

5-2019

## **Black Female Graduate Students' Experiences of Racial Microaggressions at a Southern University**

Kendra Elizabeth Shoge  
*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Counselor Education Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

---

### **Citation**

Shoge, K. E. (2019). Black Female Graduate Students' Experiences of Racial Microaggressions at a Southern University. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations* Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/3278>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact [scholar@uark.edu](mailto:scholar@uark.edu).

Black Female Graduate Students' Experiences of Racial  
Microaggressions at a Southern University

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Counselor Education

by

Kendra Shoge  
Missouri State University  
Bachelor of Science in Psychology, 2010  
Missouri State University  
Master of Science in Mental Health Counseling, 2014

May 2019  
University of Arkansas

This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

---

Erin Popejoy, Ph.D.  
Dissertation Director

---

Kristi Perryman, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Yvette Murphy-Erby, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Paul Blisard, Ed.D.  
Committee Member

## **ABSTRACT**

Researchers have found that microaggressions can cause psychological distress, frustration, avoidance, confusion, resentment, hopelessness, and fear. Previous studies from Southern universities have addressed the adjustment experiences of Black women in graduate programs, obstacles faced by Black women in higher education and strategies to overcome those obstacles, and factors associated with Black student motivation and achievement. Discrimination and racism are factors identified in those studies, however, there is little research on the experiences of Black women in graduate programs and the impact of racial microaggressions on them.

The purpose of this study was to examine Black female graduate students' experiences of racial microaggressions at a Southern university. Five women participated in the study, and a phenomenological research design was used to identify individual and group themes. These themes revealed the impact of racial microaggressions on the participants, as well as the campus climate. Findings suggest training opportunities and mentor programs that would improve experiences for Black female graduate students on campus.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to everyone who supported me throughout this journey. To my friends and family, I am forever thankful for your encouragement. Julie, I could write a whole book on the ways you cared for me throughout this process. It will take a very long time for me to thank you enough.

To my committee, thank you for sticking with me. Dr. Perryman, it is impossible to count the number of hours you spent processing my whole life with me, helping me with coding, listening to me complain, making me cry, and reminding me what you would do to me if I mention quitting again. Thank you for believing in me. I am lucky to have you. Dr. Blisard, from a thesis to a dissertation, I am so grateful for all I have learned from you, and for your warm, gentle support. Dr. Murphy-Erby, thank you for reminding me that this work is important and that it needs to be shared. Dr. Popejoy, thank you for believing in me and trusting me throughout this process.

Thank you to my participants. Thank you for trusting me with your stories, thank you for your vulnerability, and thank you for your words.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	8
Chapter Three: Research Methods and Procedures.....	24
Chapter Four: Results.....	38
Chapter Five: Discussion.....	72
Conclusion.....	89
References.....	90
Appendices.....	94

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	Participant Demographic Data.....	39
Table 2	Individual Interview Themes.....	44
Table 3	Journal Entry Themes.....	46
Table 4	Focus Group Themes.....	47
Table 5	Number of Participant Statements Supporting Each Theme.....	65

## **LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1	Data Collection Plan.....	32
Figure 2	Themes Comprised of Initial Clusters Grouped by Research Question.....	66

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The demographics in the United States (U.S.) continue to change with the anticipation that the U.S. will have no racial majority of any single identity group by 2050 (Hays & Erford, 2010). This means an inevitable increase in interactions between groups. Many people assume discrimination and racially motivated acts of violence no longer occur between groups (Wise, 2010), but many studies suggest racially related incidents are still a part of the fabric of our culture (Navarro, Worthington, Hart, & Khairallah, 2009; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007; Lusk, Taylor, Nanney, & Austin 2010).

In 2016, just days after the presidential election, there was an increase of hateful and race related messages received by people of color. According to an article posted by CNN.com, the Southern Poverty Law Center found hundreds of cases of harassment or intimidation during the days following the election (Petulla, Kupperman, & Schneider, 2017). In August 2017, White nationalists held a “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, VA, which was met by counter-protestors and ended with one woman killed (Yan, Sayers, & Almas, 2017). Students of color on college campuses have reported a sense of hostility from others and a lack of belonging that went beyond feeling disconnected from their peers on campus (Cerezo et. al., 2015). Students have reported that this then leads to some choosing to withdraw from the university early and minimal development of social networks (Cerezo et. al., 2015). Participants in one study (Alexander & Hermann, 2016) reported not only experiencing microaggressions in classrooms, but that they experienced microaggressions when seeking counseling services or other university assistance.

Some of the racially related incidents that people experience are termed microaggressions and are defined as subtle, racial slights and insults that can be intentional or unintentional (Sue

et. al., 2007). They are often the outward expression of held stereotypes. The frequency of these incidents can be easily dismissed, can occur in academic settings, or with co-workers and friends, and can happen outside of the perpetrator's awareness (Sue et. al., 2007). However, such slights can have a lasting impact on the person receiving them. Researchers (Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010) have found that African American students encountered microaggressions including being treated like a criminal, having their personal ability underestimated, and feeling isolated. These students reported higher levels of stress and a greater risk for depression than other students (Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010). In one article (McGee & Stovall, 2015), researchers stated that many Black students they interviewed seemed resilient but were suffering from chronic or acute stress due to everyday racism. One student stated that, during an internship experience at a biomedical lab, she was defined and stereotyped because of her race and gender (McGee & Stovall, 2015). The discrimination and racism caused her so much stress and pain that she considered suicide, she would tremble so badly on her way to the office each day that it impaired her driving, and she stated the reason she did not go through with her plan to kill herself was the thought of her mother's anguish (McGee & Stovall, 2015)

### **Statement of the Problem**

Stereotypes, discrimination, and prejudices have negative effects on people of color. For college students of color, academic performance, sense of racial identity, and social involvement can all be negatively impacted (Steele, 1997). Researchers have found that microaggressions can cause psychological distress, frustration, avoidance, confusion, resentment, hopelessness, and fear (Lilly, Owens, Bailey, Ramirez, Brown, Clawson, & Vidal, 2018). One study examined the association between Black women's awareness of gendered stereotypes and their overall health (Jerald, Cole, Ward, & Avery, 2017). Those who internalize stereotypes are more likely to

engage in risky sexual behavior, binge drink, suppress their anger, neglect their own self-care, binge eat, smoke, or have symptoms of anxiety and depression (Jerald, Cole, Ward, & Avery, 2017). Just the awareness that others hold these stereotypes is detrimental to health. Despite this information, race related issues are rarely addressed on university campuses as noted in Angelina Castagno's (2008) article in which she wrote, "Even though issues of race are always present and are often at the surface of school-related discourse, practice, and policies, educators are consistently silent and are socializing students to be silent about them" (Castagno, 2008, p. 315). Microaggressions are common, create distress, and impact depression in persons of color (Lilly et al., 2018).

### **Need for the Study**

When reporting negative, racially motivated incidents on campus, students have stated feeling their concerns were quickly dismissed or ignored, and that peers continued making racist jokes and comments despite being told the comments were offensive (Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012). Other students state that attempts to discuss race and racism in courses are shut down by peers or faculty (Bryan, Wilson, Lewis, & Wills, 2012). These instances of invalidation can send the message that the experiences of students of color, or the students themselves, are not important and have no place in academia.

Within the counseling and counselor education fields, multicultural competency has been made a priority and the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) has provided a list of competencies for counselors to attain. The competencies suggest that counselors have knowledge of how race, racism, stereotyping, and powerlessness impact self-concept and self-esteem, worldview, and help seeking behavior (Arredondo, Toporek, Brown, Jones, Locke, Sanchez, & Stadler, 1996). The AMCD (1996) also states that skilled counselors

should have knowledge of discriminatory practices at the social and community levels that affect the population they are serving so they can provide appropriate interventions. This researcher seeks to provide that knowledge of discriminatory practices, and experiences of racism and stereotyping specific to Black female graduate students at a Southern university. Previous studies from Southern universities have addressed adjustment experiences of Black women in graduate programs (Alexander, 2015), obstacles faced by Black women in higher education and strategies to overcome those obstacles (Nichols & Tanksley, 2004), and factors associated with Black student motivation and achievement (Morris & Monroe, 2009; Byrd, 2015). Discrimination and racism are factors identified in those studies, however, experiences of racial microaggressions in the South have not been explored specific to Black women. There is little research that exists on Black women's experiences in graduate school at predominately White universities (Alexander & Bodenhorn, 2015).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine Black female graduate students' experiences of racial microaggressions at a Southern university. This information will inform university leaders about the perception of campus climate and suggestions are offered for policy changes that would improve the experiences of Black women on campus.

### **Research Questions**

Within phenomenological research, a central research question followed by sub-questions is most appropriate for developing an interview guide (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The central research question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of Black female graduate students who have been the target of microaggressions at a Southern university? Two sub-questions then assisted to further explore the participants' experiences and perceptions and

include: (1) How do Black female graduate students at a Southern university describe the ways in which they have been impacted by microaggressions? (2) How do Black female graduate students at a Southern university describe their perception of the impact of microaggressions on campus climate?

### **Researcher Position in the Study**

As a Black woman, I have experience with negative racial interactions, including microaggressions. I studied microaggressions and the effects they have on students during my master's program and have discussed with peers the ways in which they have been affected by microaggressions of different forms. These things have influenced the proposed dissertation. As a Black woman in graduate school, I have my own ideas and personal experiences related to racial microaggressions. Assumptions of criminality, feelings of invisibility, and messages that a person with my racial background is unwanted and unwelcome are examples of microaggressions that I have experienced on university campuses, but I acknowledge that other Black women may have very different experiences. Each participant will have a unique story and it will be important for me to approach this research and each interview with curiosity and a desire to understand each individual's experience. To remain unbiased while collecting and analyzing data, I will rely on an external auditor, member checking, and the use of personal memos to ensure that researcher bias and influence is minimized.

### **Assumptions**

I acknowledge my position in relation to the study topic but assume the data will reveal participant experiences and researcher bias will be minimized. Another assumption is that participants will provide honest responses during their interviews and will be willing to share

their experiences. Finally, the researcher assumes that the study will provide data that will be beneficial to university leaders and counselors working with this population.

### **Limitations**

There are a few different limitations to this study, and they are outlined in greater detail in Chapter Five. Those limitations include the voluntary nature of the study, the limited number of available participants who meet the criteria for participation, and the sensitive nature of the topic being discussed. These things can limit the generalizability of the results.

The participants are Black female graduate students who attended one Southern university and were willing to share about negative interactions they have experienced on campus. Some of the stories were uncomfortable to share, and some participants were concerned about being identified by their experiences because African American students only make up approximately five percent of the graduate student population at the identified university (Vice Provost for Research and Innovation, 2017). This may have caused participants to leave out information, details, or experiences that would be beneficial to the reader in order to avoid being identified. However, this methodology, which aims to understand a unique phenomenon occurring within a small group, was most appropriate for revealing useful information.

### **Brief Dissertation Overview**

This study is divided into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the concept of racial microaggressions and the negative effects they can have on people of color. Chapter Two examines literature regarding racism, discrimination, and microaggressions. Chapter Three describes phenomenological research methodology and details the steps taken to conduct this study. Chapter Four provides an overview of the data analysis. And Chapter Five discusses the results and implications of the research findings.

## **Definition of Terms**

*Black:* For the purposes of this study, the term Black will be utilized to describe any person or persons who identify as Black, African, African American, or Caribbean American.

*Institutional Discrimination:* Policies and practices favorable to a dominant group and unfavorable to another group that are systematically embedded in the form of norms in the existing structure of society.

*Macroaggression:* Macroaggressions occur at a structural level encompassing actions that are meant to exclude, either by action or omission (Boske, Osanloo, & Newcomb, 2016).

*Microaggression:* Microaggressions are defined as brief and commonplace daily behavioral, verbal, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults (Sue et. al., 2007).

*Racism:* Belief that certain races of people are by birth superior to others

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this study is to examine Black female graduate students' experiences of microaggressions at a predominantly White, Southern, state university campus. Presented in the review of the related literature will be (a) current social climate; (b) racism; (c) slavery; (d) the new Jim Crow; (e) stereotypes; (f) microaggressions; (g) Black identity development; (h) Black women; and (i) campus climate.

### **Current Social Climate**

During a confrontation with the police in August 2014, 18-year-old Michael Brown, an unarmed Black man, was shot and killed. Crowds gathered at the scene of the shooting and as many as 1,000 demonstrators began protesting against police brutality in Ferguson, Missouri (Hare, 2016). Since this time, deadly confrontations between police officers and unarmed Black men, including Philando Castile, Eric Garner, Alton Sterling, and Freddie Gray, have continued to make headlines. The controversial Black Lives Matter movement is often in the news, as well (Hare, 2016). While some people claim the Black Lives Matter group is responsible for certain American deaths due to violence occurring at some protests (Mazza, 2016), others believe the ongoing instances of police brutality underscore the necessity of the group (Waldrop, 2017). Demonstrators with the Black Lives Matter movement claim they promote peace while acknowledging the anger and frustration that coincides with being Black in the U.S. They also claim to focus on identifying ways of combating injustice against Black lives (Workneh, 2017).

While incidents of police brutality and racially motivated violence have occurred throughout history, with rising visibility since unarmed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed in 2012, some people believe that a recent increase in overt hate crimes may be linked to the current president and his administration (Kuruvilla, 2017). According to a news article on

the website Huffington Post, reports of anti-Muslim harassment spiked directly after Trump was elected and some believe Trump's rhetoric has bolstered hate groups (Kuruvilla, 2017). The increase in hate crimes since the election includes anti-Semitic vandalism, as well. Threats made to certain Jewish institutions, including 148 bomb threats nationwide made in the first couple of months of 2017, are some of the first in over 60 years (Hare, 2016). There was an increase of racist slogans and hateful messages days after the 2016 election, as well. According to an article posted by CNN.com, the Southern Poverty Law Center found 867 cases of harassment or intimidation during the 10 days following the presidential election (Petulla, Kupperman, & Schneider, 2017). In August 2017, White nationalists held a "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, VA. The event was met by counter-protestors and ended with 30 people injured and one woman killed (Yan, Sayers, & Almas, 2017). Many criticized President Trump for not calling out White supremacists when speaking about the event in Virginia, including the Charlottesville mayor (Yan, Sayers, & Almas, 2017).

In 2017, women across the U.S. marched in protest of President Trump's inauguration. Many participants held signs referencing vulgar comments about women that were made by the newly elected president (Reston, 2017). In January of 2018, women marched again in the midst of the #MeToo movement that was focused on sexual misconduct (Summers, 2018). While many believe citizens in the U.S. no longer face discrimination (Wise, 2010), women, people of color, and others who are members of marginalized groups continue to protest for rights already afforded to others (Reston, 2017). News outlets and social media have increased individual's awareness of current racist and sexist acts in America, but the country has a long history of division.

## **Racism**

Race is defined as the division of human beings based on shared distinctive physical traits (Race, n.d.). This division allows people to be categorized into discrete racial groups. Differential value, power, and privilege can become associated with the various physical traits, allowing the formation of a social status ranking among the different racial groups (Markus, 2008). These racial castes have often resulted in occurrences of racism and other discrimination. Racism is a complex and dynamic form of social oppression that affects the daily lives of people of color, and has cognitive, physical, and emotional costs such as anxiety and depression (Hays & Erford, 2010). Perceived racial discrimination negatively influences mental and physical health, as well (Jerald, Cole, Ward, & Avery, 2017). The stress of racism can impact physiological responses which can then negatively impact the immune system and cardiovascular functioning, but the negative impact on mental health may be even stronger (Lewis, Williams, Peppers, & Gadson, 2017). The construct of race implicates power and indexes the history or ongoing imposition of one group's authority over another. This, then, leads to racism which is rooted in the social structure of the U.S. and its social systems.

## **Slavery**

The modern idea of race in the U.S. began alongside the establishment of slavery for Africans (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). The degraded status of Africans was justified on the grounds that Africans were an uncivilized, lesser race. During the 4 centuries in which slavery flourished, the idea of race grew as well (Alexander, 2010). Believing that people of the African race were bestial, that Whites were inherently superior, and that slavery was for the African's own good, served to alleviate the White conscience and reconcile the tension between slavery and the democratic ideals espoused by Whites (Alexander, 2010). Black men and women could

be mutilated, maimed, or killed by the slave holder, and Blacks were seen as savage creatures without morals (Jacobs, 2017). Since Black men and women were prevented from attending school, learning to read, or getting married, the inequality of Blacks and Whites was easier to justify (Jacobs, 2017).

Physical characteristics remain markers of racial identity today, though data refutes the notion that races are genetically distinct (Bryan, Wilson, Lewis, & Wills, 2012). Culturally invented ideas and beliefs about differences among groups constitute the meaning of race, and directly cause discrimination (Smedley & Smedley). In her book, *The New Jim Crow*, Alexander (2010) explores the transition from blatant racism to more discreet forms of race-based discrimination. Alexander (2010) makes the case that the “New Jim Crow” has developed as a method of continuing racial discrimination and is enacted through differential sentencing guidelines and the increasing imprisonment of Blacks compared to Whites committing the same crime.

### **Jim Crow Laws**

After the Civil war and emancipation, several laws were developed to ensure White supremacy (Bhutia & Wallenfeldt, 2016). These were used to secure cheap labor and maintain the inferiority of freed slaves (Bhutia & Wallenfeldt, 2016). For example, a vagrancy law was developed that made it illegal for a Black person to be unemployed and without permanent residence, the person would be arrested, and then bound out for a term of labor if unable to pay their fine (Bhutia & Wallenfeldt, 2016). Apprentice laws allowed for orphans or other young Black children to be hired out to Whites who were often their former slave owners (Bhutia & Wallenfeldt, 2016). Jim Crow laws were passed to ensure separation of White people from persons of color in schools, parks, cemeteries, restaurants, and on transportation to prevent

contact between Blacks and Whites as equals (Urofsky, 2014). These laws utilized to separate races were ruled unconstitutional beginning with the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, and that ruling was then applied to other public facilities, as well (Urofsky, 2014). Michelle Alexander (2010) wrote that this ruling then led to less opaque forms of oppression and separation.

**The new Jim Crow.** It is no longer socially permissible to use race, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt in the U.S. (Alexander, 2010). Some social science researchers believe that, rather than a direct reliance on race, the justice system is often used to label people of color as criminals. This labeling often begins at an early age. Black preschool students are almost 4 times more likely to be suspended than White students and Black students are nearly 4 times more likely than White students to receive out-of-school suspension between kindergarten and twelfth grade (Vega, 2016). In 2016, 12% of the U.S. adult population was Black but they comprised 33% of the prison population, while Whites made up 64% of adults in the U.S. and only 30% of prisoners (Gramlich, 2018). Once someone is labeled a felon, historical forms of oppression in the areas of employment, housing, the right to vote, education, and public benefits become legal (Alexander, 2010). Today, certain types of criminals are discriminated against in almost all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against Blacks. Alexander (2010) made the argument that discrimination has simply changed forms over the years, and it continues to be based on previous held beliefs about race that are based on stereotypes.

**Stereotypes.** Humans hold an inherent desire to make sense of the social environment, form impressions of others and the behaviors they exhibit, and then categorize these impressions (Krieglmeyer & Sherman, 2012). Humans form these categories, or stereotypes, to better

understand the world around them. Negative stereotypes applied to groups, however, may cause members to fear being reduced to that label (Steele, 1997). The extent to which stereotypes are activated depends on a number of factors, including the learning history and past experiences of the perceiver (Krieglmeyer & Sherman, 2012).

Discrimination and prejudice are based on stereotypes, and *microaggressions* are the outward expression of discrimination and prejudice (Sue et. al., 2007). Racial microaggressions are negative actions usually directed towards persons of color and, because stereotype activation happens largely outside of conscious awareness, microaggressions can also occur outside of conscious awareness (Sue et. al., 2007). The invisible nature of microaggressions can prevent the perpetrator from recognizing their participation in creating psychological dilemmas for minorities, as well as their part in creating disparities in education, health care, and employment (Sue et. al., 2007). This can also make microaggressions easy to deny or try to explain away.

### **Microaggressions**

Microaggressions are defined as brief and commonplace daily behavioral, verbal, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults (Sue et. al., 2007). They fall into several themes, are not always recognizable, and can be verbal or non-verbal. According to Sue (2007), there are three different types of microaggressions; *microinsults*, *microinvalidations*, and *microassaults*. Sue is one of the first to write about racial microaggressions, so his definitions will be cited throughout the following sections.

### **Microinsults**

A microinsult is characterized by rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity (Sue et. al., 2007). Microinsults represent subtle snubs, frequently unknown

to the perpetrator, but convey an insulting message to the recipient of color. This can look like an employee of color being asked “How did you get your job?” The underlying message from the perspective of the recipient may be twofold: (a) people of color are not qualified, and (b) as a minority group member, you must have obtained the position through some affirmative action program (Sue et. al., 2007). Microinsults can also occur nonverbally, as when a White teacher fails to acknowledge students of color in the classroom. In this case, the message conveyed is that their contribution is unimportant (Sue et. al., 2007). This can be confusing and frustrating for the student who may not understand why they are being ignored.

### **Microinvalidations**

Microinvalidations are communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color (Sue et. al., 2007). For example, when Asian Americans are repeatedly asked where they were born, the effect is to negate their U.S. American heritage and to convey that they are perpetual foreigners. When Blacks are told, “I don’t see color,” the effect is to negate their experiences as racial beings (Helms, 1992). When a Latino couple is given poor service at a restaurant and shares their experience with White friends, only to be told “Don’t be so oversensitive,” the racial experience of the couple is being nullified and its importance is being diminished (Sue et. al., 2007). As mentioned earlier, denying a person’s experiential reality can cause psychological dilemmas for members of minority groups.

### **Microassaults**

A microassault is an explicit racial action characterized by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions. Sue (2007) wrote in reference to microassaults “Referring to someone as

‘colored’ or ‘Oriental,’ using racial epithets, discouraging interracial interactions, deliberately serving a White patron before someone of color, and displaying a swastika are examples.”

People are likely to hold notions of minority inferiority privately and will only display them publicly when they lose control or feel safe to engage in a microassault (Sue et. al., 2007).

There are several themes (Torres-Harding, Alejandro, & Romero Diaz, 2012) that microaggressions can fit into; *invisibility*, *criminality*, *undesirability*, *sexualization*, *foreigner*, *environmental invalidations*. *Invisibility* involves people of color being treated as if they have lower status, are not visible or seen as a real person, and are dismissed or devalued (Torres-Harding, Alejandra, & Romero Diaz, 2012). *Invisibility* can include being delegitimized or ignored and may be applicable across racial groups. There were no differences in the reported occurrence of these types of experiences, which suggests that this may affect many people of color to a similar degree (Torres-Harding, Alejandro, & Romero Diaz, 2012). The *criminality* theme involves being treated as if one is aggressive, dangerous, or a criminal (Torres-Harding, Alejandro, & Romero Diaz, 2012). This theme was reported by both men and women, but male respondents and African Americans reported experiencing this more frequently (Torres-Harding, Alejandro, & Romero Diaz, 2012). This finding is consistent with previous findings that African American men are stereotyped as being aggressive or criminal (Bridges, 2010), and that African American females are antagonistic (Jacobs, 2017). *Undesirability* involves being treated as if people from one's racial background are all the same, incompetent, incapable, low achieving, and dysfunctional (Torres-Harding, Alejandro, & Romero Diaz, 2012). Any successful individuals from that race would be viewed as having received special treatment. According to Torres-Harding, Alejandro, & Romero Diaz (2012), African Americans also reported higher levels of this type of microaggression when compared with the other racial groups reporting in the study.

The *sexualization* theme involves being treated in an overly sexual way and being subject to sexual stereotypes (Torres-Harding, Alejandro, & Romero Diaz, 2012). Sue, et al. (2007) indicated that this a microaggression often reported by Asian American women. Other studies suggest that this is true for many women of color, and women reported being sexualized more frequently than men (Torres-Harding, Alejandro, & Romero Diaz, 2012). The *foreigner* theme involves one being made to feel they are not a true American, or do not belong due to their racial background (Torres-Harding, Alejandro, & Romero Diaz, 2012). Latinos and Asian Americans reported more occurrences of this microaggression when compared with African Americans and multiracial individuals (Torres-Harding, Alejandro, & Romero Diaz, 2012). *Environmental Invalidations* involve negative perceptions that come from recognizing that people from one's racial background are absent from work, school, or community settings or from positions of power (Torres-Harding, Alejandro, & Romero Diaz, 2012). There are different ways to experience each of these themes, and they can have a negative impact on a person's identity and self-worth.

### **Black Identity Development**

Cross's original nigrescence racial identity development model (1971) was developed to uncover the self-actualization process of Black Americans during the Civil Rights Movement. This was necessary because of the debilitating effect of repeated messages of inferiority directed towards this population (Barnes, Williams, & Barnes, 2014). Such beliefs negatively influenced success, preventing Black Americans from feeling like they had the potential to be anything but subservient to the dominant culture (Barnes, Williams, & Barnes, 2014). This model describes five stages, including pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment.

In the *pre-encounter stage*, Cross describes an internalization of negative stereotypes about Black people. In this stage, Black individuals show a desire for assimilation and feel an anti-Black sentiment (Barnes, Williams, & Barnes, 2014). The *encounter stage* is where Black individuals recognize that they are not accepted in the mainstream culture and internalize the idea that they are a member of a minority group. Anger associated with the White culture may develop during this stage, as well as decreased desire to assimilate (Barnes, Williams, & Barnes, 2014). In the *immersion-emersion stage*, individuals embrace their identity and reject Whiteness. They may become more involved in the Black culture as well (Barnes, Williams, & Barnes, 2014). In the fourth and fifth stages, *internalization* and *internalization-commitment*, individuals continue associating with their Black peers but may also form relationships with White individuals who can recognize and respect their racial differences (Barnes, Williams, & Barnes, 2014). During interracial interactions, a variety of negative things can occur that can cause a Black person to question their identity, though. These include a lack of acknowledgement or recognition, invalidation of their experiences, or a lack of mutual respect (Bridges, 2010), all of which have historically been issues for Black women.

### **Black Women**

Throughout the nineteenth century, antislavery societies and suffrage organizations were formed by White women and excluded Black members (Bay, 2015). The sought-after rights were meant to pertain to White women only and, because of this exclusion, Black women were further confronted with racism. Black women were deemed inferior not only because of their race, but also because of their gender (Bay, 2015). Because Black women received none of the privileges given to others of their gender, according to Bay (2015), they “worked as hard as men, received

no protection from sexual exploitation and assault, and were branded immoral, unwomanly, and naturally lewd, largely as a result of conditions in which they were forced to live.”

These stereotypical images of Black women developed during the slave period and were widely accepted (Jacobs, 2017). Because Black women are seen as promiscuous and of low moral character, they are seen as responsible for being sexually assaulted, or their credibility is questioned when they report such a crime. Black women are seen as overly aggressive and accustomed to violence, so they are seen less as victims and more likely as combatants (Jacobs, 2017).

**Promiscuous.** The stereotype that Black women are promiscuous and sexual animals was developed throughout the slave era (Jacobs, 2017). Black women were seen as governed by erotic desires and believed to lead men to wanton passion (Jacobs, 2017). This was the excuse for White men raping Black women, and rape laws at the time reflected this idea by defining rape as an offense only against White women (Jacobs, 2017). In one court case from 1859 where a Black male slave was accused of raping a Black girl, a judge is quoted saying “Our laws recognize no marital rights between slaves;...their intercourse is promiscuous, and the violation of a female slave by a male slave would be a mere assault and battery.” Black women were perceived as promiscuous and continue to be so today. Through most of the twentieth century, no White male from the South was convicted of raping a Black woman, and this continues to impact whether the police believe a Black woman can actually be raped or they just engaged in consensual sex that they later regret (Jacobs, 2017).

**Dishonest.** Blacks were not permitted to give testimony against White people during slavery and were viewed as incapable of being truthful (Jacobs, 2017). Initially, all women’s testimony was viewed as untrustworthy but, over time, White women came to be seen as

virtuous and innocent while Black women were seen as criminals (Jacobs, 2017). The stereotype remained after emancipation. One example from a court case in 1912 involves a Black woman accusing her White employer of sexually assaulting her and the judge wrote “I will never take the word of a nigger against the word of a White man (Jacobs, 2017; Morris, 1996). Current legal scholars find that judges tend to view testimony from Black women as less credible than the testimony of their abusers (Jacobs, 2017).

**Aggressive.** During slavery, Black women performed the same work as men, and were subjected to the same punishments as Black men (Jacobs, 2017). White people believed that Black women were not as delicate as White women and were better suited for field work (Jacobs, 2017). Once slavery ended, this stereotype continued to be perpetuated through news stories that described Black women as fiendish and their outbursts as rage that was symptomatic of their depravity (Jacobs, 2017). These stereotypes then led to White judges sentencing Black women more severely than White women for the same crimes (Jacobs, 2017).

Throughout history, these stereotypes negatively influenced success and prevented Black women from feeling like they had potential, and they continue to negatively affect Black women today (Barnes, Williams, & Barnes, 2014; Jacobs, 2017). One study examined the association between Black women’s awareness of gendered stereotypes and their overall health (Jerald, Cole, Ward, & Avery, 2017). As previously mentioned, those who internalize these stereotypes are more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior, binge drink, suppress their anger, neglect their own self-care, binge eat, smoke, or have symptoms of anxiety and depression (Jerald, Cole, Ward, & Avery, 2017). Just the awareness that others hold these stereotypes is detrimental to health. Researchers found (Jerald, Cole, Ward, & Avery, 2017) that stress generated from the awareness that others hold these stereotypes of Black women may use important cognitive

resources and is both directly and indirectly associated with poorer health and substance use. Black women face discrimination based on their gender and their race, but discrimination towards them is often ignored (Jacobs, 2017). Their lives must be understood through the intersections of racism, classism, and sexism and, while Black women have much higher rates of depression, only 7% receive mental health treatment (Robinson-Wood, Balogun-Mwangi, Fernandes, Popat-Hain, Boadi, Matsumoto, Zhang, 2015). As with other victims, healing for Black women first requires that someone acknowledges the injury.

### **Campus Climate**

Higher education has been viewed as a path towards advancement and socio-economic benefits (Karkouti, 2016). However, ethnic and racial minorities have been underrepresented in higher education, denied education because they were viewed as intellectually inferior, and legally segregated because of Jim Crow laws (Karkouti, 2016). The history of segregated colleges can influence the racial climate on campus today, and institutions of higher education continue to have difficulty understanding perceptual differences of minority students and faculty who have long been excluded (Karkouti, 2016). A multi-campus study was conducted by Harper and Hurtado (2007) examining racial climate, and they found that White students were unfamiliar with negative dispositions minority students held about their institution.

Predominately White institutions adversely affect the academic achievements of minority students and create social conflicts because faculty and deans remain insensitive to multicultural issues (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Karkouti, 2016).

When researchers (Cerezo, Lyda, Enriquez, Beristianos, & Connor, 2015) asked Black men to share their experiences on college campuses, participants reported a sense of hostility from others and a lack of belonging that went beyond feeling disconnected from their peers on

campus (Cerezo et. al., 2015). These participants reported that the consequences of the, sometimes outright, hostility included Black students choosing to withdraw from the university early, and minimal development of social networks. Perceptions of a hostile racial climate have been associated with lowered academic motivation, and reduced sense of belonging (Cerezo, et. al., 2015). Students have reported feeling that their concerns were quickly dismissed or ignored, and that peers have continued making racist jokes and comments despite being told the comments were offensive (Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012).

Students' experiences have illuminated the ways in which attempts made to address race in their classes have been deterred. One student stated that in her Library Science program, she felt urged to avoid any conversations about race (Bryan, Wilson, Lewis, & Wills, 2012).

Similarly, a White student in an Educational Foundations program explained that her attempts to discuss race and racism in an educational policy course were shut down by her peers (Bryan, Wilson, Lewis, & Wills, 2012). These instances of invalidation can send the message that the experiences of students of color are not important and have no place in academia.

### **Experiences on Campus**

During the last few years, students at many universities have protested negative racial climates on their campuses, including students at the University of Missouri, Yale, and Harvard (Lilly et al., 2018). The students stressed the role that microaggressions have played on campus, and the literature supports their claims. Students have reported that microaggressions have made them feel unwanted which discouraged them from accessing student services. They feel invisible or ignored in academic and social settings and experiencing microaggressions has been associated with increased symptoms of depression and thoughts of suicide (Lilly et al., 2018).

Results from studies have also suggested that exposure to subtle prejudice hamper's African American students' cognitive processing (Bair & Steele, 2010).

A 2016 article about Black women in STEM programs detailed specific experiences of microaggressions that participants had with peers and faculty. Alexander and Hermann (2016) found that the women in STEM programs experienced racial stereotyping, invisibility, and a need to defend their intelligence. One participant described a discussion within her biology department concerning recruitment of people of color in which a White woman implied it would be pointless to recruit Black girls in high school or middle school because they would already be pregnant or have kids by that point (Alexander & Hermann, 2016). This participant was the only person of color involved in the discussion and the White woman's comment caused her to feel stressed and isolated, and negatively impacted her desire to approach White peers (Alexander & Hermann, 2016). Another Black woman who participated in Alexander and Hermann's study (2016) described feeling unimportant in her STEM program and shared instances where her comments in class were ignored by her peers and professor until a White male student made a similar comment or openly stated that he agreed with the comment the Black woman made. Participants in this study (Alexander & Hermann, 2016) reported not only experiencing microaggressions in classrooms, but that they experienced microaggressions when seeking counseling services or other university assistance. If counselors are not aware of the issues students are facing on campus, it can be difficult to empathize or advocate for students. One participant described feeling invisible again after seeking help at the school's counseling center where she tried to help her counselor understand the microaggressions she was experiencing (Alexander & Hermann, 2016). Such occurrences can leave the student feeling unwanted and unimportant.

Universities often have a mission statement that includes cultivating a diverse and inclusive campus, but the reality is that they often mirror the greater social climate (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Karkouti, 2016). Students experience race-based discrimination on campus, and studies have shown that microaggressions are a daily occurrence for both students and faculty of color (Pittman, 2012; Blume et. al., 2012; Cerezo et. al., 2015). Racial, gender, and sexuality diversity are often cited as important to higher education, but the number of Black women in higher education is low. In 2010, Black women made up 2.9% of university professors across the U.S., and less than 5% of all students attending the university that is the focus of the current study (Robinson-Wood et. al., 2015; Vice Provost for Research and Innovation, 2017). Studies support the fact that people of color frequently experience microaggressions as a continuing reality in their day-to-day interactions with friends, neighbors, co-workers, teachers, and employers in academic, social, and public settings (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). There is a need to bring awareness of how microaggressions operate, their manifestations in society, the impact they have on people of color, the interaction between perpetrator and target, and the educational strategies needed to eliminate them (Sue, et.al., 2007). For this study, individual interviews with Black women will be utilized to explore their experiences of microaggressions.

## **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

In this chapter, the qualitative research methodology is discussed. The purpose of this study was to give voice to Black women in higher education and to better understand their common experiences of racial microaggressions as well as ways of coping with such attacks. Qualitative inquiry effectively allows for an in-depth understanding of phenomena (Hays & Singh, 2012). In qualitative approaches, researchers empower participants to tell about their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and disseminate findings that can lead to social change (Hays & Singh, 2012). The research questions, inclusion criteria, recruitment methods, instruments, data collection procedure, and data analysis used are presented. Finally, procedural steps taken to achieve trustworthiness are provided in this section.

### **Phenomenological Research**

The current study aims to give voice to Black female graduate students and to better understand their experiences of racial microaggressions at a predominantly White, Southern institution. This research was done in order to identify and share the lived experiences of the participants with policymakers and administrators on the same Southern, public university campus. Specifically, this researcher used transcendental phenomenology, as this method focuses on the lived experiences of the participants more than other qualitative methods (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology requires dismissal of previously held notions about the specific phenomenon being investigated, which is necessary as this method considers the participant the source of knowledge (Moustakas, 1994).

The procedures for this method include identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out one's experiences, and collecting data from participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The data is then reduced to significant statements or quotes and

combined into themes. What the participants experienced, and how they experienced it, is then combined to communicate an overall essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Theoretical Lens**

This section describes the theories used to guide this research and better understand the participants' experiences. Social constructivism and empowerment theory are outlined. Both were used to develop research questions and to maintain focus on the participants' perspectives.

#### **Social Constructivism**

A social constructivist perspective is a variant of grounded theory, and includes emphasizing multiple realities, and the complexities of particular worlds, views, and actions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). More emphasis is placed on assumptions, feelings, beliefs, and views of the individual than the research method. The goal of research using this perspective is to rely on the participants' views because they are formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purpose of this study is to understand experiences of microaggressions from the participants' point of view, so it is necessary to emphasize within the results the ways in which participants make sense of the world, their experiences, and their feelings. Questions posed to the participants were broad and general which allowed the participant to construct meaning of their experiences through discussion (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher was then able to make sense of the meanings participants have about the world and their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

#### **Empowerment Theory**

Empowerment theory was used to guide this research inquiry. Empowerment theory includes the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that marginalized communities can take steps to improve their situations (Hipilito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). This can

be applied on an individual and organizational level. At a personal level, empowerment theory involves viewing individuals as competent, assisting them in developing a positive identity and critical consciousness, and encouraging them to take social action (Moran, Gibbs, & Mernin, 2017; Hipilito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). Therapists, social workers, and educators who utilize an empowerment perspective focus on structural injustices and the ways in which having a lack of resources affects the lives of individuals (Turner & Maschi, 2015). They believe that those who have experienced oppression are at risk to develop low self-esteem or a negative self-image, among other issues, and work to counteract this through helping identify individual strengths (Turner & Maschi, 2015). Identifying participant strengths within this study was beneficial, not only for the participant, but for the university. Individuals and organizations can now have a better idea of specific strengths that can be cultivated through outreach programs, mentoring, or trainings.

The organizational or interpersonal level of empowerment theory involves enhancing members' skills and offering them support to effect organizational level change (Hipilito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). This level may also involve empowering communities or organizations to give resources and opportunities to their members (Moran, Gibbs, & Mernin, 2017). This, then, leads to collective empowerment in which whole communities advocate for social or political change (Hipilito-Delgado & Lee, 2007).

Experiences of microaggressions and other negative, racially motivated interactions create psychological dilemmas for minorities, as well as disparities in education, health care, and employment (Sue et. al., 2007). Empowerment theorists believe that individuals must acknowledge systemic oppression in order to improve the lives of those affected by racial discrimination, and then must empower individuals to recognize their own strengths and ability

to improve their environments (Turner & Maschi, 2015). Empowerment theory was used to guide this inquiry by focusing on individual and organizational strengths that have assisted participants in coping with their environment.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions are designed to uncover the essence of the experience of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One central question guides this study: What are the lived experiences of Black female graduate students who have been the target of microaggressions at a Southern university? Two sub-questions then aim to further explore the participant's experiences and perceptions and include:

1. How do Black female graduate students at a Southern university describe the ways in which they have been impacted by microaggressions?
2. How do Black female graduate students at a Southern university describe their perception of the impact of microaggressions on campus climate?

### **Participants**

Participants for this study were identified through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling involves identifying individuals or groups who have experience with a certain phenomenon, who are willing to participate, and who can communicate their experiences (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, Hoagwood, 2013). A recruitment letter (Appendix C) was sent through e-mail to Black graduate students via Black graduate student list-serves, the researcher spoke to classes, department heads, and the director of diversity and inclusion to seek out possible participants, and the researcher also utilized other list-serves to e-mail the recruitment letter across campus.

Participants identified as Black women of various ages who were attending graduate school at the time of the study in any program at one Southern, public university, and who have experienced racial microaggressions at some point while enrolled at the university. Chain sampling was also utilized to identify persons of interest; participants identified others that have experienced similar phenomenon, microaggressions in this case, and were willing to participate (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, Hoagwood, 2013).

Qualitative researchers handle sample sizes differently than quantitative researchers, as the goal in qualitative research is an in-depth understanding of the subject being studied and to fill in necessary ground work for future research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For phenomenological research, there is a range of recommended sample sizes from three to 25 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher sought to interview 10 individuals in order to gain an understanding of individual experiences, as well as the common experience. Five participants agreed to participate in the study. This number did not match the original goal but still fell within the range recommended by Creswell & Poth (2018), and thus an understanding of individual experiences, as well as the common experience, was still achieved.

### **Instruments**

In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to gather data and appropriately probe to explore the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). An interview guide (Appendix A) was used in order to remain focused on the experiences being investigated, while allowing for exploration of meaning, and ensure continuity of questioning. The researcher interviewed five participants, so a semi-structured interview guide helped to make use of the interview time, as well. For the journal entries, a prompt was used (Appendix E), and for the focus group, a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix F) was developed, as well. The interviews were recorded using a

digital audio recorder. A demographics form (Appendix B) was utilized to gather background information and ensure the participant was eligible, and informed consent was collected prior to participation.

### **Informed Consent and Demographics**

After participants expressed interest in participating, an IRB approved consent form (Appendix D) was provided to them. Informed consent was reviewed with participants orally and a written copy was provided to participants, as well. A form (Appendix B) was used to collect biographical and demographic information from participants regarding their age, ethnicity, graduate level program of study, and identified gender. The demographic information serves to assist the reader in understanding specifics of the population being studied.

### **Bracketing**

Within qualitative research, the researcher can have some influence on the participants and the results. The goal is to be aware of this possibility and account for it through self-reflection and acknowledgment (Patton, 2002). The researcher needs to avoid influencing or directing the portrayal of the participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and to arrive at an accurate interpretation. Within transcendental phenomenological research, this step is called the epoche.

### **Epoche**

Moustakas (1994) describes the epoche as an important first step in conducting a transcendental phenomenological study. There are two primary epoches described by Wertz (2005): abstaining from looking for explanations and preconceptions of the phenomena and separating oneself from the data. This researcher brackets out personal views, examines their own experiences, and conducts the study from a different perspective (Creswell, Hanson, Plano,

& Morales, 2007). This researcher began bracketing out her experiences by writing about them in Chapter one. This researcher has continued to do so by engaging in memo writing and journaling, or reflexivity.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

### **Informed Consent**

An IRB approved consent form was e-mailed to individuals who expressed interest in participating before the interview process began. At the start of the interviews, consent was reviewed with participants orally.

**Participant data protection.** To provide anonymity and security to participants, pseudonyms are used within this study and all data gathered is stored in a secure, encrypted file. Participants shared personal information and experiences concerning negative racial interactions. The researcher will protect the data and has excluded any identifying information to maintain the privacy of those involved.

**Participant safety.** Discussing personal experiences of microaggressions or any other negative racial interactions may be emotionally difficult for participants. Participants were given the option to stop the interviews or withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. Low-cost counseling referrals were also provided for participants, and participants were reminded prior to the interview that they are free to stop the interview process at any time.

### **Interview Process**

Concerning racism, the greatest challenge is making the invisible visible, and this can only be accomplished when people are willing to openly engage in discussions about racism (Sue, 2004). Through semi-structured interviews, participants were able to describe in depth their personal experiences with microaggressions, and the impact racial microaggressions have had on

their lives and campus environment. Participants for this study were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. This researcher recruited participants through e-mail and visits to classrooms and department heads, in which the purpose of the study was described. A drawing for a gift card was offered as compensation for their time.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary method for data collection and, as previously stated, an interview guide was used to keep the interviews focused in the time allotted on the phenomenon being studied. All interviews were recorded with a digital recorder so that interviews could be transcribed. Initially, participants were interviewed for an hour in person at a previously agreed upon, private location so that they felt comfortable and their confidentiality was maintained. After the interview, the conversation was transcribed, sent to the participant, and an hour-long meeting was scheduled for member checking once coding was completed. These follow-up meetings took place in the same room as the initial interviews.

A focus group was utilized as another source of data collection and member checking. The focus group was added to the study after the researcher exhausted efforts to find participants. However, the focus group allowed the researcher to gather more in-depth information from the five women who chose to participate. The focus group took place in a private conference room on campus and took approximately two hours. Focus groups are often used within qualitative research as they provide opportunities to collect data that may not have arisen during individual interviews. Focus groups also allow participants to comment in relation to others' experiences which can create the potential for new topics and themes to emerge (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This could also lead to participants agreeing with each other instead of sharing their own interpretations or experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

This researcher conducted one focus group with the participants after all individual interviews were completed. Three of the five participants were able to participate in the focus group. The focus group confirmed themes found within the individual interviews, and they allowed for a greater understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Figure 1 below shows the plan for data collection.

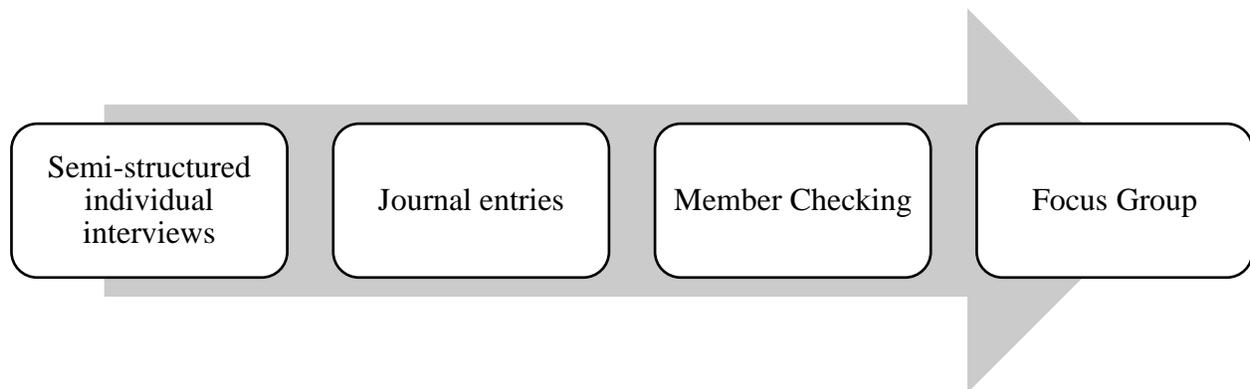


Figure 1.

*Data Collection Plan*

**Data Analysis**

Transcendental phenomenology approaches the analysis of data with a specific structure (Moustakas, 1994). Data gathered was read and transcribed to gain a sense of the information, and then the process of horizontalization began. Within the horizontalization process, the researcher identified all significant, relevant statements about how the participants experienced the topic of microaggressions (Moustakas, 1994). All statements made by participants were considered and then themes were identified (Moustakas, 1994). After themes were identified within the interviews, quotes were grouped into clusters accordingly. This step is referred to as reduction (Moustakas, 1994). Textural description developed from this process, which include a clear image of what the participants experienced concerning racial microaggressions.

### **Imaginative Variation**

Within phenomenological data analysis, the researcher is also able to use their imagination to consider different ways of analyzing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher looks for different conclusions or variations of interpretation to rule out alternative explanations. From this comes a structural description, or the conceptual aspects of an experience (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Textural and Structural Description**

The purpose of phenomenological studies is to describe the essence of an experience by looking at the “what” and “how” of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The textural description explains what the experience was like as described by participants. The structural description includes a description of how the experience happened, and participants’ reflections on the setting and context in which racial microaggressions occurred (Holder, Jackson, Ponterotto, 2015). Long, direct quotes and descriptions are presented, which provide the reader the opportunity to hear the participants’ voices and show that conclusions are supported by the participants (Holder, Jackson, Ponterotto, 2015).

### **Invariant Essence**

Finally, textural and structural descriptions were synthesized to describe the overall essence of the lived experiences being investigated (Moustakas, 1994). This provides a detailed account of the experiences and context in which they occurred. The goal is to offer the reader an accurate understanding of the experiences being described by the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **Trustworthiness**

Methodological rigor is utilized to demonstrate the quality of qualitative research (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Four criteria are proposed in order to demonstrate trustworthiness within qualitative research; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

### **Credibility**

Credibility is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and is a way of addressing internal validity (Shenton, 2004). This study utilized specific strategies to support credibility. Those include the use of triangulation, member checks, peer debriefing, dialogic engagement, and thick description.

**Triangulation.** To address triangulation in this study, supporting data from the literature will be obtained to help explain or verify the attitudes and experiences of the participants (Shenton, 2004). Initial interviews, journals, member checks, a focus group, researcher journals, debriefing sessions with peers, and an external auditor will be utilized (Shenton, 2004). These allow for scrutiny of the project and researcher interpretations. Participants were asked to keep a journal to record any thoughts, feelings, or experiences that came up for them between the two individual interviews. This allowed for a better understanding of their experiences, provided information that might be missed during the interviews, and ensured prolonged engagement and persistent observation with the participants.

**Prolonged engagement.** An investment of time is needed to build trust with participants, understand their culture, and test for misinformation introduced by the researcher or participant, which is the purpose of prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Developing trust can be difficult but is important when researching a topic that is personal, and vulnerable to discuss.

Moustakas (1994) encourages fostering a relaxed and trusting atmosphere during phenomenological interviewing, so interviews began with some casual conversation. This researcher accomplished prolonged engagement by making extra efforts to build rapport with the participants and reminding them of steps taken to ensure confidentiality. The researcher also met with the participants in person at least twice over the course of six months and stayed in contact with them via e-mail to maintain a positive relationship, update participants on progress, and schedule meetings.

**Persistent observation.** Persistent observation was accomplished through in-depth, semi-structured interviewing. The purpose of persistent observation is to identify information that is most relevant to the phenomena being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This researcher developed follow-up questions that revealed more in-depth, relevant data.

**Member checks.** Participant validation, or member checks, were utilized in the form of checking in with participants to assess the researcher's interpretations and accuracy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that member checks are the most important way of improving a study's credibility. Participant involvement was structured as a follow-up interview to discuss emerging constructs, codes, and themes. The interview protocol is outlined on Appendix A. Not only was participant feedback requested regarding transcript analysis, but in-depth conversations were utilized to engage participants in reflection and critique of codes and analytic findings.

**Focus group.** The focus group in this study was utilized as another form of checking in with participants to assess the researcher's interpretations and accuracy. The group also served as another point of data collection. Participant feedback was requested regarding the themes identified by the researcher, and then a semi-structured interview protocol was utilized to further explore the experiences of the participants.

**Dialogic engagement.** Dialogic engagement with peers assisted with challenging the personal biases of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This researcher has personal experience with the phenomenon being studied, so this engagement also allowed for others to challenge interpretations and assumptions made by the researcher to foster a complex and rigorous study. During interviews, this researcher was careful not to influence the contents of the participant's experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and utilized conversations with peers, as well as journaling, to explore personal biases and assumptions.

**Thick description.** This researcher has provided thick descriptions of participant experiences and meanings and described participant thoughts and feelings within their particular context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This enhances the study's credibility and transferability, and, with contextualizing participants' responses, the reader is better able to understand contextual factors in which quotes are presented (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Transferability**

The findings of qualitative projects are specific to certain individuals and environments, which presents a problem with applying the findings to a wider population (Shenton, 2004). It is important to provide thick description to provide a proper understanding of the situation described so that the reader can compare the experience with their own (Shenton, 2004).

### **Dependability**

To demonstrate dependability, the research process is described in detail, which enables researchers to repeat the study (Shenton, 2004). Qualitative researchers should include the design and implementation of the research, specific details concerning how the data was gathered, and an evaluation of the effectiveness of the process for the study (Shenton, 2004).

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability involves taking steps to ensure as much as possible that the research findings are the result of the experiences of the participants, and not the beliefs or preferences of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). The researcher utilized an outside auditor to verify that the data was transcribed accurately, and the integrity of the participant responses was maintained. The researcher engaged an outside professor, who is knowledgeable in the area being studied, and has extensive experience with diversity training and qualitative research, to be the external auditor for this study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS**

The purpose of this study was to examine Black female graduate students' experiences of racial microaggressions at a Southern university. This researcher believes that a better understanding of this phenomenon will inform university leaders about the perception of campus climate and offer suggestions for policy changes that would improve the experiences of Black women on campus.

This chapter presents the findings of the study obtained through individual semi-structured interviews with each of the participants, journal entries, and a focus group. All individual interviews, as well as the focus group interview, were recorded and transcribed by this researcher. These interviews were done to answer the research question reviewed below. Data analysis procedures are also reviewed below. Demographic participant data is described, and findings are presented from individual perspectives, and then those of the group.

### **Participant Data**

For this study, five women agreed to participate. All identified as Black females in graduate school who had experienced racial microaggressions on campus. This researcher exhausted efforts to recruit participants across campus, including posting recruitment letters in various spaces (the student union, the graduate school, etc.), e-mailing and meeting in person with various department heads, and sending recruitment letters through various e-mail listservs associated with the university. However, all five of the participants attended one program: counselor education. Two of the participants are working towards their master's degrees and three of the participants are working towards their PhDs. Table 1 below summarizes demographic information for the participants based on forms they completed.

Table 1.

*Participant Demographic Data*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Degree</b>
Danielle	24	African American	MA
Jessica	23	African American	MA
Samantha	37	African American	PhD
Sarah	46	African American	PhD
Tasha	40	Afro-Caribbean	PhD

**Danielle**

At the time of the study, Danielle was completing her master’s degree in counseling, and was in her final year in the program. She had a graduate assistantship on campus working with undergraduate students and moved to this University from a neighboring state to get her degree. Danielle shared several experiences of racial microaggressions that were similar to those described by other participants, and she was able to attend the focus group. In her journal entries, Danielle shared stories that did not fall within the identified themes for the journals. Danielle described experiences in which she felt anger, loneliness, and a lack of awareness from others.

**Jessica**

Jessica was also completing her master’s degree in counseling. She worked off campus and relocated to this University from out of state to attend the program. Jessica shared experiences in individual interviews that were similar to those from other participants, and she participated in the focus group.

**Samantha**

Samantha was in graduate school to complete her PhD in counselor education and supervision. She was a single mother and worked off campus. Samantha is from the area and completed her bachelor’s and master’s degrees at the same university she was attending at the

time of the study. She described instances of racial microaggressions that were similar to those described by other participants, but she was unable to attend the focus group due to illness.

### **Sarah**

Sarah was in graduate school to complete her PhD in counselor education and supervision. She is a mother, lived out of town where she was employed full-time at another university, and she commuted to campus for class. Sarah shared several instances that were similar to those shared by other participants, and some similar to what was shared during the focus group. Sarah was unable to attend the focus group.

### **Tasha**

Tasha was also in graduate school to complete her PhD in counselor education and supervision. She is a mother, and previously attended a HBCU before beginning her studies at this university. Tasha is the only participant who has immigrated to the United States. Tasha was able to attend the focus group.

## **Data Analysis**

One primary question guided this study: What are the lived experiences of Black female graduate students who have been the target of microaggressions at a Southern university? To answer this research question, two sub-questions were also addressed: How do Black female graduate students at a Southern university describe the ways in which they have been impacted by microaggressions? How do Black female graduate students at a Southern university describe their perception of the impact of microaggressions on campus climate? Clusters of meaning emerged related to each experience and results are presented below.

After transcribing interviews for the five participants, each interview was read multiple times so that details could be noted, and similarities could emerge. Transcendental

phenomenology requires dismissal of previously held notions about the specific phenomenon being investigated, which is necessary as this method considers the participant the source of knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). The procedures for this method include identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out one's experiences, and collecting data from participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The data is then reduced to significant statements or quotes and combined into themes. What the participants experienced, and how they experienced it, is then combined to communicate an overall essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Epoche**

As stated previously, epoche involves setting aside preconceived notions of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher used epoche throughout the process of the study. Focus was placed on the participants' experiences in order to understand the meaning given to the phenomenon by the participants.

### **Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction**

Transcendental-phenomenological reduction involves gathering the data, reading and transcribing to gain a sense of the information, and then beginning the process of horizontalization. At this point, the researcher bracketed out preconceived notions about experiences of racial microaggressions. This was done through journaling and peer debriefing. The researcher kept field notes during interviews, as well as a journal where personal thoughts and feelings were documented before and after interviews. This allowed the researcher to acknowledge her own experiences and, instead, focus on the participant's data.

Within the horizontalization process, the researcher identified significant, relevant statements about how the participants experienced the topic of microaggressions (Moustakas,

1994). All statements made by participants were considered and then themes were identified (Moustakas, 1994). Quotes were then grouped into clusters of meaning accordingly. This step is referred to as reduction (Moustakas, 1994). Textural description developed from this process, which includes a clear image of what the participants experienced concerning racial microaggressions.

**Themes.** The researcher examined the horizontalized statements to identify significant statements, those statements were placed into clusters, and then clusters of the statements were put into themes. Multiple themes were identified in each interview transcript. Six themes emerged from this analysis about Black female graduate students' experiences of racial microaggressions: Devaluing messages, anger, awareness, loneliness, fear/safety, and advocacy. All six of those themes emerged from the individual interviews, as well as the focus group. Similar themes emerged from the journal entries. Devaluing messages, fear/safety, and advocacy were main themes that emerged from the journals.

### **Individual Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and audio recorded with each of the five participants. Transcriptions of the interviews were then completed, and the process of transcendental-phenomenological reduction was conducted as described above. Once themes were identified for each of the participants, follow-up interviews were conducted. These follow-up interviews served as member checks. Themes were discussed with the participants and transcripts were provided to ensure the researcher correctly understood the participant's experiences.

## **Journals**

Journals were collected after individual interviews were completed. This served as a point of data collection. Participants were asked to record thoughts, feelings, and/or experiences that occurred for them between the initial individual interview and the individual member check interview that took place approximately two months later. Three of the five participants returned journals that included entries. One of those three returned her journal after the focus group was completed, and she included reactions to the focus group experience. The journal entries underwent the same data analysis as the individual interviews. Significant, relevant statements about the participants' experiences of microaggressions were identified, quotes were grouped into clusters, and those clusters formed three themes with three sub themes.

## **Focus Group**

The focus group was conducted after individual interviews were completed. This served as a member check, and also served to provide more data. This researcher utilized a semi-structured interview protocol in order to review themes common among participants, and to glean additional data. Three of the five participants agreed to participate in the focus group. One participant was sick at the time of the focus group, and another lives out of town and was unable to coordinate her schedule with the other participants. The focus group was audio recorded, transcribed, and underwent the same data analysis as the individual interviews. Significant, relevant statements about the participants' experiences of microaggressions were identified, quotes were grouped into clusters, and those clusters formed six themes, as stated above.

## **Themes**

As previously described, the researcher grouped clusters of statements together to develop themes. Textural descriptions are important to transcendental phenomenological

reduction, as this step uses the participant’s words to portray each theme. Six themes were identified from the individual interviews and Table 2 lists those themes, as well as the number of statements each participant made related to each theme. Table 3 lists the themes identified within the journals, as well as statements made by participants that support each theme. Three of the five participants made journal entries. Table 4 describes the themes identified within the focus group, as well as statements that support each theme. Three of the five participants attended the focus group. The themes themselves will be explained in greater detail within the textual descriptions.

Table 2.

*Individual Interview Themes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Statement</b>
Anger	D	“...I feel like I take on the anger...of every other Black person in that moment...”
	J	N/A
	S	“...yes, I’m like perpetually pissed off and nobody understands why”
	S	N/A
	T	“...it did bother me that this person viewed this group that I belong to this way...”
Awareness	D	“...either they’re racist and they know it or they’re racist and they don’t know it”
	J	“...I think deep down the intentions are the best here, so I rest on that...”
	S	N/A
	S	N/A
	T	“...aren’t concerned to educate themselves about stuff...”

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Statement</b>
Loneliness	D	“...be a Black person in a field where no other Black people are...”
	J	“It’s this weird balance between being invisible and hypersexualized...”
	S	“...they’ll ask the White person what they want even if they came behind me”
	S	“When you get to the level of pursuing your doctorate, there’s not a lot of Black females”
	T	N/A
Advocacy	D	“...I’ll probably respond by choosing to educate that person, which is what I strive to do”
	J	“...it’s just nice to be acknowledged, like I think that would help a ton and maybe just check in...”
	S	“...just feels good for her to like get some of it”
	S	“...I’ve had some professors here that have really helped me and motivated me...”
	T	“I just feel like Black people need to be seen as people first”
Devaluing Messages	D	“...I just don’t want to be the angry Black woman...that stereotype is a inconvenience”
	J	“...They refused to look at me...they would talk to everyone except for me”
	S	“I had a guy literally tell me, I can’t take you home to grandpa”
	S	“You’ll get those students that want to question you...simply because you’re Black...”
	T	“...this person went on and on saying really horrible things about Immigrants...”

Table 2. *Individual Interview Themes (Cont.)*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Statement</b>
Fear/Safety	D	“I don’t even have a man or kids and whenever I do, I’m already afraid for their safety and they don’t even exist”
	J	“...just a bunch of people that look the same and it kinda can be frightening if you don’t look like them...”
	S	“I don’t know why, I don’t want to make a stink”
	S	“I’m hesitant to share more in classes because I’m not always sure how it’s gonna be received”
	T	“I didn’t want to bring attention to my accent”

Table 3.

*Journal Entry Themes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Statement</b>
Devaluing Messages	D	“She looked at me and said, ‘Your skin is so beautiful’ and took her hand and caressed my face”
	J	“She was the personification of hate”
	T	“As a person who oftentimes internalizes instances of microaggressions, it was helpful to talk about some of these issues...”
Fear/Safety	D	“I normally do it (code switch) when I just don’t feel like being different from everyone that day”
	J	“I hate that I can’t escape this situation”
	T	“I also felt like I had stronger reactions listening to peers’ experiences... That probably can be attributed to my protective instincts”
Advocacy	D	“I got defensive over White people insulting a Black man”
	J	“My professor ensured me of her support”
	T	“...helpful to talk about some of these issues with people who could relate and empathize”

Table 4.

*Focus Group Themes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Statement</b>
Anger	D	"...and I got madder and I said something."
	J	"I wanted to pick my chair up and throw it at her"
	T	"...just like holding it together because I wanted to, like you say, go off so badly"
Awareness	D	"Sometimes I feel like we have even more pressure to educate people because we have a degree"
	J	"I can't accept the ignorance"
	T	"So, I'm like what do you not understand about the consequences of racism?"
Loneliness	D	"...the higher up you go, you always by yourself"
	J	"I didn't know who you were, you changed your hair so much"
	T	"It's a lonely place, though"
Devaluing Messages	D	"You know, it's like this idea that I'm supposed to be a watered-down Black woman"
	J	"I guess I'm not on the full Black spectrum that they want me to be on"
	T	"Every time I have a meeting at a school, I face so much condescension"
Fear/Safety	D	"People don't realize I have a right to feel uncomfortable around an old White person because those are the same old White people that oppressed my grandparents..."
	J	"...but just being around White people with guns...I was like there's only a matter of time before I'm fired. I just always felt that way"
	T	"You're gonna put me in a position to feed into stereotypes that you already have about me"

Theme	Participant	Statement
Advocacy	D	“My degree isn’t in breaking injustice”
	J	“I just have to learn how to stand up for myself every single time I go to the hospital ‘cause I know someone is going to try me”
	T	“...because I choose to advocate for him, and I will advocate for him in ways that I probably never would have...”

Of the five women, three participated in the focus group and three participated in the journals. Generally, the women had several statements to make related to each of the themes, and longer quotes with context will be provided for each method of data collection. This is done to show that, while a participant may not have made a statement related to a particular theme in one form of data collection, it was likely made in another form.

### **Textural and Structural Descriptions**

The next step of transcendental phenomenological reduction is developing textural and structural descriptions. These use the participants’ words and context to portray each theme (Patton, 2002). Following textural descriptions, the researcher worked to describe the context, or structural descriptions, in which the participants experienced the phenomenon of racial microaggressions (Creswell et al., 2007). The steps outlined by Moustakas (1994) were used to arrive at structural descriptions: vary the possible underlying meanings, recognize underlying themes or contexts, consider possible universal structures, and search for descriptive and vivid themes to derive structural descriptions that connect to the essence of the experience. Below, textural and structural descriptions for each theme are discussed. Individual interview themes are described, followed by journal themes, and then focus group themes.

**Themes.** The six themes that serve to answer the research questions for this study are *devaluing messages, anger, awareness, loneliness, fear/safety, and advocacy*. All six of these

themes were present in individual interviews and the focus group. Three of these themes (*Devaluing messages, fear/safety, and advocacy*) were present in the journal entries. The following sections describe each theme and give context for statements made by participants in relation to each theme. Statements include those made during individual interviews, those written in journal entries, and those made during the focus group.

***Devaluing messages.*** One of the themes that emerged in relation to the participants' lived experiences of microaggressions was devaluing messages. As each participant considered their time in their current program of study, they described experiences on and off campus with peers, co-workers, and professors from whom they received devaluing messages related to their race, gender, intelligence, and ethnicity. These devaluing messages ranged from failed attempts to connect, to explicit messages of undesirability.

One of the women described an experience where she believed an instructor was attempting to pay her a compliment, but the participant felt the attempt was also a microaggression.

One of the instructors with the trip, but also within the university, while we were here, before we had even left...this is what she said, I love how you are so proud of your Blackness, like you really express it and you're not ashamed about it, and things like that and then I was like, you know, thank you for that, I appreciate that and then she like touched my braid or whatever and she was like so how do you put this in there or whatever? She's so sweet and because I know her, it was a struggle but I was like, you know I dunno how other people are of other races but don't ever touch a Black girl's hair without asking her if you can touch her hair, 'cause like number one, her being happy or proud or whatever that I'm willing to express my Blackness was...is sweet. I understand what she was saying, but that could be considered a microaggression for sure and then her touching my hair without asking me was definitely considered one...(Danielle).

Another participant described a less subtle experience with a peer and the ways in which this experience impacted her participation in class.

In one of my classes I kind of experienced, I guess, a macroaggression. It's not really micro-. To the point where I had to talk to a teacher about it and almost have a meeting.

We're not...I'm not 100% sure if it was racially driven but, I mean, it seems as if so. I was not able to speak a lot in that class without someone saying that what I was saying was bullshit. Yeah. Those exact words. It was awkward. I've never been bullied before, so this was like my first time ever getting bullied here. Yeah, so that was really harsh. I didn't think...you always think of bullying as little kids. But yeah, it's definitely at our level too. I still don't know what her problem was with me other than I was the only Black person in there. They said it was probably just because...I don't know. They made it seem more it was the theory I chose but there was a ton of people with the same theory, so it was just me. I would just say something from my point of view, person-centered, and how I felt about it and they would just yell from the back of the class, "That's stupid" and I'd be like okay. Or "That's bullshit!" And then when I had group with them, they refused to look at me (Jessica).

One participant described several instances of receiving explicit, devaluing messages related to her gender.

I just felt like they wouldn't ever consider me as a serious girlfriend and they told me that, like so much. They would not consider me like, real marriage material ever. Because they couldn't take me home to grandpa. And that was them not even knowing that I was like Black at all. That was them thinking I was like just exotic, whatever that meant. ...I was like a fun weekend thing, play thing. And that there was a lot of like sexual interest. But not to really get to know me as a person and definitely never treated me the same way that other girls in my class were that were more in line with what they would marry (Samantha).

Another participant described an interaction between a peer and her male professor that impacted her.

...she was defensive, she was pretty hostile, and this was [toward] the professor. ...But then I do wonder, I always kind of wondered how long it would take. And what I mean by how long it would take, a Black male as a professor, yeah. I was wondering how long it would take before somebody would say something challenging or disrespectful because to me it was extremely disrespectful, very challenging, and I've never seen her do that to any of her other professors (Sarah).

An interaction in which the participant received devaluing messages about her ethnicity and race was described by another participant.

We were having a conversation with regard to immigration and it was like at the turn of this administration being in power and everything and this person being like a huge supporter, obviously, and really had a lot to say about immigration, immigration issues, immigrants, that kind of stuff. It was just very negative I guess, to say the least about it, and so conversation just kind of ensued and I just listened as this person just went on and

on and on saying really horrible things about immigrants and I didn't interrupt but at the end of it I said 'You know something, I'm an immigrant as well' and you know this individual just started stuttering. Like really stuttering badly and like 'Oh, oh I didn't know this. But you're different' I think that's the part that really gets me when someone tried to take you out of a group that you belong to and try to say 'Oh you're...but that doesn't apply to you. You're not like the others. It's good that you're here because I feel like you could be an asset' (Tasha).

Danielle described an experience with another woman at her internship site. The other woman seems to be paying Danielle a compliment, but that was not the message Danielle received from the woman.

She looked at me and said, 'Your skin is so beautiful' and took her hand and caressed my face. I was so shocked, I didn't have time to be angry! It felt as if I were an animal at a petting zoo. I don't know why she felt comfortable enough to do that, but it felt like she didn't respect my person-hood. It was so intrusive.

Jessica described in her journal how she was impacted by a peer whom she shared about during her individual interview. She explained how she felt after learning that student would be returning to campus, and she described the impact of the negative messages she received from the peer. Jessica stated, "I wish she would have never returned. However, I'd hate to have stood in her way to receive an education, though she constantly stood on the neck of mine. She was the personification of hate." Jessica felt as though the impact of the explicit messages of undesirability she received from her peer would be ongoing and continue to have a negative effect on her experience in school.

Tasha expressed in her journal how helpful it was to talk about experiences of microaggressions. She stated, "As an individual who oftentimes internalizes instances of microaggressions, it was helpful to talk about some of these issues..." Tasha was expressing that she often internalizes devaluing messages that she receives and that she needs help coping with this at times.

Participants in the focus group made more statements that fall into this category than any of the other themes. Jessica discussed failed attempts at connecting that ended up sending the wrong message to her. She stated that, “Literally if I go to the bathroom during class, a White person will go I’ve never seen a Black person [like you].” She continued, “I’m like, wow, that’s insulting. I am not a zoo animal, thank you.” The conversation continued with Jessica stating that she has often heard things like, “You’re not the typical Black person I know.” Danielle added to the conversation by saying, “...the closer my traits are to Whiteness, the more attention they get.” All of the women agreed that they often receive messages that they do not measure up, do not belong, or that they often hear compliments with qualifiers, such as, “You’re pretty for a Black girl.”

The participants also discussed negative stereotypes related to being Black and female. One such discussion centered on the stereotype that Black women are hyper-sexual or promiscuous, and the repercussions of this negative stereotype. Danielle described a conversation she had with some of her undergraduate students in which she stated, “You can’t afford to be promiscuous and sleeping with a bunch of people, number one. Because as a Black woman, they really gonna judge you.” Tasha responded by saying, “And with the history of sexual assault and everything like that...Sexual assault begins, a White girl probably would be investigated, reported, looked into. Somebody might be charged. Whatever.” Danielle replied, “One of my student’s, hers got thrown out yesterday.” The women all responded to this with disappointment, but without surprise.

**Anger.** These experiences were those in which the participant felt a range of anger. The women described situations that involve feeling irritation, frustration, and rage.

One woman described feeling angry in response to a guest speaker whom she felt was using racist and stereotypical themes throughout his presentation.

...he was instilling fear in people and it was pissing me off cause it was a room full of White people and so I just went off on him and you know it sounds simple and I did not premeditate going off on him and I did not premeditate doing what I did in class but I had took a step out of the class 'cause I got mad and when I get mad my adrenaline just moves and I start crying for whatever reason. So, I calm down, come back in class, sat down and he just kept going, he just kept going and going and so I just went off on him... And so that pissed me off and I told him 'you would never call your wife your baby mama and also my father's a police officer and a military veteran. He knows how to speak to people correctly and so what is the point of your presentation because you are not teaching me how to counsel these people, you are teaching me how to fear them and how to shoot them out of a gut reaction'...(Danielle).

One participant described how others have helped her to understand underlying feelings of anger that she was having concerning race relations.

...he was one of the people that made me say like, yes, I'm perpetually pissed off and nobody understands why. You hear it somewhat in the media which I've turned off completely because I can't take it but like my family, I've reconnected with one of my cousins in New York and she's 10 years older than me. She's Black and she's like really been a big educator about like 'Well, duh, yeah of course [you're pissed off]' (Samantha).

Another woman described her response to a peer's discussion of immigration issues, and how bothered she was by the interaction.

Yeah, so yeah, that was horrible. It was a really horrible experience, but I don't leave explosively angry about that kind of stuff. Stuff will bother me. It did bother me that this person viewed this group of people that I belong to that way so I'm thinking like what would you say to another person or what have you said about other people to the extent that like you didn't say in front of me? (Tasha).

Anger was a theme throughout the focus group, and some of the stories told during individual interviews concerning frustration and anger were told again during the focus group. It was expressed in different ways by each of the participants. One example includes Danielle describing her frustration with standards of beauty for Black women.

So, stop trying to fit me into this standard of beauty, 'cause when a Black man does that, a White man does that. You know, or a White woman does that...one of the biggest things that gets me is, people ask me about my fro when I wear it out or whatever, and I'm like, thank you, if I'm like nervous or something. But how can Catherine and Sally and Susan wear their hair the way that it grows outta their head and roll outta the bed in the morning and I can't wear my hair the way it grows outta my head and roll outta bed in the morning, which just so happens to be eight foot tall?

To which Jessica responded, "I hate that we have to think about that". Danielle expressed frustration with the expectation that she change things about herself to fit in or belong.

Another conversation involved a discussion of stories the women heard around the time of the focus group. Tasha mentioned what was going on at a local school and stated, "she was teaching the kids that slaves, they came over voluntarily", to which all participants responded with sarcastic remarks and stories of things in schools they each heard about, including a mock auction and a teacher dressing in blackface. Tasha later continued, "In 2019, these things are really traumatizing kids, and I'm like beyond angry, frustrated just because I know I have kids in the system, and I try my best to keep them educated and knowledgeable about stuff." The women again shared frustrations and expressed that they would prefer people not try to educate children on diversity if this is what comes of their attempts.

*Awareness.* Statements made in relation to this theme fell within a range. Participants described situations in which others were truly ignorant, as well as experiencing what seems to be a lack of desire in others to educate themselves.

One participant described some things that could be done that she felt were easy and could improve awareness on university campuses.

Whoever the highest up person is, if they are culturally competent and aware and informed and know how to use language, I think language is the most basic form of cultural competence. ...Inform yourself, know what language to use and what not to use and then just go out and talk to people, and then when you see somebody microaggressing someone, don't belittle them or whatever else. Inform them because it

comes from the tail up too, but the head is definitely important. And so, I think, setting a standard for language use and things that won't be tolerated (Danielle).

One participant described experiences in class when she felt others were unaware of how their actions may be hurtful to her.

A lot of people in my class will talk about, when we talk about diversity, a family member that dated a Black person and how their family overcame that, which is very hurtful and to hear that, that is super hurtful. I don't wanna hear how your family accepted someone after 10 years or maybe still does not and I look just like them. And you're talking over my head like I'm just not here. Like it doesn't affect me at all. That's extremely hurtful. And a lot of people have done it. It's really saddening to hear how people still view you 'cause they don't realize they're talking about these other people in their lives and I feel like they're talking about me...(Jessica).

Another woman described her feelings when encountering others who do not seem motivated to educate themselves or improve their awareness.

...made me walk away feeling I guess more sad than angry thinking that people have these big ideas about groups of people without having any background knowledge or just, you know, aren't concerned to educate themselves about stuff before you start making huge statements (Tasha).

Awareness was discussed throughout the focus group, as well. Again, stories ranged from experiencing ignorance in others, to what seems a lack of desire from others to educate themselves. Tasha described an experience with a peer in which she said, "I had to break down racism, like the term, for a guy yesterday". After this, participants went on to describe similar experiences. Danielle relayed a story one of her students shared with her by saying, "The White dude was singing a song. He said the N word and the Black student said he told him you don't need to say that, and the White dude was like well, it's ok and it's just the song and so they went back and forth". Jessica then stated, "I can't accept the ignorance. You're always on your phone. I can't accept that ignorance and that you think that I have to be your Google because I'm not". The participants felt that some are truly ignorant and need to be educated, and others are

comfortable in their ignorance and will use people of color to provide them with an education when they could seek the same information elsewhere.

*Loneliness.* Another theme that emerged for the participants was loneliness. Statements made in relation to this theme ranged from experiences in which they felt invisible and underrepresented, to experiences in which they felt hyper-visible.

One participant expressed feeling invisible to the point that when she changes her hair, her co-workers no longer recognize her in the office.

...I work in an office within the university and no matter where I'm at, I'm always the only Black person, but I'm the only Black person there now, anyway. I'm the only female Black person there and every time I change my hair, they're like 'Oh you change your hair so much' or 'I never recognize you because you always change your hair', I'm like my face doesn't change...(Danielle).

Another participant described experiences where she felt underrepresented. She reported that those experiences lead to her feeling that people ignore parts of her identity, experience, or struggle, seemingly for their own comfort.

I think invisibility is comfortable for others. To not see me. To not see all of me, it makes them comfortable and they can continue to operate the same exact way. And instead, pull me into their sphere where they are instead of coming to where I am. I still feel that a lot with people and sometimes I do. I willingly walk over 'cause it's easier, but it doesn't make me feel good that I feel like I'm leaving some parts of me just because they're unwilling to access that or to even take a glance at it (Jessica).

One participant described feeling hyper-visible in areas around campus so much so that she will choose to go into areas where she feels she can blend in with others.

Like, Marshallese and Hispanic people don't seem to notice or care about me that much and it's kind of relaxing feeling, so I purposely choose stores. Like, even in line in grocery stores, I get the worst anxiety because I just assume the six-foot, nice, White man with the truck behind me is just aggravated that I'm breathing and taking up space in front of him. There's a lot of that, so I only use self-checkout now and I try to get out of the way as quick as possible or not cause a fuss or something (Samantha).

Another woman spoke about the lack of Black doctoral students on campus and feeling that she is one of very few. Samantha said, “This is not a breeding ground for Black doctorates. Sorry. It’s not a lot of doctors that get doctorates from Fayetteville. But it’s where I wanted to go ‘cause they have what I want here.”

While talking about their education, the women in the focus group described feeling alone, feeling like the only one in their field, and feeling as though they are not seen as an individual. Danielle stated, “But I mean, the higher up you go, you always by yourself”, and Tasha responded with, “It’s a lonely place, though.” Danielle continued by saying, “So it does get lonely as you get higher up, ‘cause then if you don’t know how to speak up for yourself, advocate for your own rights, then you’ll be stomped further down into the ground.” The women went on to further describe feeling alone in their efforts to succeed, especially in a field where there are few Black women they can look to as role models. Jessica also spoke about feeling hyper-visible and that she does not fit in because of things like her hair, skin tone, or her eyes.

***Fear/Safety.*** The women described experiences in which they felt a range of things from apprehension to fear for their physical well-being. The participants expressed feeling that they had to walk on eggshells, mistrust others, or avoid and disconnect from others in order to protect themselves.

One participant spoke about finding it difficult to trust others during the particular political climate and feeling the need to protect her mental and physical health by questioning her peers.

...I find myself questioning, specifically since 45 [Donald Trump] got put into office, I feel like I find myself questioning White people more often. I have White friends, I love my friends, they’re great. However, but when I first meet them, I feel like I have to find out how much I can trust you and find out what kind of relationship we can have...I have to question it for my safety, is it cool mentally and otherwise and I feel like when I was in

undergrad, I didn't really have to do that as much because we had a Black president (Danielle).

Another woman further described an interaction with her peer, wanting to avoid that person, and feeling that it was unsafe to speak up in class.

It was really hard for me to focus on actual school work in there because I wanted to contribute more but I didn't feel safe, so it wasn't really a safe place to do so. I know I could have probably spoken with my professor more about it and I did bring it up but they kind of just counted it as like good banter between the two of us and I was holding my own. But it just felt really unsafe (Jessica).

One participant described experiences on and off campus in which she feels afraid, or the desire to avoid interactions.

I'm constantly afraid that race is a factor like when I go in for interviews. I mean I used to nanny a lot, being in teacher situations. Like even today sitting in Dr. [name]'s internship. We were watching videos for interns and stuff and one of the little clients was playing with dolls and she was like 'And this one's dark and blah, blah, blah, and this one's light' and immediately I was like 'Oh crap, I'm the only dark one in the room right now' 'cause I looked down and it's just like blonde, blonde, blonde and then you know a couple of brunettes and I just am like are they all gonna look at me now and think like 'Oh I hope she's not embarrassed for being dark and this kid's talking about dark versus light' (Samantha).

One woman expressed her fears about being a participant in this particular study, and the potential repercussions that could come from her sharing negative experiences within her program of study.

The hesitation to me would be any backlash that I might encounter by giving my experience, you know? ...it hasn't always been the easiest experience for me, but it is what I want, so I mean, I will persevere and that, so my thing was; do I really want to give my honest opinion about my experiences here? Was I gonna share if I did want to do that or not? (Sarah).

Another participant described the effort she puts into hiding parts of herself for fear that who she is will not be accepted.

...the whole 'shifting' just to avoid being looked on a certain kind of way and that, you know, I've gotten to the point where I'm like why are you doing this? Why are you hiding who you are? And this was like my at-home mental processes. My own personal

conversations, you know? Internal conversations like why are you trying to hide? This is who you are. This is what you bring to the table. There is no way this is going to change. I'm not going to try to change, to be someone else, right? But even with that, I still find myself being very conscious in certain environments even on this campus and just shifting to fit in that space in that moment. And this can be very exhausting... (Tasha).

Danielle wrote about an experience with a peer whom she felt was being mean and arrogant when just the two of them were working together. She explained that she was unable to determine why he was behaving this way, and she kept trying to do things that would make the environment safer for her.

When others were around, he was normal, and I just felt so uncomfortable the whole day. It's like I couldn't code switch good enough. I didn't know whether I should speak more White or act more like a man. I was so uncomfortable. ...I normally do it when I just don't feel like being different from everyone that day. And this day, I just wanted to fit in like every other facilitator, but that clearly didn't work.

Jessica expressed feeling fear when writing about the peer she felt bullied her in class. She wrote, "I thought I was done with her, but now, I can't help but feel my academic progression will be haunted by that student's harsh and aggressive view of me. I hate that I can't escape this situation." Jessica described feeling trapped, wanting to avoid interactions with her peer, and fear that she would feel silenced in courses throughout her program of study. Tasha wrote an entry after the focus group was completed and described feeling protective instincts towards others after hearing their experiences. She expressed having strong reactions to the stories of other participants and understanding the impact experiences of microaggressions have on safety.

One conversation during the focus group centered around the participants feeling as though they could not express themselves because they feared the repercussions. The participants were discussing feeling exhausted by code switching or assimilating and wishing they could just stop. However, Danielle stated, "It's a risk. Because it's like, I'm trying to provide for my family so let me braid this row back and put on this 30-inch wig." She continued, "It's a risk, so why

should I have to risk my income, my well-being to get a job?" The women all agreed that it can be risky to wear their hair certain ways or to interact around some White people in the ways they feel most comfortable. Jessica stated, "I started locking my hair over the summer, and I combed it out like a month or two ago and I'm kinda disappointed in myself that I did that but it just felt really...I felt so uncomfortable working at the courthouse, as my practicum site with all those old White people." Jessica explained that she was afraid she would be fired because people might complain, and she did not want to take that risk.

Tasha described feeling apprehensive about responding to a request for comment by someone on campus. She explained that she received an e-mail asking her to share her thoughts on two building that are to be named after former Black professors. Tasha said that she did not trust the person's intent and said, "I don't want to sit down in something and then have to be defensive and then fit in a stereotype." The participants all shared that they would feel similarly, and that they feel the need to be careful not to feed into stereotypes. Tasha stated, "The moment that I explode, people look at you like, whoa, didn't know you were like that."

*Advocacy.* All of the participants described experiences related to advocacy. These experiences fall within a range that includes avoiding advocating for themselves and others, feeling a responsibility to be an advocate through educating others, and feeling validated by others who advocate for them.

One participant described feeling pressure to advocate by educating others but wanting to be able to take a break from that.

...I was there to enjoy the trip and I did not feel like having to advocate because I just wanted to have a good time and be and so yeah, sometimes it's like cool, I'm going to take the responsibility so nobody gets hurt, and others times it's like, I just want to go to the store, you know? I just want to be. Like, I don't want to constantly be in advocate mode, which I feel like I'm naturally inclined to be an advocate, so, yeah (Danielle).

One woman described the type of advocacy she has experienced from professors previously but would like to experience more often.

I think just be aware with sharing stories. Be aware that some of our stories can be quite emotional for other people. Just sharing your experience and your trauma dealing with something could incite trauma in someone else just sitting and listening so I think more of an awareness and maybe the professors just checking in. Like, 'You good?' and a lot of them do. Actually, a lot of them do other than that one time but yeah, they usually check in. And I like that cause it's like, ok, yeah, they see me, and they know I was listening too but I'm taking things in differently (Jessica).

Another participant expressed feeling valued and validated by a focus on multiculturalism within her program of study.

...seeing that she's an African American female professor that's like risen to the top in her field and does a lot of research, I guess I get this good sense of multiculturalism being really valued and not just pushed to the side. Yeah, like, kind of throughout even though the other professors I've had have been White and I feel like the best part is that it's kind of opened my eyes...just like validating the feeling I've had since I was a little kid that all humans are equal and deserve to be treated accordingly (Sarah).

One woman expressed feeling motivation from supportive people who have been advocates for her on campus.

I've had some great instructors and even with those [other] experiences, you know, it is what it is. You know, I've had some professors here that have really helped me and motivated me and you know even when I don't always get the support that I want in the classroom, I know what I gotta do over there, you know what I'm saying? (Samantha).

Another participant described wanting to avoid participating in class because her participation was often followed up with irritating or offensive questions about her identity, intelligence, or accent. She has decided now that she can choose not to be an advocate or educate others if she does not want to in that moment.

...that was a huge deal in the first few semesters. Like, I would probably not say stuff even when I could actively contribute to conversations, discussions because I'm like I don't have time for this today um I don't wanna do this today but it has gotten less so as I've gotten further in the program 'cause I'm like crap, I really do care. Cause I can choose not to answer your questions if I don't want to. Yeah. And I didn't have that awareness at first that you know you can choose not to do any of these things if you don't

want to. Just because someone asks you a question doesn't mean you have to reply with an answer (Tasha).

Each participant wrote about advocacy in their journals, but experiences this time focused more on the importance of validation. They wrote about things that validated their experiences or gave them hope, as well as things that would make their experiences on campus better.

Danielle described feeling validated by things she noticed in the community, as well as on campus, and the impact they had on her.

When we discussed in the interview ways we could normalize minority cultures, I mentioned the idea of simply including other languages when labeling public facilities. Today, I went to the Amazium kid's place in Bentonville, AR and the bathrooms were labeled in Spanish and English! It was awesome to see and further pushed me to believe that normalization is possible! On the same day, the [university name] announced lactation rooms for moms on campus. I felt happy to be an ethnic minority and a woman on this day!

Jessica shared that, during a conversation concerning the peer whom Jessica believed bullied her, her professor ensured Jessica of her support. Jessica wrote that she was visibly disappointed and afraid of the news that her peer was returning to campus, but she appreciated the support. Tasha wrote,

I enjoyed the focus group immensely and wish it was a permanent thing. I also wished there was a space where students of color, especially Black students could come together regularly to share experiences and encouragements, as we navigate the process of pursuing higher education at a PWI.

Discussions from the focus group that fall within this theme, again, fall within a range from avoidance, or picking and choosing when to educate others, to feeling validated or hopeful. The women all described instances where they have felt that they wanted to avoid advocating for themselves or someone else simply because of exhaustion. Because of this, they often said that they have to pick and choose their battles. Danielle stated, "You don't have to walk around schoolin' everybody, that's not what you got your degree in, first of all." When describing how

she responds to those who are curious about her accent or ethnicity, Tasha said, “People will kind of inquire about that and try to maybe have conversations around it. I pick and choose which one of those I want to entertain because I don’t have to entertain all of them.” One statement related to this that really resonated with Jessica was said by Tasha who stated, “My sanity is more important than your curiosity.” The women all agreed that they often feel pressure to educate others, but they concluded that they cannot respond to everything and that it is not their responsibility.

One area the women described feeling a responsibility concerned Black men. Danielle stated, “...I also don’t like the feeling of feeling the need to protect a Black man. I feel like I need to protect Black men, but then I also feel...like I don’t wanna carry you too.” Tasha stated, “That’s a very present part of the Black community.” And Jessica replied that she feels it is not often reciprocated. The women were describing feeling the need to take care of, and advocate for, Black men, but feeling that they don’t have someone doing the same for them.

The women all had suggestions that would help them to feel validated and that someone was advocating for them. Those include seeing individuals in positions of power advocate for marginalized groups, diversifying events and diversifying campus. They explained that they are Black every day of the year, so it would be nice to have that recognized outside of Black history month. While each participant can describe negative experiences on and around their university campus, they also seem to be hopeful that positive changes can be made and that there are supportive people in these spaces.

All five of the participants were able to meet for follow-up individual member checking interviews. At this point, themes were discussed, and the participants were able to request any possible changes they wished to make, and any disagreement they had with the identified

themes. All five participants agreed with the identified themes from their individual interviews and no changes needed to be made. Those who participated in the focus group were able to further confirm the data analysis process, as well as share with the group any experiences they had not mentioned during their individual interviews. The researcher made every effort to keep those who missed the group involved in the process. The researcher suggested attending the group via video or meeting with the researcher individually a third time. None of those options seemed to work for the participants. The three women who did attend the focus group expressed their gratitude for the group and requested that the researcher keep them updated on the progress of the study.

Overall, the women described a variety of ways in which they experienced racial microaggressions, their reactions to them, and the ways they were impacted by those experiences. They described feeling angry, feeling alone some of the time, and supported some of the time as well. As was mentioned previously, some of the participants did not make statements related to all the themes in one form of data collection but did so in another form. For instance, Jessica did not make statements in her individual interview related to feeling angry, but she did so in the focus group.

### **Invariant Essence**

The final step in transcendental phenomenological analysis is synthesis, or invariant essence. The researcher combined the textural and structural descriptions to find the essence of the participants' experiences (Creswell et al., 2007). Regarding how they have been impacted by microaggressions, participants were frustrated, silenced, and felt the need to withdraw from peers. The women were afraid of the social repercussions of fully expressing themselves, and afraid for their physical safety simply because they are Black. Participants experienced the

campus climate as unwelcoming and unaware at times. They do not often see themselves represented on campus and often receive messages that, because they are Black women, they do not belong.

### **Findings Summary**

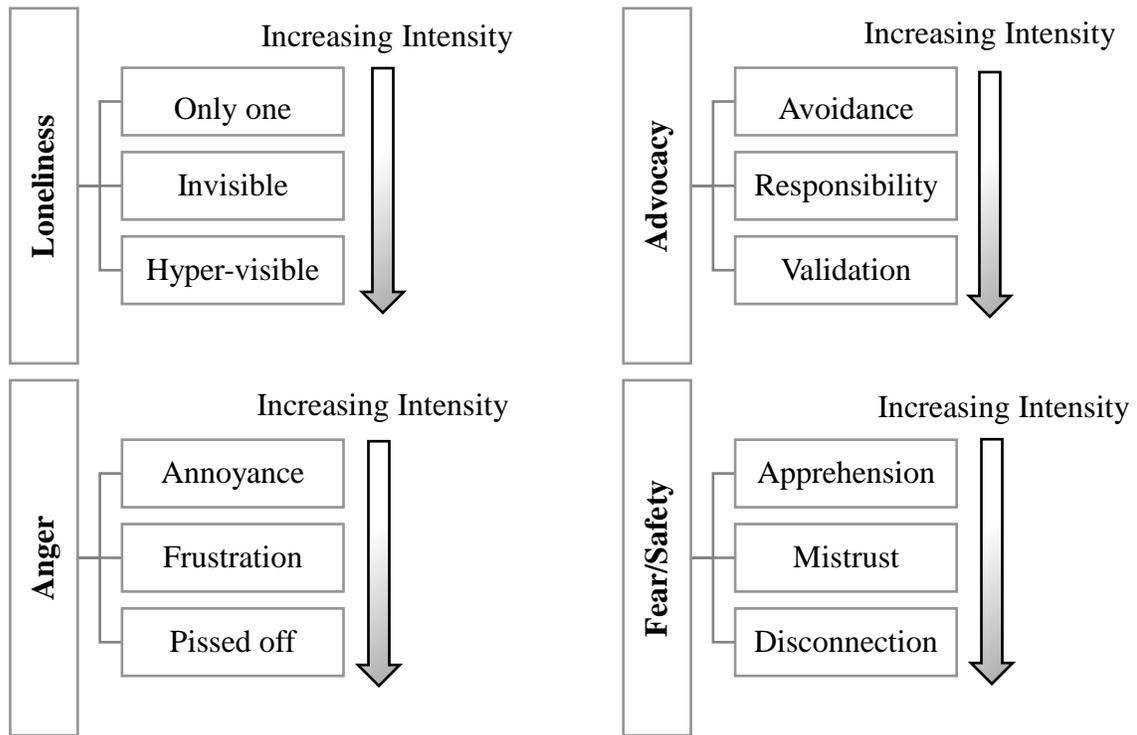
As outlined in previous sections, clusters of meaning were identified and then sorted into textural descriptions. This resulted in several themes. With regard to the impact of microaggressions on the participants themselves, the researcher identified four themes: anger, loneliness, fear/safety, and advocacy. The ways in which the participants describe the impact of microaggressions on campus climate are addressed by two themes: devaluing messages received from others and awareness (ignorance or willful disrespect). Table 5 below lists the total number of statements made by participants that fall within the six themes. Figure 2 below illustrates the clusters of meaning that formed each of the themes, and they are grouped by research inquiry.

Table 5.

*Number of Participant Statements Supporting Each Theme*

		<b>Theme</b>					
<b>Participant</b>		Devaluing Messages	Anger	Awareness	Loneliness	Fear/Safety	Advocacy
	D	40	23	14	14	30	37
	J	45	5	9	25	55	13
	S	105	1	0	10	4	21
	S	21	0	0	5	3	18
	T	53	7	29	3	24	80

Themes: Impact on participants



Themes: Impact on campus climate

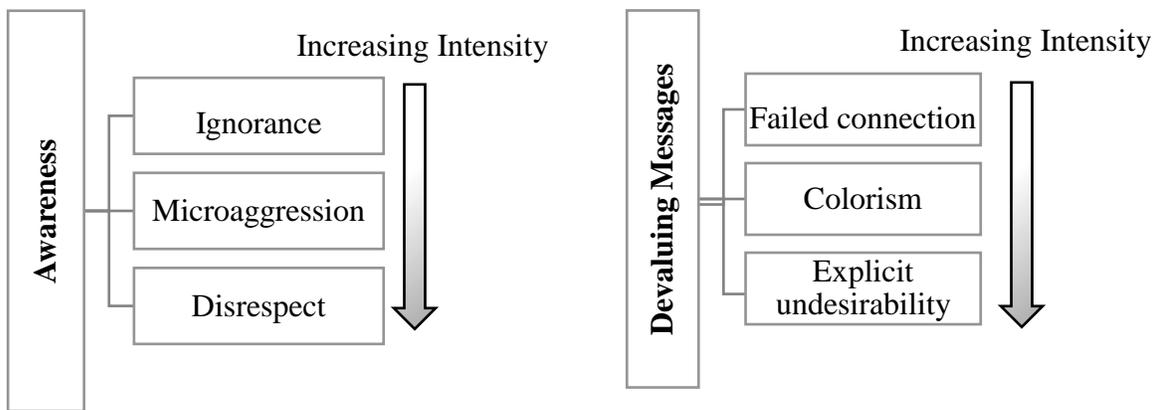


Figure 2.

Themes Comprised of Initial Clusters Grouped by Research Question

## **Devaluing Messages**

All participants expressed a range of experiences that fall within this theme, and the ways in which campus climate was impacted. Four of the five participants described experiences where they thought another person was trying to compliment them, but that they ended up feeling offended by the interaction. The women described being told that they were pretty for Black girls, or that they were very articulate. They would leave the interactions feeling that the implication was Black women are not pretty or intelligent when compared to others. Participants also described receiving much more explicit messages of undesirability, including messages relating to colorism, sexualization, and xenophobia. These interactions left the women feeling unwelcome and unwanted in class, on campus, and at work.

## **Anger**

Feelings of anger were expressed in three of the five participants' individual interviews, and throughout the focus group. Participants described feeling a range of emotions, from irritation to rage, while interacting with peers, professors, and co-workers. Participants expressed this by recalling that they felt mad, angry, pissed off, or frustrated in response to someone or something that occurred. Participants described feeling this emotion when others would say harmful things, or they saw upsetting things on the news like an unarmed Black man being shot by police. The participants also tied this theme to others by expressing the fear of being reduced to the stereotype of the angry Black woman if they expressed themselves.

## **Awareness**

Three of the five participants discuss how campus was impacted by experiences related to awareness. These experiences ranged from a general lack of awareness, or ignorance, to what seems a lack of desire from others to educate themselves. They described encountering peers in

classes where the other simply did not know any better and was truly ignorant. They also described people attempting to argue with the women in different scenarios when the women were much more knowledgeable on the topic. The individuals choosing to argue, they felt, could have easily taken the time to educate themselves on the topic instead of arguing, but chose not to. Participants also described feeling that they were being used to answer questions by those who knew little about a subject but did not want to take the time to do their own research.

### **Loneliness**

Each of the participants described feelings of loneliness, which ranged from feeling invisible to feeling hyper-visible. The women described often feeling, or actually being, the only woman of color in class or at work. They also described feeling invisible or underrepresented in their chosen profession, or hyper-visible and singled out for being the lone woman of color. This would then lead to the women feeling they had to be the spokesperson for their race.

### **Fear/Safety**

All five of the participants articulated feeling afraid or unsafe during interactions with peers, co-workers, or faculty. They described wondering whether they can trust certain people, feeling apprehension, or feeling the need to respond in ways that may keep them safe. The participants often resorted to silence or avoidance in order to feel safer, and sometimes felt the need to disconnect from the person or situation.

### **Advocacy**

Each of the participants described experiences related to advocacy. They expressed feeling the need to advocate for themselves and others by educating peers or co-workers, but they also expressed wanting to avoid educating others. The women described feeling exhausted from educating others and the need to pick and choose when they would advocate. The

participants each described different things they felt faculty and university leaders could do to better advocate for them and other people of color. Those included checking in with students, understanding and using appropriate language, or using more inclusive signage across campus. Another part of this theme included ways in which the women felt validated and supported. Some of the participants described having a mentor and how validating that has been to their experiences on campus, while others expressed gratitude for professors who advocated for them by offering their support.

### **Reflexive Self-Analysis**

Throughout the process of collecting and analyzing the data, the researcher utilized memos and journal entries to record her thoughts. The researcher also utilized peer debriefing, conversations with colleagues, and personal therapy to process thoughts and feelings regarding the data. This helped the researcher to recognize attitudes held about the topic that could influence data analysis. This researcher identifies as a Black woman and has experienced many interactions similar to those described by the participants. It was important to keep expectations based on the experiences of the researcher out of the interviews and analysis. For instance, the researcher will often feel discouraged after experiencing racial microaggressions and felt discouraged after hearing the experiences of some of the participants. However, the participants often expressed a sense of hope that positive change was possible.

In journal entries, the researcher described feeling discouraged at different points throughout the process and feeling concerned that participants would withdraw from the study because of the nature of the topic. It seems that the researcher had a more difficult time gathering the stories from the participants than they had relating the stories. The women all expressed that

it was helpful to talk about their experiences and that they would like an experience similar to the focus group to be ongoing.

Documenting and processing personal reactions and experiences throughout the research process gave the researcher the opportunity to externalize the data. It also allowed the researcher to share these reactions with the external auditor. Points of data the researcher had a strong reaction to were shared with the external auditor in order to avoid researcher influence on the results.

### **Trustworthiness and Verification Methods**

All methods used to show trustworthiness are described in Chapter Three. Those include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The use of an external auditor and member checks are specifically important for data verification and are outlined again below.

#### **External Auditing**

The external auditor was met with in person to allow for processing and clarification of themes. She is a psychologist, professor at a university in a neighboring state, and is a certified diversity trainer. The external auditor agreed with the clusters of meaning, supporting quotes, and textural and structural descriptions presented by the researcher for the individual interviews, journal entries, and focus group. Throughout the process of analyzing data, the external auditor helped with establishing overall themes, and served to enhance trustworthiness of the data through verifying the work of the researcher.

#### **Member Checks**

Following individual interviews, transcripts were provided to participants. The researcher met with each participant in person to discuss the transcript, as well as clusters of meaning that had developed from their interview. No additions, changes, or edits were suggested by the

participants. The focus group also served as a form of member checking. At the start of the group, the researcher shared the themes identified within the individual interviews. The three women in attendance confirmed the identified themes at that point. The researcher made multiple attempts to confirm these themes with the other two participants but was unable to get a response from them.

## CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine Black female graduate students' experiences of racial microaggressions at a Southern university. This study has one main research question: What are the lived experiences of Black female graduate students who have been the target of microaggressions at a Southern university? To answer this research question, two sub-questions were also addressed: How do Black female graduate students at a Southern university describe the ways in which they have been impacted by microaggressions? How do Black female graduate students at a Southern university describe their perception of the impact of microaggressions on campus climate? This chapter focuses on implications for university leaders and ways in which experiences for Black women on campus can be improved. Suggestions for counselors, limitations, and suggestions for future research are also explored.

### Summary

Data analysis revealed six main themes from individual interviews and the focus group, and three of those same themes were identified within the journals: *anger, awareness, loneliness, devaluing messages, fear/safety, and advocacy*. The impact of microaggressions on participants was described by the themes: *anger, loneliness, fear/safety, and advocacy*. Depending on the interaction, the participants described feelings related to one of more of these themes.

The impact of microaggressions on campus climate was described by the themes: *devaluing messages and awareness*. Participants experienced a lack of awareness from others,

believed they felt a lack of desire from others to educate themselves, and believed that they were receiving direct and indirect messages of undesirability from others.

## **Discussion**

This section links study findings to the existing literature on racial microaggressions. The impact of microaggressions is further discussed, as well as the interpretive lenses used. Finally, implications for the counseling profession are noted.

### **Findings, Related Literature, and Potential Implications**

This study contributed to knowledge of racial microaggressions in several ways. As stated earlier, experiences of racial microaggressions in the South have not been explored specific to Black women. There is also little research that exists on Black women's experiences in graduate school at predominately White universities. However, several clusters of meaning identified in this study corroborate racial microaggression themes identified by Torres-Harding, Alejandro, and Romero Diaz (2012) and outlined in Chapter Two. Data collected also supports the identification of negative stereotypes held about Black women by Jacobs (2017). Participants described feeling seen as overly promiscuous or as incapable of being raped, believing that others viewed them as dishonest, and feeling they were viewed as overly aggressive or the angry Black woman. Further, the experiences described in this study support experiences described by students of color on other university campuses, including feeling unwanted, silenced, or invisible (Lilly et al., 2018). Black women are experiencing racial microaggressions often in their daily lives and they have an impact on the ways in which these women can interact in the world.

Researchers reported that Black men experienced hostility from peers, which would sometimes lead to the Black student withdrawing from the university in order to get out of the

situation (Cerezo et al., 2015). While the women in this study did describe feeling hostility from peers or co-workers, they did not express a desire to withdraw from the university. However, one participant described feeling as though it would not make sense for her to continue taking classes if she had to take courses with one peer who seemed to single her out. Another described taking a day off from classes as a way of coping with a negative experience during the previous class, and all expressed that they felt they could not or should not participate in class at times. This makes sense if we understand that these women are receiving negative messages of worth and value or are being told (subtly or explicitly) that they do not belong. Their response is to disconnect, avoid, and be silent.

**Impact of microaggressions on participants.** This section will discuss the impact of microaggressions as described by the participants and relate those themes to the literature. The impact of microaggressions on participants was described by the themes: *anger, loneliness, fear/safety, and advocacy.*

**Anger.** Four of the five participants described feelings of anger at some point during the study, and some expressed anger more during the focus group than in their journal or individual interview. This was surprising to the researcher, as anger felt by the researcher was often processed with a mentor, external auditor, or therapist following interviews. One study examined the association between Black women's awareness of gendered stereotypes and their overall health (Jerald, Cole, Ward, & Avery, 2017). Researchers found that those who internalize negative stereotypes are more likely to suppress their anger or neglect their own self-care (Jerald, Cole, Ward, & Avery, 2017). However, when the researcher began combing through transcripts, what seemed to be incredulity was noticed instead of anger. This came up often throughout the focus group, as well as individual interviews. For example, during the focus group, one of the

participants was describing hearing that a local school was teaching children that African slaves came to the U.S. voluntarily. The women responded by asking if the story was true, asking who would be jumping up and volunteering, and speaking for the hypothetical volunteers by saying “Please take me away from my family and everybody that I know.” This pattern happened multiple times during the focus group. One woman would describe an event, one or more women would respond seemingly in disbelief by repeating part of the story, and then they would stress some part of the story as if to say none of this makes any sense. This occurred during individual interviews, as well.

One possible explanation for what seems to be incredulity instead of anger is *stereotype threat*. Stereotype threat is the fear of being reduced to negative stereotypes when one’s behavior confirms those stereotypes (Steele, 1997). Four of the five participants expressed feeling frustrated or angry, but participants also talked about wanting to avoid being seen as the angry Black woman. This was a stereotype discussed by Jacobs (2017) and explained in Chapter Two. This stereotype has been perpetuated through news stories that described Black women as fiendish and their rage as symptomatic of their depravity (Jacobs, 2017). One participant described the angry Black woman stereotype as an inconvenience because she believes it prevents her from being able to fully express her emotions. Another participant described a desire to respond angrily to her son’s teacher whom she felt was being condescending. The participant explained that if she did respond angrily, it would only confirm negative stereotypes that teacher already held. Responding with disbelief or incredulity seems safer. It seems to be a way of coping with the psychological dilemma that microaggressions cause, but without stereotype threat.

*Loneliness.* Feelings of loneliness were described by each of the participants at some point throughout the study. As mentioned previously, this included the participants feeling as though they were the only Black person or Black woman in a space, feeling invisible or easily dismissed, and feeling hyper-visible. Students of color often feel invisible and ignored in academic and social settings (Lilly et al., 2018), and the women in this study expressed often feeling invisible. One participant in this study explained that she believes invisibility is more comfortable for her White peers and faculty. If they do not have to fully acknowledge her and who she is, it is easier. As mentioned in Chapter Two, there are multiple instances of students of color reporting that they were discouraged from discussing race in the classroom or that they felt invisible when White students discussed negative racial stereotypes in front of them (Alexander & Hamilton, 2016). Openly discussing issues of race is difficult, and the women in this study described many experiences where discussions of race related issues were complicated and emotional. It makes sense, then, that the participant believes her invisibility is easier for others. However, she also expressed that going along with those who choose not to acknowledge part of who she is makes her feel like she is leaving part of herself behind.

The women also described being the only Black woman in their classes or in their program. This caused the women to feel hyper-visible while still not seen as full individuals. A couple of the participants talked about instances when they would change their hairstyles. They were the only Black women in their class or at work, but others would still comment that they were unrecognizable with the new hairstyle. The participants commiserated during the focus group over hearing this so often, even expressing their sarcastic disbelief that White co-workers of theirs are still recognizable when they get new hairstyles.

*Fear/safety.* All the participants described experiences related to fear/safety throughout this study. They described feeling afraid of being reduced to negative stereotypes (stereotype threat), feeling apprehensive, and changing the ways they interact in the world to avoid rejection or disconnection. Participants talked about code-switching, or shifting, to fit in while in predominately White spaces. An article written for NPR.org by Thompson (2013) explains that code-switching is the practice of changing the way you express yourself or the language you use in conversation with others. The article outlines similar reasons for code-switching as those mentioned by participants. The women in this study shared about the ways they change or shift their behaviors to fit in. They described the lengths they go to so that they can improve their chances during a job interview, including only wearing certain hairstyles, choosing less ethnic looking clothing, and making conscious efforts to tone themselves down. They even stated that it would be really risky to attend a job interview without doing things like concealing their natural hair in a wig because they felt that would often lead to a quick rejection. They discussed during the focus group the ways in which their language changes around White co-workers, as well. One participant described the difference between working in an environment with all Black co-workers and one with all White co-workers. She explained that she felt more passive-aggressiveness from her White co-workers and it took her time to get used to responding to that. If code-switching does not seem to work, the participants described often feeling like they can no longer contribute to conversations. They are silenced and, therefore, do not speak up in class. One participant said that she felt silenced due to interactions with one of her peers. She explained that she did not feel safe enough to contribute to class discussions and was afraid of the repercussions of answering a question. One participant expressed being fearful of repercussions that could come from taking part in the current study, and two participants did not take part in

each portion of the study. This could be due to feelings of fear and the silencing effect it has had on some of the women.

Another way that fear/safety came up in this study has to do with the current social and political climate. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the shooting deaths of unarmed Black men by police have been made more visible with social media. The women in this study not only talked about feeling angry when they hear these sorts of stories, but afraid for their fathers, sons, or brothers. One participant described already feeling afraid for the children she will have one day. The women are afraid for their physical safety, and the safety of those close to them. An article was posted to CNN.com titled Living While Black: Here are all the routine activities for which police were called on African Americans this year (Griggs, 2018). The article describes instances in which police were called on African Americans who, it turns out, were not doing anything wrong. One of those instances involves a Black female student at Yale who took a nap in the common room of her own dormitory. The police are routinely being called on Black people, and interactions with police can end like they did for Michael Brown, Philando Castile, or Sandra Bland, so it makes sense that the Black women who participated in this study are often afraid for their safety.

**Advocacy.** All of the participants in this study mentioned advocacy. They talked about being an advocate themselves, feeling pressure to advocate for themselves and others, and being grateful for the support and advocacy of others. All the participants in this study are part of the same department and attend graduate school for counseling in some manner. As stated in Chapter One, multicultural competence is a priority within counseling and counselor education. However, participants in one study (Alexander & Hermann, 2016) reported that they experienced microaggressions when seeking counseling services or other university assistance. Another

participant in that study described feeling invisible after seeking help at the school's counseling center where she attempted to help her counselor understand the microaggressions she was experiencing (Alexander & Hermann, 2016). This could be exhausting, and in fact, the participants spoke often about the exhaustion that comes from having to advocate for themselves. They described having to pick their battles and decide when and how deeply they would involve themselves, if they chose to become involved at all. When someone is frequently witnessing or experiencing microaggressions, it can feel overwhelming. One participant in this study described choosing her battles as a way of protecting her sanity; not everything can be addressed.

One participant in the current study described receiving support from a therapist off campus, who is a woman of color, and only one stated she had a mentor within the counseling department. Others found mentors and supportive persons elsewhere. That is not to say that there are not supportive and multiculturally competent people within the counseling department. While some of the women in this study did describe negative experiences with their faculty and peers, they also described some expressions of support and validation from faculty that were meaningful to them. One woman in this study said that she believes most of her peers have good intentions and are genuinely interested in learning about different cultures. While each of the participants did describe feeling exhausted and overwhelmed at times, they did not describe feeling discouraged. This was a surprise to the researcher who felt discouragement at different points throughout this study in response to the participants' experiences.

Overall, the women in this study described being impacted by microaggressions in a few ways. They have received support because of their experiences, felt anger, fear, and loneliness, and have chosen to advocate for themselves and those around them when they are able.

Participants described feeling frustrated and overwhelmed but still seemed to have a sense of hope that things can improve, which was surprising to the researcher.

**Impact of microaggressions on campus climate.** This section will discuss the impact of microaggressions on campus climate as described by the participants in this study, as well as how they relate to the literature. The impact of microaggressions on campus climate was described by the themes: *devaluing messages and awareness*.

*Devaluing messages.* There is a long history in the U.S. of people of color being excluded from higher education. Racial minorities have long been seen as intellectually inferior (Karkouti, 2016), and continue to be seen that way today. Participants in the current study stated that others would comment on how articulate they are, which seemed to the participants to imply that less intelligent communication was expected from them. One participant described feeling condescended to by her son's teacher, having words defined for her, or others speaking more slowly around her until she would finally get so frustrated that she would let them know she has two master's degrees and does not need to be spoken to in such a way. The participant said that the response then is that they had never met someone like her who was so smart. To the participant this implied that Black women are not intelligent.

Devaluing messages are not only related to the participants' intelligence. The women described devaluing messages related to colorism and sexualization, as well. Participants described receiving negative messages for having dark skin, light skin, a certain hair texture, and appearing exotic. One woman talked about often being seen only as an exotic beauty, with assumptions made that she was promiscuous. This sexualization is described in Chapter Two by Torres-Harding, Alejandro, & Romero Diaz (2012). The participant in the current study was told she was someone to have a good time with but was not to be taken seriously. Four of the five

women recalled being told many times they were pretty for Black girls. One said that the closer her physical traits are to Whiteness, the more attention those traits get. All of this sends the message to the women that they are not good enough and do not live up to some ideal standard of beauty. During the focus group, the participants described receiving these messages from Black men and women, as well. This makes sense when we recognize that promiscuity for Black women is a negative stereotype that has persisted (Jacobs, 2017). During slavery for Africans, Black women were seen as controlled by erotic desires, overly promiscuous, and incapable of being raped (Jacobs, 2017). During the focus group, the participants were discussing this very stereotype and that they believe rape allegations made by Black women are not often investigated. One participant said that a student of hers had her case thrown out just the day before.

The participants in this study also described failed attempts at connection, which sent mixed messages to the women. Several participants described what would be called a psychological dilemma when experiencing microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). In the current study, the women described believing that someone was trying to pay them a compliment, but that the interaction was hurtful instead. One woman said that a White co-worker reached out and touched the participant's face while saying that she had beautiful skin. The participant felt violated by this and felt as though the co-worker did not see her as a full person. Other participants in this study described instances of their hair being touched without permission. One instance of this was witnessed by the researcher while walking next to the participant after an individual interview. The participant saw a peer, greeted them, and the peer commented on and touched the participant's hair. After, the participant said to the researcher that this happens all the time. While it is entirely possible these people mean well when they are touching the hair or face

of the Black women in this study, the participants are still receiving the message that they do not deserve as much dignity or respect as their White peers.

*Awareness.* Throughout this study, participants described experiences with peers, co-workers, and faculty related to awareness. Some interactions involved a lack of awareness, such as a peer asking why White people in the U.S. cannot be the target of racism. The participants seemed to be more forgiving of those types of interactions because they felt the person was truly ignorant on the subject and wanted to learn. Other interactions involved ignorance without a desire to learn, such as a professor believing what one participant perceived as hateful bullying was just good-natured debate. Despite the participant's complaints, the professor did not put a stop to said bullying in the classroom. And still other interactions involved more of a willful ignorance and disrespect. An example of this would be a White student arguing with one of the participants in this study. The participant was his instructor for the class and the White student was arguing that during slavery for Africans, White couples would often adopt young African children simply to give them a better life. He continued arguing until one of his peers asked him to stop so that the participant could continue giving her lecture.

All these experiences contribute to the campus climate and send messages to the receiver about whether they are welcome or not, whether they fit in or not, and whether they can contribute or not. Throughout history, negative stereotypes and other forms of discrimination have impeded success and prevented Black women from feeling like they had potential, and they continue to negatively affect Black women today (Barnes, Williams, & Barnes, 2014; Jacobs, 2017). The participants in this study often receive negative messages about their worth, intelligence, and place. These experiences do not make the campus seem like a place where they are welcome, though they can all point to something that makes being on campus a little easier.

**Interpretive lens.** Social constructivism and empowerment theory provided a lens for interpreting the responses of the participants. Social constructivism, a variant of grounded theory, and empowerment theory align with transcendental phenomenological research as they each focus on the client's perspective.

Empowerment theory involves viewing the individual as competent with identifiable strengths (Hipilito-Delgado & Lee, 2007), and this was used as a guide in developing interview questions for the participants. The researcher wanted to understand the participants' lived experiences, while also assuming they each had strengths that could be cultivated through programs and policies on campus. For example, the researcher asked participants what has been beneficial to their experiences on campus. The participants all talked about relationships with others, especially mentor relationships that have been beneficial. On an organizational level, empowerment theory then involves enhancing strengths and offering support to make organizational level changes, such as developing mentoring programs and trainings, or surveying students to understand the ways in which resources are being used and how those resources can be improved.

**Counseling profession implications.** As mentioned in Chapter One, multicultural competence has been made a priority within counseling and counselor education by the AMCD. The competencies outlined by AMCD suggest that counselors have knowledge of the ways in which race, racism, stereotyping, and powerlessness impact self-concept and self-esteem, as well as worldview and help seeking behavior (Arredondo et al., 1996). Alexander and Hermann (2016) describe an experience in which a student went to her school's counseling center but felt invisible again after attempting to help her counselor understand microaggressions she was experiencing. Counselors need to understand the ways in which Black women experience daily

life. If they are frequently experiencing microaggressions and other negative interactions with peers and faculty, counselors should understand the impact on motivation, health, stress, and help seeking behavior.

### **Limitations**

Some of the limitations to this study include: the voluntary nature of the study, the limited number of available participants who met the criteria for participation, and the sensitive nature of the topic being discussed. This study had five women who met the criteria and chose to participate. They all attended the same university and were part of the same department on their campus. All these things can limit the generalizability of the results.

To take part in this study, participants needed to volunteer. This researcher took steps to ensure the recruitment letter was made visible across campus, in different departments and different buildings. This researcher spoke to classes of students, heads of departments, professors, and sent the recruitment letter to students via e-mail listservs.

The participants are Black female graduate students who attended one Southern university and were willing to share about negative interactions they had on and around campus. Some of the stories were uncomfortable to share, and some participants were concerned about being identified by their experiences. Students who identify as African American make up approximately five percent of the student population at the identified university, and the majority of those students are in undergraduate programs. (Vice Provost for Research and Innovation, 2017). The researcher encountered multiple heads of departments who stated that they did not have any Black females in their graduate programs. There were some, though, who would direct me towards a lone student in their program. These women each declined to participate without

explanation. This makes sense if they believed they could be easily identified within their program if they did share negative experiences.

Another limitation is the fact that the concept of microaggressions is not universally supported. There are those who challenge the validity of microaggressions (Lilienfeld, 2017). Lilienfeld (2017) believes that the concept of microaggressions is an open concept having unclear boundaries and an extendable list of indicators, is ambiguous, has an assumed link to implicit messages that may not be definitive, and unclear terminology. Racial microaggressions require further study and more clear definitions.

### **Recommendations**

The purpose of this study is to examine Black female graduate students' experiences of racial microaggressions, to use that information to inform university leaders about the perception of campus climate, and to offer suggestions to improve experiences for Black women on campus. Recommendations from the literature and the participants in this study will be described in this section. Suggestions for future research will follow.

### **Mentoring**

Results from other research studies have found that mentor relationships are a critical part of the experiences for Black women at a predominantly White university (Alexander & Bodenhorn, 2015). Some students had Black mentors, and some had White mentors, but students in either category reported positive experiences (Alexander & Bodenhorn, 2015). The participants in the current study expressed gratitude for individuals they identified as mentors, and all suggested that beginning a mentoring program on campus would be beneficial to Black students. While some studies have shown that White mentor relationships can have positive results, the participants in the current study all expressed a need and appreciation for mentors

who can relate to their experiences. A more diverse and representative faculty and administration would help with this and allow for students to be connected to a mentor when they enroll in graduate school. Students could be surveyed and asked to identify their personal strengths and areas in which they struggle, as well as what they hope to gain from a mentor relationship, then be paired with someone who would fit that description. Mentors would have appropriate training regarding multicultural awareness, microaggressions, and other areas of diversity to ensure more positive outcomes for mentees. Participants also suggested that simply checking in with them and asking what their experience has been like is very meaningful to them. This helps them to feel seen and validates their experience as a Black woman.

### **Education and Awareness**

According to Karkouti (2015), diverse educational environments require that students are provided with opportunities for cross-racial engagement and relationships. This can improve campus climate and create inclusive learning environments (Karkouti, 2015). There needs to be an emphasis on awareness and understanding of multiculturalism that begins with institutional leadership in order to transform the existing climate of a campus (Karkouti, 2015). The participants in the current study agreed that awareness and education are vital and begin with leadership on campus. The participants suggested trainings and multicultural education for those in leadership positions so that they are more aware of the experiences of Black women on their campus and can be advocates for them, as well.

Trainings could be conducted through health or counseling centers on campus, and provide faculty, staff, counselors, and physicians with education regarding the experiences of students of color, and specifically Black women. Students and those who specialize in diversity trainings could conduct seminars and have panel discussions to provide information on what is

occurring on their campus and how they are affected. Microaggressions have an effect on physical and mental health, as well as academic and social involvement, and an understanding of the impact should be a requirement. Response teams could be utilized to handle incidents of microaggressions and macroaggressions, and they could train faculty and staff on appropriate ways of responding to these incidents in the classroom and on other parts of campus.

The participants in the current study, and participants in past research, also encouraged safe spaces around campus and different ways of signaling inclusivity. Multi-language signs, lactation rooms, pride flags, and gender-neutral bathrooms are all ways of signaling inclusivity, and they were identified by participants as helpful. Other things specific to Black women, like a space to get their hair done or having products that are for Black women, were also identified.

For students of color, support groups could be offered through the counseling center. The participants in this study expressed gratitude for the focus group as it gave them an opportunity to share with and relate to other Black women in graduate school. For all students, classes on diversity should be a requirement and multicultural competence should be made an ongoing process across disciplines. The 2016 Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards list social and cultural diversity as a core area that is required in all graduate counseling programs. Part of that core area includes developing strategies for identifying and eliminating barriers, prejudices, and processes of oppression and discrimination. This should not only be a focus in counseling, but it should be made a focus in each department on campus by diversity officers.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This study examined Black female graduate students' experiences of racial microaggressions at a Southern university. For this study, a definition of microaggressions

developed by Sue et. al. (2007) was used, but there is a need for a definition and terminology that is clearer.

There were developments throughout the study that were surprising and interesting to the researcher that are likely due to the nature of the topic being studied. One of those developments occurred during the recruitment stage of the study. As previously explained, the researcher had a difficult time finding Black women on the campus who were attending graduate school. After talking with professors and heads of departments in person, it became clear that the pool of students was smaller than anticipated. Additionally, two participants did not attend the focus group or complete journal entries. One of these women reported receiving the highest number of devaluing messages (105). It is likely that feelings they experienced during the interview process led to their avoidance of the focus group and journals. Further research into recruitment and retention strategies for Black women in graduate programs is needed in order to gain more understanding of their experiences and is suggested in the literature, as well (Alexander & Bodenhorn, 2015; Karkouti, 2015).

Another development was the incredulity expressed by the participants. It is unclear whether the participants are aware of this reaction, or what the intent was when expressing their disbelief. Further research could explore the use of incredulity as a protective factor for microaggressions or other negative experiences.

Finally, Black men were discussed on a few occasions, but not explored with any depth. The participants in the current study described complicated relationships with Black men, feeling protective of them and desiring to advocate for them, but also disappointed that they did not often feel that was reciprocated. Future studies could further explore those relationships.

## CONCLUSION

Black women routinely experience microaggressions and other negative interactions with peers, co-workers, and faculty. These interactions negatively impact the women by causing them to feel anger, fear, loneliness, and avoidance. They feel silenced and a desire to disconnect from others, and they are receiving messages that they do not belong and are not respected. It is important to be aware that Black women feel this way when considering ways to diversify campus, educate those in leadership positions, and retain students already enrolled. There are also implications for counselors and counselor educators who are working with this population.

The examination of Black female graduate students' experiences of microaggressions at a Southern university provided the experiences of the participants with thick description and rich quotes. This chapter summarized the implications of the participants' experiences and connected it to existing literature. Participants also had suggestions for improving campus for Black women, and those were connected to existing literature, as well.

## REFERENCES

- Alexander, Q. R., & Bodenhorn, N. (2015). My rock: Black women attending graduate school at a Southern predominantly White university. *Journal of College Counseling, 18*(3), 259-274. doi:10.1002/jocc.12019
- Alexander, Q. R., & Hermann, M. A. (2016). African-American women's experiences in graduate science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education at a predominantly white university: A qualitative investigation. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 9*(4), 307-322. doi:10.1037/a0039705
- Arredondo, P., Toporek, M. S., Brown, S., Jones, J., Locke, D. C., Sanchez, J. and Stadler, H. (1996) Operationalization of the multicultural counseling competencies. AMCD: Alexandria, VA
- Bair, A. N., & J. R. Steele. 2010. Examining the consequences of exposure to racism for the executive functioning of Black students. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 46*: 127–132.
- Bhutia, T. K., & Wallenfeldt, J. (2016). United States history-The Black codes. In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/black-code>
- Boske, C., Osanloo, A., & Newcomb, W. (2016). Deconstructing macroaggressions, microaggressions, and structural racism in education: Developing a conceptual model for the intersection of social justice practice and intercultural education. *International Journal of Organizational Theory and Development, 4*, 1-18.
- Byrd, C. M. (2015). The associations of intergroup interactions and school racial socialization with academic motivation. *Journal of Educational Research, 108*(1), 10-21.
- Castagno, A. E. (2008). "I don't want to hear that!": Legitimizing Whiteness through silence in schools. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 39*(3), 314-333.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2016). *Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS)*. Retrieved from [http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/leadcaus10\\_us.html](http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/leadcaus10_us.html)
- Cerezo, A., Lyda, J., Enriquez, A., Beristianos, M., & Connor, M. (2015). African American and Latino men's recommendations for an improved campus environment. *Journal of College Counseling, 18*(3), 244–258. <https://0-doi-org.library.uark.edu/10.1002/jocc.12018>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N., (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed., pp. 24-179). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

- Creswell, J. W., Hanson, W. E., Plano, V. L. C., & Morales, A. (2007). Qualitative research designs: Selections and implementation. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 35(2), 236-264. doi: 10.1177/0011000006287390
- Gramlich, J. (2018). The gap between the number of blacks and whites in prison is shrinking. In *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/12/shrinking-gap-between-number-of-blacks-and-whites-in-prison/>
- Griggs, B. (2018, December 28). Living while Black: Here are all the routine activities for which police were called on African-Americans this year. In *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/20/us/living-while-black-police-calls-trnd/index.html>
- Hays, D. G., & Singh, A. A. (2012). Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings (pp. 3-8). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Holder, A. B., Jackson, M. A., & Ponterotto, J. G. (2015). Racial microaggression experiences and coping strategies of Black women in corporate leadership. *Qualitative Psychology*, 2(2), 164-180. doi:10.1037/qup0000024
- Hollingsworth, D. W., Cole, A. B., O'Keefe, V. M., Tucker, R. P., Story, C. R., & Wingate, L. R. (2017). Experiencing racial microaggressions influences suicide ideation through perceived burdensomeness in African Americans. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 64(1), 104-111. doi:10.1037/cou0000177
- Hotchkins, B. K., & Dancy, T. E. (2017). A house is not a home: Black students' responses to racism in university residential halls. *Journal of College & University Student Housing*, 43(3), 42-53.
- Institutional discrimination. (2017). In *Open Education Sociology Dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://sociologydictionary.org/institutional-discrimination/>
- Jerald, M. C., Cole, E. R., Ward, L. M., & Avery, L. R. (2017). Controlling images: How awareness of group stereotypes affects Black women's well-being. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 64(5), 487-499. doi:10.1037/cou0000233
- Karkouti, I. M. (2016). Black students' educational experiences in predominantly White universities: A review of the related literature. *College Student Journal*, 50(1), 59-70.
- Krieglmeyer, R., & Sherman, J. W. (2012). Disentangling stereotype activation and stereotype application in the stereotype misperception task. *Journal of Personality And Social Psychology*, 103(2), 205-224. doi:10.1037/a0028764
- Lewis, J. A., Williams, M. G., Peppers, E. J., & Gadson, C. A. (2017). Applying intersectionality to explore the relations between gendered racism and health among Black women. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 64(5), 475-486. doi:10.1037/cou0000231

- Lilienfeld, S. O. (2017). Microaggressions: Strong claims, inadequate evidence. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 12*(1), 138-169. doi: 10.1177/1745691616659391
- Lilly, F. W., Owens, J., Bailey, T. C., Ramirez, A., Brown, W., Clawson, C., & Vidal, C. (2018). The influence of racial microaggressions and social rank on risk for depression among minority graduate and professional students. *College Student Journal, 52*(1), 86-104.
- Morris, J. E., & Monroe, C. R. (2009). Why study the U.S. South? The nexus of race and place in investigating Black student achievement. *Educational Researcher, 38*(1), 21-36. doi:10.3102/0013189X08328876
- Morris, T. D. (1996). *Southern Slavery and the Law 1619-1860* (p. 143). N.p.: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nichols, J. C., & Tanksley, C. B. (2004). Revelations of African-American Women with Terminal Degrees: Overcoming Obstacles to Success. *Negro Educational Review, 55*(4), 175-185.
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2013, November 6). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Springer Science+Business Media*. doi:10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y
- Patton, S. (2014, September 26). After Ferguson, Black Students Ask: Does a Ph.D. Still Matter?. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. p. A10.
- Pyant, C. T., & Yanico, B. J. (1991). Relationship of racial identity and gender-role attitudes to Black women's psychological well-being. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 38*(3), 315-322. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.38.3.315
- Racism. (n.d.). Retrieved March 24, 2018, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/racism>
- Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, N. M. (2016). *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Reston, M. (2017, January 22). Women's march: Cathartic moment or enduring movement?. In *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/21/politics/womens-march-highlights/index.htm>
- Robinson-Wood, T., Balogun-Mwangi, O., Fernandes, C., Popat-Jain, A., Boadi, N., Atsushi, M., & Xiaolu, Z. (2015). Worse than blatant racism: A phenomenological investigation of microaggressions among Black women. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research, 9*(3), 221-236.

- Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity performance. *American Psychologist*, *52*(6), 613-629. doi: 10.1037/0003-066X.52.6.613
- Sue, D. W. (2003). *Overcoming our racism: The journey to liberation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Sue, D. W. (2004). Whiteness and ethnocentric monoculturalism: Making the “invisible” visible. *American Psychologist*, *59*, 759–769.
- Sue, D., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, *62*(4), 271-286. doi:10.103770003-066X.624.271
- Summers, J. (2018, January 20). One year later, women's march returns. In *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/20/politics/womens-march-anniversary-trump-shutdown/index.html>
- Thompson, M. (2013, April 13). Five reasons why people code-switch. In *NPR*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/04/13/177126294/five-reasons-why-people-code-switch>
- Torres-Harding, S. R., Andrade, J. L., & Romero Diaz, C. E. (2012). The Racial Microaggressions Scale (RMAS): A new scale to measure experiences of racial microaggressions in people of color. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *18*(2), 153-164. doi:10.1037/a0027658
- Urofsky, M. I. (2014). Jim Crow Law. In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/event/Jim-Crow-law>
- Vega, T. (2016). Taking the 'school-to-prison pipeline' to the stage. In *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://money.cnn.com/2016/12/16/media/anna-deavere-smith-school-prison/index.html>
- Vice Provost (2017). <https://research.uark.edu/research-analytics/ua-student-degree-enrollment-and-demographics.php>
- Waldrop, T. (2017, September 28). Judge rules Black Lives Matter movement can't be sued, dismisses case. In *CNN*.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A. Individual Interview Protocol

#### Experiences on Campus

Name of Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Preliminary Script: “This is [interviewer’s name]. Today is [day and date]. It is \_\_\_\_\_ o’clock, and I am here in [location] with [name of interviewee], the [title] of [institution or system]. We’ll be discussing [topic of interview].”

1. Tell me about your experiences of microaggressions on campus.
2. What is the best part of your program? The most difficult?
  - a. How is this different from your previous school/program?
  - b. What has made your experiences here positive?
3. How do you feel about the environment on campus? Has it changed since you started here?
  - a. Have there been any major events surrounding these changes?
  - b. What has been beneficial to your experiences on campus?
4. Describe your experiences as a woman of color on this campus.
5. Describe the impact microaggressions have had on you.
  - a. What would you do differently, if anything, to make things better if you were in charge?
  - b. Is there anything you wish others knew, or were doing, that might make your experience better?
6. Is there anything you would like to talk about that we have not touched on yet?

Appendix B. Demographic Information

1. Participant ID: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Gender identity: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Sexual orientation: \_\_\_\_\_
5. With which racial or ethnic group do you most identify?  
  
\_\_\_ African  
  
\_\_\_ African American  
  
\_\_\_ Caribbean American  
  
\_\_\_ Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
6. Are you currently enrolled in a graduate program? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Previous universities/degrees: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Marital/relationship status: \_\_\_ Married \_\_\_ Single \_\_\_ Divorced \_\_\_ Life partner  
\_\_\_ Widowed \_\_\_ Other
9. Religious affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_
10. Socioeconomic status: \_\_\_ Working class \_\_\_ Lower middle class \_\_\_ Middle class  
\_\_\_ Upper middle class \_\_\_ Upper class

## Appendix C. Recruitment E-mail

My name is Kendra Shoge and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at the University of Arkansas. I am conducting my dissertation research on Black female graduate students' experiences of racial microaggressions.

### **I invite you to participate in this study if you:**

- (1) identify as a Black, African American, or Caribbean American female.
- (2) are currently enrolled in a graduate program at the University of Arkansas.
- (3) have experienced racial microaggressions (defined as brief and commonplace daily behavioral, verbal, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults) on the University of Arkansas campus.

**Participation:** Participation in this study involves two individual interviews and a focus group. During these interviews, you will be asked to meet with me and respond to a series of questions. Additionally, you will be asked to keep a journal of any experiences, thoughts, or feelings that arise between the two interviews.

The interview (s) will be conducted in person (or via video conferencing technology), using an audio recording device, as well as written notes. The audio recordings will be used to accurately transcribe the interview (s). Interviews may vary in terms of time however most interviews will last for about an hour.

*If you are interested in participating in this study or know someone who may be*, please e-mail me at keshoge@uark.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kendra Shoge MS, PLPC

*This research is being overseen by an Institutional Review Board ("IRB"). If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the University of Arkansas IRB Coordinator at 479-575-2208.*

## Appendix D. Informed Consent

**Investigator:** Kendra Shoge, M.S., PLPC  
University of Arkansas  
479-575-6808 keshoge@uark.edu

**Faculty Advisor:** Erin Popejoy, Ph.D., LPC  
University of Arkansas  
479-575-6521 erinkern@uark.edu

**Description:** The purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine Black female graduate students' experiences of racial microaggressions (defined as brief and commonplace daily behavioral, verbal, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults) at the University of Arkansas. As part of your participation, you will be asked to sit for a semi-structured interview with questions pertaining to your individual experience. The interview should take approximately 1-2 hours and will be audio-recorded. Additionally, you will be asked to keep a journal and record any experiences, thoughts, or feelings that arise in the weeks following the interview. Approximately one month after the initial interview, you will take part in a second individual interview to share journal entries and discuss themes that were identified in the initial interview. This should take approximately one hour and will be audio-recorded. Following individual interviews, a focus group will be scheduled where all participants will be invited to meet for further discussion of their experiences. This will take approximately 2 hours. Demographic information will also be collected including gender, age, sexual orientation, identified racial group, socioeconomic status, relationship status, religious affiliation, and education level.

**Risks and Benefits:** Potential risks include discussions of microaggressions and other negative racial interactions that may be emotionally difficult, therefore, a referral sheet for Licensed Mental Health Professionals will be provided to each participant. Benefits include becoming more self-aware of the circumstances unique to your experience and sharing suggestions that could improve your experience on campus.

**Voluntary Participation:** You are free to refuse to participate in the research or to stop participating at any point during the interviews. A decision not to participate will bring no negative consequences to you.

**Confidentiality:** Your responses to this study will be collected in a secure location. You will be assigned a participant code. All identifying information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact me through the e-mail listed above. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's IRB Coordinator, Ro Windwalker, 109 MLKG Building, 479-575-2208, irb@uark.edu.

I have read and understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix E. Journal Prompt

Describe any thoughts, feelings, or experiences you have had since the initial interview concerning racial microaggressions.



## Appendix G. IRB Approval Letter



---

**To:** Kendra Elizabeth Shoge  
BELL 4188

**From:** Douglas James Adams, Chair  
IRB Committee

**Date:** 01/18/2019

**Action:** **Expedited Approval**

**Action Date:** 01/18/2019

**Protocol #:** 1806126738A002

**Study Title:** Black Female Graduate Students' Experiences of Microaggressions at the University of Arkansas

**Expiration Date:** 06/28/2019

**Last Approval Date:** 01/18/2019

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

**Adverse Events:** Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Erin Kern Popejoy, Investigator