Racism, Black College Students’ Mental Health, And The Efficacy Of Diversity And Inclusion Initiatives: A Case Study.

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RACISM, BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS’ MENTAL HEALTH, AND THE EFFICACY OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION INITIATIVES: A CASE STUDY

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the phenomenal Black women and man in my life. Thank you mom, Camille, and Lynette. You were my anchor and refuge during this entire process. Your love and support means everything to me. Thank you dad for also providing a safe space for me to write, relax, and be myself.
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ABSTRACT

Black college students who attend predominantly White institutions of higher education (PWIs) regularly encounter subtle and explicit forms of racism on campus. These daily experiences of prejudice and discriminatory behaviors can have an adverse impact on their mental health. This study examines the intersections of racism and mental health, particularly within an environment where racism is socially unacceptable. More specifically, this study uses qualitative methods to explore how Black college students who attend a predominately White institution of higher education (PWI) make meaning of their experiences with racial discrimination and its impact on their mental health, as well as their perceptions of PWIs efforts to redress the campus racial climate through diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Individual, in-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted with a convenience sample of Black college students (ages 18-24) at a PWI in the southeastern United States. Data were analyzed using a combination of analytical strategies including critical race methodology (CRM) and a modified approach to grounded theory (GT). Qualitative data analysis revealed students’ experiences with everyday racial discrimination that contributed to overall feelings of anger, loneliness, social isolation, and invisibility in the narratives of their subjective sense of well-being. Students’ narratives also revealed how they perceived their university’s approach to diversity and inclusion to be superficial, which benefited White students while marginalizing the Black students.
Placing the perspective of Black students at the center of inquiry allows for the development of a more nuanced understanding of the enduring discrimination that Black students negotiate at PWIs. The ways in which Black college students make sense of their experiences with racism on campus in relation to their mental health directs attention to the importance of expanding efforts to improve the racial campus climate at PWIs. Such insight can lead to potential strategies not currently in place such as activist based interventions guided students, faculty, and staff of color that actively confront the discourses of White supremacy that are entrenched in PWIs.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CRT ................................................................. Critical Race Theory
CRM ................................................................. Critical Race Methodology
GT ................................................................. Grounded Theory
PWI ............................................................... Predominately White Institution of Higher Education
“Therefore, a vast amount of the energy that goes into what we call the Negro problem is produced by the white man’s profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white, not to be seen as he is, and at the same time a vast amount of the white anguish is rooted in the white man’s equally profound need to be seen as he is, to be released from the tyranny of his mirror.”

-James Baldwin, 1963

“‘Inclusion’ means inviting those who have been historically locked out to “come in.” This well-intentioned meaning must be strengthened. A weakness of this definition is evident. Who has the authority or right to ‘invite’ others in? And how did the ‘inviters’ get in? Finally, who is doing the excluding? . . . The act of inclusion means fighting against exclusion and all of the social diseases exclusion gives birth to.”

-Shafik Asante, n.d.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

A. Problem Identification and Definition

Racism is a central dimension of all American social institutions, particularly predominantly White institutions of higher education (Griffith, Hurd, & Hussain, 2017; Harper et al., 2011; Harris, Barone, & Davis, 2015). Research consistently demonstrates that racial discrimination, a dimension of racism, adversely impacts the mental health of Black Americans in the United States (Cokley et al., 2017; Paradies et al., 2015; Williams & Mohammed, 2013). Exposure to and perceptions of racial discrimination is correlated with an increase in psychological distress, depressive symptomatology, and racism related stress among this population (Banks, Kohn-Wood, & Spencer, 2006; Borum, 2012; Brondolo et al., 2011; Cokley, Hall-Clark, & Hicks, 2011; Williams & Mohammed, 2009).

The campus racial climate of predominately White institutions (PWI) of higher education negatively impacts the mental health of Black students (Griffith et al., 2017; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hoggard, Byrd, & Sellers, 2015). Black American college students who attend predominantly White institutions (PWI) of higher education regularly encounter subtle and explicit forms of racial discrimination on campus. The impact of the racial environment of a college campus is far reaching; it significantly affects multiple aspects of Black students’ health and well-being, including their mental health, who perceive the environment to be racially intolerant. Racial
discrimination in the form of racial microaggressions, inequitable treatment by faculty
and staff, and course content that excludes knowledge produced by Black Americans all
contribute to a campus climate in which Black students feel socially isolated, invisible,
and invalidated (Banerjee, Meyer, & Rowley, 2016; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hoggard et
al., 2015; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Such experiences can be profoundly stressful for
Black students, especially when they occur regularly and in tandem with the daily college
hassles all students face (Banks et al., 2006; McGee & Stovall, 2015).

Institutional efforts to address discrimination and improve the campus climate and
by association, the mental health and well-being of students, faculty, and staff of color (as
well as other marginalized groups) at PWIs typically come in the form of diversity and
inclusion initiatives. While they are not a new phenomenon in higher education (Hikido
& Murray, 2016), due to increased attention to implicit bias and institutional racism
within colleges and universities nationwide, many PWIs have revitalized their efforts to
promote diversity, inclusion, and equity. Given that diversity and inclusion initiatives
were created to address and ameliorate racial discrimination and improve the campus
climate, qualitative research with Black students can enhance our knowledge of how they
make sense of such efforts in the face of daily experiences of racial discrimination and
how such efforts affect their mental health as they persist toward degree completion. This
study is situated at the intersection of public health and sociology and explores how racial
discrimination impacts the mental health of Black students in the context of neoliberal
discourses of diversity and inclusion.

Using a case study approach informed by critical race theory and methodology,
this dissertation examines how Black students discuss (a) their experiences of racial
discrimination in college and (b) the enactment of university diversity and inclusion initiatives in relation to their mental health. Two specific aims guided this research.

**Specific Aim 1:** Use individual interviews to explore how Black college students enrolled at the PWI: (1) perceive and experience racial discrimination in the context of the university setting and (2) make sense of the impact of racial discrimination on their mental health.

**Research Questions:**

1. What are Black college students’ perceptions of and experiences with racial discrimination while in college?
2. How do Black college students make sense of the impact of their experiences with racial discrimination on their mental health?

**Specific Aim 2:** Use focus groups to explore how Black college students enrolled at the PWI: (1) conceptualize diversity and inclusion given their experiences with racial discrimination and (2) evaluate the efficacy of the university’s diversity and inclusion initiatives.

**Research Question:**

A. How do Black college students evaluate and make meaning of their university’s diversity and inclusion initiatives given their experiences with racial discrimination?

**B. Theoretical Framework**

The vast majority of research that investigates the experiences of Black students who attend predominately White institutions (PWI) focus on “success” or “failure,” which is operationalized based on measurable outcomes such as grade point averages,
rates of college acceptance, graduation rates, and what those trends depict in regards to educational outcomes (McGee & Stovall, 2015; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Strayhorn, 2014). Moreover, when examining the effects of racism, or specifically, the effects of the campus racial climate, empirical research tends to narrowly focus on the interpersonal dynamics of racism as measured by psychometric survey instruments, which take a more individualistic approach to assessment (Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008; Oseguera & Rhee, 2009). While such research is important and timely, solely focusing on outcomes garnered from quantitative methodologies may not offer the nuanced insight that can be used to illustrate how racial operates as a social determinant of mental health.

In order to facilitate this theoretical endeavor this study used a critical race theory (CRT) and social determinants of health approach. Used in combination, these two theoretical frameworks offer important approaches to the study of race and racism’s influence on psychological health and illness within the field of public health (Brown, 2008). Social determinants of health denote the structural and economic conditions in which individuals are born, grow, live, and age (Marmot, 2005). Racism is a significant social determinant of health that can impact well-being via multiple pathways (Braveman, Egerter, & Williams, 2011; Williams & Mohammed, 2013). Complimentary to a social determinants of health framework, CRT acknowledges the role race and racism play in pre-determining the opportunities available to marginalized communities; however, CRT foregrounds the assumption that racism is structural and systemic, rather than simply a matter of prejudice, which deepens the articulation of its impact on mental health. CRT acknowledges that racism isn’t external to the structure of society meaning that its impact on mental health cannot be elucidated by simply conceptualizing it as an
act of prejudice (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Furthermore, though the use of intersectionality this framework draws attention to how race and gender intersect and converge with oppressive institutional structures to reveal how systems of power further marginalize Black students. Furthermore, CRT consists of multiple tenets that provide a robust understanding of the role of race and racism in the lives of Black students at the case study PWI. The tenets of racial realism, counter storytelling, interest convergence, and intersectionality theory will be engaged with in this study. For instance, as a theoretical framework, intersectionality draws attention to how racism and sexism intersect in the context of institutional structures and reveals how these interlocking systems of power and inequality further marginalize Black students. The concept of interest convergence allows for the exploration of how efforts to create a more equitable campus climate for students of color require the convergence with the interests of White students, faculty and staff.

This study combines CRT and a social determinants of health approach in order to interrogate the relationship between racism and mental health in the everyday lived experiences of Black college students attending a PWI. Doing so allows this study to move beyond more psychological, interpersonal understandings of racism to gain an in-depth understanding of how racism as a social structure operates in higher education and more specifically, how Black college students perceive and navigate its impact on their mental health.

C. Positionality

Like other scholars engaged in critical race studies, it is important for me to situate my own subjectivity in relationship to my research. I am a Black woman whose
understanding of the social world is grounded in a critical race and Black feminist epistemology. As a Black woman who has matriculated through multiple PWIs, I not only share the lived experiences expressed by the participants in this research, I still grapple with the emotional and psychological ramifications of my time in predominately White educational spaces. My identity and my lived experiences influence how I engaged with each stage of the research process, as my ultimate goal with this study was to produce scholarship that critiques and addresses the intersecting systems of oppression that are embedded in and normalized on college campuses that lead to an array of social and health inequities impacting Black students. To aid in this research endeavor, I embraced and drew from critical race theory as a way to leverage the voices of marginalized students so that their experiences become a disputable component of educational policy and practice.

D. Justification of Research

Black college students often experience social isolation and racial discrimination on an everyday basis. Therefore, their narratives of coping and resilience in the context of individual, in-depth interviews can illuminate how racism influences their mental health during college as they persist toward degree completion. The rich interview and focus group data coupled with a critical race approach to data analysis allows for the uncovering of discourses and practices embedded within and produced through the case study PWI. Such insights shed light on how we might develop more innovative and effective approaches to addressing the racial campus climate not currently in place.
E. Preview

The remaining chapters of this dissertation will cover the background and significance (chapter 2), methods (chapter 3), two manuscripts (chapter 4), and study implications (chapter 5). Chapter 2, the background and significance section, will include a synthesis of existing literature that presents the research inquiry and a justification of the importance of this dissertation study. Drawing from an interdisciplinary body of literature, this chapter is divided into five individual sections that will provide a brief overview of pertinent bodies of work that helped foreground this research study. For example, following a brief introduction outlining the overall aim of the study, the second section of this chapter will provide a succinct overview of Black college student’s education experiences at PWIs and how the campus racial climate impacts their experiences. The next section of this chapter will explore how diversity and inclusion in conceptualized within PWIs and how curricular/co-curricular diversity impacts college student development. The fourth section of this chapter will provide an in-depth examination of race and racism and how racism and racial discrimination impact the mental health of Black college students. The final section will consist of a statement of the public health problem discussed within this research study: how racial discrimination impacts the mental health of Black college students.

Chapter 3, the methods section, will encompass the pertinent methodological components of this research study. Overall, this chapter will provide a detailed summary of the multiple qualitative methods (in-depth interviews and focus groups) used to investigate the research inquiry. In addition to a summary of the methods, this chapter will present pertinent information related to the study design, target population, study
setting, measures, data collection methods and data analysis methods. Chapter 4 will include two standalone manuscripts. The first manuscript is entitled “Racial Discrimination, Racialized Comportment, and Mental Health: Black Students’ Narratives of their Experiences with Racial Discrimination at a PWI and its Impact on Their Mental Health”. The first manuscript uses individual, in-depth interviews to further the literature examining the relationship between racial discrimination and mental health by exploring how Black college students make meaning of the effects of their everyday experiences with racial discrimination while attending a predominately White institution (PWI) of higher education in the American South. The second manuscript is entitled “Critical Race Theory and Interest Convergence: Exploring Black Students’ Narratives of the Commodification of Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives on a Southern PWI”. The second manuscript examines how Black students attending a PWI assess and make meaning of their university’s diversity and inclusion initiatives given their everyday experiences with racism.

Lastly, chapter 5, the study implications, will present a concise and comprehensive summary of the dissertation, it’s implications, and how the findings can guide future research. This chapter will provide a brief overview of the major findings of this study in addition to discussing how the findings from this study fit within the broader framework of literature exploring the mental health of Black college students. Within the first manuscript, the qualitative analysis of the interview data revealed experiences with everyday racial discrimination in the form of overt racism, racial microaggressions, and inequitable treatment by faculty and staff. The combination of such repeated experiences contributed to overall feelings of anger, loneliness, social isolation, and invisibility in
participants’ narratives of their subjective sense of well-being. Likewise, within the second manuscript, the focus group data demonstrated how their university’s superficial, or surface level, approach to diversity and inclusion created an environment that was palatable to those in power while oppressive to Black students. The findings from this study demonstrate the ways in which racial privilege (White supremacy) undergirds the university’s implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives. Chapter 5 will also provide a succinct overview of the research limitations and suggestions related to how this study may inform future work guided by CRT.
CHAPTER 2
BACKGROUND & SIGNIFICANCE

A. Introduction

Despite the increase in access to higher education, Black Americans remain disproportionately underrepresented among those with college degrees. Over 50% of Black students enrolled in a 4-year college or university do not graduate, compared to 33% of White students (Museus & Quaye, 2009). Research demonstrates that the lower persistence and completion rates for Black students is significantly influenced by their exposure to indirect and direct forms of racism (Iacovino & James, 2016; Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai, 2014; McClain & Perry, 2017; Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, & Hart, 2008). Racial discrimination in the form of racial microaggressions, inequitable treatment by faculty and staff, and course content that excludes knowledge produced by Black Americans contribute to a campus climate in which Black students feel socially isolated, invisible, and invalidated (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Such experiences can be profoundly stressful for Black students, especially when they occur often and in tandem with the daily hassles that most if not all college students face (Banks, 2010; McGee and Stovall, 2015). The cumulative effects of racial discrimination, no matter how subtle, can make it challenging for Black students to thrive and persist in college (Deitch et al., 2003; Lett & Wright, 2003).

The collective voices and actions of students nationwide have renewed universities’ focus on racial dynamics on campus. While not a new phenomenon (Hikido & Murray,
2016), predominantly White institutions of higher education have revitalized efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in recent years in part due to student-led efforts that challenge numerous forms of social injustice at universities and colleges nationwide (Johnston-Guerrero, 2016). Diversity and inclusion initiatives are in part a response to the growing Black student population, as well as students of other marginalized identities, and their demands for a campus climate that is equitable, inclusive, and supportive of diversity. However, little is known about how Black students themselves make sense of such efforts and how such efforts affect their mental health as they persist toward degree completion.

**B. Black College Students and Predominately White Institutions of Higher Education**

The number of racial and ethnic minorities enrolling in institutions of higher education in the United States has steadily increased over the last decade (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010; Denson, 2009). Approximately 15% of college students are Black, with the vast majority (90%) enrolled in predominantly White institutions (Hoston, Graves, & Fleming-Randle, 2010; Provasnik & Shafer, 2004; Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Legislative and policy efforts, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and affirmative action programs, have facilitated Black Americans’ access to once exclusionary PWIs (Singer, 2005). While the access provided by these laws and policies has resulted in annual increases in Black student enrollment, they have done little to change the culture of PWIs that continue to marginalize Black students and other students of color (Bourke, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992). As a result, Black students navigate environments where they encounter incessant direct and indirect social cues that
communicate they are intellectually inferior and do not belong (Watkins, 2012), which can lead to adverse mental health outcomes (Flowers, 2006; Love, 2008; Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008).

Previous research documents that PWIs are often characterized by campus racial climates that are rife with racial discrimination and segregation, institutional neglect of students, faculty, and staff of color, a systemic incapacity to openly and candidly discuss race and racism, and exclusionary and marginalizing policies (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). The impact of the racial environment of a college campus is far reaching; it can significantly affect multiple aspects of health and well-being, particularly the mental health of students who perceive the environment to be racially intolerant. Furthermore, it is well documented that White and Black students have significantly different perceptions of the campus racial climate (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). For example, Black students who attend PWIs consistently report experiences of racial hostility, discriminatory experiences, unjust treatment by faculty and staff, and demands to conform to institutional norms (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992). These macro and micro level inequalities result in Black students feeling isolated and invalidated, which is correlated with mental fatigue, psychological distress, and depressive symptomologies (Harper, 2013; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013).

a. Campus Racial Climate

A considerable body of work has investigated the educational experiences of Black Americans who attend predominantly White institutions of higher education. One
defining feature of this research is the role the campus racial climate plays in promoting, and exacerbating, racism and racial discrimination. Educational scholars define the campus racial climate as the behaviors and attitudes that reflect acceptance or rejection of racial diversity on a campus (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Institutional and interpersonal forms of racism that create a negative campus climate that has a significant impact on Black students’ mental health (Franklin, Smith, & Hung, 2014; Hurtado, 1992). For example, experiences of interpersonal racial hostility in the form of racial microaggressions, inequitable treatment by faculty and staff, and course content that excludes knowledge produced by Black Americans create a campus climate in which Black students feel socially isolated, invisible, and invalidated (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Love, 2008; Rankin & Reason, 2005). As a result, Black students navigate environments where they encounter incessant direct and indirect social cues that they are intellectually inferior and do not belong (Watkins, 2012), which research has been shown leads to adverse mental health outcomes (Flowers, 2006; Love, 2008; Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008).

Research exploring the racial climates of PWIs continue to indicate macro and micro level inequalities that result in racial minorities feeling isolated, invalidated, and the target of racism (Harper, 2013; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). For example, a synthesis of fifteen years of research exploring the implications of campus racial climates found persistent and reoccurring themes of racial segregation, institutional negligence, prejudicial treatment, racist campus environments, an inability to discuss race and racism, and exclusion and marginality (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Given their oppressive history
and the fact that racism still plagues their campuses, most PWIs have created institutional mandates to promote a more inclusive and diverse environment.

C. Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives in PWIs

At the forefront of mission statements of most institutions of higher education are values dedicated to a commitment to equity, inclusion, cross-cultural learning, appreciation for differences, and most importantly diversity (Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Wilson, Meyer, & McNeal, 2012). Diversity and inclusion initiatives originated in the era of affirmative action (late 1960’s/1970’s) and evolved due to the multicultural ideals of the 1980’s (Berrey, 2011; Harris, Barone, & Davis, 2015). Three distinct types of diversity have been conceptualized within educational scholarship: structural, interactional, and curricular/co-curricular diversity (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). Each are described in detail below.

Structural diversity encompasses numerical/proportional representations of the demographic characteristics (race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) of a student body. Structural diversity is commonly operationalized as the proportion of students of color enrolled in an institution or the density (e.g. critical mass) of different racial and ethnic groups present on a campus (Bowman, 2012). Interactional diversity, also known as cross-racial interaction, encompasses the frequency of informal student cross-racial (intergroup) contact. Interactional diversity represents the degree to which students from diverse backgrounds come into contact with one another within their respective campus environments (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Lastly, curricular/co-curricular diversity denotes programmatic efforts created by the respective institution that are intended to facilitate student’s engagement with diverse content exploring race and ethnicity.
Most contemporary diversity and inclusion initiatives fall within the category of curricular/co-curricular diversity. Students engage with curricular/co-curricular diversity through their curriculum and/or coursework or through participation with activities that facilitate racial-cultural awareness. Examples include diversity workshops, presentations, intergroup dialogues, and multicultural courses (e.g. required and non-required diversity courses, ethnic studies courses, and women’s and gender study courses). The diversity and inclusion initiatives at the case study PWI are an example of curricular/co-curricular diversity. More information about the case study PWI and its implementation of diversity and inclusion initiatives can be found in manuscript 2.

The primary goal of curricular/co-curricular diversity is to reduce intergroup (or racial) bias (Bowman, 2010; Denson, 2009; Denson & Chang, 2009). To achieve this goal, programs and activities aimed at supporting curricular/co-curricular diversity are commonly facilitated through two mechanisms: approaches that involve students learning about other racial/ethnic groups, and activities that promote contact and bring different racial/ethnic groups together. Such initiatives are created to “stimulate important mediators, cognitive and emotional processes in the students, which in turn reduce racial bias—a multifaceted phenomenon consisting of attitudes (prejudice), cognition (stereotypes), emotions (negative affect), and behavior (discrimination)” (Denson, 2009, pg. 808). In their respective meta-analyses of empirical research investigating the curricular/co-curricular diversity’s impact on reducing racial bias within PWIs, both Engberg (2004) and Denson (2009) found that this form of diversity has a moderate effect on reducing racial bias in White college students.
While the value of the studies exploring curricular/co-curricular diversity’s impact on racial bias should not be diminished, many of the studies conducting the meta-analyses focus on quantifiable outcomes related to student learning and growth, such as increases in democratic involvement (Zuniga, Williams, & Berger, 2005), students’ awareness, appreciation, and acceptance of different racial groups (Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2001), and students’ commitment to promoting racial tolerance (Vogelgesang, 2001). Not only did the majority of these studies involve samples comprised of only White students, none of the studies focused on how students of color, particularly Black students, perceive curricular/co-curricular diversity. Additionally, within these studies, racial bias was limited to interpersonal forms (stereotypes, affective reactions, and prejudices), which ignores the structural mechanisms operating at PWIs that maintain racism.

D. Race and Racism

Race is a social construct that both signifies and symbolizes how socio-historical conflicts (e.g. colonization, chattel slavery, Jim Crow) and interests resulted in differential classifications placed upon human bodies (Omi & Winant, 2014). Since its conception, race, or the creation of distinct racial categories, has been and continues to be deeply connected to colonization and subjugation (Chesler, Lewis, & Crowfoot, 2005). Race is socially constructed but that does not mean it is not real in it consequences (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). The concept of race, and racial categories, essentializes and stereotypes individuals and their respective social status, social ranking and behaviors by transforming physical traits into markers/signifiers of racial identity (Smedley & Smedley, 2011). Within American society, the concept of race is a significant factor in
the organization and stratification of human lives, regulation of social interactions, structuring of social institutions, and allocation greater or lesser access to social opportunities and resources (Chesler, Lewis & Crowfoot, 2005). The deeply embedded hierarchical notions of racial superiority and inferiority that undergird American society not only justify and legitimate patterns of domination and subordination, but also maintain racialized social systems (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Chesler et al., 2005). It informs individual and collective dehumanizing actions that seeks to rationalize the unfair, harmful, and discriminatory treatment of persons deemed inferior (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005).

Many in mainstream contemporary American society have embraced the belief that racism is a phenomenon now firmly located in the past; any evidence to the contrary is due to the deeds of a few bigoted individuals whose actions and character can then be publicly condemned and dismissed as aberrations (Doane, 2006; Lum, 2009). Considering that some blatant racially based actions are now punishable criminal offences and openly expressing explicitly racist attitudes is generally stigmatized, contemporary dominant racial ideologies work by creating generalized belief systems that explain social relationships and practices in highly racialized language (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Taylor, Austin, Perkins, & Edwards, 2012). As a result, the persistent inequalities that racial and ethnic minorities experience is explained and rationalized through colorblind logics that insist that racism cannot possibly be the source of these injustices since it is in the past, which effectively obscures the structural processes that facilitate and maintain ongoing White supremacy and racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Jones, 2002; Wingfield & Feagin, 2012).
Even though overt expressions of racism (e.g., hate crimes, the public use of racial epithets, and blatant discriminatory acts motivated by racial animus) are less common, many scholars claim that the manner in which racism is expressed has transformed into a more contemporary and insidious form that is concealed in our cultural assumptions, beliefs, and values, institutional policies and practices, and the deeper recesses of our individual psyche (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). Contemporary forms of racism are largely invisible, subtle, and more indirect, operating below the level of conscious awareness and continuing to oppress in unseen ways (Granger, 2011). Examples include symbolic racism (Sears, 1988), modern racism (McConahey, 1986), colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2013), and aversive racism (Dovidio and Gaertner, 1996). A key component of the mechanisms that perpetuate contemporary forms of racism is the ability to operate in absence of individuals’ intentions or actions. Although not widely recognized as a contemporary form of racism, structural racism is at the center of inquiry in this research study because it operates in the same manner as contemporary forms due to its ability to constantly reconstitute the conditions that are necessary to ensure its perpetuation (Link 1995; Bonilla-Silva, 1997).

a. Racism, Racial Discrimination, and Mental Health

Black Americans bear a disproportionate burden of pronounced, persistent, and pervasive health inequities (Sondik, Huang, Klein, & Satcher, 2010). The source of these inequities can be explained by the persistence of racism (Brondolo, Libretti, Rivera, & Walsemann, 2012; Feagin & Bennefield, 2014; Gee & Ford, 2011; Gee, Walsemann, & Brondolo, 2012; Harrell, 2000). Racial discrimination, a product of racism, is the most
commonly experienced and reported form of racism (Paradies et al., 2015). Racial discrimination is broadly defined as the “manifestation of a negative attitude, judgment, or unfair treatment toward members of a group on the basis of race” (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009, pg.3). Empirical research illustrates that racial discrimination affects health through several pathways by: restricting access to social and material resources; producing negative affective/cognitive and psychological processes; increasing allostatic load; reducing behaviors that improve health/ increasing the adoption of behaviors that negatively impact health and experiencing direct racist violence (Paradies et al., 2015). Of particular interest to this research is the ways in which racial discrimination impacts the mental health of Black college students.

It is well documented that racial discrimination is a psychosocial stressor that adversely impacts the mental health of Black Americans (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999; Mays, Cochran, & Barnes, 2007; Williams et al., 2012; Williams & Mohammed, 2013). Current understandings of the ways racial discrimination operate as a psychosocial stressor has been greatly enhanced by the development of the race-related stress models articulated by Clark et al. (1999) and Harrell (2000). Both models foreground the interactional stress model developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and theorize that racism-related stress is a physiological and psychological process that is activated when individuals, in this case Black college students, encounter or perceive racism within their environment which subsequently sets into motion a process of physiological responses whose cumulative nature has a downstream effect on mental health (Pascoe and Richman, 2009). Harrell’s (2000) and Clark et al.’s (1999) conceptualization of racism-related stress emphasizes the interaction
between the environment and the individual, in that racism-related stress arises when an individual’s ability to cope is taxed or exceeds existing resources (Utsey & Constantine, 2008). Both models inform the theoretical approach in this study because they situate racism in its ideological form, not simply defining it in terms of interpersonal interactions. Racial discrimination imposes a psychological burden that typically taxes or exceeds existing resources available to carry the load or cope, which in turn creates emotional pain, distress, and feelings of powerlessness (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Sanchez-Hucles, 1999; Utsey & Constantine, 2008).

When examining the relationship between racial discrimination and mental health, psychometric scales are commonly used. Frequently cited measures include the Everyday Discrimination Scale (Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997), the Experiences of Discrimination Scale (Krieger, 1990), the Index of Race-Related Stress (IRRS; Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996), the Racism and Life Experiences Scales (RaLES; Harrell, 1997), the Perceived Racism Scale (McNeilly et al., 1996), and the Schedule of Racist Events (SRE; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). Used in combination with psychometric properties of exploring mental health the link between racism and adverse mental health outcomes is typically conveyed within discrete quantifiable outcomes. Commonly used measures of mental health included the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES–D; Radloff, 1977), Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffen, 1985). Given that experiences of racial discrimination can be subtle, unwitting, and unconscious utilizing qualitative methods to explore the relationship between racism and mental health may
provide insight not previous uncovered within more traditionally accepted means of research.

b. Racial Discrimination and Black College Students Mental Health

Studies involving diverse samples of Black Americans find that exposure to and perceptions of racial discrimination correlate with an increase in psychological distress, depressive symptomatology, and racism related stress (Banks et al., 2006; Sellers et al., 2003; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). Among the college attending population of Black Americans, perceptions of racial discrimination are associated with higher levels of psychological distress, suicidal ideation, anxiety, depression, and stress (Donovan et al., 2013). Research exploring the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and mental health also indicates that, in comparison to other students of color (i.e., Latinx and Asian), Black students report higher frequencies of experiencing racial discrimination (Cokley, Hall-Clark, & Hicks, 2011). Additionally, gender has also been shown to affect the relationship between racial discrimination and mental health, with evidence suggesting that Black men are more likely to think they are the targets of racial discrimination, regardless of their age, when compared to Black women (Banks et al., 2006; Borrell, Kiefe, Williams, Diez-Roux, & Gordon-Larsen, 2006; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). Given the extant research, much can be learned about how Black college students make sense of their experiences with racial discrimination, particularly when they attend schools that appear to be trying to decrease the likelihood that such experiences will occur.
E. Conclusion and Statement of Public Health Problem

It is well documented that a college degree plays a significant role in upward social mobility, particularly for those that are more economically disadvantaged (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). This is not lost on students or university administrators. A college education can also greatly influence overall lifetime health and wellness, life satisfaction, and earning potential (Braveman, Egerter, & Williams, 2011). The enactment of diversity and inclusion initiatives not only function as a response to the increasing number of Black students at PWIs, but also as mechanism to retain students of color and ensure that they persist to degree completion (Ahmed, 2012; Hikido & Murray, 2016).

Although many studies have examined the effectiveness of diversity and inclusion initiatives in promoting an inclusive environment, there is still a gap in the literature as it relates to the mental health implications of such efforts. This research study uses qualitative methods to examine how racism shapes the everyday experiences of Black students attending a PWI and in turn, how they make sense of diversity and inclusion initiatives as it relates to efforts to improve the campus racial climate. As this chapter shows, racism adversely affects the mental health of Black college students by diminishing their academic self-concept, confidence, and mental efficacy (McGee & Stovall, 2015). This research used multiple qualitative methods to examine the pathways though which racism affects the mental health of Black Americans in the context of environments that are supposedly diverse and inclusive. Ultimately, this research study aims to add to the public health literature exploring the relationship between racial discrimination and mental health in addition to educational literature that examines the impact of diversity and inclusion initiatives in PWIs.
CHAPTER 3
METHODS

A. Study Design

A qualitative case study approach guided this research study. The overall aim of this research study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how racial discrimination impacted Black college students’ mental health in the context of a PWI with widely circulated diversity and inclusion initiatives. Multiple qualitative methods, including individual, in-depth interviews and focus groups, were employed to explore the complex interplay of factors that shaped the lived experiences and mental health of Black students, particularly as these related to the persistence of racism on college campuses and institutional efforts to promote diversity and inclusion. The in-depth interview and focus group data were analyzed using a combination of analytical strategies including critical race methodology and a modified approach to grounded theory (GT).

B. Target Population, Study Subject, and Sampling Techniques

Black college students attending the case study PWI, the University of the Southeast (a pseudonym), were the target population of this study. Eligibility criteria were limited to students who were enrolled as an undergraduate at the time of the interview, had matriculated for at least two consecutive semesters, self-identified as Black or African American, and were 18 years old or older. Three recruitment strategies were used. Students were recruited with the assistance of the faculty and staff who disseminated study recruitment information, including a flyer and script that described
the research study, via email. The recruitment script included eligibility criteria, the aim of the study, and information about the incentive. The second recruitment strategy included disseminating the study flyer through a group chat platform only accessible to Black students at the case study PWI. Lastly, snowball sampling was used to recruit hard to reach subsets of the Black student population, namely men. Snowball sampling involves a referral system in which one student nominates another, or group of students, to potentially participate in the research study. A total of 30 students participated in the individual in-depth interviews and 30 students participated in the focus groups. Each participant received $20 for their time. Additional demographic information can be found in chapter 4.

As previously stated, the research was conducted with students at the case study PWI, University of the Southeast. Founded in 1801, the University of the Southeast is a predominately White institution of higher education located in the American South. It is a four-year public university whose student population consists of roughly 30,000 students (25,237 undergraduate students) (University of the Southeast, 2015). At the time of data collection, racial and ethnic demographic data for the university revealed that 77% of undergraduates were White and 10% were Black. The remaining student population identified as Asian (2.3%), Latino (4%), or as two or more races (5.1%). The setting of the proposed study was chosen because it lends itself well to the exploration of the specific aims. In particular, like many public predominately White institutions in the American South, it has a well-documented legacy of institutional racism and exclusion of Black students.
C. Theoretical Framework

a. Social Determinant of Health Framework

Social determinants of health denote specific features and pathways by which social and economic conditions significantly affect health (Krieger, 2001). Racism is a significant social determinant of health that can impact well-being via multiple pathways (Braveman, Egerter, & Williams, 2011; Williams & Mohammed, 2013). While there are multiple theories that explore how racism influences health whether it be through differential exposure to determinants of health (e.g. socioeconomic, environmental and behavioral), differential access to and quality of health services, and the direct effects of racism such as trauma and stress (Braveman et al., 2011; Jones, 2010; Karlsen & Nazroo, 2004; Williams & Mohammed, 2013), this research study focused on the ways in which racial discrimination operates as a social determinant of the mental health for Black college students.

Racism was and continues to be a key factor in the organization of all American social institutions including higher education. Employing a social determinants of health framework allows for an explicit focus on how higher education is organized by socially constructed (i.e. colorblind and neoliberal) ideas about race and racism which had an impact on various aspects of mental health of Black college students. A social determinants of health framework also provides the conceptual tools necessary to examine the commonly unnoticed pathways through which racial discrimination operates on an interpersonal, structural, and institutional level.
b. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Methodology (CRM)

Critical race theory (CRT) is a broad theoretical framework that emerged from the pioneering work of critical legal studies scholars and activists (e.g. Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Kimberle Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado) who sought to address how the persistence of racism within the legal system, and society at large, perpetuated and sustained various forms of structural inequalities (Ackerman-Barger & Hummel, 2015; Bell, 1980, Crichlow, 2015; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical race theorists, both past and present, are concerned with, exposing, challenging, disrupting, and dismantling the racist policies and practices that continue to subordinate and disenfranchise people of color while protecting dominant groups (Milner, 2008). CRT is not constrained by a set of canonical doctrines, nor is there a rigid set of methodologies to which all critical race scholars ascribe (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller & Thomas, 1995). Regardless of the discipline, all CRT oriented research begins with three common assertions: racism is pervasive, racism is permanent, and racism must be challenged (Bell 1992; Bernal 2002; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Lynn, Yosso, Solórzano, and Parker 2002; Tate 1997). Thus, research informed by these assumptions advances our understanding of how American society has created and continues to sustain an impenetrable regime that buttresses White supremacy while maintaining the oppression and marginalization of communities of color (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller & Thomas, 1995).

CRT research is guided by a set of interdisciplinary tenets that actively confront conventional research texts and worldviews by foregrounding a socio-historical understanding of race and racism (Crewell, 2007). The tenets, originally theorized by
Delgado and Stefancic (2001), inform CRT scholars of the continued normalcy of racism in US society, interest convergence/ material determinism, the social construction of race, intersectionality and anti-essentialism, and the importance of voice and counter-narrative. This study focused on the tenets delineating the normalcy of racism, counter storytelling, and interest-convergence to guide the theoretical and analytical framework.

**Normalcy of Racism.** The theoretical foundation of CRT hinges upon the awareness and acceptance that racism is a normalized and permanent facet of life in American society. Defined as an organized system premised on the simultaneous categorization and ranking of social groups into races, racism is a powerful structural factor that possesses the ability to devalue, disempower, and differentially allocate desirable societal opportunities and resources to racialized populations regarded as inferior (Williams and Mohammad, 2013). Racism is informed by an ideology that maintains that races are populations of individuals whose physical differences are inseparable from significant cultural and social traits and characteristics, which can be measured, stratified, and judged (Golash-Boza 2016). It is comprised of material, structural, and ideological phenomena, as opposed to an individual level pathology or set of outmoded, ignorant beliefs and attitudes (Jones, 1997; Tatum, 2002). Racism, which is both pervasive and powerful, often leads to the development of negative attitudes (i.e. prejudice) and beliefs (i.e. stereotypes) about non-dominant, stigmatized racial groups, which results in the differential treatment (i.e. racial discrimination) of these groups by both individuals and social institutions.

Mainstream contemporary American society have embraced the belief that racism is a phenomenon now firmly located in the past; any evidence to the contrary is due to the
deeds of a few bigoted individuals whose actions and character can then be publicly
condemned and dismissed as aberrations (Doane, 2006; Lum, 2009). Considering that
many blatant racially based actions are now punishable criminal offences and openly
expressing explicitly racist attitudes is generally stigmatized, contemporary dominant
racial ideologies work by creating generalized belief systems that explain social
relationships and practices in highly racialized language (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Taylor,
Austin, Perkins and Edwards, 2015). The wide-spread acceptance of a colorblind racial
ideology has involved swapping “old-fashioned” forms of overt racism with politically
correct racialized discourses that are replete with culturally-deficit thinking about Black
Americans, and people of color in general, how they allegedly fail to live up to traditional
neoliberal and meritocratic American values and practices (Chesler, Lewis & Crowfoot,
2005). As a result, the persistent inequalities that racial and ethnic minorities experience
are explained and rationalized through colorblind logics that insist that racism cannot
possibly be the source of these injustices since it is in the past, which effectively obscures
the structural processes that facilitate and maintain ongoing White supremacy and racial
inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Harvey and Feagin, 2012; Jones, 2002).

As a form of oppositional knowledge production, CRT openly challenges the
experiences of White Americans as the normative standard by exposing the historical,
ideological, psychological and social contexts that supposedly do not exist within post-
racial American society (Morfin, Perez, Parker, Lynn & Arona, 2006; Parker and Lynn,
2002). CRT recognizes that racism, in its numerous forms, is not aberration – in fact, it is
quite ordinary and therefore deeply engrained in the fabric and structure of American
society. Because racism is ordinary, colorblind conceptions of equality for all regardless
of their race fail to recognize and reconcile forms of racism that are not overt and blatant (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). CRT asserts that the power structures that exist in America are based on white privilege and supremacy, which functions to preserve and protect systems that marginalize of communities of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

**Counter Storytelling.** Materialized in the form of storytelling, CRT challenges racial oppression and the status quo through the production of counter-narratives (also known as counter-stories). Counter narratives function to challenge dominant narratives of White supremacy by amplifying the experiential knowledge of those who are systemically silenced by racism (Matsuda, Lawrence III, Delgado & Crenshaw, 1993). Counter storytelling enables CRT scholars to construct a different truth that opposes our culture, which is constructed through a social reality that promotes a neoliberal and meritocratic paradigm (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013).

As originally articulated by Delgado and Stefancic (2012), counter stories: 1) serve a powerful function for minority communities by giving them a voice and revealing that others have had similar experiences; 2) name injustice; 3) can begin “a process of adjustment” (i.e. reforms or paradigm shifts) whereby the counter-stories call attention to “neglected evidence”; and 4) are a “cure for silencing” (43-44). Counter storytelling serves as a pedagogical and methodological tool that can help challenge the totalizing narratives and discourses of those in power that are viewed as the default or norm (Delgado, 1989). Counter stories can also challenge abstract liberalism and the ideological claim that the United States is an equitable and just society where everyone has access to the same opportunities (Morfin et al., 2006; see also Bonilla-Silva, 2013). The students’ counter stories will serve as tool that examines the cumulative impact of
racial discrimination while also exposing the racist social structure and campus climate in which Black college students find themselves at PWIs. Their counter stories also provide new and valuable insight into how we conceptualize the relationship between racial discrimination and mental health.

**Interest Convergence.** Interest convergence, also known as material determinism, asserts that any progress or advances made towards racial equity for people of color will only occur when it converges with the interests, needs, expectations, and ideologies of White people (Harris et al., 2015; Milner, 2008). Inherent to the tenet of interest-convergence are the concepts of self and systematic interest and a loss-gain binary (Milner, 2008). Self and systematic interest, as theorized by Bell (1980), asserts that White people are more likely to support social justice and equity oriented policies when it does not require them to alter their status. Thus, those in power will only advance social justice agendas when the progress suits their self-interest and doesn’t require that their “own ways, systems, statuses, and privileges of experiencing life changes” (Milner, 2008, 334). A loss-gain binary suggests that the ability of White people to negotiate and make decisions that will result in more equitable policies and practices would mean that during the exchange they will ultimately lose something important to them, their power and privilege (Castagno & Lee, 2007).

**Intersectionality.** Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that emerged from Black feminism. Intersectionality, a term originally coined by feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989,1991), demonstrates how multiple social categories (e.g. race, gender class, and sexuality) intersect and converge to shape the lived experiences, and sometimes oppress, people of color (Crenshaw, 1991). Central to this theoretical
framework is a critique of essentialist identity politics, which intersectional feminist scholars argue fail to capture the complexity of how membership in multiple social categories is linked to how an individual is perceived, treated, and experiences life (Collins, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991). Applying an intersectional perspective facilitates awareness of the fact that no social identity or form of social inequality is more significant than another; they are not additive and cannot be ranked (Bowleg, 2012; Collins, 2000). Since its inception, intersectionality has been used to explore the experiences of Black women are shaped by interlocking systems of oppression; however, it can be used to examine both the experiences of multiple social groups located at the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality as well as the workings of intersectional systems of power and inequality at multiple levels of analysis.

Within the realm of higher education, there is a small but growing body of intersectional scholarship that has explored how race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect within the lives of students of color attending PWIs (Cabrera, 2011; Griffin & Museus, 2011; López et al, 2018; Museus & Griffin, 2011; Vue, Haslerig & Allen, 2017). Likewise, within the field of public health intersectionality has been applied to elucidate the ways in social identities interlock with systems of privilege and oppression in a multitude of ways to produce beneficial or harmful health outcomes (Bauer, 2014; Bowleg, 2012; Etherington, 2015; Green, Evans & Subramanian, 2017). This interdisciplinary research study will incorporate intersectionality as a theoretical and analytical tool to promote greater understanding of how race and gender intersect to shape the lived experiences of Black students in predominately White educational environments.
D. Positionality

Addressing my positionality is critical to this research study given my placement within the case study PWI. Being reflexive about my positionality will not only allow me to clearly state the lens through which I view, interpret, and fit in America’s racialized social system, but also how it influences and shapes my research and scholarship. Taking the time to self-reflect on my positionality has forced me to deal with my own inherit biases and experiences, and my current social context in order to comprehend my position in the context of my dissertation research. I identify as a working class, cisgender, able-bodied Black woman pursuing a terminal degree. My blackness is a very relevant part of my life and it influences every facet of my being: my blackness is me and I am my blackness. I have learned to no longer run away from my blackness; I treat it with the high esteem and care it deserves.

It is pertinent that I position myself and my respective role in this research so that it is clear how my lived experiences influenced the manner in which I approached the research process. As someone who has attended multiple PWIs (including the case study PWI), my research aims to critique and address the intersecting systems of oppression that are embedded in and normalized on college campuses that lead to an array of social and health inequities impacting Black students.

I have experienced firsthand how racism, including its institutional, interpersonal and internalized forms, negatively affected my sense of self and academic achievement. My experiences within this realm has greatly influenced how I view the world and how I conduct research. My understanding of the social world is grounded in critical race and Black feminist epistemologies that address racial inequities from an interdisciplinary
standpoint. I believe that race is a social construct that has been used to produce a powerful, although invisible, inferiority complex in those who do not ascribe to the dominant culture. When thinking about my experiences and how they have shaped my life, I draw from the works of critical race theory (CRT) to find emotional and spiritual solace and because of this, I am a passionate critical race scholar (and racial realist) who firmly believes that racism is a permanent fixture in U.S. social institutions, especially colleges and universities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), and that liberation can be found in the lived experiences and voices of the silenced and marginalized.

E. Measures

a. Individual, In-Depth Interviews

Individual in-depth interviews were conducted to explore multiple dimensions of the students’ lived experiences. The overall goal of the individual in-depth interviews was to explore how the students talked about their perceptions of and experiences with racial discrimination on campus, their mental health, and their perception of the university’s diversity and inclusion initiatives as they relate to a range of other themes. The individual interviews were guided by the following research questions: (1) What are Black college students’ perceptions of and experiences with racial discrimination while in college and (2) How do Black college students make sense of the impact of their experiences with racial discrimination on their mental health?

b. Focus Groups

Following completion of the individual interviews, focus groups with Black college students were convened to investigate how they perceive the university’s diversity and inclusion initiatives, programs, and policies in greater detail. Within the
scope of this project, a focus groups were used to investigate the context-embedded experiences of the students. Moreover, the focus groups were a very efficient and fruitful way to explore and expand upon themes that emerged within the in-depth interviews within the context of a group that shared a racial identity. The overarching goal of the focus groups were to examine the structural, systemic, and ideological practices that shape the lived experiences of the students. Both individual in-depth interviews and focus groups complement each other in this study and elicit a deeper and more complete picture of the students' perceptions and lived experiences. The focus groups were guided by the following research question: (1) How do Black college students evaluate the efficacy of the university’s diversity and inclusion initiatives given their experiences with racial discrimination?

F. Data Collection

a. Individual In-Depth Interviews

A total of 30 individual in-depth interviews were conducted and digitally recorded. Each interview was audio recorded and ranged from 60 to 90 minutes in length. A semi-structured interview guide consisting of three distinct sections was used so that the themes, as guided by the research questions, could emerge from the students’ narratives. The first section of the interview guide examines how students understand experiences of racism. The second section of the interview guide explores how students view the university-led diversity and inclusion initiatives. The final section of the interview guide assesses Black students’ perception of the impact diversity and inclusion initiatives in influencing their mental health. Students who participated in the in-depth
interviews received a $20 cash incentive to compensate them for their participation in the short demographic survey and interview.

b. Focus Groups

A total of four focus groups were convened in order to accommodate the students’ schedules. The focus groups were audio recorded and lasted about approximately 90 minutes in length. A focus group facilitation guide consisting of three distinct sections was used to elicit more detailed narratives about students’ experiences with racism and its effect on their mental health in conjunction to their perceptions of the implemented diversity and inclusion initiatives. The first section of the facilitation guide examined perceptions of cross-racial interactions on campus. The second section consisted of several questions aimed at understanding of how the students perceived and interacted with the campus racial climate. The final section focused exclusively on how the students assessed the university’s diversity and inclusion initiatives. Students who participated in the focus groups received a $20 cash incentive to compensate them for their participation in the short demographic survey and interview.

G. Quality Control Procedures

Maintaining and safeguarding the rights, welfare, and confidentiality of the participants was a top priority of this research. Before recording the in-depth interviews and focus groups all participants were asked to choose a pseudonym; this name, along with a participant identification number, was used and referenced on all written, audio, and other materials related to the individual study participant and research results. Records, such as the consent documents, were available only to the PI. A master list of names and pseudonyms was kept on a password-protected desktop computer, accessible
only to the PI. Any hard copies of data were stored in a locked file cabinet. The study’s findings were reported in the aggregate for the protection of individuals’ anonymity and privacy to the fullest extent possible.

All data were obtained for research purposes only. Data were only identifiable by a study identification number. Rigorous safeguards were put in place to ensure the safety, integrity, and confidentiality of the data. For example, each student was assigned a numeric identifier (participant identification number) that was associated with each participant’s demographic data and audio recording. Verbal consent procedures were conducted before data collection occurred. Participants were also informed of their rights to end their participation in the study at any time; if they decided to end their participation prior to completing the interview they still received the incentive. In order to protect the institution’s confidentiality, the PWI serving as the case study site for this research, as well as the various student organizations, university offices, and programs cited by the students, were anonymized and referenced using pseudonyms.

**H. Data Analysis and Analytical Framework**

The in-depth interviews and focus groups were coded and analyzed using a combination of critical race methodology (CRM) and a modified approach to grounded theory (GT). Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software was used. Grounded theory involves the researcher entering the situation of inquiry with questions as opposed to hypotheses based on prior research; those questions may be modified throughout the research process so that the data reflexively informs the project (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). This study’s approach to GT is described as ‘modified’ because the approach to the coding process
was informed by prevailing themes in the existing literature while also allowing themes to emerge during the analytic process.

Critical race methodology was used to analyze participants’ narratives. Using CRM to analyze the interview and focus group data allowed for an explicit and targeted focus on how higher education is organized by socially constructed (i.e. colorblind and neoliberal) ideas about race and racism, which has an impact on various aspects of Black students’ mental health (e.g. how racially discriminatory discourses and practices are perpetuated/concealed to the detriment of Black students). CRM provided the theoretical tools necessary to examine the commonly unnoticed pathways through which racial discrimination operates on an interpersonal, structural, and institutional level. Through the process of counter-storytelling, CRM also recognizes the value of experiential knowledge as a legitimate and valuable tool for analyzing racism and challenging White supremacy (Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Matsuda, Lawrence III, Delgado & Crenshaw, 1993). CRM was used to analyze the data by foregrounding a socio-historical understanding of race and racism into how the data were interpreted, which helped expose the discriminatory institutional structures and campus climate many of the students found themselves navigating. Additionally, using CRM as a data analysis tool helped challenge the dominant discourses that are traditionally used to explain Black students’ experiences at PWIs.

Using a combination of CRM and GT ensured that the students were able to “name their own reality” (Delgado, 1995, pg. 57). Furthermore, such an analytical approach helped reveal the social structures that Black students experienced, which were in part perpetrated by faculty and staff, by historicizing how race and racism are always
factors in the collegiate experience (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). This approach also enabled themes and patterns to emerge from data that may not be anticipated by the research questions or by previous research. The goal of this analytical strategy is to ensure that the students’ experiential knowledge is placed at the center of inquiry, rather than at the margins.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter is comprised of two independent manuscripts that detail the findings of this study and partially fulfill the requirements of this dissertation. The first manuscript is entitled “Racial Discrimination, Racialized Comportment, and Mental Health: Black Students’ Narratives of their Experiences with Racial Discrimination at a PWI”. The second manuscript is entitled “Critical Race Theory and Interest Convergence: Exploring Black Students’ Narratives of the Commodification of Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives on a Southern PWI”.

CHAPTER 4: MANUSCRIPT 1

Racial Discrimination, Racialized Comportment, and Mental Health: Black Students’ Narratives of Their Experiences with Racial Discrimination at a PWI

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1 Lewis, K.R. To be submitted to Critical Public Health
Abstract

This article uses individual, in-depth interviews to examine how Black college students make meaning of their mental health in relationship to their everyday experiences with racial discrimination while attending a predominately White institution (PWI) of higher education in the American South. The author uses critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical and methodological framework to examine how Black students’ efforts to navigate the campus racial climate of their PWI take a toll on their mental health and shapes how they comport themselves. The students’ narratives illustrate how (1) racial discrimination manifests and persists on their campus, (2) such repeated experiences contribute to an array of mental health outcomes, and (3) their experiences with racial discrimination become an embodied dimension of their gendered, racial subjectivities. The findings provide insight into the ways in which racial discrimination impacts the mental health outcomes of the study population. The students’ narratives disrupt the dominant assumption that colleges and universities are colorblind, race neutral spaces of diversity and inclusion by illustrating how racism continues to operate in unforeseen ways that oppress Black students. This article advances a theory of racialized comportment that can help elucidate an additional pathway by which cumulative exposure to racial discrimination may impact mental health.

Key Words: Race, Racism, Mental Health, Multiculturalism, Black College Students
The number of racial minorities enrolling in institutions of higher education in the United States has steadily increased over the last decade (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010; Denson, 2009). Approximately 15% of college students are Black, with the vast majority (90%) enrolled in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Hoston, Graves, & Fleming-Randle, 2010; Provasnik & Shafer, 2004; Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Legislative and policy efforts, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and affirmative action programs, have facilitated Black Americans’ access to once exclusionary PWIs (Singer, 2005). While the access provided by these laws and policies has resulted in yearly increases in Black student enrollment, they have done little to change the culture of PWIs that continue to marginalize Black students and other students of color (Bourke, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992). As a result, Black students navigate environments where they encounter incessant direct and indirect social cues that communicate they are intellectually inferior and do not belong (Watkins, 2012), which can lead to adverse mental health outcomes (Flowers, 2006; Love, 2008; Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008).

An impressive body of educational literature has documented the impact the campus racial climate of PWIs can have on Black students (see Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; McClain & Perry, 2017 for reviews). PWIs are often characterized by campus racial climates that are rife with racial discrimination and segregation, institutional neglect of students, faculty, and staff of color, a systemic incapacity to openly and candidly discuss race and racism, and exclusionary and marginalizing policies (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). The impact of
the racial environment of a college campus is far reaching; it can significantly affect multiple aspects of health and well-being, particularly the mental health of students who perceive the environment to be racially intolerant (Iacovino & James, 2016; M. C. James, Hall, Liles, Williams, & Marrero, 2016; Oliver II, Datta, & Baldwin, 2017). Furthermore, it is well documented that differential perceptions of the campus racial climate persist among White and Black students (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). For example, Black students who attend PWIs consistently report experiences of racial hostility, unjust treatment by faculty and staff, and demands to conform to institutional norms (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992). These macro and micro level inequalities result in Black students feeling isolated and invalidated, which is correlated with mental fatigue, psychological distress, and depressive symptomologies (Harper, 2013; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013).

While the aforementioned mental health implications of cumulative experiences of racial discrimination for Black students have been the subject of empirical inquiry for well over a decade (Banerjee, Meyer, & Rowley, 2016; Brown, 2003; Carter, 2007; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Hoggard, Byrd, & Sellers, 2015; Williams et al., 2012), much less is known about how Black students interpret their experiences with racial discrimination. With the exception of Brown (2008) and Masko (2005), there is a dearth of literature that explicitly applies a critical race theory (CRT) framework to this domain. In what follows, this article uses CRT to analyze interview data collected from a convenience sample of Black college students to interrogate the relationship between racism and mental health, as they make sense of it, including how racism shapes how they comport themselves on campus. The students’ narratives reveal how racial
discrimination manifests and persists on their campus, how their experiences with racial discrimination influence their embodiment as racial minorities, and how these experiences take a toll on their mental health and well-beings. These insights advance the research on the relationship between racism and health.

**Campus Racial Climate**

A considerable body of work has focused on the educational experiences of Black students who attend PWIs (Harper, 2013; Iacovino & James, 2016; Monroe, 2016; Solorzano et al., 2000; Taylor, Austin, Perkins, & Edwards, 2012). One prominent theme of this research is the role the campus racial climate plays in maintaining and exacerbating various forms of racism. Educational scholars define the campus racial climate as the overall feel and structure (behaviors, attitudes, institutional policies, and services) that reflect an acceptance or rejection of racial diversity on a campus (Ancis et al., 2000; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Solorzano et al., 2000). The racial climate of PWIs is a multidimensional phenomenon directly impacted by external forces (governmental policy and sociohistorical factors) and internal forces (the respective racial context of the institution) (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). The internal forces that shape affect the campus racial climate can be grouped into four distinct categories: structural diversity, the institutions historical legacy, the psychological climate, and the behavioral climate.

The psychological dimension of the campus racial climate is comprised of perceived notions of hostility, segregation, racism, and tension held among community members stemming from issues of race (Hurtado et al., 1999). Likewise, the behavioral dimension of a campus racial climate reflects the frequency and quality of cross-racial
interactions and whether these interactions are characterized as friendly, open, discriminatory, or tense. Perceptions of the psychological and behavioral dimensions of the campus climate vary significantly between White students and students of color (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). White students tend to judge the campus racial climate more favorably than Black students, who are more likely to report incidents of racial discrimination in the form of faculty incivility, uncomfortable academic interactions, and environmental cues that devalue their identity (Iacovino & James, 2016). As a result, for Black students and other students of color who attend PWIs, racial discrimination becomes a significant factor in the quality of their college life (Banks, Kohn-Wood, & Spencer, 2006; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003). Racial microaggressions, inequitable treatment by faculty and staff, perceptions of racial segregation, and low academic expectations held by faculty contribute to a campus climate in which Black students feel socially isolated, invisible, and invalidated (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Solorzano et al., 2000; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008).

**Racial Discrimination and Mental Health**

Racism is an ideology which posits that races are populations of individuals whose physical differences are inseparable from the cultural and social traits/characteristics from which they are measured, stratified, and judged (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Golash-Boza, 2016; Jones, 2002). Racial discrimination, a product of racism, is a psychosocial stressor that adversely impacts the mental health of Black Americans (Clark et al., 1999; Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999; Mays, Cochran, & Barnes, 2007; Williams et al., 2012; Williams & Mohammed, 2013). Racial discrimination is broadly
defined as the differential treatment of individuals facilitated through institutional mechanisms (e.g. racialized practices such as residential segregation) and interpersonal social exchanges (e.g. negative attitudes, judgment, or unfair treatment) predicated on the basis of race (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Perceived racial discrimination imposes a psychological burden that typically taxes or exceeds existing resources available to carry the load, or cope, which in turn creates emotional pain, distress, and feelings of powerlessness (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Sanchez-Hucles, 1999; Utsey, Hook, Fischer, & Belvet, 2008).

Studies involving diverse samples of Black Americans find that exposure to and perceptions of racial discrimination correlates with a variety of negative mental health outcomes such as psychological distress, depressive symptomatology, and racism related stress (Banks et al., 2006; Brondolo et al., 2011; Sellers et al., 2003; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). Among the college-attending population of Black Americans, perceptions of racial discrimination are associated with higher levels of psychological distress, suicidal ideation, anxiety, depression, and stress (Donovan et al., 2013). Research within this target group also indicates that, in comparison to other students of color (e.g., Latinx and Asian students), Black students report higher frequencies of experiencing interpersonal racial discrimination (Cokley, Hall-Clark, & Hicks, 2011). Given that everyday forms of racial discrimination pose a significant risk to the mental health of Black Americans (Lee & Turney, 2012; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009), much can be learned about how Black students make meaning of its impact on their mental health.
Racial Discrimination and the Body

Scholars of racism and health have developed a number of theoretical concepts to enhance our understanding the impact of racial discrimination on the health and well-being of Black people in the United States, which helps explain why this population experiencing certain health disparities. In particular, the stress induced by repeated, cumulative experiences of racial discrimination not only results in poor mental health outcomes, it can also have detrimental effects on the body. For example, Geronimus (2006) found that repeated exposure and adaptation to stressors among sample of Back men and women ages 18–64 years old lead to an excessive exposure to stress hormones, which over time result in an increased allostatic load, or wear and tear, on the body. Geronimus (1992, 1994, 2001) referred to this phenomenon as ‘weathering.’ It provides an example of how structural racism impacts the body through the process of accelerated aging. Weathering illustrates how the declining health Black Americans can be attributed to sustained exposure to social inequality (e.g., racial discrimination). This results in increased levels of stress, prolonged coping demands, and greater “allostatic load.”

In addition to weathering, another theoretical concept that captures the impact of racism on the health of Black Americans is John Henryism (James, 1994). The concept refers to how stressors impact the body through the usage of active coping mechanisms. James referred to such coping strategies as ‘John Henryism’ because during the time of the Industrial revolution, a Black steel-driver named John Henry raced a steam powered machine, only to die after winning the competition because of the physical demands exerted on his body. John Henryism is defined as a behavioral disposition to use persistent and sustained coping strategies to lessen the impact of prolonged exposure to
psychosocial and environmental stressors (S. A. James, 1994; S. A. James, Hartnett, & Kalsbeek, 1983). Lastly, Krieger (1999, 2016) and Krieger and Davey Smith (2006) advanced an ecosocial theory of disease distribution by illustrating how epidemiological data can be used to demonstrate how marginalized populations biologically embody various forms of social inequality. The social and ecological environment in which marginalized populations live can become engrained in such a way that overtime, their social conditions shape the expression of biologic traits, population distributions of disease, and ultimately, social inequalities in health.

Public health literature investigating the relationship between racism and its impact on the Black body provides the context for the study design and a theoretical foundation for conceptualizing how the students discussed the intersection of racial discrimination and bodily comportment. Within this article, the concept of racialized comportment refers to how continuous Black students’ encounters with racial discrimination result in both a physical and emotional comportment of their bodies as a means to assimilate into and cope with a racially oppressive environment. This article advances a theory of racialized comportment to explain how cumulative exposure to racial discrimination may result in Black students’ propensity to self-regulate their bodily comportment while navigating the campus of their PWI. The remainder of this article will explore how the study sample talks about the ways in which aspects of the campus racial climate impacts their mental health and how their experiences take a hold on their body.

**Method**

The data are drawn from a larger study that used a qualitative case study approach to examine Black students’ narratives of their mental health in relation to both (a) their
experiences of racial injustice in college and (b) their perceptions of diversity and inclusion initiatives enacted by their university. Three research questions were used to guide this research study: (1) What are Black college students’ perceptions of and experiences with racial discrimination while in college? (2) How do they make sense of the impact of their experiences with racial discrimination on their mental health? And, (3) How do they discuss the ways in which racial discrimination impacts their mental health?

Participants and Setting

This study was approved by the case study PWIs Institutional Review Board. The first author conducted semi-structured, individual, in-depth interviews with 30 Black college students who were attending the case study PWI at the time of data collection. Eligibility criteria were limited to students who were enrolled as an undergraduate, matriculated for at least two consecutive semesters, self-identified as Black or African American, and were 18 years old or older. Students were recruited with the assistance of the faculty and staff who disseminated study recruitment information, including a flyer and script that described the research study, through various listservs. The recruitment script included eligibility criteria, the aim of the study, and information about the incentive. Many of the students were recruited through the listserv emails and the remainder were recruited through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling involves a referral system in which one student nominates another, or group of students to potentially participate in the research study. This method of recruitment was very beneficial in recruiting harder to reach subsets of Black students, particularly men. Although the initial sample included 30 participants, five non-traditional students were excluded from the analysis because they did not interact within the university setting
beyond attending classes. This produced the final sample of twenty-five undergraduate students between the ages of 18-24. Additional demographic information can be found in Table 4.1

All the interviews were conducted at the case study PWI. The case study PWI is a large public university located in the southern region of the United States. White students comprise about 77% of the undergraduate population, while Black students make up about 10% of the undergraduate population, which is a stark difference from the state racial demographics (i.e., 64% White and 28% Black). The University of the Southeast is situated in a moderately-sized metropolitan city that can be described as a college town, where much of the city’s activities and efforts revolve around the university, particularly its NCAA Division I athletic program.

Data Collection

The interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. Before their interview, the students were asked to complete a written consent form followed by a short demographic questionnaire. The in-depth interviews were conducted between February 2017 and April 2017 and ranged from 45-90 minutes in length. The semi-structured interview guide used to conduct the interviews consisted of three sections, each targeting a different dimension of the students lived experience. The first section of the interview guide examined the student’s earlier life experiences and how they discussed aspects of their racial identity. The second section consisted of several questions aimed at gathering an in-depth illustration of how the students perceived and interacted with the campus racial climate. The final section focused on gathering
information about the student’s mental health from their own subjective perspective. Pseudonyms are used to protect the students’ identity.

Individual interviews were the chosen method instead of the more commonly used psychometric measures of racial discrimination and mental health because the first author wanted to ensure that the students in the study were able to narrate their own conceptualizations of racial discrimination, racism, and mental health. Moreover, the semi-structured nature of the in-depth interviews enabled the students to describe their perspectives in their own words and “name their reality” (Delgado, 1995, pg.95) while also enabling the interviewer to probe their experiences with significant depth. A common critique of survey measures used to assess dynamic processes such as discriminatory experiences is that their focus can be too narrow, resulting in under-reporting (Berkel et al., 2009). Semi-structured interviews allow for students to explain in their own words how issues around racism, racial discrimination, and mental health impact their daily lives. This methodological strategy is widely used by scholars who employ a commitment to advancing social justice in their research and scholarship.

**Data Analysis**

Each interview transcript was coded using critical race methodology as an analytical tool in addition to a modified approach to grounded theory (GT) (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). A combination of open coding (i.e., delineating concepts and categories) and axial coding (i.e., relating concepts and categories to each other) was employed so that themes and patterns that may not have been anticipated by the research questions or by previous research could naturally emerge from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). For instance, after the initial review of each transcript open coding was used to generate a list
of inductive codes based on the emerging and reoccuring themes. A preliminary definition, instructions for usage, and an example were developed for each code that was generated during this process. As new transcribed data arrived axial coding was used to update the previous codes and generate new theoretical categories. The themes that were generated through the close reading, memoing, and combination of open and axial coding resulted in the first pass of a coding framework. Subsequent revisions garnered from new insights from the additional transcriptions resulted in a final coding scheme that was used to recode all of the interviews.

Critical race methodology (CRM) was used to analyze the coded data. Using CRM as an analytical tool allows for an explicit and targeted focus on how higher education is organized by socially constructed (i.e. colorblind and neoliberal) ideas about race and racism which can have an impact on various aspects of mental health (e.g. how racially discriminatory discourses and practices are perpetuated/concealed to the detriment of Black students). CRM provides the theoretical tools necessary to examine the commonly unnoticed pathways through which racial discrimination operates on an interpersonal, structural, and institutional level. Through the process of counterstorytelling CRM also recognizes the value of experiential knowledge as a legitimate and valuable tool for analyzing racism and challenging White supremacy (Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Matsuda, Lawrence III, Delgado & Crenshaw, 1993). Using CRM, the data were analyzed by foregrounding a socio-historical understanding of race and racism into how the data were interpreted, which helped expose the discriminatory institutional structures and campus climate many of the students found them selves traveling within. Additionally, using CRM as a data analysis tool helped
challenge the dominant discourses that are traditionally used to explain Black students' experiences at PWIs.

**Findings**

The following sections highlight three of the major themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts that illustrate how the students’ efforts to navigate the racial climate of their PWI took a toll on their mental health. The students’ narratives illustrate (1) how racial discrimination manifests and persists on their campus, (2) how such repeated experiences contribute to an array of mental health outcomes, and (3) how their experiences with racial discrimination become an embodied dimension of their gendered racial subjectivities.

**Normalecy of Racism and Racial Discrimination at a Southern PWI**

The students’ narratives reveal a complex understanding of how racism and racial discrimination operated on their campus. Their discussions detailing their personal experiences with racial discrimination on their campus was nested within an intricate understanding of how the context of their university aided in perpetuating such occurrences in addition to shielding Whiteness from blame. Whiteness, rather than racism, is used to capture the essence of the students’ assertions because it encompasses how the normative structures and social arrangements embedded in the university privileges Whites while marginalizing black students. Within this section of the findings, the students not only discuss their experiences with racial discrimination but also how the racial climate of the institution is structured in a way that minimizes the socio-historical impact of the racist incidents that happen on the campus while permitting White students
the ability to avoid identifying how they benefit from Whiteness and White privilege (Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2016).

Numerous participants expressed a keen, matter-of-fact awareness of blatant racism and subtler forms of racial discrimination expressed by their White counterparts and faculty and staff. Their recollections of campus-wide incidents of overt racism included images of White students in blackface, racial slurs written on campus property, nooses hung in trees, and multiple public social media posts referring to Black students as monkeys. However, when tasked to discuss their everyday experiences as Black students on a predominately White campus, many of the students collectively, and fervently, discussed the insidiousness of the daily, more subtle and covert forms of racial discrimination and its impact on their everyday college experience. For example, narratives detailing their daily experiences with racial discrimination illustrated incidents of discriminatory treatment by faculty and staff on the basis of race in the form of assumptions of cheating due to high test scores, hyper-surveillance by the campus police, and multiple instances in which professors made racially charged jokes in front of students. Nearly all of the students interviewed recounted observations of institutional level discrimination, the most commonly mentioned example being when the university funding for an annual predominately Black homecoming event (a step show showcasing Black Panhellenic organizations) was abruptly cut in order to promote a more racially inclusive event. The students’ narratives also highlighted the daily struggle of encountering incessant racial microaggressions such as “you’re articulate for a Black person,” “you’re not like other Black people,” and “you must be here on a sports scholarship, what sport do you play.”
A large portion of the students recounted their experiences with racial discrimination when asked to describe their interactions with other students on campus. However, the students’ discussions of their encounters also encapsulated their thoughts on why they believed their experiences to be a normative part of college life. Alexis, a sophomore media arts major, expressed that such experiences are the norm when you “live in the South.” She continued her assertion by stating, “there’s some people who are still so stuck in their ways who just don't like black people. It’s just something that you got to deal with if you accept coming to a flagship university in the South.” William, a junior geography major added to the idea expressed above when he stated,

We're dealing with majority white people who are raised in the south. This is how they were raised, you know what I mean? These are people that I'm sharing classes with. These people are blatantly racist and they will never face repercussions for it. They live in an environment that tolerates that.

Both Alexis and William illustrate how racism as a system privileges White college students and enables them to deny that racism and racial discrimination are pertinent social issues while placing the burden on marginalized communities to simply “deal with it.” Jasmine’s narrative provides a nuanced understanding of racism and racial discrimination, the reality it creates for many of the Black students, and why it persists on their campus.

We're a southern institution. We're rooted in racism. I feel like that's the inevitable. Some people grew up racist. They grew up having these bigoted thoughts poured into them and not even realizing it. Just because it had the face of their grandma,
because it had the face of their father, they feel as though they are not affected or they feel as though they are not under the influence of racism.

Jasmine not only challenges the notion that racism is some aberrant occurrence, she also directly problematizes the idea that individual character flaws or moral failings cause racial discrimination. After a brief moment of silence, she continued by stating,

So that leaves those who are affected, because all minorities are affected by racism, so it leaves us scrambling, searching for places of comfort. So I feel as long as these issues exist, there's going to always be a group that's ignoring it. And there's always going to be a group hurting and looking for release. So I feel like that's why it is the way it is here. They don't believe that these problems are relevant. We have to keep supporting ourselves and finding community within ourselves.

Her statement illustrates how racism operates as an ideology that informs individual and collective dehumanizing actions that rationalize the unfair, harmful, and discriminatory treatment of persons deemed racially inferior (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005). Jasmine’s admission also illustrates how the inability of Whites on the campus to contend with or even acknowledge racism further marginalizes and oppresses Black students. As John, a junior business major stated, “they live in this fantasy believing that racism doesn't exist, believing that there is no such thing as privilege, believing that there's no such thing as disadvantage for minorities.”

Like Alexis, William, and Jasmine, several participants openly grappled with the significance racism and racial discrimination has in their college experience. Malcolm’s thoughts regarding why racism is a permanent fixture on campus aptly surmises this theme. When asked why he thought such occurrence kept happening on campus he stated
“they are afraid of diversity.” When probed to learn more about why he thought the White students on campus were afraid of diversity Malcolm stated,

Because they don't know how to deal with it. They don't know. They grew up in white communities where they had white friends with white parents and they went to a white church. It's like they didn't encounter diversity or other religions so they don't have this open mind pool. As a conglomerate, they typically don't have these open ideas or open viewpoints, especially growing up in the south, again, mostly conservative. They believe religiously what their parents believe. They believe politically what their parents believe.

The students’ narratives provide an analysis of why they believe racial discrimination is such a commonplace feature of their college experience. Given the historical implications of racism in the American South, the students provide an intricate account of racism’s ability to constantly adapt to socio-cultural changes by altering its expression and enabling it to be produced in everyday social interactions (Vaught and Castagno, 2008; Zuberi, Patterson & Stewart, 2015). The cultural and ideological norms passed down through generations of White people, as described by the students has created an insular, are arguably colorblind, environment where racism and racial discrimination doesn’t exist which forces to Black students “find community within themselves.” Moreover, their viewpoints illustrate how White supremacy operates a mechanism that makes Whites complicit in perpetuating racism.

**Mental Health Implications**

When discussing the impact of their experiences with racial discrimination, an array of mental health outcomes emerged within the students’ narratives. The manner in
which the students talked about their mental health indicated how the cumulative, and seemingly normalized, nature of their experiences took a toll on them. Three subthemes emerged from the data: emotional toll of racism, racism-related stress, and emotional labor.

**Emotional Toll of Racism**

Students’ discussions of the mental and emotional effects of their cumulative experiences of racial discrimination reverberated within many of their narratives. A significant majority of students mentioned feelings of anger, loneliness, social isolation, detachment, fear, and invisibility tied to experiences of racial discrimination. For example, Samantha, a senior finance major, stated her experiences on campus made her feel “detached. Don’t want to go to class usually, even though there’s times ... Today I don’t want to go to class, but there’s days when you are just so mentally down and just not up for the challenge of getting out of bed.” After recounting an experience involving a White friend’s overtly racist statements about Black men being thugs and criminals, Dillon described how such occurrences, which happened often, made him “a lot more aware that there are people on this campus that won't ever respect me because of the color of my skin, or will always think I'm less than them.” When asked to explain how those experiences impacted him emotionally, he stated,

> It makes me feel pretty awful. I realized no matter what I do, I'm always going to be black, and some people are always going to see that as inferior, and less than. People just won't respect me no matter what I do. I watched Roots last summer and one of the lines that really stuck with me was when he goes, “What do you, you know, what we call a free N-word in North Carolina? An N-word.”
Students also recounted how their experiences made them feel invalidated and unintelligent, like Trisha, a senior marketing major, who stated, “it can be difficult because it's like you want people to understand and to see that we are human despite our color and we can't change that. It's like why can't we be heard and that could be like really hurting sometimes.” What several of the students are describing is the affective, or emotional, toll experiences with racism can evoke among marginalized populations and the tactics they developed to deal with their emotions. For example, Stacie, a sophomore elementary education major, stated,

People have their own opinion, and if you don't like somebody just because of the color of their skin, that's just ridiculous to me, and it kind of hurts at first, but once you don't let it bother you it's like oh, you don't like me because I'm black, like oh okay. I won't say it's like growing tough skin. Well I guess it kind of is. No, because I'm still a water bucket. I guess it's just because I can't change what color I am, and I can't change what color they are. Why just let it keep bothering you every day? If it's going to be something, just take it for what it is, with a grain of salt, and just keep moving.

Although Stacie initially credited her ability to deal with racial discrimination to her “tough skin”, midway through her narrative she openly discussed how her experiences affected her mentally. Like most of the other students, Stacie, was very candid about how her experiences emotionally impacted her throughout her interview. She also revealed at the closing of her interview that her experiences with racial discrimination was a deciding factor in her moving off campus. The racial campus
climate the students in this study engage with on a daily basis is emotionally taxing and has a significant impact on their mental health.

**Racism-Related Stress**

A number of students detailed how racism-related stress impacted their mental health. Students discussed stress impacting their overall college experience, ability to concentrate in class, engagement in university activities that require them to leave their dorm room, sleep, and even navigating the campus comfortably. The excerpt taken from Camille’s narrative highlights the feelings around stress that many of the students expressed within their narratives.

I'm worried about things that other kids don't worry about. Most kids are just worried about college. They're worried about who's going to what party. They're worried about their grades. They're worried less about if their life may or may not potentially be in danger. Or if somebody's gonna think a certain thing of them just because of how they look before they even introduce themselves. It's stressful. You have the stress of an adult at a young age. The stress of somebody that's 35 and has to pay bills and has a whole bunch of other responsibilities.

In addition to Camille, Trent, a sophomore computer science major recounted how stress made him “constantly overthink things. You can't sleep. It's just second guessing yourself, you're second guessing your actions, your existence at this campus or university. Always just thinking about things you probably shouldn't be thinking about.”

When probed to learn more about what his stress made him think about he stated,

Whether or not is my blackness accepted here; do my blackness make people feel uncomfortable; do my blackness intimidate others; do people think down because
I'm black; how do my white counterparts think of black people; what do they think about my blackness, my being black. Those type of things.

Racial discrimination is experienced as a stressor that can result in a host of negative outcomes (e.g., trauma, hurt, humiliation, rage, and confusion), affecting multiple dimensions of well-being (Harrell, 2000; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). Camille’s and Trent’s excerpts illustrates how the social construction of race creates a reality for people of color that has real health related consequences. Moreover, the stress induced by their experiences has been shown to be associated with accelerated aging, or weathering, over time (Braveman, Egerter, & Williams, 2011; Geronimus, Hicken, Keene, & Bound, 2006). The students’ narratives speak to the unearned privileges racism creates for Whites (e.g., not having to worry about your surroundings simply due to the color of your skin) and the disparate reality it creates for people of color.

**Emotional Labor**

Another salient point that emerged from participants’ narratives of the influence of racism on their mental health involved the pressure they felt to act as if they were okay, essentially describing the emotional labor involved in ignoring the day-to-day racial discrimination with which they dealt with. The narratives discussed within this subtheme emerged following a series of questions asking the students to discuss if they felt any pressure to manage the feelings and emotions tied to their everyday experiences with racial discrimination. The sentiments expressed by Katrina, a senior education major, encapsulates how she actively dealt with experiences of racial discrimination.

Knowing that you're not going to be taken seriously when you're hurt about something that's going on socially or when you know that the people around you
don't really care, it's how do I carry on. Sometimes the best thing to do is just smile and fake it. So you put on this façade. You just you go on. Like Paul Dunbar. *We Wear the Mask.* And we do. We have to constantly figure out how to survive, how to maneuver, and how to I guess pretend to be okay.

Likewise, Lynette, a sophomore biology major, expressed how she felt as a Black woman, stating, “Black women don't get to be angry. We don't get to show the emotions.” She continues her discussion by revealing,

We don't get to really voice how we truly feel because we know that it'll be dismissed. We know that they'll just give us a stereotypical label. Oh you're just being an angry black woman. Please go sit down. So we’re sued to the dismissal, so you just act like you’re okay when you’re not.

What Katrina and Lynette are describing is the emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012), or self-management of feelings, necessary to create a publicly acceptable appearance, which is a process that many of the students within this research study engaged in (Evans & Moore, 2015). Many of the students discussed engaging in emotional labor in an effort to protect their mental health from the constant policing of students who didn’t understand the challenge’s they faced. Fallon, a junior social work major, elaborated,

Certain stuff, it does get to you, but you feel like you have to be strong in front of them because if you don't, then they know that they've gotten to you and they'll know a way to get to you, if that makes sense. You have to act like oh, me being different, it doesn't matter, but then if it actually hurts, you have to be like okay,
yeah, it does, but I'm not going to let you know that. You're not going to get my goat.

In addition to discussing the emotional labor they exerted, numerous students articulated how the process of engaging in emotional labor can negatively impact Black mental health. For example, Robert, a senior business major, stated, “in our community, Black communities and family, culture, we've been taught to pray away things and not actually go to seek help or counseling. I've adopted that same mindset.” Additionally, Kristina, a sophomore public health major asserts, “I feel like in the black community mental health isn't something that is acknowledged at all. It's like, oh you black you strong, you do this, you go out and do that and get it done. You're not allowed to break down, have any type of feelings.” Jaslene, a junior nursing major, made the following point in relation to this theme when she stated,

I think that we put on this mentality of being strong and having everything together. Nowadays complaining about race, or complaining about issues, it's like why are you doing that? It's not understood, because Black mental health has never really been something that people have tried to understand. We've swept our own mental health underneath the carpet. We've let other people sweep it under the carpet. Then we just keep trying to keep moving and moving, and going and going, because we know, honestly, if we stop for one moment, we could lose everything. We don't have time to take breaks.

Not only do these students’ narratives call attention to the ways in which mental health is talked about within the Black community, they also highlight the burden of a catch-22 situation, which can have deleterious mental health outcomes: either participate
in your own objectification and marginalization or actively confront the oppressive structures and potentially face a backlash that can result in being ostracized, censored, or the target of additional discriminatory acts (Evans & Moore, 2015). Moreover, their discussions about mental health and the Black community highlights how decades of systemic oppression and anti-blackness has instilled this notion of working around mental health concerns rather than acknowledging them for fear of losing everything.

**Racialized Comportment**

While many of the participants openly grappled with the significance race and racism have on their college experience, one unexpected theme that emerged from the analysis of the students’ narratives about racism and their mental health entailed how the frequency of their experiences with racial discrimination got under their skin in such a way that it impacted how they comported their body as a way to cope. For example, Derrick, a senior business major, stated,

A lot of time I have to be apologetic for my blackness. I always have to do more to make myself seem like I'm not a threat. It's just a lot of subconscious things such as I feel like I always have to over-exert myself to make sure that people feel comfortable, and that I make sure that people understand that I'm not the misconception or whatever image that they perceive me to be. I feel like that may also be erasing some of my blackness. I have to do a lot more to feel comfortable, to make white people feel comfortable around me.

Derrick’s narrative illustrates how the unrelenting oppression and racial discrimination he endures became such a salient aspect of his everyday college experiences that he altered the way he comported himself. When probed to learn more
about how his realization made him feel and impacted his sense of self as a Black male student at the PWI, Derrick stated,

It's very stressful. It's mentally exhausting. It's not a good feeling. I don't know, it's like they want us to be ourselves but can we be ourselves, what is being ourselves. If being ourselves isn't accepted by our white society can we be ourselves? Where is that on and off switch? I don't know. That's something I'm figuring out as I speak but it definitely goes into the fact of being a black man. I feel like subconsciously we are a threat to society; I feel like society paints these horrid images of us and the industry, and media of gang violence and just thugs.

Dillon, a junior political science major, recounted how his experiences with racial discrimination impacted him as follows,

I have to carry myself a certain way around these people. Sometimes it's a little frustrating because I see obvious signs of, I don't want to say racism, I don't want to say discrimination either, just it would not had happened if I weren’t Black. For example, it's late at night, I'm walking down the library, this happened numerous times, and there's a white girl walking in front of me. What I do is I just say “Okay, let me just go ahead and get on this side of the street so she doesn't have to look back and think this person's trying to come after her or something like that.”

The experiences Dillon and Derrick recount illustrate how gender and race intersect in their experiences with racism and its impact on their bodily comportment and mental health. Black men are often viewed within a White racial frame (Feagin, 2013) that labels them as inherently prone to violence, emotionally unstable, and even subhuman (Carter, 2007; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007), which as Derrick and Dillon
demonstrate can become an embodied and comported experience. The ways in which the students highlighted in this theme discuss self-regulating their body due to internalizing their experiences of racial discrimination underscores the need for more targeted research to understand the pathways through which racism impacts the body.

**Racial Discrimination as a Motivator**

The familiar Black proverb states, “Being Black in America, you’ve got to work twice as hard only to get half as far.” Therefore, not surprisingly, a great deal of the students internalized this message based on their experiences of racial discrimination. In line with John Henryism literature, the students’ excerpts illustrate how their cumulative experiences with everyday racial discrimination become embodied. Many of the participants suggested that if they just worked hard enough, they could control and limit the effect of stressors such as racial discrimination (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). For example, when probed to think about how his encounters of racial discrimination on campus impacted him, Brandon, a sophomore exercise science major, stated, “It annoys me but it also drives me. I want to graduate and prove them wrong. That I belong here and I got an education and I didn't need to throw a ball around or dribble a ball on a court.” Jacob, a senior history major, elaborated on this theme, “I really force myself to put in the work. I use my experiences as extra motivation to push myself to do more. So I always try to put my best foot forward no matter what.”

Working twice as hard, or exerting extra energy, seemed to operate as a mechanism for the students to channel the stigma associated with being a Black student at a PWI. Excerpts from Tonya’s and Gregory’s narratives neatly surmised the notions that
many of the students expressed within this theme. For example, Tonya, a senior accounting major, stated,

I think it's always very important because to know to never get comfortable. I can't be as lazy some of my white counterparts and just get by. My mom and my grandmother are not in the financial state to where they could bail me out of anything. I have to constantly stay on my P’s and Q’s, to constantly stay vigilant to get to where I want to be in life. I have to work twice as hard to be half as good.

When tasked to think about how his experiences with racial discrimination impacted his college experience, Gregory, a junior political science major, stated,

Sometimes you feel like we aren't welcomed, sometimes I feel like we aren't accepted, and sometimes I feel like I'm not ever good enough. I feel like now I'm always going to have to work quadruple as hard just to make myself fit in this white culture. I feel, mentally, always draining of us as black people, black men in particular. I feel like I always have to go above and beyond to try just to fit in, or to just be on the same playing level. Even when you get to the same playing level it's still an unfair advantage because you're still doing so much just to get there. It's not the same.

Not only does Gregory’s quote uncover they ways in which the effects of John Henryism manifests, his admission also illustrates a keen awareness of how racism unequally structures opportunities for Black people. Like Gregory, the students featured within this theme not only depict how they interpret cumulative experiences of racial discrimination, but also their outward expressions of how they cope. As an analytical tool, CRM exposes how racial discrimination has become a normal aspect of their lived
experiences. Likewise, this analytical tool reveals how narratives of racial discrimination as motivation to succeed reinforces the deficit discourse about Black students by furthering the colorblind and neoliberal rhetoric that Black students can overcome “adversity” if they simply work harder. Such tactics only subvert the focus to the marginalized students rather than the racist institution.

**Discussion**

The students’ interviews illustrate how their efforts to navigate the racial campus climate of the case study PWI took a toll on their mental and emotional health. By using CRM as an analytical tool, the students’ narratives provide a nuanced understanding of the pathways by which racism and more specifically racial discrimination can contribute to adverse mental health outcomes. Although current literature includes a rigorous examination of campus climate as it relates to the individual experiences for students of color who attend PWIs, fewer studies have focused on how the campus racial climate influences how Black students make meaning of their mental health. Moreover, this study also calls attention to the ways in which racism persists on a predominately White college campus and the detrimental impact it can have for Black students.

**Mental Health Implications**

This work adds a nuanced understanding of how the cumulative impact of racial discrimination impacts the overall college experience and mental health of Black college students. In particular, the mental health findings of this study contribute to existing literature that draws attention to the ways in which the campus racial climate of PWIs adversely impacts the overall health and well-being of Black college students. The students within this study emphasized how experiences with racial discrimination in the
form of racial microaggressions, discriminatory treatment by students, faculty, and staff, both overt and subtle expressions of racial slurs, and racially biased encounters (experiences of hyper-surveillance) by campus police contributed to their overall feelings of anger, loneliness, social isolation, and invisibility. Their emotional responses to these experiences took a toll on them as many of the students described feeling detached, a diminished sense of self-worth, unintelligent, and invalidated. Additionally, within their discussions of the emotional toll of their experiences with racial discrimination, the students highlighted how they felt their experiences were connected to their Blackness. The majority of students featured in this theme explicitly called out how their experiences made them aware of their Blackness and how they felt as if their Blackness was inextricably linked to how they were treated by their White peers.

The students’ discussions about the emotional labor they had to engage in in order to not only cope with experiences of racial discrimination but also survive and thrive on campus, was another finding that is also consistent with previous research. Evans and Moore’s (2015) study of students of color attending an elite law school revealed that the combination of everyday racial micro-aggressions and dominant ideologies that deny the relevance of race and racism resulted in students of color engaging in an unequal distribution of emotional labor. The law students of color developed tactics to deal with their experiences with racism in order to thrive within their institution, such as managing their reactions so that they wouldn’t be labeled overly emotional by their White peers; this mirrors the experiences shared by the students in this study. Emotional labor can also be understood as a form of impression management. Impression management occurs
when an individual alters their self-image in order to project one that is consistent with how they want to be seen by others (Goffman, 1959).

The ways in which the study participants comported their bodies reflected how their experiences with racial discrimination led them to self-regulate their bodies, which took a toll on their bodies and minds. The theoretical concept of racialized comportment captures how cumulative experiences with racial discrimination can become an embodied dimension of lived experience. Their narratives describing how racial discrimination impacted them in such a manner that they began to police their own bodies so that they are seen as “non-threatening” and “comfortable” to White people adds to the literature exploring racial discrimination and the body. The narratives of racialized comportment are a testament to the insidiousness of racism and like the concepts of weathering and John Henryism they depict how racism is a fundamental element of adverse mental health outcomes. Although the theories discussed in the front end of this article have been explored using quantitative methods, they not only provide a scholarly illustration of how racism manifests in both mundane and overt ways to negatively impact health, but also the impetus to learn more about racialized embodiment and the impact it can have on the body over time.

The students’ narratives about the impact of racism on their mental health also highlight a prominent issue explored within mental health literature – the impact of racism-related stress. Many of the students who participated in this study discussed the stress they endured as a result of continuous experiences of racial discrimination. The students discussed how outcomes such as the inability to concentrate in class, decreased motivation to participate in university activities that required them to leave their room,
inability to sleep, and discomfort navigating the campus were linked to their experiences of racism-related stress. Overall, the mental health findings from this study indicate that the ways in which Black college students make sense of their experiences with racial discrimination on campus in relation to their mental health directs attention to the importance of expanding efforts to improve the racial campus climate at PWIs.

**Permanence of Racism in Higher Education**

The findings from this study disrupt the commonly held belief that institutions of higher education are progressive, colorblind, and multicultural spaces by illustrating how race, racism, and racial discrimination operate in unforeseen ways to oppress Black students. Even with the implementation of diversity and inclusion initiatives, PWIs still remain highly racialized spaces due to unexamined historically situated ideology of Whiteness embedded in the institutions’ cultural practices, norms, and traditions. The outcome of this unexamined dominant racial ideology of white supremacy is an environment that remains an alienating space of hegemonic power, which the students explicitly pointed out in their narratives. Gusa (2010) defines this ideology as one “when Whites neglect to identify the ways in which White ideological homogenizing practices sustain the structure of domination and oppression, they allow institutional policies and practices to be seen as unproblematic or inevitable and thereby perpetuate hostile racial climates” (p. 465). An anti-Black campus racial climate is indicative of the larger systematic issue of institutionalized racism (Davis & Harris, 2016). Because they appear as “normal” components of the inner workings of higher education, White supremacy often goes unchallenged, which the data in the study illustrates can have harmful impacts for students of color. Racism remains normative fixture of the PWI.
Conclusion

The research described in this article contributes to the literature on Black college students’ mental health by providing qualitative data that demonstrates how racial discrimination manifests and how cumulative exposure to racial discrimination can impact mental health in a variety of ways. This study placed the perspectives of Black students at the center of inquiry in order to allow for the development of a more nuanced understanding of the impact of enduring racial discrimination on Black students attending a PWI. By examining how the stress of these experiences influenced aspects of their mental health in their own words, this study provides a vivid illustration of the racial dynamics they must navigate in order to persist to degree completion. The experiential knowledge shared by the students sheds light on how they understand and come to terms with racism in its various forms, which objectify and other them, which has a deleterious impact on their mental health. Their experiences with racial discrimination illustrate how the PWI in which they are embedded continues to maintain institutional boundaries that perpetuate White supremacy and white privilege, despite the PWIs insistence that it supports racial diversity and inclusion.

In sum this research highlights the need for strategies that create an equitable campus climate on PWIs. The insight shared by the students can lead to the development of potential strategies not currently in place within these environments. Examples include activist based interventions spearheaded by students, faculty, and staff of color, and supported by White administration, that actively confronts the discourses of White supremacy that are entrenched in PWIs. Another example would include the development of anti-racist trainings and resources geared towards creating and maintaining a system of
accountability within these institutions. Regardless of which method is chosen, the narratives shared within this article and the narratives of students of color nationwide indicate that structural changes need to be made within predominately White institutions.
Table 4.1 Interview Participant Demographics, N=25

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<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
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<td>Super-Senior</td>
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<td>Mixed</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>5 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-year College Degree</td>
<td>4 (16%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4-year College Degree</td>
<td>7 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Graduate</td>
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<td>High School Graduate or GED</td>
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References


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CHAPTER 4: MANUSCRIPT 2

Critical Race Theory and Interest Convergence: Exploring Black Students’ Narratives of the Commodification of Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives on a Southern PWI

2 Lewis, K.R. To be submitted to Critical Studies in Education
Abstract

This qualitative study examines how Black undergraduate students attending a PWI assess and interpret their university’s diversity and inclusion initiatives given their everyday experiences with campus-based racism. Three overarching themes emerged from data analysis. The students (1) interrogated the rationale behind the university’s implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives, (2) questioned who really benefits from the implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives, and (3) called attention to how the ineffectiveness of the PWIs diversity and inclusion initiatives impacted their sense of belonging. By employing the concept of interest convergence as an analytical tool, this article uses the students’ narratives to illustrate what happens when initiatives aimed at promoting a more equitable and inclusive campus racial climate converge with the interests of an institution that centers Whiteness. The findings from this study illustrate the ways in which White supremacy undergirds the university’s implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives and the reality it creates for Black students.

Key Words: Race, Racism, Interest Convergence, Multiculturalism, Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives
Introduction

Legislative mandates such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Higher Education Act of 1965, and affirmative action policies facilitated Black Americans’ access to colleges and universities that were historically all-White and now are referred to as predominantly White institutions of higher education (PWI). Today, 35% of Black 18-to-24 year olds are enrolled in a two or four-year institution of higher education (National Center of Education Statistics, 2017). Currently, 85% of the Black college-attending population is enrolled at PWIs; however, despite these gains in access and enrollment, higher education research consistently illustrates that the campus racial climate of PWIs negatively impacts Black college students’ educational experiences (Griffith, Hurd, & Hussain, 2017; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hoggard, Byrd, & Sellers, 2015). Black students’ routine experiences with discrimination, prejudice, under-representation, and a diminished sense of belonging contribute to a negative impact on their persistence to degree completion (Iacovino & James, 2016; Lee & Barnes, 2015; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008).

Among all college attending students, Black students have the lowest overall six-year graduation rate (28.7%) for cohorts starting in 2010, followed by Hispanic/Latinx students (35.6%), White students (47.5%) and Asian students (51%) (National Student Clearinghouse, 2017). Moreover, the low retention rates of Black students not only translate to inequities in educational attainment; they are also associated with inequities in social mobility, employment, income, wealth, and health (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). Feelings of being marginalized and silenced, witnessing overt racism on campus, and encountering environmental cues that devalue their social group contributes to poor
adjustment and lower persistence among Black students (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai, 2014; Lee & Barnes, 2015). As universities across the nation continue to grapple with the recruitment and retention of students from under-represented minority groups, including Black Americans, PWIs face the unique challenge of taking into consideration how past and present forms of institutional and interpersonal racism within the university setting affect the capacity of Black students as well as other students of color to not only complete their college degrees but also thrive while doing so.

In an attempt to address their exclusionary past, aid in retention rates, and ameliorate the present forms of racism that manifest on their campuses, many PWIs have created and implemented initiatives focused on promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. While they are not a new phenomenon in higher education (Hikido & Murray, 2016), due to increased attention to implicit bias and institutional racism nationwide, many PWIs have revitalized their efforts to promote diversity, inclusion, and equity. A simple Internet search using the terms ‘race’ and ‘college campuses’ yields a plethora of reports, articles, and news clips depicting a range of racially motivated incidents that have occurred on PWIs nationwide. These include threats of lynching, death threats directed towards students of color, and racial epithets (N-word) and racist symbols (swastika) displayed on campus property (Case & Ngo, 2017). Given that diversity and inclusion initiatives were created to address and ameliorate racial discrimination and improve the campus climate, much can be learned about how Black students assess such efforts in the face of daily experiences of racism and how they interpret how these efforts impacts them.
In what follows, critical race theory (CRT) is used to analyze focus groups conducted with Black college students attending a PWI in the southeastern United States. The focus groups explored students’ perceptions of the PWIs diversity and inclusion initiatives using the theoretical concept of ‘interest convergence,’ derived from CRT. Interest convergence posits that progress towards equity for people of color will only occur if it benefits Whites (Bell, 1980). As such, the narratives that emerged from the focus groups (1) interrogate the rationale behind the university’s implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives, (2) question who really benefits from the implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives, and (3) call attention to how the ineffectiveness of the PWIs diversity and inclusion initiatives impacted their sense of belonging.

**PWIs and Dominant Diversity Ideologies**

At present, two ideologies about diversity dominate how organizations and institutions in the United States handle interpreting differences and structuring intergroup relations: colorblindness and multiculturalism (Gündemir, Homan, Usova, & Galinsky, 2017; Kandaswamy, 2007; Plaut, 2010; Plaut, Gamett, Sanchez-Burks, & Buffardi, 2011). Colorblindness and multiculturalism are diversity ideologies that embody implicit and explicit systems, ideas, meanings, and practices that indicate how (1) different social groups are supposed to accommodate one another and (2) the most efficient way to organize a diverse society (Plaut, 2002). Colorblindness, typically exemplified by the ubiquitous melting pot metaphor, asserts that racial and ethnic categories should be ignored, everyone has the same access to goods and services, and any differences based on an individual’s social identity should be integrated into an overarching, unifying,
colorblind category (Gündemir et al., 2017; Plaut, 2010; Plaut et al., 2011). Inherent within the colorblind diversity ideology is the all-encompassing narrative that all individuals, regardless of how they identify with respect to race and/or ethnicity, are the same. Within social institutions, colorblindness is commonly viewed as a mechanism for decreasing racial inequality and combatting stigmatization, which is consistent with the American ideals of individualism and meritocracy (Knowles, Lowery, Hogan, & Chow, 2009; Purdie-Vaughns & Ditlmann, 2010).

By contrast, multiculturalism champions acknowledging and celebrating differences among social groups in order to promote a more democratic society (Kandaswamy, 2007; Plaut et al., 2011). Multiculturalism is described as the most compelling diversity strategy given the research illustrating the positive consequences it produces with regard to intergroup relations (Plaut, et al., 2011). Multiculturalism is the hallmark diversity ideology currently prevailing within predominately White institutions of higher education (Hikido & Murray, 2016). Within higher education, multiculturalism, which is often operationalized as ‘diversity,’ is touted as an integral factor in producing a more democratic and civically engaged student body (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Hurtado, 2006; Jayakumar, 2015; Warikoo & de Novais, 2015). As such, diversity has been linked to outcomes such as increased social and curricular engagement (Denson & Chang, 2009), leadership skills and cultural awareness (Antonio, 2001), prejudice reduction (Davies et al., 2011; Jayakumar, 2009), complex thinking (Antonio, 2004), and preparation for an increasingly diverse 21st century workforce (Engberg & Hurtado, 2011).
Diversity Initiatives in PWIs

Education scholars have developed a typology of forms of diversity that coalesce into three types: structural diversity, interactional diversity, and curricular/co-curricular diversity (Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). Structural diversity encompasses numerical/proportional representations of the demographic characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) of a student body. Structural diversity is commonly operationalized as the proportion of students of color enrolled in an institution or the density (e.g., critical mass) of different racial and ethnic groups present on a campus (Bowman, 2012). Interactional diversity, also known as cross-racial interaction, encompasses the frequency of informal student cross-racial (i.e., intergroup) contact. Interactional diversity represents the degree to which students from diverse backgrounds come into contact with one another within their respective campus environments (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Lastly, curricular/co-curricular diversity denotes programmatic efforts created by the respective institution that are intended to facilitate student’s engagement with diverse content exploring race and ethnicity (Gurin et al., 2002).

Most contemporary diversity and inclusion initiatives are the actualization of curricular/co-curricular diversity. Students engage with curricular/co-curricular diversity through their curriculum and/or coursework or through participation with activities that facilitate racial-cultural awareness. Examples include diversity workshops, presentations, intergroup dialogues, and courses associated with promoting multiculturalism (e.g., required and non-required diversity courses, ethnic studies courses, and women’s and gender studies courses). The primary goal of curricular/co-curricular diversity is to
reduce intergroup (or racial) bias (Bowman, 2010; Denson, 2009; Denson & Chang, 2009). To achieve this goal, programs and activities aimed at supporting curricular/co-curricular diversity are commonly facilitated through two mechanisms: (1) approaches that involve students learning about other racial/ethnic groups, and (2) activities that promote contact among different racial/ethnic groups by bringing them together. Such initiatives are created to “stimulate important mediators, cognitive and emotional processes in the students, which in turn reduce racial bias—a multifaceted phenomenon consisting of attitudes (prejudice), cognition (stereotypes), emotions (negative affect), and behavior (discrimination)” (Denson, 2009, pg. 808). In their respective meta-analyses of research investigating the curricular/co-curricular diversity’s impact on reducing racial bias within PWIs, both Engberg (2004) and Denson (2009) found that this form of diversity has a moderate effect on reducing racial bias in White college students.

While the value of the research exploring curricular/co-curricular diversity’s impact on racial bias should not be diminished, many of the studies engaged in the meta-analyses focus on quantifiable outcomes related to student learning and growth, such as increases in democratic involvement (Zuniga, Williams, & Berger, 2005), students’ awareness, appreciation, and acceptance of different racial groups (Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2001), and students’ commitment to promoting racial understanding (Vogelgesang, 2001). Not only do the majority of these studies involve samples comprised of only White students, none use qualitative methods to focus on how curricular/co-curricular diversity is perceived by students of color, particularly Black students. Additionally, within these studies, racial bias is limited to interpersonal forms (e.g., stereotypes, affective reactions, and prejudices), which ignores the institutional,
structural, and ideological mechanisms operating on PWIs that promote White supremacy.

In response to the research backing the benefits of diversity and inclusion initiatives, educational scholars have offered powerful critiques of the discourse (i.e., multiculturalism) that undergirds how diversity is operationalized in higher education (Ahmed, 2007, 2012; Ferguson, 2017; Kandaswamy, 2007). Namely, scholars have asserted that higher education’s widespread embrace of multiculturalism ideology has given rise to the commodification of diversity in higher education, in which diversity is packaged as something to be managed as a profitable resource (Ahmed, 2007). As a result, this process “works to individuate difference and to conceal the continuation of systematic inequalities within universities” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 236). How multiculturalism is articulated and commodified in higher education places an emphasis on a heightened visibility of socially constructed differences, such as racial and other social group differences, rather than a critical analysis of power (Melamed, 2006). Under the guise of multiculturalism an examination of how those socially constructed differences structure opportunities and outcomes is masked by an exploration of problematically defined cultural and racial differences (Kandaswamy, 2007).

Literature that both commends and critiques the implementation of diversity initiatives in higher education is growing; however, relatively little research has centered the perspectives of Black college students. Therefore, the findings from this study make a novel contribution in that they illuminate the how Black student perceive the impact of curricular/co-curricular diversity (i.e., commonplace diversity and inclusion initiatives) in their everyday experiences on campus. Additionally, this study examines how Black
students’ insights illuminate institutional mechanisms that perpetuate White supremacy to the detriment of Black students. This article uses of the CRT tenet of interest convergence as an analytical tool to help interrogate, understand, and ultimately leverage change by using the students’ narratives to uncover the inherent tension in implementation of diversity and inclusion initiatives in a historically oppressive environment.

**Theoretical Framework**

Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that emerged from the pioneering work of critical legal studies scholars such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado who sought to address how the persistence of racism within the legal system, and society at large, perpetuates and sustains various forms of structural inequalities (Ackerman-Barger & Hummel, 2015; Crichlow, 2015; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical race theorists are concerned with disrupting, challenging, exposing, and dismantling the racist policies and practices that protect dominant groups and continue to subordinate and disenfranchise people of color (Milner, 2008). Regardless of the phenomenon being examined, all CRT-informed research adheres to three assertions: racism is pervasive, racism is permanent, and racism must be challenged (Bernal, 2002; Crenshaw et al., 1996; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Research informed by these assertions advances our understanding of the persistence of White supremacy as a fundamental dimension of American society and the numerous ways it facilitates and reinforces the oppression of communities of color (Crenshaw et al., 1996).

CRT research is guided by a set of interdisciplinary tenets that collectively challenge existing modes of scholarship (Crewell, 2007). The tenets, originally theorized
by Delgado and Stefancic (2001), inform CRT scholars of the normalcy of racism in US society, interest-convergence (material determinism), the social construction of race, intersectionality and anti-essentialism, and the importance of voice and counter-narrative. This research focuses on the tenet of interest convergence.

**Interest Convergence**

Interest convergence, also known as material determinism, asserts that any progress or advances made towards racial equity for people of color will only occur when it converges with the interests, needs, expectations, and ideologies of White people (Harris, Barone, & Davis, 2015; Milner, 2008). Bell (1980) coined the theoretical concept of interest convergence to explain that the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* or the success of any litigation involving racial issues, were not the result of White morality or altruistic motives. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* was the Supreme Court case that ruled that the racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional. Rather, Bell argued that the demands of the Civil Rights movement for school desegregation were only met when the outcomes and gains of such a decision converged with the self-interest of powerful White elites (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Namely, Bell asserts that the global community’s growing criticism of the hypocrisy of the United States’ alleged commitment to equality in relation to the glaring lack of human and civil rights of Black people was the main reason why the “separate but equal” clause was overturned (Bell, 1980, 2004; Thompson Dorsey & Venzant Chambers, 2014).

Inherent to the concept of interest convergence are the notions of self-interest, systematic-interest, and a loss-gain binary (Milner, 2008). Self- and systematic-interest refers to the tendency of White people to be more likely to support social justice and
equity oriented policies when it does not require them to alter their status (Bell, 1980). Thus, those in power will only advance social justice agendas when the progress suits their self-interest and doesn’t require that their “own ways, systems, statuses, and privileges of experiencing life change” (Milner, 2008, p. 334). Similarly, loss-gain binary suggests that the ability of White people to negotiate and make decisions that could result in more racially equitable policies and practices is shaped by whether or not they will ultimately lose something important to them – their power and privilege (Castagno & Lee, 2007). By using the theoretical concept of interest convergence to analyze how Black students’ make sense of the case study PWIs policies and practices regarding the promotion of diversity and inclusion initiatives, this article captures the reality it creates for Black students who encounter racism.

**Methods**

**Study Context**

This study uses focus groups to answer the overarching research question. All data were collected at the case study PWI, a large public Research I university located in the southern region of the United States that was the seat of slavery and later Jim Crow, until the landmark changes to civil laws in the 1950s and 1960s. White students comprise approximately 77% of the undergraduate population, while Black students make up about 10% of the undergraduate population. The PWI is situated in a moderately sized metropolitan city that can be described as a college town, where much of the city’s activities and efforts revolve around the university, particularly its NCAA Division I athletic program.
Like most PWIs across the nation, the case study university has had its share of nationally and locally publicized racist incidents and subsequent student protests. Akin to other institutions with predominately White faculty, staff, and student populations, the university reflects a culture of Whiteness that centers the views, needs, and subjectivities of White people while maintaining and perpetuating the subjugation of students, faculty, and staff of color. Expressions of racism on this campus have fluctuated between overt manifestations (e.g., incidences in which White students donned blackface, hung a stuffed toy monkey hung from a noose in a tree, and displayed racial epithets on campus property) to more subtle manifestations (e.g., racial microaggressions, face-to-face racial discrimination, and hyper-surveillance of Black students, faculty, and staff). The culture at the university informs Black students’ feelings of hyper invisibility, social isolation, and discomfort while navigating the campus environment (Lewis, et al., in preparation). Moreover, such experiences contribute to mental health issues among the Black student population (Lewis, et al., in preparation).

Data Collection

This study was approved by the case study PWIs Institutional Review Board. Four focus groups were conducted with a convenience sample of 30 Black students who were enrolled in the case study PWI at the time of data collection. Each focus group consisted of 8 to 12 students. Eligibility criteria were limited to students who were enrolled as an undergraduate, had matriculated for at least two consecutive semesters, self-identified as Black or African American, and were age 18 years or older. Participants were recruited with the assistance of faculty and staff who disseminated the recruitment information via listservs, which was comprised of a flyer and script that described the
research study. Additional recruitment strategies included snowball sampling and disseminating the study flyer through a group chat accessible only to Black students at the case study PWI. Most of the students was recruited through the listserv emails, and the remainder were recruited through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling involves a referral system in which one student nominates another student, or group of students, to potentially participate in the research study. This method of recruitment was beneficial in recruiting harder to reach subsets of Black students, particularly men (Patton, 2001).

At the beginning of each focus group, the students were asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire, followed by their verbal consent to begin the focus group. Pseudonyms chosen by the participants were used protect their identity. A semi-structured focus group facilitation guide consisting of three sections, each targeting a different dimension of the students lived experience, directed the focus groups. The first section examined the perceptions of cross-racial interactions on campus. The second section consisted of several questions aimed at gathering an in-depth understanding of how the students perceived and navigated the campus racial climate. The final section focused exclusively on gathering information about how the students assessed the university’s diversity and inclusion initiatives. Each focus group was audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software.

Data Analysis

The coding of each focus group transcript was guided by the CRT tenet of interest convergence as an analytical tool in addition to a modified approach to grounded theory (GT) (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). The following research question guided data analysis: how do Black college students evaluate the efficacy of the university’s diversity and
inclusion initiatives given their experiences with racism on their campus? A combination of open coding (i.e. delineating concepts and categories) and axial coding (i.e., relating concepts and categories to each other) informed by the CRT tenet of interest convergence was employed so that themes and patterns that may not have been anticipated by the research questions or by previous research could naturally emerge from the data (Corbin and Strauss, 2007). For instance, after the initial review of each transcript open coding was used to generate a list of inductive codes based on the emerging and reoccurring themes. A preliminary definition, instructions for usage, and an example were developed for each code that was generated during this process. As new transcribed data arrived axial coding was used to update the previous codes and generate new theoretical categories. The themes that were generated through the close reading, memoing, and combination of open and axial coding resulted in the first pass of a coding framework. Subsequent revisions garnered from new insights from the additional transcriptions resulted in a final coding scheme that was used to recode all of the interviews. Interest convergence was used an analytical tool to examine how the lived experience of the students were impacted by the implementation of their university’s diversity and inclusion initiatives.

**Researcher Positionality**

Addressing my positionality is critical to this research study given my placement within the case study PWI. It is pertinent that I position myself and my respective role in this research so that it is clear how my lived experiences influenced the manner in which I approached the research process. As a former student who attended multiple PWIs (including the case study PWI), my research aims to critique and address the intersecting
systems of oppression that are embedded in and normalized on college campuses that lead to an array of social and health inequities impacting Black students. I have experienced firsthand how racism, including its institutional, interpersonal and internalized forms, negatively affected my sense of self and academic achievement. My experiences within this realm has greatly influenced how I view the world and how I conduct research. I identify as a Black woman whose understanding of the social world is grounded in critical race and Black feminist epistemologies that address racial inequities from an interdisciplinary standpoint. When thinking about my experiences and how they have shaped my life, I draw from the works of critical race theory (CRT) to find emotional and spiritual solace and because of this, I am a passionate critical race scholar (and racial realist) who firmly believes that racism is a permanent fixture in U.S. social institutions, especially colleges and universities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), and that liberation can be found in the lived experiences and voices of the silenced and marginalized.

Findings

The following sections highlight three of the major themes that emerged from the analysis of the focus group transcripts, which illustrate how the students evaluated the efficacy of the university’s diversity and inclusion initiatives given their experiences with racism on campus. The three salient themes illustrate how the students: (1) interrogated the rationale behind the university’s implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives, (2) questioned who benefited from the implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives, and (3) called attention to how the ineffectiveness of the diversity and inclusion initiatives impacted their sense of belonging.
Within each focus group there was an undercurrent of shared apprehension when the students were asked about their thoughts concerning the university’s implementation of diversity and inclusion initiatives. Many of the students openly shared their concerns about what they perceived to be the real reasoning behind the university’s implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives. Students voiced that they assumed the university implemented the diversity and inclusion initiatives as a means to appease the Black students, rather than legitimately promote social and racial justice. The students called into question how the university conceptualizes diversity and inclusion, which they asserted impacts how the university articulates and implements aspects of diversity and inclusion on their predominately White campus. For example, several students discussed how they felt as if the university’s purported commitment to diversity and inclusion on their campus was viewed within a narrow framework of a “percentage/quota system.” Responses such as, “I just feel like they really do have a quota for the number of black people” and “I think when they say ‘diversity,’ it's more like – not like a quota, but like a percentage,” reverberated across the focus groups. After asking the students about their interpretation of the university’s diversity and inclusion initiatives, Josiah, a junior political science major, stated, “Someone put a little bit of pressure on them. The Black people was complaining a little bit too much. They said, “throw them a bone. Throw them a bone. Get them off me.’” In response, Yasmin, a sophomore English major, stated,
It was something that they were kind of pressured into doing. Like, all of the other schools are doing it, you gotta do it to be competitive. It's like, okay, everyone's being so modernized. All these different schools have Black programs. Let's bring some black students here. We want to throw that one Black girl and that one Asian kid on our admissions packet.

When asked why they felt that way, Yasmin responded, “if the pressure's not put on them, they're not gonna do it. So I feel like it was kind of like where are all the black people? Like people kind of asked, people wanted to know. And it was like - it was something that they were kind of pressured into doing.” Similarly, the exchange between Valerie and Hope, members of a different focus group, presented below, encapsulate the perceptions of many of the students.

**Valerie:** This is a tricky one because diversity I feel like as of right now what everybody feels diversity is if you got –

**Hope:** One black person.

**Valerie:** One black, one Asian. You have the token people, too, the people that look the most distinct for whatever the stereotype is, those are the three people that you have for the other minority groups. Then you've got a ton of White people that are just random. It always baffles me that it's like you know, for example, you can identify different kinds of White girls by their hair color, and yet you can't do that for a black girl. So it's like, “Oh yeah, that's a blonde. That's a brunette. She has red hair.” But for a Black girl, it's like, “Oh that’s the Black girl.” It's like, “Okay. Well, all right.” So I feel diversity is only –

**Hope:** Surface level.
Valerie: Yeah, it's only to the surface.

The conversation between Valerie and Hope is one of many examples that emerged within the focus groups that illustrates why the students regarded the implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives as superficial. Valerie and Hope directly problematize how they believe Black students are being used as tokens of diversity. The students’ critiques of the diversity and inclusion initiatives also arose out of their direct involvement in the university sponsored activities. Given their direct contact with these activities, the students acknowledged of the value of creating safe spaces to talk about race and racism, while also sharing their misgivings about the ways in which the university went about executing the diversity and inclusion initiatives. For example, a Lisa, sophomore elementary education major, stated,

I feel like there's a big presence of white privilege on this campus. We're kind of forced to be in their world, and they have the option to pretend that ours doesn't exist. I think a lot of [White] people on this campus choose to do that. How is making an organization for only Black people – how is that gonna promote diversity? What we need is for the white organizations to welcome us into theirs and to make us feel like we have a place to be.

Lisa’s narrative illustrates how she believes that rather than address the source of the problem on campus – White privilege – the institution creates organizations that aid in further marginalizing Black students. Adding to the thoughts expressed above, Renee, junior public health major, recounted how her photo became a prominent feature on the campuses diversity and inclusion website which was spurred by a statement made by Gabrielle and Anthony,
Gabrielle: And it's like, I don't know, you be seeing all these Black people on all the [institutions] websites. Where you finding all these black people, because I'm a junior and I ain't seen all these black people.

Anthony: Like, I never seen - [Laughs]

Gabrielle: But you find them for your pictures, don't you?

Renee’s recollection of the event began with her sitting in a lunch room with her friends when she was abruptly approached by another student who asked her if she wanted to be involved in a photo shoot.

Like, it was, like, literally, like, me and my four black friends like sitting there. We were just about to have dinner and they were like, “Oh, yeah. We're gonna do a photoshoot. You want to join?” And I was like, “Okay.” They're like, “You'll get a free T-shirt.” And then they brought this little white girl over and they were like, “Yeah, she's taking the picture with you too. Come sit down. Sit there.” And then she, like, sat on the end. And they were like, “No, sit down in between them. Pretend y'all having a conversation.” And they, like, made us, like, fake talk so they can come take a picture. I wish I was lying, but I'm so serious. And that was right on the front of the diversity website, it's like all of us laughing and talking. When the reality is, like, it's fake.

In line with Lisa’s narrative, Renee clearly expresses how she and her friends were used as tokens to promote the illusion of diversity and inclusion on the campus. The students’ narratives illustrate how they perceive the university to be working towards a superficial form of diversity and inclusion that is not about creating structural changes.

There is a clear indication, as voiced by the students, that the manner in which the
institution conceptualizes and articulates the diversity and inclusion initiatives is driven by the needs of the institution – not the students. Moreover, their thoughts and concerns expose how Whiteness and White privilege are so normalized on their campus that White students, faculty, and staff are knowingly or unknowingly complicit in the oppression of Black students.

**True Beneficiaries of Diversity and Inclusion**

Another salient theme that emerged centered around the students’ perceptions of who they think benefits from the university’s implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives – White people. This inquiry, which originated as an impromptu question within the first focus group, was sparked during a tangent conversation about the student’s involvement in campus diversity and inclusion-related activities and programs. An overwhelming number of the students within the focus group had participated in various activities and programs, however, they all seemed to share similar perspective about their experiences. For example, Tamera, a sophomore math major, was very vocal about how her position as the president of a department-level diversity and inclusion student committee meant she frequently attended university-sponsored diversity and inclusion events. While she acknowledged the value in having such activities and programs, she also discussed how they seemed to fall short of their idealized intent. The event she describes below involved a group of student leaders and activists eating lunch and discussing pertinent topics related to diversity and inclusion with administration, faculty, and staff. The overall goal of this event was to gather hand-selected students, faculty, and staff in order to discuss why diversity and inclusion is important and to brainstorm ways to foster an inclusive campus community.
I went to one of the little meetings for diversity and inclusion, and it was supposed to be at a table for diverse people and talk about topics. It was still just the same old, same old. Everybody was scared to speak the truth because you had high officials in that room. Nobody wanted to say the truth of how race relations really are on this campus and what they go through on a day-to-day basis, whether you are minorities or people of different sexualities. Everybody was scared to speak up because what is it going to change?

Although the event was probably created with the intentions of fostering an equitable and engaging dialogue, Tamera indicates how they continue to perpetuate the status quo due to unchecked power dynamics. Sentiments like the one above that described such activities and programs as “Black students taking to other Black students about Black problems” and “minorities push those things, it’s not like the school itself is pushing for them.” Surprisingly, this was a shared experience among most of the students, many of whom did not know each other previously. In the example that follows, three students engaged in a conversation in response to questions about who they thought the university’s diversity and inclusion initiatives benefited:

_Candace_: White people.

_Toya_: Yeah, it makes them look better.

_Candace_: It makes them feel better, too.

_Toya_: It's easy to say that you're doing something, but are you really?

_Kristina_: It gives them a way to back up the fact that they aren't racist the next time they say something racist.
Nested within the students’ conversations about White students, faculty and staff benefiting from the implementation of diversity and inclusion initiatives emerged their thoughts about why they believed it to be that way. Numerous students found that the manner in which racist incidents were handled on their campus affirmed their beliefs. The incident the students are discussing below involved a picture of a White student writing a racial epithet on school property as a means to explain why certain campus amenities did not work properly.

*Moderator:* Who do you think may benefit from the diversity and inclusion initiatives?

*Angela:* It makes white people feel more comfortable.

*Joy:* They do it to put their stuff out there. So they just do it just to say they did just so it'll be there, just in case.

*Kendra:* "Oh, we got stuff for black people, too."

*Angela:* Yeah, it makes them feel more comfortable like, "Oh, no, they're totally doing X, Y, and Z for you. So you should be happy that that's happening." But it's like, "Okay." The thing with the girl and the board, did she ever come back to school? I don't know. There was something else that was posted that someone said or did in a group chat. We were all like, “Did you report it?” And she [university administrator] was like, “Yeah, they're going through the conduct process.” But then is something really gonna happen? Are they just gonna talk to her? Are there actual consequences? Are you just talking to this person, and they're like, “Oh, I didn't know? I didn't understand”? Are you actually holding people accountable for their actions, or are you just going through these motions to, what is it? Assuage
people or whatever so, “Oh, the African-American students can kind of see that we're doing stuff about it.” But then you're not really doing anything about it. And then the White students also see [by the administration’s action] if they actually care. The white students are like “yeah, they're doing something about it. So don't be mad. Something's being done.” But then to the other people that are actually doing the racist things, it's like, “Oh, I'm just gonna get a slap on the wrist.”

Mercedes: I feel like, like what you said, it's like it's just there for show.

Analyzing the narratives of the students from using the CRT concept of interest convergence exposes how the rhetoric behind the university’s diversity and inclusion initiatives provides protects White students, faculty and staff, thereby reinforcing their privilege, rather than benefiting the population they were allegedly created to serve.

A Sense of (Not) Belonging

The students’ personal narratives about their experiences with racism on campus reverberated within each focus group. Experiences included incidents of discriminatory treatment by faculty and staff on the basis of race in the form of assumptions of cheating due to high test scores, hyper-surveillance by the campus police, and daily racial slights in the form of denigrating racial microaggressions. While acknowledging their experiences with racism on their campus, the students also articulated how those experiences impacted them given the university’s promotion of being a diverse and inclusive environment.

This theme emerged from students’ responses to a question probing them to think about how their experiences with racism on their campus influenced how they evaluated the diversity and inclusion initiatives. An overwhelming number of responses to this
question centered on the student’s admission that their experiences made them feel like they did not fit in on their campus. The students discussed how the juxtaposition of their experiences with racism and the implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives made them reevaluate how they felt about being a Black student on the campus. For example, when asked how he interpreted his experiences with racism on campus given the diversity and inclusion initiatives, Brittani, a senior geography major stated, “I feel like I am disposable, and that I'm just a temporary and momentary thing. Not only a thing, but an issue that is going to go away eventually.” Similarly, Mia, a junior biology major, stated, “I think, personally, the message they send to me is that my place is beneath them.” Sentiments such as “I feel like I don’t belong here”, “I feel alone a lot of the time”, and “some people don’t want me here, some people would rather I wasn’t here and I wasn’t at their university” were commonly shared throughout the focus groups.

Many of the narratives captured within this theme are describing the emotional, or affective, impact of living within an environment that purports racial inclusivity while still maintaining racism. For instance, Jada, sophomore social work major, stated,

I guess, it would be not really telling me that I have a place, but that this is their place. This is their school. They dominate academia. They dominate the classroom. They dominate in population. I feel like they don't have to make room for me because this is their space. So they don't have to be inclusive because, again, this is their campus. So it's not so much of telling me what my place is, it's just, I guess, ignoring you or making you feel disregarded.

Affirming Jada’s statement above, Montrell, a senior public health major stated, “[I] think the message is that there definitely is a place, but it's more of a contractually-
bound place.” When asked to explain what he meant by a “contractually bound place,” he elaborated by stating, “Yes, you're here because we have to; we can't not accept black people. We have to have black people at our school. We have to fill a certain quota. We have to do this and do that.” Montrell continued by stating he feels this way because of the way the school is structured,

You definitely can tell that the power structures are not really set up as to where there are not really a lot of Black people in power at the executive level who could speak on behalf of us. So there's no Black people sitting in the Provost Office that you could call and file a complaint with; there's no Black people in the president's office and stuff like that. So you kind of feel like your chain of power stops right here. But then, meanwhile, some people can go all the way up here.

Regardless of the purported intentions and expectations behind the implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives, the students’ narratives capture the material actualization of the initiatives and the way they enabled a campus environment were racism persists in part because of a lack of interrogation of institutionalized Whiteness and structural racism. Their narratives, particularly Montrell’s, indicate how Black people’s lack of access to higher level positions is yet another mechanism that keeps White power structures in place.

Discussion

The students’ narratives illustrate how their university’s superficial, or surface level, approach to the promotion of diversity and inclusion created an environment that was palatable to those in power while perpetuating the oppression of Black students. By employing the CRT concept of interest convergence in my analysis of students’
narratives, the findings illustrate what happens when university initiatives geared towards promoting a racially equitable campus climate converge with the interests of the White academy (e.g. White students, faculty, and staff). The findings from this study demonstrate the ways in which White privilege undergirds the university’s implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives. How the university’s diversity and inclusion initiatives were conceptualized and implemented did not require an analysis of the institutionalized Whiteness prevalent in the structures and practices of the university which, as the students voiced, benefited Whites while marginalizing the Black students. The narratives that emerged from the focus groups also highlight how diversity and inclusion initiatives at the case study PWI were approached as agenda items, rather than paradigmatic changes, which resulted in perpetuating and protecting institutionalized Whiteness and racism rather than creating substantive changes toward equity that could transform the culture of an institution with longstanding racial history of oppression. The remaining sections will explore the significance and implications of this study’s research findings.

**Interest Convergence and the Commodification of Diversity and Inclusion**

There is a growing body of literature that incorporates interest convergence into critical scholarship on education (Alemán, Jr & Alemán, 2010; Harris et al., 2015; Jackson, 2011; Thompson Dorsey & Venzant Chambers, 2014). As an analytical tool interest convergence offers a valid critique of the commodification of diversity and inclusion at the case study PWI. One such critique is the way in which Black students, and students of color more generally, are used a props to sustain the practice of marketing diversity (structural/visual) to attract students as consumers (Harris et al., 2015).
Institutional and administrative leaders, who are usually overwhelming White, possess the power to manipulate and construct a diverse student body, which serves the needs of the institution while situating Black students as a commodity that White students and a broader White public can consume (Iftikar, 2016). This commodification allows Black students to be positioned as providers of diversity that Whites students, faculty, and staff can consume in order to perpetuate the dominant diversity ideology of multiculturalism. Rather than being seen for who they are, i.e. students with their own set of needs and goals, Black students are objectified for the market value they can bring (Iftikar, 2016).

One example within the findings is Renee’s story about being asked to participate in a photo for promotional material for the university. PWI marketing/promotional materials typically contain images of diversity that are significantly different than the actual student body (Pippert, Essenberg, and Matchett, 2013). Rather than presenting representative student demographics in their illustrations, PWIs are more likely to symbolize diversity by oversaturating their materials images of Black students (Pippert, Essenberg, and Matchett, 2013). According to Urciuoli (2003), most institutions focus on skin color as a way to portray an observable definition of diversity. Renee’s experience illustrates how Black students are positioned as objects to serve the needs of their institution. Black students are valued for the imagined cultural differences they provide and when they are positioned as objects for consumption which means their own needs are made insignificant under the guise of diversity and inclusion which reinforced their own neglect (Ahmed, 2012; Iftikar, 2016; Urciuoli, 1999).

A second articulation is that, on the one hand, the students’ narratives demonstrate how their institution is attempting to create an equitable and inclusive environment;
however, the nominal and incremental changes that were implemented have done little to change the culture of the university, thus preserving the status quo. For example, many of the students acknowledged the creation of safe spaces (e.g., organizations, programs, and activities for Black students) as steps towards creating a more inclusive, welcoming campus racial climate, but they also discussed how such advancements seemed rudimentary, counterintuitive, and yet another way to marginalize and silence Black students. Rather than create segregated spaces only for Black students, the participants called for a university staff and administration to take a closer look at the White privilege rampant on the campus. As articulated within the narratives, even with such structures in place, racism and racial discrimination was a commonplace aspect of their college experience. Students’ views exemplify how admitting more Black students or creating organizations and programs specifically for Black students are not enough if they continue to feel unwelcomed, unwanted, and invalidated; such efforts are not a remedy for structural and systematic racism (Puritty et al., 2017).

**Whiteness-Centered Diversity and Inclusion**

Many of the students shared the view that the university’s implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives solely benefited White students, faculty and staff, which made them feel as if they weren’t valued members of the campus environment. Similar to the concerns voiced by the students, Harris, Barone, and Davis (2015) found that most universities conceptualize diversity in terms of the numerical value of people of color to make it more palatable to those in power because “token incrementalism in terms of racial heterogeneity does not substantially threaten generations of institutionalized racial privilege” (p. 25). Many of the initiatives centered on diversity and inclusion are
complicit in perpetuating a historically-specific, socially constructed, hierarchical racial order that favors Whiteness (Hu-DeHart, 2000). The dominant conceptualization of diversity directly centers Whiteness because it “starts from the dominance of white worldviews, and sees the culture, experiences, and indeed lives, of people of color only as they relate to or interact with the white world” (Bell & Hartman, 2007, p. 907). Such a conceptualization forces students of color to simultaneously assimilate to White culture in order to succeed while also requiring them to be complicit in the marginalization their own culture (Harris, et al., 2015). In her qualitative study examining how the diversity discourses commonly found within educational policies, Iverson (2007) asserts that the ways institutions of higher education conceptualize diversity reflects and produces particular realities for people of color on university campuses nationwide. The findings from her study reveal that dominant diversity discourses construct people of color as outsiders, at-risk victims, commodities, and change agents (Iverson, 2007). While this study did not directly interrogate the case study PWIs written diversity and inclusion initiatives, the concerns and thoughts voiced by the students mirror the findings asserted by Iverson (2007) in that students of color can become commodities or pawns in the business of diversity in higher education.

Another way in which the findings illustrate how Whiteness is centered within the case study PWIs diversity and inclusion initiatives is the manner in which racist incidents have been handled on campus. Within each focus group students consistently emphasized that the methods university administrators used to publicly handle racist incidents on campus seemed like a “slap on the wrist” that ignored the larger problems at hand. This insight is consistent with previous research investigating how universities nationwide
respond to racist incidents on their respective campus. For example, Cole and Harper (2017) analyzed the statements college presidents released after a racially motivated campus incident became publicized and found that even though the responses to these events were disseminated on multiple platforms, they typically did not acknowledge the systematic or institutional issues underlying the event.

Diversity and the Absence of Inclusion

Given that the majority of the Black college attending population is enrolled at PWIs, there is a vital need to critically examine the characteristics of these spaces and analyze how they influence the academic and social development of Black college students (Beasley, Chapman-Hilliard, & McClain, 2016). The students’ narratives illustrate how structural diversity alone does not acknowledge or ameliorate how racism is built into the university. The absence of discussions about experiences of real, meaningful inclusion among the students is also indicative of the structural issues most PWIs face as the literature indicates that there is a widespread and unacknowledged disconnect between diversity and inclusion initiatives and the actual experience of the students’ they were created to serve (Puritty et al., 2017).

Limitations

It is important to note some of the limitations of this study. Given the qualitative nature of this study, and the sampling methods used, the findings of this study are not generalizable as they are not representative of all PWIs nationwide. Additionally, self-selection bias may have accounted for the students who participated due to the recruitment messages on the flyers. Despite these limitations, this study makes an
important contribution to the growing body of literature that examines the impact of diversity and inclusion initiatives.

**Conclusion**

In spite of the growing number of students, faculty, and staff of color in previously White-only institutions of higher education, the climate, structure, and culture of these spaces continue to be unwelcoming and racially contentious (Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2016; Evans & Moore, 2015). This study illustrates the need for more targeted research that examines the impact of diversity and inclusion initiatives, especially from the perspective of students and faculty and staff of color. Although arguably well-intentioned, efforts to promote diversity and inclusion at the case study PWI were deemed by the participants as insufficient. They wanted structural changes, which they believed were necessary to achieve a more equitable environment. The study findings provide an entry point for researchers and university administrators alike to rethink and reconstruct diversity and inclusion initiatives as tools that can simultaneously create a more welcoming and equitable environment for students, faculty, and staff of color while also dismantling the structures built into the university that perpetuate oppression. As the students in this study indicate, even with the creation of diversity and inclusion initiatives, when a racially insensitive event occurs on campus, the focus is typically placed on students of color to bring it to the attention of the administration. When those in power create diversity and inclusion initiatives but don’t possess an understanding of the ways in which White supremacy and racial hierarchy structure institutions of higher education, their policies and programs amount to cursory tactics that can actually be very harmful for Black students; they reinforce stereotypes, create unequal positions, and
exacerbate self-segregation (Woodall, 2013). As an analytical concept, interest convergence also reveals how such action work to obscure a focus on the underlying causes of the racial issue and place the burden on Black students to cope with an unwelcoming environment (Cabrera et al., 2016). This research contributes to the growing body of literature that uses critical methods to challenge the normalized status quo within predominately White institutions of higher education.
Table 4.2 Focus Group Participant Demographics, N=30

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CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Major Findings

A qualitative case study approach guided this research study. The overall aim of this research study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how racial discrimination impacts Black college students’ mental health in the context of a PWI with widely circulated diversity and inclusion initiatives. Multiple qualitative methods, including individual, in-depth interviews and focus groups, were employed to explore the complex interplay of factors that shaped the lived experiences and mental health of Black students, particularly as these related to the persistence of racism on college campuses and institutional efforts to promote diversity and inclusion. This dissertation uses critical race theory as a theoretical framework and analytical strategy to examine how Black students’ narratives of their mental health in relation to both (a) their experiences of racial discrimination in college and (b) the enactment of diversity and inclusion initiatives by the university in which they are matriculating.

Specific Aim 1

The first specific aim of this study focused on using individual interviews to explore how Black college students enrolled at the PWI: (1) perceive and experience racial discrimination in the context of the university setting and (2) make sense of the impact of racial discrimination on their mental health. The results from this specific aim are presented in manuscript 1 entitled “Racial Discrimination, Racialized Comportment,
and Mental Health: Black Students’ Narratives of their Experiences with Racial Discrimination at a PWI and its Impact on their Mental Health”. Within this manuscript, three main themes emerged from the students interview data. The students’ narratives illustrated how: (1) racial discrimination manifests and persists on their campus, (2) how such repeated experiences contribute to an array of mental health outcomes, and (3) their experiences with racial discrimination become an embodied dimension of their gendered racial subjectivities.

The students’ interviews illustrate how their efforts to navigate the racial campus climate of the case study PWI took a toll on their mental and emotional health. By using CRM as an analytical tool, the students’ narratives provide a nuanced understanding of the pathways in which racism, and racial discrimination can contribute to adverse mental health outcomes. This study contributes to the literature on Black college student’s mental health by providing qualitative data that demonstrates how racial discrimination manifests and how cumulative exposure to racial discrimination can impact mental health in a variety of ways. Overall, the findings indicate that the ways in which Black college students make sense of their experiences with racial discrimination on campus in relation to their mental health directs attention to the importance of expanding efforts to improve the racial campus climate at PWIs.

**Specific Aim 2**

The second specific aim of this study focused on using focus groups to explore how Black college students enrolled at the PWI: (1) conceptualize diversity and inclusion given their experiences with racial discrimination and (2) evaluate the efficacy of the university’s diversity and inclusion initiatives. Results for specific Aim 2 are illustrated
in the second manuscript in Chapter 4 titled, “Critical Race Theory and Interest Convergence: Exploring Black Students’ Narratives of the Commodification of Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives on a Southern PWI”. Within this manuscript, three main themes emerged from data analysis of the focus groups. The students (1) interrogated the rationale behind the university’s implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives, (2) questioned who benefits from the implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives, and (3) called attention to how the ineffectiveness of the diversity and inclusion initiatives impacted their sense of belonging.

The students’ narratives illustrate how their university’s superficial, or surface level, approach to diversity and inclusion created an environment that was palatable to those in power while oppressive to students of color. By employing interest convergence as an analytical tool, the students’ narratives illustrate what happens when initiatives geared towards promoting an equitable campus racial climate converge with the interests of the White academy (White students, faculty, and staff). The findings from this study demonstrate the ways in which racial privilege (White supremacy) undergirds the university’s implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives.

B. Limitations

It is important to note some of the limitations of this study. Given the qualitative nature of this study the findings of this study are not generalizable as they are not representative of all PWIs nationwide. This study used a combination of convenience and snowballing sampling which may not have allowed for a representative sample of the Black students who were enrolled in the case study PWI. Additionally, self-selection bias may have accounted for the students who participated due to the recruitment messages on
the flyers. Lastly, this study did not engage with approaches commonly used to establish validity (trustworthiness) in qualitative studies. Besides actively engaging with my reflexivity, techniques such as collaboration and peer debriefing could have been used (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Despite these limitations, this study makes an important contribution to the growing body of literature that examines both the mental health of Black college students and the impact of diversity and inclusion initiatives. This study illustrates how using research methods that position the narratives of Black students as a valid form of data allows for the emergence of thick, rich data that sheds a light on the reality of Black students who attend PWIs.

C. Implications for Future Research and Practice

A vast amount of interdisciplinary scholarship has focused on racism in higher education and its impact on Black students. The narratives shared within this research study contribute to this large body of knowledge and adds an additional layer to an already complex story. Drawing from the students’ narratives and lived experiences it is clear that the way in which the diversity and inclusion initiatives are conceived and implemented on the PWI’s campus communicates messages that they fail to deliver. As poignantly stated by W. Carson Byrd (2015), college diversity and discourses of inclusion are, but don’t have to be, for Whites. The implementation of diversity and inclusion efforts at the case study PWI reified the status quo, which had an observable impact on the participants’ mental health. In addition to the aforementioned findings, the students in this study also tell a story about White privilege and White supremacy. Namely, it is a story about how Whiteness and White privilege are centered in the
university’s efforts to promote diversity and inclusion, which results in the
marginalization of Black students.

Given the implications of the students’ narratives, this study offers a final recommendation that may contribute to a more equitable campus climate at the case study PWI: the PWI should actively seek to decenter Whiteness and White Supremacy in diversity and inclusion initiatives both in theory and practice. In order to begin this journey, change must start by accepting that current articulations of diversity and inclusion are anything but diverse and inclusive. Furthermore, listening to the voices of Black students is imperative if the overarching goal of the institution is to improve the campus climate and by association, the health and well-being of Black students. The narratives that emerged within this study provide the tools and knowledge necessary to begin the process of re-conceptualizing diversity and inclusion by decentering Whiteness and White Supremacy. The remainder of this section will use a social justice lens informed by CRT to explore three unique, although not mutually exclusive, ways in which for future research and practice at the case study PWI, or beyond, can begin this structural endeavor. Foregrounding CRT within a social justice approach allows for a targeted focus on how privilege, power, and oppression are hidden in diversity and inclusion initiatives, which ultimately results in the reinforcement of White supremacy in the case study PWI. A major component of CRT oriented research is to make meaning of and dismantle structural forms of racism in order to promote transformative social action (Hughes & Giles, 2010); the three proposals discussed below can be used to interrogate and dismantle the oppressive norms that are commonplace in PWIs.
Counterstorytelling and Acknowledging the Lived Experiences of Black Students

Initiatives geared towards improving the campus racial climate and fostering diversity and inclusion on PWIs are typically authored by White administration, faculty, and consultants (Harris, Barone & Davis, 2015; Iverson, 2007). Even when they’re not White, the logic and structure of these efforts still center Whiteness (Ahmed, 2007). Regardless of the racial/ethnic configurations, these taskforces result in policies and initiatives that center the perspectives of those at the table, they are also structurally devoid of the voices and insight of the groups they are intended to serve. A key tenet of CRT highlights the centrality of experiential knowledge, which is amplified through the narratives of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). While the policies and initiatives at the case study PWI may attempt to paint a picture of harmony and balance, the narratives of Black students tell a story of Whiteness and white privilege. Their stories illustrate what happens when an institution created by Whites creates policies and initiatives that only serve the interest of Whites.

Placing the perspectives of Black students at the center of inquiry allows for the development of a more nuanced understanding of how Black students contend with Whiteness and White privilege, as experienced through various forms of racial discrimination, and the impact it has on their overall college experience and mental health and well-being. Often social science research justifies the marginalization of African Americans through research that either decents or dismisses their experiential reality (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The narratives provided by the students provide a vivid illustration of the racial dynamics that they must navigate in order to persist to degree completion. The experimental knowledge shared within the students’ narratives shed a
light on how these students understand and come to terms with the interpersonal and structural forms of racism that objectify and other them and its impact on their mental health. As evidenced by their narratives racism was a normative fixture in their PWI, it was so engrained in the structures they interacted with that it had become a normalized fixture. The rich qualitative data that emerged from this study demonstrates how racial discrimination manifests and how the internalization of those experiences adversely impact mental well-being. Rather than simply documenting the mental health implications of racial discrimination, this research actively calls-out the mechanisms that perpetuate it and challenges the root causes.

Given that racial discrimination can be subtle, unwitting, and unconscious, utilizing methods that center the perspectives of Black students may provide insight not previous uncovered within more traditionally accepted means of research because it can also provide the necessary steps to ensure that how we talk about Black students doesn’t reinscribe their marginalization. Future research interested in exploring the voices of Black students, or any marginalized population, should consider applying a critical race perspective given its emphasis on the use of narrative analysis and counterstorytelling to uncover, critique, and expose the nuanced contexts in which racism has become normalized (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Hughes & Giles, 2010). Narrative inquiry and counterstorytelling is intrinsic to CRT and when used to elevate oppressed communities it can provide the thick descriptions and interpretations necessary to affect meaningful change.
Decentering Whiteness and Challenging White Supremacy at PWIs

Whiteness, as both an identity and performance, can be described as a position of racial privilege, a standpoint perspective, and set of cultural practices that often remain unmarked and un-interrogated (Hikido & Murray, 2015). Whiteness is a hegemonic form of racial power that operates by privileging White individuals while subordinating racialized “others.” Whiteness is an intricate, and often invisible, feature of American social institutions because it is comprised of a complex web of discourses and practices that sustains an unearned racial privilege because it is perceived as normal and non-existent (DiAngelo & Allen, 2006). When White people do not acknowledge and actively challenge the privileges conferred to them because of their race they construe their social, political, and economic statuses as natural and their achievements as solely the product of individual merit and hard work (Hikido & Murray, 2015). In higher education, particularly predominately White institutions, Whiteness is a normalized fixture in both the dominant culture and climate, that is rarely interrogated from a critical standpoint (Cabrera et al., 2016).

In this study, the students’ narratives are a call to action to decenter Whiteness, and by association White privilege, that undergirds the university’s implementation of the diversity and inclusion initiatives and positions Black students as problems to be fixed. Moreover, the study findings provide an entry point for researchers and university administrators alike to rethink and reconstruct diversity and inclusion initiatives as tools that can simultaneously create a more welcoming and equitable environment for students, faculty, and staff of color while also dismantling the structures built into the university that perpetuate oppression. While delving into the actual mechanics of decentering
Whiteness and White Supremacy in the case study PWIs diversity and inclusion initiatives is beyond the focus of this dissertation, change can begin by actively calling out and challenging Whiteness when it manifests in everyday practices. Essential to calling out and challenging Whiteness in predominately White educational spaces is understanding the contours of Whiteness: Whiteness is a racial discourse and social concept, whereas White people represent a socially constructed identity (Leonardo, 2002). As a racial discourse and social concept, Whiteness entails observable indicators such as an unwillingness to discuss racism, avoidance of identifying with a racial group, and a minimization of a racist legacy (Leonardo, 2000). Likewise, Whiteness can be described as a performance (Giroux, 1997) which draws attention to the ways in which actions and constructed identities can be oppressive and sustain the status quo (Gillborn, 2005; Leonardo, 2002). Moreover, Whiteness as performativity is important to take note of because people of color can perform Whiteness and should not be above being called out for their oppressive actions.

**Beyond Policy: Incorporating CRT into Higher Education Practices**

Higher education in the United Stated is shrouded in the notion that pursuing and subsequently obtaining a college degree is the great equalizer that levels the playing field for any individual who is willing to work hard and succeed. Such a belief is pushed forth by neoliberal and meritocratic ideologies that are laced with racist and classist assumptions that assume that hard work is the solution for marginalized populations and are devoid of any analysis of the ways in which institutions of higher education are inextricably linked to inequity (Byrd, 2015).
Incorporating CRT-oriented perspectives into predominately White educational spaces can bring about awareness of the role in which higher education plays in perpetuating and reinforcing racism and White Supremacy. CRT can help unmask the racism that is rooted in PWIs in conjunction with providing the tools necessary to acknowledge and work against the systematic structures that further the disadvantage and oppression of Black students (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Hiraldo, 2010). For example, the tenets of CRT can help campus leaders, faculty, and students alike acknowledge how racialized discourses and perspectives, usually anti-black, have been incorporated into the curriculum, diversity initiatives, and institutional policies and how it can be actively dismantled. Given that the CRT tenets address unique, yet interconnected, issues they be employed to unearth the various ways in which PWIs reproduce racism (Hiraldo, 2010).

In his research exploring the role of educational policy in structuring racial inequity, educational scholar David Gilborn (2005) refers to educational policy as an act of White supremacy. Given the narratives shared with this research study it is also apparent that the ways in which the diversity and inclusion initiatives were both conceptualization and implementation of diversity and inclusion initiatives were undergirded by White Supremacy. Concerns about diversity and inclusion are widely espoused within higher education, however they are not sufficiently enacted (Harris, Barone & Davis, 2015; Patton, 2016). On an institutional level, diversity and inclusion related initiatives, policies, and programs intend to be a reflection of the institutions commitment to fostering an equitable campus climate and sense of accountability (Patton, 2015). However, the findings from this research and the occurrences at PWIs nationwide illustrate how they represent easy to digest and non-threatening institutional changes that
places the responsibility for change on the backs of students, faculty and staff of color.

Drawing from the research findings and moving beyond policy, I would like to highlight the work of R. Nicole Johnson-Ahorlu (2017) which demonstrates how CRT can be used to inform social movement strategy development. Johnson-Ahorlu’s (2017) work intricately details how each tenet of CRT can easily map on to the stages of strategy development. She provides an in-depth explanation of how CRT research, when combined with the efforts of activists, increases its capacity to produce social justice oriented change.

Educational institutions in the United States, regardless of their level, reproduce existing racial and social hierarchies because they operate within a cis-gender, heterosexual, White supremacist society (Chesler, Lewis & Crowfoot, 2005). Since its inception, higher education has historically promoted the material and symbolic interests of wealthy, White male elites and even in the face of developments to expand higher education’s accessibility by people of color, they continue to be harmful and inequitable places for people of color (Chesler, Lewis & Crowfoot, 2005; Hamer & Lang, 2015; Taylor, Austin, Perkins & Edwards, 2015). One of the many focal points that emerged from the students who participated in this study is that predominately White educational spaces have not properly invested the resources necessary to address the complexities of racial and ethnic diversity (Hamer & Lang, 2015). Overall, the content discussed in each of these proposals can be used to critically engage with and dismantle the historically oppressive structures within PWIs; whether or not they will be accepted with open arms is a separate discussion.
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APPENDIX A

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you for agreeing to participate. As you know, this study will explore experiences with and perceptions of diversity and inclusion. Today, I hope to converse with you about your experiences and perceptions. Your experiences are important to me, so please treat this as a conversation. There are no right or wrong answers.

Before we begin, I’d like to reiterate a couple of key points from the signed consent form.

1. The interview will take about 1 to 1.5 hours to complete.
2. You can share what you wish to share. If you would rather not respond to a particular question, that is fine. You can simply indicate so.
3. You are free to choose not to participate in all or any part of this study. At any time, you can end the interview without any consequences.
4. To ensure that I have an accurate record of our discussion, I would like to audio-record the interview. Is that ok? If you would like to stop the recording any time during the interview, just let me know.
5. You should know that I will do everything in my power to keep your responses confidential by never linking anything that might identify you with any part of my data set. Your real name and any identifying information will not be associated with this interview in any published reports of the research findings. Instead I will use a fake name of your choice. What would you like that name to be?

[Begin recording]

This is Kaleea Lewis with participant #__ who has chosen the pseudonym ______.

Section I: Earlier Life Experiences and Identity Formation

1. Where did you grow up?
2. What was it like where you grew up?
   
   **Probe:** What region of the country did you grow up in (North, South, East West)?
   
   **Probe:** Was that area rural, suburban, or urban?
   
   **Probe:** What was the racial make-up?
   
   **Probe:** Would you say it was upper, middle, or lower class?
3. Who did you live with growing up (presence/absence of biological mother and father, and other family members)?
   
   **Probe:** How many siblings do you have?
4. What was your home life like?
   
   **Probe:** Did you get along with members of your household?
5. What was high school like?
   - **Probe:** Did you attend public or private (religious or secular) school?
   - **Probe:** What was the racial composition of your schools like (elementary, middle and high school)?
   - **Probe:** What were your high school friends like?
     - i. **Probe** for gender, sexual orientation, and racial/ethnic make-up of friends

6. Thinking about your earlier life experiences, when was the first time you became aware of your race?
   - **Probe:** Can you tell me how that happened?

7. Before you started college, did your family ever talk with you about issues of race and racism?
   - **Probe:** Before you started at USC, did anyone in your family talk to you directly about race and racism specifically in reference to going to college?
   - **Probe:** If so what were the conversations like?

8. Thinking about your earlier experiences did you have any concerns or reservations about attending USC?
   - **Probe:** If so, what were they?

### Identity Formation

9. What words or phrases would you use to describe your identity?
10. How do you define being “Black or African American”?
11. Thinking about your definition, how important is being Black or African American to your sense of self?
12. How often do you think about being black?
13. Are there any other parts of your identity that are as salient as being Black or African American?
14. How important is it for you, as a Black student, to surround yourself with other Black students?
   - **Probe:** Have you ever been judged negatively by other Black students because you primarily interact/associate with non-Black students?

### Section II: Campus Racial Climate

*I’m going to ask you some broad questions about your time at USC and later I will ask some specific questions to learn more about your personal experiences.*

1. Do you think USC is a racially diverse university?
   - **Probe:** Thinking about what you just described, how does it feel to live in this type of environment?
2. What does it feel like to be a Black or African American student at a PWI?
3. How do you think Black people are viewed by others on campus?
   - **Probe:** How does it impact your day to day routine on campus?
   - **Probe:** Do you feel you fit well within USC?
4. If any, how would you describe the degree of racial separation on the campus?
5. How would you describe interactions between Black students and faculty at USC?
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Probe: Thinking about these experiences or interactions, do you think the faculty and administration sensitive (or even aware) of the needs and interests of Black students at a PWI?

Probe: What about staff (custodians, food service worker, etc.)?

6. How would you describe interactions between Black and White students at this institution?

7. If you had to make this choice over again, would you select USC?

Section III. Experiences with Racism

1. What year are you at USC?

Probe: How has your overall experience been so far?

Now that we’ve covered more broad experiences, I want to ask some specific questions about your personal experiences and perceptions of things going on around campus.

Institutional Racism

1. Recently there has been major discussion around campus about creating and publicly displaying plaques that illustrate how slaves built certain buildings on campus. For example, USC is in the midst of raising money to erect a statue of the first African American professor, Richard T. Greener. What do you think about USC acknowledging the contribution African Americans have made at USC?

Probe: How do you feel about the fact that many of the buildings on campus were named after White Supremacists (e.g., Strom Thurmond Wellness Center)?

2. The vast majority of the faculty are White at USC. Actually, less than 10% of the faculty at USC is African American, with a smaller percentage being tenured.

Probe: Why do you think there are so few faculty of color at this university?

Probe: How does that affect you as a Black student?

3. A major theme in research exploring African American students perception of PWIs is their critique of the pervasiveness of whiteness in university spaces, curricula’s, and activities. I want to ask about questions about curricula. Have any of the courses you’ve taken included content that focused on race and/or racism?

Probe: Tell me about those courses and what was covered (probe for AFAM courses or other racially-specific topics as well as general courses that had a component on race/racism).

Probe: Did you find those classes to be inclusive of Black scholarship/books/readings?

4. How did you feel about how the focus on race and/or racism was handled in those classes?

Probe: Probe for specific examples in each relevant course

Interpersonal Racism

5. Have you ever been made to feel uncomfortable or self-conscious around campus because of your race and/or identity?

6. Have there ever been times around campus where you have been treated differently?

Probe: How about other students?
7. Have there ever been times around campus where you have seen or heard someone make a bad or insulting remark about any aspect of your identity?
8. Have there ever been instances where another student, a professor, or a staff member have made you feel as if you’re not smart or intelligent?
9. Have there ever been instances where you felt like you were not heard, being ignored or looked down up on by someone?
10. How did these experiences make you feel?
    **Probe:** What kind of message did that send you about your place on campus?

Section IV. Diversity and Inclusion

1. What does diversity and inclusion mean to you?
   **Probe:** Thinking about what you just said, do you see that here?

   *USC has made it priority to try to create a positive, inclusive, and supportive environment possible for students, faculty and staff through the implementation of Diversity and Inclusion initiatives.* *(Give student list of sponsored events and organizations)*

2. Where you aware of USC’s stance towards diversity and inclusion?
   **Probe:** What do you think?
   **Probe:** Do you see this around campus? Do you think they are following through?
3. Prior to this conversation, were you aware of these diversity and inclusion initiatives?
   **Probe:** If yes, how did you learn about them?
4. What do you think about diversity and inclusion initiatives at USC?
   **Probe:** Do you attend or are you actively engaged in these efforts?
   i. If engaged/attending, what activities, events, programs have you attend or are engaged with?
   ii. If not engaged/do not attend, what are some of the reasons why you aren’t engaged?
5. What do you want to see changed at USC as it relates to diversity and inclusion?
   **Probe:** What do you think could be done better to promote diversity and inclusion on campus?
6. Besides personal experiences, have you heard of racist/offensive occurrences on campus?
   **Probe:** How do you think these events have been handled?
   **Probe:** What would you have liked to see done?

As you are probably aware, there have been many highly publicized student protests occurring nationwide. Many of these protests are examples of student-led efforts to challenge racism and the lack of diversity and inclusion within higher education.

7. What are your views on the student protests that have been happening lately nationwide related to diversity and inclusion?
   **Probe:** Many of the student protests were informed by the Black Lives Matter movement. What is your opinion about the BLM movement?
   i. Do you think it belongs on a school setting?
8. What are your views about the student protest that occurred on USC’s campus (Vision 2020)?

Probe: Would you ever participate in a student protest on campus?

Section V: Racism Related Stress and Coping

Racism Related Stress

1. In general, what have been some major sources of stress within your life at USC?
2. Can you think of any stressful experiences have had that was attributed to your race?
   Probe: How have these experiences affected your college experience?
   Probe: How have these experiences affected you mentally?

Going back to the experiences we discussed, I want to learn more about how they impact you.

3. When you experience racially stressful event does it make you feel?  
   Probe: Does it make it hard for you to concentrate on whatever you’re doing?
   Probe: Does it impact your ability to enjoy your normal day-to-day activities?
   Probe: Does it make you feel like you’re losing confidence in yourself?
   Probe: Do you ever lose sleep?

4. Are there times on campus, since you’ve been here, that you’ve felt sad about being Black?
   Probe: How about happy? Why?

5. Research shows that Black students often feel pressure to act like they are “okay” even when they might not be. Is this an experience you’ve had? If so, can you tell me about that?

Coping and Social Support

Going back to the experiences we discussed, I want to learn more about how you deal with them.

6. When you experience racially stressful events what do you do? How do you deal with it?
   Probe: Are there any organizations on campus you lean on?
   Probe: Who do you talk to about these type of experiences?
   Probe: Do you ever just bottle up our feelings?
   Probe: Do you ever get angry?
   Probe: Do you ever just distract yourself?
   Probe: Who do you rely on?
   Probe: Where do you think the diversity and inclusion initiatives could fit in with helping Black student deal with racially stressful events?

7. What are your recommendations for future Black students about ways to cope with the realities as you saw and/or experienced them on campus?

Go back to the first day you moved in. Thinking about everything that we’ve talked about together, what would you tell your younger self in order to prepare yourself for life at USC?
APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Introduction (5 minutes)

Good evening and welcome to our discussion. Thanks for taking the time to join us to talk about your perspectives and experiences as a Black student at USC. My name is _______ and working with me is ________. She will be taking notes. (Offer a little about your background.)

First we are going to read the informed consent script to make sure everyone knows what they’re agreed to participate in today and then we’ll get started.

[Read script]

Background on Focus Group Research Study
I'm going to tell you a little bit about our project and what you can expect during our time together. Our focus group discussion is going to last until [time that the group will end]. Once we get started, I am going to ask you questions and we’d like you to share your thoughts and opinions freely. You will do most of the talking. We will be doing a lot of listening. Remember you are the experts and we want to learn from you. We are not going to necessarily "teach" you anything today.

Appreciation
To show our appreciation for what you teach us and for your time, we have provided a meal for you today and a cash incentive of $20.

How Today's Focus Group Will Work (5 minutes)

Talking about Race, Racism, and Mental Health
We’re going to be talking about the broad topics of race, racism, diversity and inclusion, and mental health today in the context of USC. In our society race can be a very sensitive subject and some people don’t always feel comfortable talking race and experiences with racism and we often don’t have many opportunities to talk openly and honestly about these matters. Much of what we talk about tonight will be focus on your unique experiences, attitudes, and perceptions around diversity, inclusion, mental health, and being a Black student at a PWI. We want to make sure that you feel safe and comfortable in this group talking about these kinds of issues. Here are some ground rules that will help make this group safe and comfortable:
• **No assumptions:** We won’t make any assumptions about your behavior. We expect that there is a lot of diversity of thought in this group as it relates to the topics. We are going to be asking you about your opinions and experiences and hope you will feel comfortable sharing.

• **Feelings are OK:** Because people don’t have a lot of opportunities to discuss these issues openly, they sometimes feel a little uncomfortable, shy, or silly. All of these feelings are normal.

• **No judgments or put downs:** Please don’t judge or put anyone down in the group because of something they say. In order for everyone to feel safe and comfortable, they have to know that no one is going to laugh at them, tease them, or put them down for anything they say today. So can we all agree that there will be no teasing or put downs? (look around for nods in agreement)

**No "Right" or "Wrong" Answers and Participation**

We'll be asking you some questions for the next two hours or so. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers to these questions because we want to know what you think. It’s okay to have a different opinion from other people in the group. It's really important for us to hear all the different points of view in the room. We want you to share your point of view, whether it’s the same or different from what others are saying. We want you to feel comfortable saying what you really think and to respect each other’s opinions.

Don't feel like you have to respond to me all the time. Feel free to talk to one another when discussing my questions. If you want to respond to something someone said, agree or disagree with something someone said, or give an example, you can do that; just be respectful. We want all people to have a chance to share ideas. We may need to interrupt or call on people to make sure this happens. Please do not feel offended if we do this.

**Recording and Confidentiality**

We will be recording the session because we don't want to miss any of your comments. People often say things in these sessions and we can't write fast enough to write them all down.

We will use each other’s pseudonyms today and again, we will not use your actual names in our report. No one will be able to link your identity back to what you said and only project staff like myself will listen to this recording. I am also going to ask all of you to keep what is said here confidential, so that everybody feels comfortable talking and knows what they say we will not be repeated. Can you all do that?" (Make eye contact with each person in the group and wait for her to nod affirmatively.)

Also, you do not have to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. If you are asked a specific question and don’t want to answer, you can just say ‘pass.’
Timing and Incentives
We expect to be here until ______. We appreciate you giving us your time and we want to make sure we end on time. _____ will be watching the clock and may need to interrupt the discussion at times and move us on to another question to be sure we have to time to discuss all topics.

At about _____(5 minutes before the end of our time together), we will end the focus group and distribute the incentives to thank you for your time and participation and receipts for you to sign with your initials (not your full name).

Tell the group that you will be starting the recorder and do so.
[Begin recording]
Introductions [5-10 minutes]

Let's begin. We have asked you to wear a name tag to help us remember each person’s fake names. Let's go around the room and introduce yourselves by giving your pseudonym, your year at USC, and where you grew up.

Focus Group Questions
We are here today to talk about your unique experiences, attitudes, and perceptions around diversity, inclusion, mental health, and being a Black student at USC. We will begin by talking about your everyday experiences here at USC.

Section I. Everyday Experiences
1. To begin, why did you decide to attend USC?
2. How has your overall experience been so far at USC?
   a. **Probe:** What has been the best thing about being a student here?
   b. **Probe:** What has been the worst thing about being a student here?
3. How would you describe the race relations on campus?
4. How do you think Black people are viewed on this campus?
   a. **Probe:** How does it impact your day to day routine on campus?
   b. **Probe:** Do you feel you fit well at USC?

The next couple of questions will ask you to think about personal experiences with discrimination and/or racism you’ve encountered on USC’s campus (or affiliated housing).

5. Have you ever been made to feel uncomfortable or self-conscious around campus because of your race and/or identity?
   a. **Probe:** How so?
   b. **Probe:** Have there ever been times around campus where you have been treated differently because of your race?
   c. **Probe:** Have there ever been times around campus where you have seen or heard someone make a negative or insulting remark about any aspect of your identity?
   d. **Probe:** Have there ever been instances where another student, a professor, or a staff member have made you feel as if you’re not smart or intelligent?
e. **Probe:** Have there ever been instances where you felt like you were not heard, being ignored or looked down upon by someone?

6. Thinking about the experiences we just discussed, how did they make you feel?
   a. **Probe:** What message do these experiences send to you about your place on this campus?

**Section II. Mental Health**

*Thanks for sharing your personal experiences with the group. Now I would like to switch gears and talk about mental health.*

1. What does the phrase “mental health” mean to you?
2. Thinking about the definitions you just shared, how do you think attending USC impacted how you think about your mental health?
3. What are some ways you take care of your mental health?
4. Research shows that Black students often feel pressure to act like they are “okay” even when they might not be. What do you think about this?
5. A lot of time when I’ve talked to students about racist experiences they’ve encountered and its impact on their mental health they respond by telling me that “they just don’t let it get to them”. What does it mean to not let a racist experience get to you?
   a. **Probe:** Why do you think you can’t “let it get to you”?
   b. **Probe:** What would happen if you did “let it get to you”?
   c. **Probe:** Do you feel like you have to act a certain way when you experience a racist encounter?
      i. What would it feel like to be your authentic self in that moment?
6. I know you’ve talked about it a little already, but how do these experiences make you feel?
   a. **Probe:** How can we start to have conversations about how racism affects us emotionally?
      i. How do we tell others that their actions have impacted us?
7. Building off the question you just answered, what are some other ways that you handle experiences with racism on campus?
8. Think about how you felt after you’ve had a racist encounter. What are some strategies you use to manage the stigma associated with that encounter?
   a. **Probe:** Of the strategies, what do you think is the best way to respond to racism/racist experiences on this campus?
      i. Why?
   b. **Probe:** Of the strategies, what do you think is the worst way to respond to racism/racist experiences on this campus?
      i. Why?
9. How do you think the experiences you’ve faced at USC will impact you later in life?

**Section III. White Institutional Spaces and Resistance**

1. What do you think “diversity and inclusion” mean?
USC is one of many universities that has moved towards taking a more proactive approach to creating a positive, inclusive, and supportive environment possible for all students, faculty and staff through the implementation of what are often referred to as “Diversity and Inclusion initiatives.” Here is a list of all of the diversity and inclusion initiatives at USC.

2. What do you think about the diversity and inclusion initiatives USC has?
   a. **Probe:** Do you think they are effective?

3. Why do you think USC created these diversity and inclusion initiatives?
   a. **Probe:** Who do you think benefits from these initiatives?

4. What kinds of actions or efforts do you think USC needs in order to create positive change and reduce racism on campus?

The final set of questions are going to ask about resistance. SO that we are on the same page, there are no right or wrong answers. Resistance can look like...but it also happens when we...

5. How do you define resistance?
   a. **Probe:** What does resistance look like to you?
   b. **Probe:** What does those actions feel like?
   c. **Probe:** Are acts of resistance valued?

6. What do you think it would feel like to be in an environment where resistance wasn’t necessary?

**Wrap Up [5 minutes]**

Our time is coming to a close and we want to thank you so much for taking the time to participate in the focus group.

If you have not already put your completed questionnaire in the envelope, please do so before you leave today.

Lastly, please sign the incentive receipt with your initials and then we will distribute the incentives. Thanks again for sharing your insights today!
APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research exploring students’ experiences of racism and perceptions of diversity and inclusion. Before we begin the interview, please fill out this survey. If anything is confusing, please let me know.

Demographic Background

1) How old are you? ______

2) What gender were you assigned at birth?
   a. Female
   b. Male
   c. Other: Please specify _____________________

3) What gender do you identify as now?
   a. Please specify _____________________

4) What is your current academic standing?
   a. Sophomore
   b. Junior
   c. Senior
   d. Super-Senior
   e. Other: Please specify _____________________

5) Which do you feel describes your racial/ethnic background? (Choose one)
   a. Black/African American
   b. African (2nd, 3rd generation)
   c. Mixed (specify) _____________________
   d. Refuse to Answer

6) What country were you born in?
   a. USA
   b. Other Specify “Other” country________________________

7) What city/town/community did you grow up in? _____________________
8) What is your current religion? (Choose one)
   a. Catholic
   b. Christian
   c. Jewish
   d. Muslim
   e. Buddhist
   f. None
   g. Other religion      Specify “Other” religion________________________

9) Are you a member of a Greek or Service-Learning sorority/fraternity?
   a. Yes                 Organizations Name________________________
   b. No

10) Where do you currently live?
    a. On Campus: Please specify ___________________
    b. Off Campus: Please specify ___________________

11) Which do you feel best describes your sexual orientation/identity?
    a. Heterosexual/Straight/Attracted to the opposite gender
    b. Gay/Lesbian/Attracted to the same gender
    c. Bisexual/Attracted to people of both genders
    d. Asexual/Not attracted to people of any gender
    e. Other: Please specify__________________
    f. Decline to answer

12) What is the highest grade or year of school your mother has completed? (Choose one)
    a. Less than high school
    b. High school/ GED
    c. Some college
    d. 2-year college degree
    e. 4-year college degree
    f. Post graduate degree
    g. Don't know

13) What is the highest grade or year of school your father has completed? (Choose one)
    a. Less than high school
    b. High school/ GED
    c. Some college
    d. 2-year college degree
    e. 4-year college degree
    f. Post graduate degree
    g. Don't know
14) What is your **mother’s** occupation? __________________

15) What is your **father’s** occupation? __________________

-----------------------------------Project Staff Only----------------------------------

Participant ID # _ _ _
APPENDIX D

VERBAL ASSENT FORM

Project Title: Racism, African American College Students’ Mental Health, and the Efficacy of Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives: A Case Study

Principal Investigator:
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Oral Consent Text:

You are being asked to take part in a research study. If you have any questions or concerns about the contents of this agreement, please discuss them with me before deciding whether to participate in the study.

As you know, I am a researcher from the University of South Carolina in Columbia, SC. I am conducting a study that will explore faculty and staff engagement in promoting diversity and inclusion initiatives around campus.

If you agree to be in the study, I would like to audio record our conversation, so I can get your words accurately. The focus group will last approximately 120 minutes. Also, if you agree, I would like your permission to contact you via email so that you can fact check the transcript to ensure that you are comfortable with the conversation we had.

If at any time during our talk you feel uncomfortable answering a question, please let me know. You do not have to answer any question you are uncomfortable with. Or, if you want to answer a question, but do not want it tape recorded, please let me know and I will turn off the machine. If at any time you want to withdraw from this study, please tell me and I will delete the recording of our conversation.

Maintaining and safeguarding your rights, welfare and confidentiality are a top priority. I will do everything I can to protect your privacy. You may choose to withdraw from the study at any time.
If you would like a copy of this letter for your records, please let me know and I will give you a copy. If you have any questions regarding the research, contact please the principal investigator, Kaleea R. Lewis at 803-479-7400 or LewisKR2@email.sc.edu.

Now I would like to ask you if you agree to participate in this study, and to talk to me about your experiences with contraception and contraceptive counseling. Do you agree to participate and to allow me to tape record our conversation?