot of swastikas around campus. They've been on doors, dorm doors, people putting up the flags in their rooms. Writing it on the walkways as I'm walking."

5.2 Coping strategies. Although many students did not use official supports like the university counseling center, we did find evidence that students' individual responses to the challenges they perceived reflected a sense of self-preservation. These strategies generally took the form of joining teams and groups, both race-neutral and those based explicitly on shared racial identity. Some students assumed leadership roles on campus, using those positions to work purposefully on behalf of social justice for other students of color. Some of the students chose to use social justice as an approach to help them deal with the impact of their experiences at the PWI. Tight, a senior, talked about how even though his experience had been mostly good and he had a lot of opportunities, he learned that others did not have it that good. He stated, "Wow. People are marginalized, and their voices aren't heard. And so, I started using my platform to try and help out who I can… I really started to vocalize about injustices showed around campus." He goes on to state that he was chosen to speak at senior convocation and used that opportunity to speak up for others. He took the opportunity to use his voice in a positive yet important way:

> I was picked to speak, and I think they thought it was a real light-hearted message but I said, people think that racism doesn't exist at high-level education institutions but that not true. They tell us all lives matter, but they continue to ignore the black ones so if you have a voice, it has to be heard because… people feel so divided, and people feel alienated, I feel, think it's most important… I think as an African American male and our past and our ancestry and stuff like that; I owe it to them. I owe it to the people that don't have a voice as I have a prominent voice. I've let it be heard.

Other students used leadership to address many issues. Franco, a senior, stated. "I think I'm pretty involved…I've always wanted to have a significant impact on the communities that I'm a part of…" Tight, a senior, spoke about using his role in leadership to help others as well, "A lot of people talk about being born as a leader, and I heard that a lot and I came here, and I just tried to embody what it was to be an African American student here cuz you are starting to representing more than yourselves." Another student, Trevor, a senior, uses his job as a member of the board of trustees to try to make a difference for others. He stated, "I try my best to keep my ear to the ground on different topics that come up so that I can bring them up during board meetings. So, because it's my job I've felt a lot more connected."

Many of the students spoke about the role that the Black Student Union (BSU) had played. Max, a senior, mentioned that the role of the BSU has changed over her time at the University. She stated, "we've definitely transformed the Black Student Union, not only a force to be reckoned with on the campus but something that shows black students, yeah, we're here, and we have something to say." The BSU is open to all students no matter what racial group with which they identify. For many, it is a place to belong and to be able to discuss issues that impact certain groups on campus. She talked about why it is important to her, "We discuss many things, we discuss issues within the black community. We discuss issues that we all as a whole may face… we talk about lighter topics like things that are kinda common to black people, things that the majority of us have experienced." Percy, a first-year student, explained that

> It's not because it's just the Black student union, it's because there are many people there. There's Caucasian people there, the LGBT community there, and so it's like seeing all different types of people come, because we all have this shared remorse for things that have happened to probably the black people, or lesbian and gay, trans people and we all, we have fun and we also talk about issues, and learn different things.

For some students, being part of an athletic team helped them significantly. This was true for Brandon, a first-year student, who stated, "being a part of the basketball team, I have 15 other guys that I'm with almost every single day. So those are almost like my brothers. And then they introduced me to their friends, and we'll eat lunch together, stuff like that." James, a first-year student, had a similar experience with football. "With the football team, it's instantly like a brotherhood, coming in, everybody, the recruiting process is fun."

6. Discussion

Our results align with research that finds race highly salient (see, e.g., Evans, Cardenas, and Dixson, 2017). We also find that race plays a significant role in the lives of interviewees, and that their experiences as

Black students at isolated PWIs are largely negative. The value of this study is in the use of strong narrative accounts from students who willingly offered up their stories. Even though the students experienced various level of bias, overt racism and microaggressions, they were involved in their campus communities and valued their educational opportunities. Some limitations include having a smaller sample size and studying only two rather small university settings. The study is qualitative which limits the generalizability of the findings. However, it does afford a significant snapshot into each participant's experience at the PWI.

There are several protective factors that the study identified which should be encouraged and nurtured. There should be an active plan for more shared spaces available to students that reflect their culture and ethnicity. Leadership is another area that helped students cope. There should be a concerted effort to promote leadership opportunities for students of color on each campus. There should be more opportunities to learn about diverse groups and their culture and ethnicity. Faculty and staff need to show support and build relationships with students by showing up at meetings of groups like the Black Student Union or Diversity United. These groups should also have adequate funding so that they can have good programming for the whole campus community without having to spend the valuable time they do not have in fundraising. More thoughtful planning on how to create an inclusive campus community, beyond recruiting students who meet a diversity quota, is clearly needed. Faculty and staff need to make a point of getting to know these students and building strong relationships with them. This study demonstrated that there is value in having opportunities for students to associate with others with whom they identify. The university needs to do more to build a sense of multicultural awareness. This needs to begin at the very first visitation day for accepted students right up until graduation occurs. This is more than standing up at a rally after an incident of bias. This is an everyday approach to the campus community that sets the standard that different is good and that there is something that each person can tell us about themselves if we are willing to listen to their stories. The information gathered in my study strongly suggests that PWIs need to listen to their students' narrative accounts of their experiences, effectively address issues of racism, and support students so that they feel included in campus life.

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