

THE CANARY'S PERSPECTIVE: A SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE ON
PURSUING GRADUATE EDUCATION AS A BLACK WOMAN

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THE CANARY'S PERSPECTIVE: A SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE ON
PURSUING GRADUATE EDUCATION AS A BLACK WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

A Scholarly Personal Narrative was completed to share critical experiences that shaped my pursuit of a doctorate in School Psychology. Retellings and reflections are provided with the goal of showcasing the barriers that exist within systems beyond those which are more readily viewed as flawed. Critical Race Theory was used as the theoretical framework for the current project to assist in conceptualizing the impact of my identity as a Black woman. To support trust in the current work, peer debriefing sessions were held. Serving as sources to challenge my perspectives and as additional sources of truth, eight peer debriefers participated in interviews. Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis were utilized as a guideline for analysis that resulted in three themes from which broader implications are drawn.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The current work will explore the experiences of the primary investigator as a Black woman pursuing a degree in higher education. The Scholarly Personal Narrative method will be utilized to give voice to these experiences. This project was developed during a time of heightened racial tension. A time when a global pandemic halted life as we knew it and forced our nation into a long overdue racial reckoning. While this project was built under these circumstances, the idea to complete it and the critical experiences that underly it preceded this moment of collective consciousness. The stories shared within this project take place within the in-between.

Research Identity as a Contextualizing Factor

In order to contextualize the narrative that will be shared I feel it is necessary to reflect on the various intersections of my identity. While I will expand on my identity development throughout the current work. I think it is most important that I first introduce myself. As it stands today if I were to answer the question, “Who are you?” I would most certainly respond with my given name. I am Helen Young. While this may seem an obvious response, it is steeped in an immovable pride. It is an honor to carry the name of my maternal grandmother and an honor to be readily identified as a member of the Young family. I am grateful to carry a name that is representative of both the maternal and paternal sides of my family, a tie that cannot be broken by time or space.

I would continue on by listing the next most visceral and salient aspects of my identity. Black, and Woman. I was introduced to these contextualizing factors of my identity just as soon as I was given the name that I carry. I have been socialized by loved ones with these aspects in mind, with safety of mind and body as the ultimate goal. In

truth, the list could very comfortably end there. The largest pieces of myself lie within the ways I relate to my family lineage, my Blackness, and my womanhood. Some would notice the absence of other true, but less personally anchoring components of identity such as religion, sexuality, and socioeconomic status.

Even further some would notice the absence of the still true, but least identified with aspect of nationality. Technically, I am an American. To be born in the western suburbs of Chicago, Illinois, to parents who are United States citizens means just that. What that formula does not account for however, is my Blackness. It would be untrue to say that I have never checked a box claiming to be “African-American”, or that I have never referred to myself in that way. I am finding however, that said terminology feels increasingly inauthentic. To simplify it, I believe Toni Morrison may have summed it up best when she said, “In this country, American means White. Everybody else has to hyphenate.” The dissonance only grows when I consider the tensions that exist between these identities that I hold.

Tensions Between Identities

An unfortunate truth for the United States of America is that it is a nation with a historical foundation of enslavement, which is indicative of callous racism and White supremacy (Parkinson, 2021). Though often regarded as a distant memory, the U.S. historically has and at present continues to perpetuate the dehumanization and disenfranchisement of Black people (Gafney, 2017) whose proximity to Whiteness was deemed insufficient. A particularly troubling history can be traced when considering the United States’ treatment of Black people. While several institutions, established for the oppression of Black people, have been abolished or seemingly dismantled, our nation has

a way of replacing shackles with chains and labeling unexcavated problems, problems solved.

The institution of slavery was “abolished” in the confederacy in 1863, but the final enslaved persons were not declared free persons until two and a half years later in 1865 (Britannica, 1999). The abolition of slavery is not an act to be dismissive of. Still, it is important to acknowledge that the power and hatred that said institution was representative of was not abolished. Rather, it was swiftly transformed and transferred into what is known as the Black Code, enacted the same year of slavery’s true abolition, 1865 (Britannica, 2004). This established by law that any Black person deemed “vagrant”, without permanent residence and employment, could be arrested, fined, and sentenced to a term of labor if unable to pay that fine (Britannica, 2004). Born in rapid succession to Slave Code which provided protections for enslavers by deeming enslaved peoples property (Britannica, 2015), the Black code and the dehumanization of Black people subsumed within these laws would eventually be transferred into Jim Crow law which did not see the beginning of its demise until the 1950s (Urofsky, 2020).

Seventy years later, there are many individuals who will refuse to sit with the gravity of our country’s history. The civil rights movement facilitated the end of Jim Crow law (Library of Congress, 2014). While this is true, it did not grant us the end of the power and hatred that had been continually transformed and transferred since the birth of chattel slavery. The unacknowledged truths of the past lend themselves to the conflicts that we continue to struggle against today. They provide a clear source for the reckoning that 2020 has brought to this country’s doorstep (Thomas, 2020). Recent years have been tumultuous, serving as a potent reminder of the evitable present-day

persistence of the United States' historical truths of the dehumanization and disenfranchisement of Black people. Institutionalized racism has made it so that we no longer have the ability to name the specific institution of slavery or blatant legislature such as the Slave code, Black code or Jim Crow law (Jones, 2000). It blurs the lines, thriving on invisibility, relinquishing the need for an "identifiable perpetrator" to flourish (Jones, 2000). Though the racism our country was built on has transformed into a more insidious state of being, it is of the utmost importance that our nation excavates present day systems to identify the ways in which It thrives within our current society.

In many ways, ripples of the institution of slavery and historical legislation can be seen throughout our nation's "justice" system. On May 25th, 2020, George Floyd lost his life to police brutality. Murdered as a result of an alleged twenty-dollar infraction, his death served as a catalyst in reigniting the rage and grief that has surfaced and retreated many times throughout the course of our nation's history. A rage and grief that had surfaced just a few months earlier when Ahmaud Arbery was murdered for going on a jog. One that would resurface for Breonna Taylor who was murdered for existing in her own home at the wrong time. While it remains to be seen whether these individuals will receive "justice", it is also certain that they will not, as the highest form of justice would be that they were able to live out their lives in peace.

The lessons our country is grappling with as a result of these losses are the same lessons that we refused to learn from the loss of Amadou Diallo, Elijah McClain, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Atatina Jefferson, Sandra Bland, Botham Jean, Michael Brown and countless others. Our nation consistently reinforces the truth that we have not done the work that is necessary to unhinge ourselves from the ugliness of our past.

A Shortsighted Solution

The loss of Black life to continued police brutality has placed large focus on that of our nations policing practices. It has given way to the possibility that perhaps the hatred that had traveled from slavery all the way through the inception of Jim Crow law did not simply disintegrate as a result of the successes of the civil rights movement (Durr, 2015). From All Cops Are Bastards (ACAB) hashtags to movements established to defund or abolish the police, many see policing as a receptacle of our nation's historical tendencies toward the destruction of Black life (Durr, 2015; Dreyer, 2020).

To some, 2020 has established itself as a time for deep reflection on our country's history and the ways in which Black lives are viewed as expendable. In my own reflection on our nation's history, I have questioned the range of the ACAB movement and the ways in which it seems limited. Policing within this country has been linked to previous slaving practices (Durr, 2015). The ACAB movement makes a logical argument of police departments as rooted in a history of oppression and injustice. An additional point to consider then, is if there are systems within our nation that exist independently of, or have successfully removed themselves from, our nations roots?

Casting a Wider Net of Responsibility

It is my belief that in considering the impacts that various systems have on Black lives it is important for us to understand that the greater system is not only rotten in regard to policing. While many are channeling their energy into understanding how White supremacy, systemic and systematic racism exist within our justice system, it seems that there is a tendency to stop short of viewing the bigger picture. Fixing the justice system and creating barriers to police brutality only acknowledges one cog in a

strategically integrated system. As a Black woman living in the United States of America, I see injustice and brutality everywhere.

Research Questions

It is a goal of my work to continuously take steps to limit my contributions to the harm perpetuated by systems, and to minimize the negative impact that I may have as an individual who makes said systems run. Anti-Blackness is not something that police have sole ownership of. Black people are being harmed at the hands of a majority of systems that our nation has established as a result of the foundation our country was built upon. Within the current work, Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) method will be utilized to As the United States continues to grapple with injustices that occur at the hands of police, the current project seeks to consider the injustices that occur under the watch of the powerful institution that is academia. A scholarly personal narrative is completed to answer the following questions:

1. As a Black graduate student, which master narratives need to be re-written and released?
2. How has the absence of this work impacted my experience as a Black graduate student?

Movements to honor and uphold the worth of Black life have swept our nation (Buchanan, 2020; Giorgi 2020; Thomas, 2020). Many have chosen to reflect on systems and positions of power with regard to policing and our legal system, stopping short of delving into the ways in which the systems they exist in and interact with daily, also perpetuate racism and anti-Blackness. I will utilize Delgado and Stefancic's (2017) Critical Race Theory, and my personal experiences within academia to foster a greater

sense of understanding and accountability within myself and to encourage the same in the greater academy. I hope to shed light on how our nation's historical trend of disregarding reflection and accountability has reared its head to transform, transfer, and sustain anti-blackness within academia at Predominantly White Institutions.

Bridging Personal and Professional Identity: Beyond Scholarly Impact

In addition to that which I hope to contribute to the greater academy there are also personal goals that are encompassed within the current work. In the earlier days of working on this project I wrote the following note to self:

At twenty-eight years of age, I am recognizing that this plight is one that will haunt me for the rest of my life. The violence imparted and upheld by systems of White supremacy is deep seated. While I do not believe the roots of White supremacy will be excavated within my lifetime, I do believe that there are ways in which I can help to contribute to its dismantling. This work is one contribution.
(April 16th, 2021)

As noted within my reflection I believe that the challenges I faced within my graduate program will not disappear once I graduate. I have intentionally selected to work with a committee that based on physical presentation is comprised solely of White individuals. In reflecting on the selection of my committee members it is important that I am transparent about the underlying intention. While I selected these faculty based on the history of support that they have provided, I also selected them based on the challenge that speaking my truth to them will present. The spaces that I have occupied for a majority of my life have been predominantly White. As such, I have spent a majority of my life softening, editing, and fitting into more palatable forms of myself. Moving

forward, both personally and professionally, I want to ensure that I am able to speak my truth regardless of who is in the room. To me, it is an intimidating and necessary undertaking, to aid in the development of my voice.

Acknowledging the Contradictions

I chose to pursue a profession that has a complex, problematic history when it comes to its interactions with and impacts on persons of color, and particularly Black people. As forementioned, I am of the belief that it would be difficult to find an institution within this country that does not have similar foundations. Though this is the case, there was a level of naivety with which I pursued my degree. In October of 2021, the American Psychological Association (APA) released a statement apologizing to people of color within the United States (Apology to People of Color for APA's Role in Promoting, Perpetuating, and Failing to Challenge Racism, Racial Discrimination, and Human Hierarchy in U.S., American Psychological Association [APA], 2021). After commissioning a historical examination of work conducted within the field of psychology, the Cummings Center for the History of Psychology chronologically outlined the harms the association and the profession has led and contributed to (Cummings Center for History of Psychology, 2021). APA took the stance that surveying the experiences and outcomes was a necessary component in starting the journey toward accountability, healing, and true progress. Obtaining an understanding of lived experiences can help to showcase the ways in which racism shows up in day-to-day life. This is the first step in halting that cycle.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem is that White people see racism as conscious hate, when racism is bigger than that. Racism is a complex system of social and political levers and pulleys set up generations ago to continue working on the behalf of Whites at other people's expense, whether Whites know/like it or not... Racism is an insidious cultural disease. It is so insidious that it doesn't care if you are a White person who likes black people; it's still going to find a way to infect how you deal with people who don't look like you. Yes, racism looks like hate, but hate is just one manifestation. Privilege is another. Access is another. Ignorance is another. Apathy is another. And so on... it remains a powerful system that we're immediately born into. It's like being born into air: you take it in as soon as you breathe. It's not a cold that you can get over. There is no anti-racist certification class. It's a set of socioeconomic traps and cultural values that are fired up every time we interact with the world. It is a thing you have to keep scooping out of the boat of your life to keep from drowning in it...it's hard work, but it's the price you pay for owning everything. (Woods, 2014, para. 14)

Theoretical Framework and Underlying Assumptions

The current narrative is framed by tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT). With roots in critical legal studies and radical feminism, CRT was developed in the 1970's in response to setbacks and a decline in momentum of the civil rights movement (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). Delgado and Stefancic's text, *Critical Race Theory* (2017), was utilized to inform the theoretical framework for this work as I feel it most appropriately

aligns with the way I see the world and the way in which I want to share my narrative. This framework gives voice to my experiences while also showcasing their complexities.

In the early stages of CRT's development, Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado worked to address the ways in which race, racism, and power interact within society. Additional thought leaders, include Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Harris, Charles Lawrence, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams. I will utilize the framework to address the ways these factors impacted my pursuit of graduate education. In the 2017 text by Delgado and Stefancic, the following six tenets are presented as largely agreed upon as underlying CRT:

1. CRT asserts that racism is normal, or commonplace. While this is not an assertion of the acceptability of racism, it is a declaration that racism is not as much of a rarity as some may wish to believe. The ordinariness of racism then, makes it very difficult to remedy it in its most insidious forms as it is difficult to resolve that which has not been acknowledged. Spoken to in the epigraph to the chapter, poet Scott Woods alludes to a belief system similar to that expressed within CRT which views racism as ingrained in all aspects of our society. CRT addresses racism as more than just the more heinous examples that individuals deem racist, exposing the fallacies that lie within color-blind notions of equality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).
2. CRT posits that benefits received as a result of racism increase with one's proximity to Whiteness. This means that a majority of individuals within our society benefit from and inevitably have a stake in perpetuating or allowing racism. This is again spoken to in the epigraph to the chapter in which Woods

alludes to the belief that racism directly benefits White people regardless of the level of an individual's contribution to it. Further, this tenet speaks specifically to Interest Convergence, or material determinism, which suggests that progress made with regard to eradicating racist practices or policies has been rooted in interest and preservation of Whiteness as opposed to the recognition or desire to uphold Black people as equals (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

3. CRT adheres to the social construction thesis, asserting that race is a social construct as opposed to an objective reality rooted in genetic or biological science. This tenet acknowledges the surface-level differences provided by varying levels of melanin and patterns of physical traits. However, greater consideration is given to the many more biological commonalities that bind humans as a unified race. This tenet questions society's tendency to manipulate and ascribe hierarchical value to categories of race despite the lack of a relationship between race and human traits of intelligence, personality, and morality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).
4. The current tenet concerns differential racialization and lends itself to the aforementioned social construction tenet in that it draws attention to the reality of the dominant group's tendency to redefine and bend conceptualizations of race to its will (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Within this tenet, CRT addresses the ways in which race is used as a tool of control. Particularly, the ways in which narratives surrounding racialized groups are manipulated, vacillating between positive and negative as it aligns with societal need (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

5. CRT acknowledges the complexity of identity by way of the tenet of Intersectionality and anti-essentialism. Crenshaw, the formative voice of the concept of intersectionality describes the importance of intersectionality as essential to remediating the tendency to view race and gender as distinctly separate, unblended aspects of identity (1989). Crenshaw highlights the way in which the absence of an intersectional lens can lend itself to the erasure of the experiences of Black women (1989). This tenet of anti-essentialism and intersectionality addresses the ways in which individuals' identities overlap to create complex webs. CRT asserts that there are no unidimensional identities and addresses the ways in which this truth creates the potential for conflicting interests within individual persons and larger social movements. Though the difficulties of doing so are recognized, CRT asserts that to better society, the intricacies of identity acknowledged by intersectionality must be included when considering what progress will look like (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).
6. The voice of color thesis is a tenet of CRT which speaks to access that identity and perspective provides. This element of CRT posits that people of color are more apt to understand the complexities of oppression than their White counterparts. Per this tenet people of color have a level of competence, and perhaps expertise, with regard to discussing race and racism. In a seminal article, Matsuda speaks to the importance of hearing from the "bottom", "Black Americans, because of their experiences, are quick to detect racism, to distrust official claims of necessity and to sense a threat to freedom. These intuitions generated from the bottom are useful in making normative choices" (1987,

pp.360). CRT encourages the act of counter-storytelling in which people of color speak to their experiences providing insights as to how their experience and perspective differs from that portrayed by master narratives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Though these tenets are outlined as commonly agreed upon, different works and theorists may have different perspectives on the number and content of CRT's basic tenets (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Over time CRT has expanded and taken root in a variety of fields. Though it began in the field of law, it is a perspective that is now commonly utilized in education, sociology, political science, ethnic studies, and more. Additional branches, including LatCrit, QueerCrit, AsianCrit, and TribalCrit (Capper, 2015) continue to develop and the agreed upon tenets will differ as a result of the vastness of theory. The tenets selected for the current project were presented as outlined by Delgado and Stenfancic (2017) and felt most relevant to my personal experiences with race and racism. Other tenets that may be presented in different works include ideas regarding Whiteness as property and critiques of liberalism (Capper, 2015).

Racism in America as Racism in Academia

Within the context of the current narrative, the definition of racism is as follows:

“A system of dominance, power, and privilege based on racial group designations; rooted in historical oppression of a group defined or perceived by dominant-group members as inferior, deviant, or undesirable; and occurring in circumstances where members of the dominant group create or accept their societal privilege by maintaining structures, ideology, values, and behavior that

have the intent or effect of leaving nondominant-group members relatively excluded from power, esteem, status and/or equal access to societal sources.”

(Harrell, 2000, p.43).

Racism is a complex concept with many levels and intricacies allowing for systemic and systematic impacts. Insights surrounding racism within the literature are by no means novel. In fact, the effects of racism on a national level were examined in 1998 by the Presidential Race Advisory Board (Sue, 2007). At the time, the board made four conclusions surrounding racism in American society. The board determined that (1) racism is a primary source of division, (2) the racist foundation of our country continues to thrive in modern-day policies, leading to disparities, (3) the disparities are ingrained in our society in a way that makes racism nearly invisible, and (4) White Americans are unaware of the ways in which they benefit from and contribute to the oppression of persons of color (Advisory Board to the President’s Initiative on Race, 1998; Sue, 2007). Though the project undertaken by that Advisory Board took place over thirty years ago, the findings still ring true today. Yet, examination of the influence that this powerful system inevitably has on a system as vast as academia has been neglected.

According to the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCES) 35,404 individuals, designated as U.S. citizens or permanent residents, received a doctoral degree in 2018. Of these recipients, 24,951, or roughly seventy percent of doctoral recipients, identified as White (NCSES). Further, though six percent of Black Americans received their doctoral degree, the U.S. census estimates that Black Americans make up roughly 13.4 percent of the U.S. population, highlighting a disparity in participation at the doctoral level of academia (United States Census Bureau, 2019).

Though racism in academia does not appear to have garnered much attention from the scholarly community, the dearth in research aligns with CRTs assertion of the ordinariness of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The proportion of White academics to academics of color, may provide insight into the lack of critical questioning of the existing system. This is to say that a system that does not serve as a hindrance to a majority of those involved in said system may be more likely to go unchallenged.

The issue of the proportion of Black to White scholars is reviewed by Goleman (2004). In considering racism in academia Goleman discusses the ways in which Black scholars face barriers with regard to the job market highlighting disparities in rank, pay, and access to institutions of greater prestige (2004). Additionally, Goleman speaks to the added barrier of bias in publishing, which decreases the likelihood that the work of Black academics would be published within top-tier journals (Goleman, 2004).

The topic of racism in academia has been largely examined from the perspective of the impact of racism as opposed to the means by which it is maintained. In particular, several studies have set out to review racism within the realm of education. With the goal of raising race consciousness amongst educators, a study conducted in 2011 combined action research and critical case study to examine the persistence of racism in urban schooling (Young). The study revealed research participants struggled to agree on how to categorize racism. Conflicting conceptualizations of “individual pathology” as opposed to “a systemic problem” resulted in the identification of four personae of racism which shed light on the ways racism is enacted. These included (a) the conscious perpetrators, (b) the unconscious perpetrators, (c) the deceived perpetrators/activists, and (d) the enlightened perpetrators activists (Young, 2011).

A more common trend within the literature is the examination of the effects of racism on individuals of color. A 2012 study conducted by Clark et al. examined the barriers experienced by graduate students of color within school psychology programs. The researchers worked with 313 White students and 87 students of color, measuring student experience of racial microaggressions, belongingness, autonomy, emotional distress (perceived stress, depression, anxiety), and academic engagement (Clark et al., 2012). The study revealed students of color experienced significantly more negative race-related events, or microaggressions, resulting in higher levels of emotional distress (Clark et al., 2012).

Further, a 2021 study conducted by Lewis and Shah examined experiences of Black students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Results of the study revealed Black students deemed diversity and inclusion initiatives at the Predominantly White Institutions they attended to be insufficient (Lewis & Shah, 2021). These findings seemingly align with literature which indicates White Americans have difficulty accepting that they may discriminate against or contribute to the oppression of persons of color (Sue, 2007).

When considering the role everyday racism played in their experiences, Black students reported that the initiatives resulted in surface level diversity without inclusion, Whiteness-centered diversity and inclusion, and a lack of a sense of belonging (Lewis & Shah, 2021). There is support within the literature to declare that the harmful effects of racism are seemingly boundless. With the ability to negatively impact mental health, physical health, educational experiences, behavioral outcomes, and workforce entry and

adjustment, racism has the potential to serve as a detriment to people of color in all aspects of life (Alvarez et al., 2016).

Jones and colleagues spoke to the critical nature of supporting black graduate students through the experience of negative race-related events (2018). In the 2018 article, particular consideration was given to the student experience of the then recent events of the 2016 presidential election, increases in hate crimes as a result, and the persistence of the trend of police killings of unarmed Black people (Jones et al., 2018). Insights shared within the article encouraged academic institutions to strive for multicultural competence, to hire diverse faculty, to recognize the time faculty of color spend on mentoring relationships with students of color, and to discuss issues surrounding race and ethnicity without fear (Jones et al., 2018). Though the four aforementioned takeaways were provided as areas of focus to create inclusive climates additional insights were discussed within the article with regard to the response of White students and faculty.

Within the article Jones and colleagues discuss a hesitance, and refusal, for White students and faculty to acknowledge the existence of racism and oppression and the extent to which these forces impact people of color (2018). The intent of the article was to identify ways to support students of color in times of social upheaval, however the ways in which the behavior of White students and faculty could serve as a hinderance to this (Jones et al., 2018) gives way to an interesting line of questioning. When considering the ways in which racism is discussed within the literature attention is largely placed on the burdens perpetuated by racism, with recommendations for intervention provided to alleviate the effects on people of color. Little attention, however, is placed on the ways in

which academia often focuses on addressing the symptoms of racism as opposed to identifying and intervening at source.

A review of the literature revealed that little examination has taken place with regard to critical investigation of the impacts of racism within academia. Studies on the ways in which the academic experience interacts with race are present in the literature. However, empirical examination of the ways in which racism is situated within or perpetuated by the academy via majority group members and academic systems is rather limited.

A significant shift to this pattern took place within the field of psychology when the American Psychological Association (APA), partnered with the Cummings Center for the History of Psychology (CCHHP) to provide a critical review of the field's contribution to racism in the form of racial hierarchy and perpetuation of inequality for people of color within the United States of America. Within the apology APA explicitly reflects on many of the wrongdoings of the field. Particular emphasis was placed on the ways in which a majority of the information that we seek and reference within the field has continually centered on Whiteness. This reckoning resulted in the conclusion that there is a need to acknowledge, witness, and record, the lived experiences and oral history of communities of color (APA, 2021).

CHAPTER III: METHOD

One thing I want to say about research is that there *is* motive. I believe the reason is emotional because we feel. We feel because we are hungry, cold, afraid, brave, loving, or hateful. We do what we do for reasons, emotional reasons. That is the engine that drives us. That is the gift of the Creator of Life. Life feels... feeling is connected to our intellect, and we ignore, hide from, disguise, and suppress that feeling at our peril and at the peril of those around us. Emotionless, passionless, abstract, intellectual research is a goddam lie, it does not exist. It is a lie to ourselves and a lie to other people. Humans – feeling, living, breathing, thinking, humans – do research. When we try to cut ourselves off at the neck and pretend an objectivity that does not exist in the human world, we become dangerous, to ourselves first, and then to the people around us. (Hampton, 1995, p.52)

Scholarly Personal Narrative

Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) is a qualitative research method developed by Dr. Robert J. Nash of the University of Vermont. The importance of the choice of SPN as method for the current work lies in the opportunities that it provides the scholars who choose to utilize this method. Within the academic world this method seems to draw individuals from marginalized groups who have insights to share regarding their unique experiences (Nash, 2004; Hyater-Adams, 2012). Specifically, Nash asserts that it is a genre of particular importance to “people of color who have had to suppress their strong, distinct voices along with their anger, for years in the academy” (Nash, 2004, p.2). I have chosen to share my personal narrative as I fit within the rationale of lure that Nash

supplies. As alluded to in the epigraph to the current chapter, through use of SPN I intend to produce a work that holds space for both my humanity and my intellect.

It is my stance that they are permanently intertwined and that this is a truth that exists within all research methodologies, traditional or otherwise. The difference of SPN exists in the allowance of the explicit and unapologetic display of that connection. Within SPN I am given the opportunity to express myself through sharing of my experiences. I am able to explain my perspective with the hopes that it might shed light on what Black graduate students experience at predominantly White institutions.

SPN is the method of choice for the current work as it is one of very few within academia that establishes my experience as a, living, lone, Black, woman as one that matters. As a Black graduate student at a predominantly White institution, I have encountered things that I believe if shared will provide meaningful implications for the greater academy. The aspirations of the current project are several-fold in that I hope to encourage and provoke critical thought and potentially change on behalf of majority group members of the academy. I believe that there is value in my story and that I have a duty to shed light on that which I am able to draw from it. Additionally, I am confident that other Black students of the academy, current or former, will find solace in the form of community in my story and that hopeful students may be better prepared as they embark on their journey.

Through SPN I will analyze experiences that I myself have deemed critical, based on their salience to my personal and professional identity as a Black graduate student. I will draw from negative race-based events that are personal and require unbarred vulnerability on my behalf. To further support the scholarly aspect of SPN, revelations

will be contextualized within the literature and the current, and historical, status of American society. Through the use of literature, and my own critical conceptualization of my experiences I will arrive at meaningful universalizability that will be presented in the form of distinct themes. To bolster credibility, and aid in transparency, I will include details of my personal racial identity development. This will be completed through use of the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) a framework developed from an amalgamation of mainstream and underground models of racial identity models, created to aid in the conceptualization and parsing of facets of Black identity (Sellers et. al, 1998). Delgado and Stefancic's text, *Critical Race Theory*, will be used as a framework, along with literature surrounding experiences of racism in graduate school and within school psychology programs in particular (2017).

Guidelines as Procedures for Scholarly Personal Narrative

Further explanation of the method and procedures to be followed are provided through my understanding of one of Nash's most fundamental resources on SPN. Within the text, *Liberating Scholarly Writing*, Nash outlines components of SPN. According to Nash, when engaging in this work, the researcher should strive to: (a) establish clear constructs, hooks, and questions, (b) move from the particular to the general and back again, (c) try to draw larger implications from personal stories (d) draw from a vast store of formal background knowledge, (e) tell a good story, (f) show passion, (g) tell the researcher's story in an open-ended way, (h) remember that writing is both a craft and an art, (i) use citations as appropriate, and (i) love and respect eloquent language.

In reviewing the guidelines of SPN the goals of the current project are subsumed within. The initial task of the current project is to establish clear constructs, hooks and

questions. Nash defines a construct as a “central theme or message, not necessarily based on empirical evidence, that integrates your material in some way.” Constructs and questions are used to develop a device known as a hook. When used successfully throughout the current narrative, hooks will keep readers attention and preserve the focus of overall narrative (Nash, 2004). Within the current narrative the question that is continually asked is, “In what ways are the historical underpinnings of our nation, maintained within academia?” Additionally, the narrative seeks to answer the question of impact of the experiences I have had as a Black woman pursuing a doctoral degree.

Next, the current project aims to respect and incorporate works of previous scholars and empirical works by moving from the particular to the general and back again (Nash, 2004). When writing a SPN it is important to emphasize the “why” in addition to the “what” of the story that is being told. Writers are encouraged to find the universal in their experience. While SPN work is inherently internal, it is important that writing moves beyond this so as not to be solely self-serving in its purpose. Thus, while the current narrative will draw from the personal, or the “what” of my experience, theory and literature that draws on the experiences of others will also be incorporated. This guideline will be upheld within the current narrative to increase universalizability by aiding in and further developing the consideration the “why” (Nash, 2004).

Intertwined with the aforementioned guideline, Nash encourages SPN researchers to use citations as appropriate. Within the current work it is my responsibility to strike a balance between citing too much and citing too little. Quotations from meaningful works that are relevant to the narrative will be utilized. Within SPN the quotations should be used to provide context or additional insights. However, an SPN should not use an excess

of quotations as this could be perceived as overly academic and impersonal (Nash, 2004). By selecting this method, I have undertaken the responsibility to develop and present my own ideas. Per Nash, this necessitates that I do so without the padding of excessive citation while also referencing previous works to strengthen, support, and clarify my arguments (Nash, 2004).

Further, it is necessary that the current work is more than just a sharing of my personal experiences. Though meaningful, the value of sharing my story will quickly be lost if I do not draw larger implications from my personal stories. Researchers utilizing SPN as method are encouraged to look for deeper meaning in their experiences. Revelations as to what the personal could mean for other individuals, as well as what it could mean for groups, organizations and society are to be shared. As such, I will analyze the personal negative race-based events I have encountered to uncover what these happenings may mean. SPN demands access to the personal with the hope that the reader will extend themselves to view their world from a different perspective (Nash, 2004). Taking the additional step of contextualizing events experienced within the CRT framework and additional literature aids the reader in arriving at the greater meaning that is to be found within my personal experiences.

Researchers pursuing SPN are encouraged to draw from stores of formal background knowledge. Specifically, Nash suggests the inclusion of knowledge acquired from one's formal discipline.

Thus, in reviewing my personal narrative I will also incorporate field specific contextualization that speaks to the ways in which school psychology impacts my narrative. The inclusion of formal knowledge should be used strategically within the

narrative to teach the reader something new and to present the challenge of depth of thought (Nash, 2004). This challenge is presented through the unassuming guideline that requires that I tell a good story. SPN is said to be strengthened by the telling of a series of stories (Nash, 2004). SPN is not to be confused with, nor comprised of, the telling of story for story's sake. Within this method stories told should be interesting, well developed and should succeed in presenting a significant lesson to the reader; important truths should be conveyed (Nash, 2004). Accordingly, I will incorporate within my SPN a series of events experienced as opposed to one particular moment. By sharing a series of stories, as opposed to a singular occurrence, I hope to strengthen the overall theme of my narrative. Additionally, I believe adhering to this guideline will provide support, and perhaps credibility, to my ideas by drawing attention to the pervasiveness of that which I have encountered.

When sharing my story, I will do as suggested in the guidelines and tell my story in an open-ended way. In completing a SPN the goal of the writing is not to convert or indoctrinate the reader. Rather, the goal is for the reader to arrive at a place where they are able to consider the worldview and life experience of the researcher (Nash, 2004). As such SPN mandates that the researcher remain mindful of ego and expectation with regard to what the reader may take away from the work (Nash, 2004). Nash purports that the best outcome of SPN is that the reader feel compelled to think more deeply; for their interest to be captured by the possibility of a different perspective (2004). Those completing SPN are encouraged to "Be willing to surrender your truth to a better truth, if only for the moment, or maybe even for a longer while." They are reminded that "Wisdom begins in all that is gentle and generous." and that "In order to convince others

of your truth, you need first to overcome your writer's hard and stubborn ego to declare your truth as The Truth. When and if you do this, you might even change the world. (Nash, 2004, p.64)". In alignment with this guideline within my SPN I will write with the certainty that I can only tell my story from my perspective. I will inevitably discuss key characters who took part in shaping my story. However, I will not presume to know the intentions or thought processes of these key characters, engaging solely with the *impact* of events I have experienced.

The remaining guidelines subsume aspects of SPN that relate to writing style and researcher voice. The current project deviates from traditional academia in that researchers are encouraged to write with passion. Stories within a SPN are written with honesty and conviction and comprised of writing that is dynamic. Objective, removed, or stoic writing is discouraged within this method. Within the current project I will, as encouraged by the foundations of the method, own my truth and my stories. While I will not invalidate my own experience, I will tell my story from a place that allows for the possibility of other truths (Nash, 2004). Within the current project I situate myself as an expert on my experiences and will share my story from that place. My story will not be written with arrogance. There will be no heroes and no villains, as I acknowledge the fallibility that exists within myself as it does all individuals.

Nash, builds on the prior guideline, reminding researchers that this method is not, nor is it meant to be, easy. Rather, it requires discipline, motivation, and an ability to move beyond "an infinite number of avoidance strategies". Completing a successful SPN will require that I arrive at level of comfortability with writing that I have not attained to this point. Nash stresses that to write an SPN, writers must first dedicate themselves to

the craft of writing so that they may arrive at the stage where writing becomes art (Nash, 2004). In order to produce an SPN that is engaging and meaningful, I must write well. This notion gives way to the final guideline that encourages SPN researchers to develop a love and respect for eloquent language. The writing within the current project should take on a style that supports the readers comprehension of the events shared. Nash asserts that with SPN writing should be “powerful, fluid, graceful, and persuasive.” SPN should be comprised of language that is accessible, consumable, inclusive, and considerate of a variety of audiences, as opposed to a chosen few (Nash, 2004).

Legitimizing Scholarly Personal Narrative

SPN is a method that is relatively new and may be viewed as unconventional, or even unscholarly to those of differing, more positivist epistemologies. As such, limitations of SPN lie largely in that it is a method that exists outside of the majority of what is executed within academia. Though SPN itself is a newer method, the foundational concept of sharing personal narratives is not, and continues to steadily garner support within the academy (Gornick, 2001; Wall, 2006; Kim, 2016). The increasing popularity of self-narratives has been seen across a multitude of academic disciplines including education and psychology (Chang, 2016). For many qualitative scholars, SPN is viewed as a legitimate and credible method as it falls within the realm of narrative inquiry (Creswell, 2012). Particularly, SPN shares close ties to the more respected method that is autoethnography.

The methodological similarities between autoethnography and SPN are supported by Hyater-Adams (2012) who refers to SPN as a sister of autoethnography citing shared theoretical origins in anthropology. Authoring the foreword of Nash’s Guide for Writing

Scholarly Personal Narratives, Chang (2011) further supports the methodological kinship, referring to SPN as a cousin of autoethnography. Chang cites additional similarities of paring self-examination with scholarship, stating, “SPN is good at mixing two seemingly incompatible ingredients – self-reference and sound scholarship—to create a powerful recipe for academic writing. As in autoethnography, scholars completing SPNs use autobiographical facts as tools of self-examination (Chang 2016) while also integrating scholarly discourse and content (Chang, 2011).

Controversies of Scholarly Personal Narrative

Many of the fundamental safeguards embedded within traditional quantitative and qualitative methods are not possible within SPN or are antithetical to the method.

Differences in key terms, and therefore key underpinnings of SPN as opposed to that of traditional scholarly work reveal several fundamental differences. To provide insight into the world of SPN research in comparison to that of non-SPN research, Nash and Bradley outline the parallels to pillars of traditional quantitative and/or qualitative works (2011). SPN researchers consider vigor, subjective experience, personal testimony, perspectives, introspective questions, and universalizability when critiquing SPN as opposed to more traditional criteria.

In SPN the concept of vigor replaces that of rigor (Nash & Bradley, 2011).

Though SPN incorporates empirical works it is not rigid and may be considered “soft” by scholars who engage in work that is more traditionally produced within the academy.

SPN is expressive, emotional, and allows for risks to be taken with regard to writing style (Nash & Bradley, 2011).

The personal vulnerability that is required of scholars completing SPN research necessitates subjective experience as a focus of SPN as opposed to that of experimental design (Nash & Bradley, 2011). The goal of SPN is not to discover or provide proof of distinct, objective, truths. Rather, the goal is to arrive at universalizability through the investigation and analysis of personal experience. A meaningful SPN will give the reader greater access to understand themselves personally, professionally, or perhaps both (Nash & Bradley).

Credibility may be one of the most controversial aspects of SPN as the criteria by which it is deemed “credible” are unique. Within SPN personal testimony is used as a tool of evidence as opposed to the notion of evidence as typically acquired through empirical means (Nash & Bradley, 2011). Though traditionally, concepts of reliability and validity are considered, within SPN work is deemed credible when scholars present a genuine and authentic showing of self within their work (Nash & Bradley, 2011).

Due to the constructivist nature of SPN researchers pursuing this method are most concerned with the way individuals make sense of their worlds. Through their work, SPN researchers construct and describe that which they are studying. Findings result in what are deemed “perspectives” rather than data, as SPN researchers are not concerned with the burden of proof, but with subjective, active, meaning making (Nash & Bradley, 2011). In working to arrive at the perspectives presented within SPN introspective questions are used as a tool of self-interrogation (Nash & Bradley, 2011). SPN researchers do not claim objectivity in their work as they are not reporting objectively on the life experiences of a participant. Instead, SPN researchers are actively engaged

participants who have stake in the sharing of their personal life experiences (Nash & Bradley, 2011).

Another more controversial deviation from traditional research methods lies within the concept of ability to replicate findings shared. The value of SPN does not lie within the ability for the work to be copied or replicated to confirm truth (Nash & Bradley, 2011). As an alternative, universalizability of themes is emphasized within SPN. The notion of universalizability mimics that of generalizability however, it is something to be felt, or believed by the reader as opposed to quantified. Limitations are acknowledged within SPN by way of the researcher's admission that the work presented is based on personal experience cannot be wholly free of bias (Nash & Bradley, 2011). Falsifiability is judged by the reader based on authenticity, and universalizability rather than objective validity (Nash & Bradley, 2011).

Further, plausibility, honesty, and coherence are sought in place of traditional validity and "truth" is found if researcher voice is perceived as sincere and cohesive (Nash & Bradley, 2011). Further, SPN is judged on the ability of the writer to explicitly draw connections between the stories told and the fundamental themes of the work. The final notable difference lies within the means by which scholarly works are included within SPN. Illustrative references embedded within and throughout the narrative are used as opposed to distinctly separate reviews of literature (Nash & Bradley, 2011). More appropriate to the method of SPN is what SPN researchers deem a literature embed (Nash & Bradley, 2011). As such relevant literature is organically situated within the work as it best fits within the scholar's personal narrative.

Trustworthiness

SPN is a malleable method comprised of components that are necessary by definition, and those which are much more reliant on researcher discretion. This leaves room for considerable questioning of researcher bias. The guidelines and key terms reviewed thus far are based in several years of exploration of personal narrative writing and the Scholarly Personal Narrative method (Nash, 2004). They were established for the purpose of supporting researchers in completing a scholarly personal narrative with integrity (Nash, 2004). Though these elements will be utilized as a tool for establishing boundaries around the current work, the malleability of the method leaves room for additional scholarly oversight.

Consequently, trustworthiness of the current work will be further supported by incorporating additional evaluative criteria often used to establish credibility of qualitative works. The tools of thick description, researcher reflexivity, triangulation, peer debriefing and an audit trail will all be utilized throughout the course of the current project (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Miller, 2000).

The first of the criteria, thick description, is closely linked to and even necessitated by the method of choice. Within the current project I will move beyond surface level accounts of my personal experiences. Stories will be told with clarity, and honest explanation of the relational, social, and cultural contexts within which stories took place will be provided. To aid in the continuous reflection of my own bias I will develop a journal for reflexivity within which I continuously interrogate my motives for completing the current project, barriers to completing the current project, and notations of relevant and influential current events. In addition to journaling to unpack personally

derived inquiries, insights obtained through work with committee members and other experts within academia will be reflected upon.

Closely linked to the tool of reflexivity will be the collaboration with peer reviewers. The process of peer review, also termed peer debriefing, has been compared to that of the quantitative concept of interrater reliability in that it allows additional persons to confirm, or challenge, processes and interpretations established by the researcher (Creswell, 2007). Peer reviewers will be partnered with throughout the course of the development of my personal narrative. The role of peer reviewers will be to aid in the development of a more complete narrative, challenging my interpretation and perspectives of the critical events shared within the project. Peer debriefing sessions will take place at the beginning stages of each section of the current project, resulting in a minimum of four separate sessions. The peers selected for this collaborative task will be current and former students who have prior knowledge of or were present for each of the experiences that will be shared within my scholarly personal narrative. In addition to the criterion of prior knowledge, selected peers will be recruited based on an established rapport that allows for the comfortability necessary to challenge my perspective and encourage depth of thought.

Within each session, the purpose of the SPN and insights from reflexive journaling surrounding the event will be shared. Peer reviewers will then be asked the following series of questions to facilitate their role: (a) Are there aspects of this experience you feel I have misremembered? (b) Do you remember this experience? (c) What is your immediate reaction to being asked to recall this experience? (d) What do you remember most about this experience? (e) What do you remember most about events

surrounding this experience? (f) How would you summarize your feelings surrounding this experience? (g) What would you want me to keep in mind when sharing my personal perspective of this experience? (h) Are there crucial aspects of the experience you would want me to reflect on, if so, which? (i) Are there crucial aspects of the experience you think I may neglect to share, if so, which?

Lastly, Creswell and Miller (2000) suggest that the qualitative tool of an audit trail is most important when sharing work with scholars more familiar with traditional rigor and systematic procedures. Coupled with peer debriefing, will be utilized to bolster credibility of the current project. An audit trail will provide transparency of the process of developing my scholarly personal narrative. The audit trail will detail meetings held related to development of the current project. Any changes in process of interpretation of my experiences as result of ongoing peer debriefing will be recorded. The audit trail will be shared as an addendum of the current project.

Researcher Bias

An additional tool of trustworthiness commonly implemented within qualitative works is bracketing. Typically, this tool is utilized as a means of controlling researcher bias by providing researchers with the avenue to remove themselves from their experiences (Creswell, 2007). Paired with reflexivity, researchers are then able to study and report on the topic of interest without the overlay of preconceived notions, or biases (Creswell, 2007). My stance on bias in the current work largely aligns with the epilogue to the current chapter. As Hampton suggests, the current work will not be devoid of passion or emotion, nor exclusively intellectual. I do not believe that is possible. To report that the notion of bracketing, or removing myself from my own lived experiences,

as a feasible task would be false. While reflexive journaling is a strategy that will be used throughout the project, the completion of a scholarly personal narrative is necessarily informed by my perspective and my experiences. I do not believe I am able to completely remove bias from the current work. I will, however, attempt to shed light on bias where it exists by being transparent about the current location of my racial identity development and the perceived location of my racial identity development as it aligns with the chronology of my narrative.

Data

To complete the current project, the scholarly personal narrative will be shared along a chronology based upon my stance within my academic program. Separate units will be analyzed, and several data sources will be utilized within each unit. Memory data will be a major source and starting point within all units of analysis of the current project. Next, in addition to memory, relevant literature and theory will be utilized to interpret experiences and draw concluding themes for each unit. Further, additional sources that provide substance, evidence, and extend the narrative will include archival data such as national and local news articles, course assignments, syllabi, and PowerPoints, and emails. Lastly, in addition to bolstering credibility of the current study, insights obtained, and challenges accepted from peer debriefing sessions will serve as a tool for analyzing the process and product developed within each unit of analysis.

<p>Table 1</p>

<p><i>Organization of SPN Analysis and Data</i></p>

Academic Year	Critical Experience by Program Stance	Data Sources
>2015	Forewarning - History of race relations at Mizzou	Memory Data Relevant Literature National News Sources Local News Sources University News Bureau Reflexive Journal Entry Peer Debrief
2016 – 2017	1 st Year in the program Critical events encountered through the completion of course work	Memory Data Relevant Literature National News Articles Reflexive Journal Entry PowerPoints Syllabi Peer Debrief
2017 – 2018	2 nd Year in the program Critical events encountered through the completion of course work	Memory Data Relevant Literature Reflexive Journal Entry Syllabi Course Assignments Peer Debrief
2018 – 2019	3 rd Year in the program	Memory Data Relevant Literature

	The aftermath of critical events encountered	Reflexive Journal Entry E-mails Peer Debrief
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Institutional Review Board

Prior to conducting any portion of the study, permission was sought from the University Institutional Review Board. All aspects of the study were reviewed and approved including, but not limited to recruitment procedures, participant selection, interview method and materials, and procedures followed. In addition, the primary investigator associated with this project had completed all required IRB trainings and conflict of interest forms prior to engaging in any forms of data collection.

The current project is a dissertation utilizing the Scholarly Personal Narrative method. The primary investigator received permission to complete an analysis of her experiences as a Black graduate student pursuing a doctoral degree in school psychology. Personal memory and reflection have been utilized as a main source of data in conjunction with publicly available local, and national news articles, as well as readily available scholarly literature and journal articles. Recruited individuals were asked to participate by serving in the role of peer debriefers. Those who agreed, completed a consent form to participate in an interview in which they challenged the primary investigator to more thoroughly analyze her experiences encountered throughout graduate school. After sharing retellings and perspectives of events. Peer debriefers provided guidance by providing feedback on any aspects of story have gone un-analyzed or been neglected by the primary investigator.

Due to the personal nature of the Scholarly Personal Narrative methodology, the primary investigator recruited peers who were present at the experiences that will be shared and analyzed within the project. Aligning with the procedures approved by the IRB, peers within the school psychology program were contacted via e-mail to ascertain their willingness to participate in the project. Recruitment was completed solely by the primary investigator in order to increase participant anonymity. Generic labels (i.e., Peer Debriefers 1) were attached to saved data to further protect the identities of individuals who participated.

Peer Debriefers

Nine peer debriefers were recruited for participation in the current project with eight consenting to participate. Limited demographic information is shared due to the sensitive nature of the current work. Of the individuals who agreed to serve as peer debriefers, four identified as persons of color, and four identified as White. With regard to gender, seven of the eight debriefers identified as female and one identified as male.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic all peer debriefing sessions were conducted via Zoom. Peer debriefers were selected based on several factors. Most importantly peer debriefers were recruited based on their presence and participation in the shared memories and events that are reflected on within the current narrative. All peer debriefers are individuals who were witnesses to events that happened and/or their aftermath. With the exception for the critical event that reflects on a meeting attended only by myself and one other person, peer debriefers fulfilled the role of both challengers and validators of the veracity of memories that I reflected back to them. Due to the personal nature of the current work, peer debriefers were also selected based on the belief that they would be

comfortable enough to disagree with my perspectives should they feel I remembered or reflected on something inaccurately. Reflexive journaling was completed immediately before and immediately after peer debriefing sessions, in addition to journaling that took place throughout the course of completing this project.

Each debriefer participated in one session that followed a set agenda. Upon beginning the session, the primary investigator shared a retelling of the event to be discussed as it shared within the data section of the current work. The primary investigator then began the debriefing session by asking a series of semi-structured interview questions. The primary investigator then provided the opportunity for the debriefers to ask the same, or additional questions of the investigator. If more than one critical event was covered the process began again once questions from the first event discussed were completed. Sessions lasted between forty and seventy-seven minutes, with an average session length of fifty-eight minutes.

Table 1			
<i>Map of Peer Debriefers Contributions</i>			
Peer Debriefers	Critical Event(s) Debriefed	Independently recalled additional critical events	Concerns with Accuracy of Retelling
PD 1	Year 3	Yes	No
PD 2	Year 2	No	No
PD 3	Year 2	No	No

PD 4	Precipitating events	Yes	No
PD 5	Year 1	Yes	No
PD 6	Year 1	Yes	No
PD 7	Year 2	No	No
PD 8	Precipitating events	No	No

Events that Shaped My Experience

In beginning to share my story, one the most important elements to provide is a strong foundation of context. To understand the weight of my lived experience, it is important to understand all that surrounds and contributes to it. All that I have encountered as a Black graduate student cannot be siloed within the walls of a classroom. There are Four components, external to myself and my identity, that I believe most strongly influence my experience.

In chronological order, those are the events of 2015 that preceded my re-enrollment at the University of Missouri, the election of Donald J. Trump as the president of the United States of America, and the NAACP's implementation of a travel ban for the state of Missouri.

When I made the decision to pursue graduate education at the University of Missouri it was not a choice that I made lightly. As an alumna of the university, I had closely followed the events that took place in 2015. I had friends who were still enrolled. Friends who fearfully texted me their concerns as threats to their life were made via the infamous Yik Yak app while rumors that the Klu Klux Klan was on campus

simultaneously traveled through the undergraduate community (Yan & Stapleton, 2015; MU news bureau). I can remember very clearly having conversations with my family as we watched retellings of the events unfold on the news.

In conversation with my father, we discussed the experiences I had at the university as an undergraduate. He asked me about my experiences, recalling my fondness for the institution and trying to make sense of how my experiences differed from that which was taking place in my absence. I loved the University of Missouri and was proud to be a graduate of an institution that provided me with a high-quality education, dedicated mentors, and lifelong friendships. In answering my father's inquiries, I shared with him that I was proud that the events were taking place because it meant that people were not afraid to stand up for what was right. While I was very aware of the impact it was having on individuals who were there, I was also aware of the courage it takes to engage in those movements. From my perspective, I believed that the hardships that students were protesting against were not hardships that were unique to the University of Missouri. The courage and commitment it took to respond to those events in such a meaningful way was.

In hindsight I can clearly see that by returning to my undergraduate alma mater I made the naïve miscalculation that events of the past, events experienced by other people, would not affect my future. What I understand now though, is that when an issue is not fully healed, it does not go away, it lingers, and it transforms. Local and National news outlets covered the events of that year. Though notably absent from the university's electronic news archives, a timeline of the events that took place was documented at the local and national level. A timeline laid out by Cable News Network (CNN) recounted

events of 2015 and before that have contributed to the state of race relations at the university (Pearson, 2015). The timeline stretched from 2010 through November of 2015. The article, which was written in November of 2015, also noted contextual factors of the campus population. At the time, Mizzou's campus had an undergraduate population totaling 35,000. Of those undergraduate students, 79% were White, and 8% were Black. Faculty diversity was also spoken to, with more than 70% of faculty identifying as White while, a little over 3% of faculty identified as Black (Yan and Stapleton, 2015). A summary of the timeline is provided below:

Table 2	
<i>Timeline of race-based events preceding graduate school enrollment</i>	
Date	Event
February 26, 2010	Cotton balls are scattered outside of the university's Black Culture Center.
August 9, 2014	Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Ferguson is situated roughly two hours from the university and Michael's death served as a catalyst for discussion on race and a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement.
September 12, 2015	The President of the university's Student Government expresses concerns over bigotry, anti-homosexual, and anti-transgender attitudes. In recounting a personal experience of harassment in

	<p>which racial slurs were yelled at him by people riding in the back of a pickup truck Payton Head posted the following on Facebook:</p> <p>“For those of you who wonder why I’m always talking about the importance of inclusion and respect, it’s because I’ve experienced moments like this multiple times at THIS university, making me not feel included here”.</p>
September 17, 2015	<p>Chancellor Loftin issues a statement in which he declared that “recent incidents of bias and discrimination” were “totally unacceptable”.</p>
September 24, 2015	<p>Students protest as they believed that university officials had not sufficiently responded to the concerns shared by Student Government President, Payton Head.</p>
October 1, 2015	<p>Per, Columbia, Missouri’s local newspaper, another protest, ‘Racism Lives Here’, was held on campus. Protesters were said to have chanted “White silence is violence, no justice, no peace”.</p>
October 4, 2015	<p>Chancellor Loftin issues a statement within which he reflected upon the states of the university sharing, “racism is clearly alive at Mizzou” and going on to acknowledge that, “What we have done is not enough. Every member of our community must help us change our culture”.</p>
October 8, 2015	<p>Chancellor Loftin announces diversity and inclusion training will be mandated for students and faculty beginning in 2016. Loftin hoped that the training would serve to inform the campus</p>

	<p>community by raising consciousness with regard to being inclusive with both words and actions. This was corroborated by MU's news archives, which notes the university would mandate diversity training with the caveat that failure to complete the training would leave students ineligible to enroll in classes.</p>
October 10, 2015	<p>At the university's homecoming parade, protesters block the car of University President Tim Wolfe in attempt to make their concerns heard. Reports that Wolfe's car "taps a protester" were made, leading to increased frustrations. Additionally, protesters reported excessive force was used by police to clear protestors from the streets. The student body president at the time recounted the events of the protest, posting online that President Wolfe "smiled and laughed", "He Laughed. In our faces, This is your president. This is America. 2015.", referring to the president's response to the protest. The account was corroborated by the local newspaper who quoted graduate student Jonathan Butler recounting the purpose of the protest, stating, "We disrupted the parade specifically in front of Tim Wolfe because we need him to get our message,". He went on to recount previous steps taken that had gone unaddressed, "We've sent emails, we've sent tweets, we've messaged, but we've gotten no response back from the upper officials at Mizzou to really make change on this campus. And so, we directed it to him personally."</p>

October 20, 2015	Concerned Student 1950 issues a list of demands. The student group, named for the first year that Black students were able to attend the university, receives no immediate response from university administrators. Among the demands, Concerned Student 1950 sought an apology from president Wolfe, removal of President Wolfe from his position, and racial awareness and inclusion curriculum overseen by both faculty and students of color.
October 24, 2015	An incident occurs at a residence hall in which someone uses feces to draw a swastika on a wall.
October 26, 2015	President Wolfe meets privately with student group Concerned Student 1950 and declines to meet their demands.
November 3, 2015	Jonathan Butler, the graduate student who was quoted recounting a lack of acknowledgement from university administrators on the day of the homecoming parade, begins a hunger strike. Butler announced, "Mr. Wolfe had ample opportunity to create policies and reform that could shift the culture of Mizzou in a positive direction, but in each scenario, he failed to do so."
November 4, 2015	Students begin boycott in support of Butler.
November 6, 2015	President Wolfe issues an apology to Concerned Student 1950. Within the statement, Wolfe acknowledges the existence of racism at the university condemning it as unacceptable. On the same day however, when interacting with protesters in Kansas

	<p>City, Wolf increases frustrations by sharing his views on systematic oppression. When asked if he knew what that was he responded, “its – systematic oppression is because you don’t believe that you have the equal opportunity for success.” This yielded protesters to question if Wolfe was blaming those who experience systematic oppression for their experience.</p>
November 8, 2015	<p>Black football players announce the beginning of their protest, refusing to practice or play until Wolfe is removed from his role as university President. Outlined in tweet, players stated, “The athletes of color on the University of Missouri football team truly believe “Injustice Anywhere is a threat to Justice Everywhere”. The tweet went on to declare, “We will no longer participate in any football related activities until President Tim Wolfe resigns or is removed due to his negligence toward marginalized students’ experiences.” The players received the support of the athletic department, coach Gary Pinkel, and many of their fellow White teammates.</p>
November 9, 2015	<p>The resignation of university president Timothy Wolfe is called for by the executive cabinet of the Missouri Students Association, which stated that Wolfe had, “undeniably failed us”. President Wolfe announced his resignation, encouraging the university community to, “use [his] resignation to heal and start talking again”. A few hours later, Chancellor Loftin announced that he</p>

	<p>would be stepping down as well. Loftin spoke to the actions of graduate student, Jonathan Butler in particular stating, “I want to acknowledge his extraordinary courage and leadership.” He went on to reflect on Butler’s actions, “A very tough, tough young man, a very focused young man, a very intelligent and forward-looking young man, so we owe him a lot.”</p>
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Deciding on Higher Education

The 2016-2017 academic year was my first year of graduate school. In reflecting on my decision to return to the University of Missouri for graduate school I can think of no other way to describe myself as a first-year student than bright-eyed and bushy tailed. I chose to pursue graduate education because I was endlessly excited to learn and explore. After working as a Title I Instructional Assistant I was inspired by my Interventionist supervisor and felt I had found my career path. I wanted to become a force to be reckoned with in my newly adopted field of school psychology. I came into the program with expectations of professional and personal growth. I experienced bouts of the ever-pervasive “imposter syndrome” and was faced with challenges of compatibility when exposed to realities of disproportionality in Special Education and disciplinary practices in schools. For the most part though, I was just excited to have a seat in the room. Lead by faculty who had achieved things I had never even considered attempting, I felt excited to be pursuing my doctorate at an institution that had already provided me with the high-quality education I had received as an undergraduate.

To have been trained by individuals with such expertise and dedication to excellence so early on in my graduate experience was, and still is, an honor. Because of this, any initial difficulties I encountered were simply viewed as challenges to be addressed and solved rather than barriers that would eventually impact my own success. In hindsight, it seems naïve, to have had such a pragmatic frame of reference for the issues that exist within the field of school psychology. As if somehow, the issues that plague k-12 schools, could not reach the hallways of the academy.

I would suggest now that my initial response to the challenges faced, was forged by my concurrent state of racial identity development. In a course that I will later reflect on within this paper, my peers and I were introduced to models of racial identity development. I cannot recall encountering such models or having many in depth conversations about the various stages of my identity development prior to graduate school. I believe that it is important for me to reflect on that within the retelling of this narrative as it provides additional context to the “why” behind some of my perspectives. In order to do this, I have selected the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity Development as I believe it allows for the truest conceptualization. In reviewing other models, I have found that attempting to place myself within the various stages allotted feels forced. Attempting to place myself within these models would feel false, as many of the categories approach truth, but fall short of a genuine representation of how I have interacted with my identity throughout my life.

Racial Identity Development

The Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) posits racial identity can be ascertained by assessing the significance and qualitative meaning that individuals

apply to their racial group membership (Sellers et al., 1998). The MMRI further suggests that four assumptions underly that conceptualization of the definition of racial identity. These are that 1) identity is both stable and situationally influenced, 2) individuals hold many identities, race of which is only one, 3) one's perception of their racial identity is the most accurate measure of said factor, and 4) emphasizes that Blackness is defined by the individual, acknowledging that different individuals will ascribe different factors and characteristics to Blackness.

The MMRI also outlines four dimensions to consider when discussing racial identity. These are salience, centrality, regard, and ideology. Sellers and colleagues define salience as the relevance of one's race with regard to their self-concept. It is important to note that racial salience is to be assessed within the context of specific events (1998). It is impacted by an individual's core beliefs about themselves and situational contexts. Different social settings and contexts will impact (i.e., increase or not), individuals in a variety of ways. The MMRI acknowledges that contextual, as well as stable factors influence an individuals' racial identity (Sellers, 1998). Within the current work, I believe the salience of my racial identity was magnified by a continuous confrontation of negative worldviews and perspectives as they relate to my Blackness. There are several contextualizing factors that served to intensify the distress surrounding the experiences I will share. If we consider political and societal ongoings, one of the most contextualizing factors that impacted my feelings of safety with emphasis on both my racial and gender identity was the election of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States of America. This took place during the first year of my graduate school program. During the summer of my first year, leading into the second year of my

program my feelings of safety within dwindled further upon the release of a statement by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In June of that year, the association announced an urgent travel advisory. While many points were noted as supporting the rationale behind issuing such a statement, the most salient was the reference to, “Racist attacks on University of Missouri students while on the states’ campuses”. Particular emphasis was placed on threats that had been made to shoot “Blacks”, leaving students fearing for their lives.

The second dimension, centrality, is defined as the magnitude of race when defining oneself. This aspect of racial identity, in contrast to that of salience, is said to be a more stable, constant factor. It also accounts for a “rank order” notion with regard to identity in that it situates racial identity by locating the proximity of race to an individual’s core definition of self. As can be referred to in the current work, when considering my identity, or operationalizing “who I am”, the aspect of my identity that is most central to who I believe myself to be is Black. It is the first characteristic about myself that I will acknowledge when defining myself. When considering my perspectives and the ways in which I present the current work, it is important to acknowledge this.

The third dimension of racial identity outlined is racial regard (Sellers et al., 1998). This is a two-prong aspect of identity, with both public and private components identified as relevant and distinct components of regard. Measured along a positive to negative scale, racial regard is defined as ones’ judgement of their own race. Specifically, public regard is defined as an individuals’ beliefs about how the public views their racial identity. Private regard then, is defined as an individuals’ own beliefs about members of their same racial group. Thus, racial regard, assesses and locates an individuals’ feelings,

public and private, positive, or negative, about their group membership. When considering my positioning public positioning, I am of the belief that generally speaking, Blackness is viewed as a mark against one's record. Growing up in predominantly White spaces has given me the perspective that Blackness often comes with a very particular definition. One that I did not often fit cleanly within. Throughout my life, positive characteristics of mine were often attributed to Whiteness, or seen as outliers to the point that my Blackness came into question or was swept under the rug. My beliefs surrounding public regard of my racial identity are largely influential of my own private regard. The ways in which I have been responded to throughout my life makes it difficult for me to define Blackness. I view Blackness as vast and limitless, and I view Black people in the same light. Often misunderstood and misjudged, my private regard is that Black people are capable and resilient in spite of an overwhelming lack of care.

Lastly, ideology is outlined as the fourth element of racial identity (Sellers et al., 1998). This is defined as the ways in which an individual believes members of their racial group should behave. Racial ideology is also broken down into four distinct philosophies. These are the nationalist, oppressed minority, assimilation, and humanist philosophies and are defined as follows:

- (1) Nationalist: This philosophy is said to emphasize the uniqueness of being Black. Sellers and colleagues purport individuals who identify with this philosophy often do so as a result of resistance to marginalization and appreciation for ones' culture and the successes and accomplishments of those of shared membership groups.

- (2) Oppressed minority: This philosophy emphasizes, the shared experience of oppression between individuals of various marginalized identities. Individuals who ascribe to this philosophy are cognizant of the oppression members of the Black community face and perceive a shared experience with other marginalized groups.
- (3) Assimilation: This philosophy is grounded within an emphasis of sameness. Individuals who ascribe to this philosophy are likely to highlight the ways in which Blackness aligns or is the same as mainstream, American society.
- (4) Humanist: This philosophy expands upon that of the assimilation philosophy, perceiving sameness across all groups. Individuals with a humanist lens focus on greater issues of morality focusing on issues such as climate change and hunger, rather than more individualized identity factors such as race, gender, sexuality, etc.

These four philosophies should not necessarily be viewed as individual ideologies that are ascribed to. Rather, a single individual may ascribe to any of the four philosophies depending upon the “areas of functioning” within which is it assessed, (i.e., political/economic development, cultural/social activities, intergroup relations, and perceptions of the dominant group.) As such, my personal placement within this portion of the MMRI is not provided given the variety of placements an individual could have based on the specific circumstances.

Critical Events of Year One

In the spring of my first year of graduate school I was enrolled in a course that focused on teaching the underpinnings of cognitive assessment. A review of the syllabus

for the course reveals that we would be exposed to a variety of concepts. I remember looking forward to the class. I was excited about it because I would be learning a very concrete skill. Gaining a foundation in assessment and familiarizing myself with these tools felt like my first initiation into becoming a true school psychologist. The course was challenging at times. I made simple mistakes that could be fixed, but that if left unnoticed could impact the validity of the entire assessment and as such, the outcomes for the students I was working with, but I was learning. In thinking back to the course, I can remember a lot of its components.

I can remember navigating the course requirement of needing to practice our new skillset of cognitive assessment with an actual school-aged child. Navigating that requirement in a town where I personally knew zero children or families was challenging but surmountable. I can remember working with my instructor on finding more students to work with when the few community connections I had been able to establish ran out. What I recall most from that course though, and from that semester was the day that we discussed bias in cognitive assessment. In beginning the lecture, we were asked to discuss the notion and implications of bias in testing with our classmates. More specifically, we were presented with a slide of several discussion prompts. On the slide, entitled “Preliminary Thoughts of Test Bias”, the following questions were listed:

- Do you believe that racial-ethnic groups differ on intelligence?
- Why should we be concerned about bias in intelligence tests...
 - o That is, in what ways may bias in intelligence tests be manifesting itself in impactful ways in “the real world”?

- Given your exposure to two different instruments (Wechsler and DAS) that assess intelligence, what are you[r] initial thoughts on the basis for an argument of bias in assessment of cognitive/intellectual skills?
- What, if anything do you think needs to be done to address potential bias (or perceptions of bias) in intelligence tests?

In turning to my peers seated at the same table as myself I felt prepared to have a pretty simple conversation. This same topic had been discussed in a previous course we had taken, and I felt we had sufficiently covered, and agreed upon, the existence of bias within testing. Like much of the class that day, the conversation with my peer did not go as expected. While I am sure we at least skimmed the other questions, I remember our conversation largely focusing on the question that was written on the slide in red text. A discussion of the implications of bias in testing. I referenced the material we had discussed in our other class, that was taught by the same instructor, bringing up the Larry P. V. Riles case we had recently learned about. We had learned that this case, ultimately resulted in the banning of the use of cognitive assessments to qualify Black students for special education in the state of California. In discussing the ways in which “bias in intelligence tests may be manifesting itself in impactful ways in “the real world”?”. The obvious answer to me was in disproportionality in Special Education placements. To my point, my classmate at the time questioned the harm of being placed in special education unnecessarily. From their perspective, there was not a harm in receiving additional support. Despite the fact that they may not have met the appropriate criteria, the benefit of more individualized intervention seemed to outweigh any potential consequences.

I remember feeling a bit of pressure to get my classmate on the “right page”. In hindsight this reveals a tendency of making myself responsible for others growth, and a naivety in thinking that I know the way. Nevertheless, I shifted the conversation. I brought up the social implications of an inappropriate special education placement, as well as the educational implications, noting the quality of special education outcomes. Our conversation came to a close as we regrouped as a whole class to begin to cover the same discussion questions.

What came next left me reeling for weeks to come. In commencing our whole class discussion, the instructor shared that they had previously believed bias in testing existed. They shared that they had written papers on it themselves but had a different perspective to deliver to us that day. Eventually, through sharing their story about their previous perspective, we arrived at the punch line of the lesson. That there is no bias in cognitive assessments, and that any differences in intelligence across racial groups were inherent to the population, rather than a reflection of biased instruments.

The instructor shared that there were four different ways to conceptualize bias in assessment. These were the egalitarian definition, the standardization definition, the culture-bound definition, and the statistical definition (Class Artifact).

According to our class materials the egalitarian definition was based in the assumptions that “all people are created equal... no variance in intelligence across SES and racial/ethnic groups”. A “translation” was provided, purporting that, “if group differences [are] found in [an] intelligence test, the test must be biased” and that, “tests reveal differences in individuals, not groups, thus any group differences indicate test bias.”. A challenge to the egalitarian definition was also provided, which stated, “not

falsifiable – no way to prove/disprove the above postulate”. I remember reflecting on this slide in the moment to myself, thinking that we may be getting back to a discussion that I felt more comfortable.

We moved on to discuss the Standardization definition. Again, the assumptions underlying this definition were provided: “Assumption – all groups must be appropriately represented in the standardization sample given that SES and racial/ethnic groups are inherently different with regards to intellectual capacity. The translation provided for the standardization definition indicated that, “Any lack of (or insufficient) inclusion in standardization sample results in a biased test against said groups”, and that it “might be biased... also might not be biased.” Within this conceptualization it was shared that “standardization involves 2 steps”. Those were selection of items and norming of scores. While the selection of items left room for potential bias, it was stated that norming of scores had no bias potential.

Continuing our way through the material we next discussed the culture-bound definition. Again, assumptions underlying this conceptualization were shared. Underlying this conceptualization was the idea that, “culture loading equated to notion that correct answering of an item requires particular cultural knowledge/experience/background (e.g., cultural locality, time period)”. That, “some groups are advantaged or disadvantaged based on those cultural opportunities”, and that “test items can be arranged on a continuum – culture reduced to culture saturated. A challenge to this conceptualization was also shared. The challenge indicated:

Culture loading is a subjective judgement (often with relatively high agreement across professionals), however this doesn’t automatically translate to test bias”.

An additional point extended the challenge arguing that, “test bias as it relates to culture loading must be analyzed with actual data and objective statistical analysis. (Class Artifact)

The final of the four conceptualizations of test bias was then presented. The statistical definition was clearly indicated as the “(**best definition**)”. The slide did not make much sense to me. Formatted differently than the other slides, there were no assumptions or challenges explicitly laid out. Instead, the following information was presented as evidence in support of the statistical definition:

- Defined: test bias is systematic measurement error
 - “systematic errors in the predictive validity or the construct validity of tests scores of individuals that are associated with individual’s group membership” (Jensen, 1980, p. 375)
- Systematic error occurs in two ways:
 - Test measures one thing for one group and another thing for another group
 - Test predicts performance on some external criterion (e.g., academic achievement) well for one group but [not] for another
 - Example: LEP students
- Statistical indicators of test bias
 - Internal – statistical properties of the test (e.g., reliability, rank order of item difficulty, factor structure) varies by group

- Predictive – regression parameters (slopes, intercepts, and standard errors) for predicting external criteria (e.g., academic performance, job success) via test performance/score differ by group

The overall conclusion was presented as “The Bottom Line on Test Bias”. Within this slide, the instructor revealed that, “According to the statistical definition of bias, standardized test[s] of intelligence are not substantially biased for native-born, English-speaking children in the US, regardless of SES or racial/ethnic group”. The slide continued on to purport that, “When bias is detected, it is usually in favor of the racial/ethnic groups that tend to obtain the lowest average scores on intelligence tests (i.e., predictive nature of test performance on external criteria is higher in groups with the lowest average scores on the tests)” (ESCP 8100, Spring 2017).

I was taken aback by the concluding content of the lesson. I can remember scanning the room, perhaps with widened eyes, searching for a dissenting opinion or at least a critical questioning of the information that was presented. I took it upon myself to be the voice that I was looking for as no one else in the room appeared to take issue with the lesson. This was the same instructor who in a different course walked us through the Larry P case. In addition to my feelings about the content of the lesson, I was having difficulty making space in my mind for the incompatibility of the two lessons. I spoke up, bringing up that very point. Recalling what we had learned about disproportionality and the fact that utilizing cognitive assessment with Black children for the purposes of special education placement was outlawed. I was told that was not a relevant point for the current discussion. I questioned other factors that could contribute to differences in intelligence, referencing the history of our country, how Black people were barred from education for

so long, segregation, etc. I began to feel like I was grasping at straws. Only one of my peers in the class used their voice to question what we had been taught. No progress was made, and the conversation moved on. The final two slides were shared, providing considerations for “Best practices in assessment of diverse children and youth”.

I was further confused as it seemed to present another contradiction. The content encouraged us to consider when and how to use intelligence tests. In addition, we were to consider the impact of both the selection, administration and interpretation of tests and the efforts to protect examinees from misuse/misconceptions of test results. Cultural and linguistic background were the final consideration listed on the slide with “level of acculturation” identified as specific component.

Lastly, selection of appropriate tests was briefly covered again with the reminder that “lack of representation \neq test bias, though representation is always better”. A final point that language proficiency should be considered and that use of non-verbal tests of intelligence or translator/translated test[s] was an option.

The Impact

I remember arriving at a particular point in the conversation where, physiologically speaking, I could not take any more. I began to coach myself internally. Breathe. Do not cry. Do not cry. Do not cry. I have no idea what I looked like to other people in the room, or if they would have been brave enough to glance in my direction and bear witness to my struggle at that point. I continued to coach myself, making it through the remainder of the class period. Fight or flight had kicked in for me. I had a strong urge to get up and leave. To run. To seek consultation from other faculty members that felt safe, and who could tell me that the “truth” that I had just been taught was not

true. I convinced myself to remain seated, I felt my body shake as I held back tears, I waited to be dismissed and left the classroom.

I felt small. Confused and shaken. I felt afraid. I felt embarrassed. I felt inadequate. Furthermore, I had received my first taste of the realization that I did not belong in a Ph.D. program. That this space that I had been “accepted” into was not meant for people like me. Throughout my undergraduate experience I had heard many a White peer argue about the injustice of undeserving Black students taking the spots of their White friends at various organizations, institutions, and universities. I had always felt deserving of the academic success I had attained. This was the first moment in my life that I truly questioned if I were in the room for the purposes of meeting a quota. A lone Black woman in a room full of White peers and a White instructor, I was unsure of why I was there.

The feelings of disappointment set in later. In the moment I can remember feeling as if I were looking to my peers to display an ounce of curiosity or pushback. As the “bottom Line on Test Bias” was shared only one classmate, outside of myself, outwardly questioned what we were being taught.

Critical Events of Year Two

In the spring semester of my second year, I enrolled in my program’s required multicultural course. I remember feeling uncertain about enrolling. In reflecting back in hindsight, I would share that I did enter into the course with a bias. That uncertainty that I felt was truly a hesitancy regarding the instructor’s identity. I believe that I felt uncertain

of their ability to show up in a way that would serve to extend my knowledge within this topic.

Older students who had taken the course in years prior shared their reflections on what the course was like for them. They vaguely recalled that there had been issues in the past, but that it was structured differently now, and there was a different instructor. From my perspective, this course was unique to others I had taken in that it turned out to be one that a majority of our program enrolled in. Generally, courses had been comprised of mainly cohort mates or other same-year students in closely related programs.

Our introduction to the course was difficult and I believe the cross-cohort offering only made that more difficult. There was a certain presumption of safety that seemed to exist, but while we were all in the same program, that course was our first introduction to some of our peers who were in different cohorts. The first activity that we did together was one that is sometimes called a “privilege walk”. It is difficult to explain, but I can only say that there was an instantaneous knowing. I knew it would not go well. The activity was explained. The instructor would read a series of statements from a sheet of paper. If the statement applied to you, you would walk to the other side of the room. If it did not you would remain on the starting side.

Many of the statements that were read were, from my perspective, innocuous. Many of the statements that were read were not. The statements I remember most required students who knew someone who struggled with addiction, and students who lived alone/far away from family to cross to the other side of the room. In beginning the activity no guidelines were established. Students were not given the option to withhold disclosures. The statements were read, and we moved from side to side. At some point,

when one of the more difficult statements was read, a student walked across the room by themselves, while twenty-something of their peers stood on the other side of the room without them. The student became upset and left the room crying. Unfortunately, this was only the first of many tearful exits that would take place during that class. I remember our instructor attempting to get us back to a good place before class ended, and I remember trying to help with that too. I alleviated some of the feelings of fear expressed by my younger White peers, acknowledging that while it could be a really uncomfortable class, it could also be a really great growth opportunity. As we all sat in a circle on the floor, we discussed the activity we had just completed and how the course would go. We concluded our first session and while I wish it were not true, I can say that my attitude about the class only deteriorated from there.

Our first assignment was one that I had been asked to do so often in life. It was an assignment that I felt dated back to elementary school curricula and one that each time neglected the difference in standing amongst the peers who would be asked to complete it. We were asked to complete a two part “Roots Representation and Journal Entry”. Via syllabus for the course, this assignment was completed:

“in order to increase your personal self-awareness of your own cultural background, you will design a “Roots Representation.” This is an opportunity to explore your own cultural identity by investigating your family’s unique history. By looking at your own roots, you may gain insight into your own worldview. Creatively represent your roots with words, pictures, personal items, poetry, drawings, art, etc. You will display your roots presentation and describe it to your peers in a 3-5 minute presentation.”

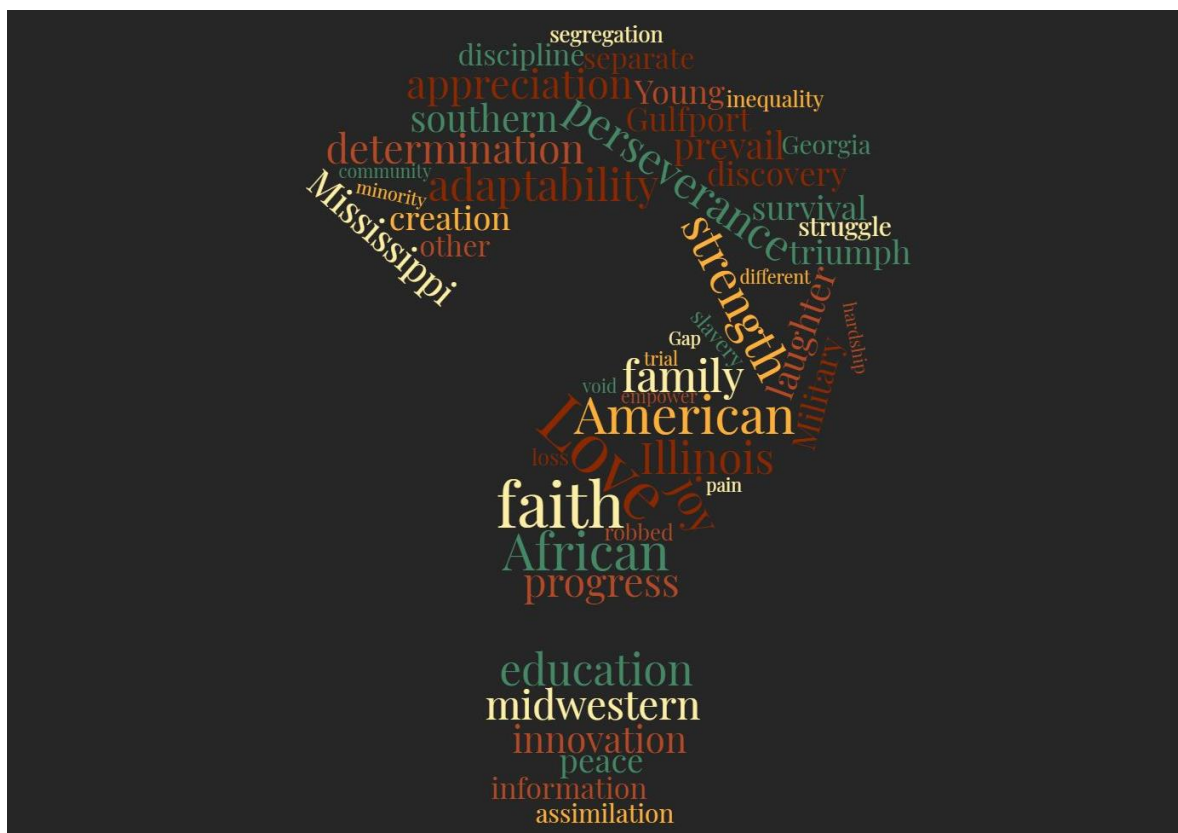
I remember feeling frustrated and at a loss for what I would do for my assignment. I knew how it would go. As someone who has spent their entire life engaged in predominantly White spaces I had gone through this before. I thought through it on my own as first. I attempted to figure out what I could bring in or present that would encompass my culture.

I considered taking what I perceived to be the easy way out. Maybe I would discuss midwestern culture, or the influence of the southern culture my parents were raised in. At some point I remember member feeling stuck to the point where I needed to process my thoughts. I sought out ideas and support from a mentor that I had met throughout one of my training experiences. I shared with her that I was unsure of how to tackle an assignment with a quickly approaching due date. I informed her that I needed to find an object that encompassed my “culture”. I remember feeling this sense of what I can only guess in hindsight was anger. I was angry that someone would ask me to trace my roots, without even a consideration for what I thought was the very obvious history I would find.

As we talked about the project she acknowledged and validated my concerns. She also shared with me that a friend of hers, was recently interested answering some of the same questions about her own cultural background. As a result, she sought answers from a company that mapped out individuals’ ancestry based on a provided DNA sample. Her friend’s exploration led to the revelation that she only had to go back two generations before she was met with information regarding the enslavement of her family members. At that point, I had decided what I would do to complete the assignment. While I became more consciously aware of the fact that some of my feelings of “anger” were also laced

with embarrassment, I decided to face my concerns head on. I addressed to portions of my culture that felt real and true, while also bringing attention to what I felt was the elephant in the room. The image presented in Figure 1, is the artifact that I created as a way of representing my cultural roots.

Figure 1. Roots representation assignment and presentation



While my peers presented on their family history dating back to the 1400s in some cases, I presented an intentionally thought-provoking question mark. Comprised of words that describe the makeup of my culture, I explained the artifact I had created to my peers. I shared that in many ways my roots are unknown and what is known can be painful to explore. While it was my goal to draw clear attention to the hardship that an exploration of my roots could uncover it was also my goal to showcase the resilience and

the successes that an exploration of my roots showcased. As such, the hardship was reflected in smaller print, while the triumphs and points of pride were presented in larger fonts.

My feelings surrounding the assignment were very clearly reflected within the accompanying journal reflection. We were asked to respond to the following prompts:

1. What is the item/object? Where did it come from?
2. How does the item represent your cultural roots?
3. What is your cultural background? If you don't know your cultural background – how did this happen in your family and what is your reaction to not knowing?
4. Are particular beliefs or values represented by this item? What elements of your worldview are represented by this item?
5. What did you learn from this assignment? Did anything surprise you?

In reviewing my response to the assignment, I found my answers to prompts to be painfully honest reflections of my experience. Though this assignment was completed very early on in the course, my exasperation can be felt within the tone of the written journal. In responding to prompt five, I wrote:

“Nothing about this assignment surprised me. I think the only thing that I may have learned, though I kind of already knew, is how uncomfortable I am with sharing my truth with a majority group. I think in this program in particular, I have had to become more guarded with my truth and experience because people rarely engage. I think to consistently engage or initiate conversations where I am highly vulnerable to be met with silence is exhausting. I have learned that I am

tired of putting myself on exhibit for others to learn from when it seems to be of little value to members of the majority group regardless.”

My feelings of fatigue and exasperation only increased as the course progressed. At some point I began to act on the frustrations I wrote about within my journal by appealing to my peers. Though the course had very quickly divided into Black students asking White peers to engage and White peers stonewalling with silence I continued to make appeals for my peers to engage. I remember getting somewhat stuck on the notion of allyship. I thought back to the critical event of year one in which my professor taught my peers and I that students of color were less intelligent. I reflected on how I felt in the moment of being taught that information, that I would obviously be opposed to accepting the information because I was the one being discussed. When the moment arose, I did my best to communicate that in the multicultural course. I asked my White peers to engage and attempted to explain the importance of their voices in seeking progress for members of marginalized groups. I explained that while we would continue to use our voices, some people were only ever going to be able to hear certain truths from people who looked like them. I appealed to my peers on many occasions. As the semester progressed the course began to weigh on me more and more. White students sat in silence as Black students shared their experiences and asked for more engagement for the betterment of children's lives. In reflecting back upon this experience, I can say that I always had the agenda of moving my peers forward. I had seen them sit in silence when guest lecturers taught that White privilege was not real, I had seen them sit in silence when professors taught that people of color were inherently less intelligent. As a school psychologist in training, I was worried about the children that my peers would one day go on to “serve”. Worried

that they would simply go on to perpetuate the same oppressive trends that exist within school systems today. As my peers and I made these appeals, I would say that my professor made excuses. I can remember feeling undercut, by the instructor, as we asked for our peers to engage in difficult conversations with us, the leader of the course asked nothing of them. In fact, the instructor on occasion, responded to the request for engagement by stating that the White students were engaging in the course by completing their assignments to reflect upon weekly journal prompts. I realized at that point that the instructor's stance would leave no space for the progress I was seeking. Unfortunately, from my perspective, they simply modeled the safety of avoiding difficult conversations by falling silent. For the most part, if White students did speak, they did so in defense of their silence. In response to requests to engage, I can remember specific peers responding that they knew that when the time came they would be able to speak up. I believe the final breaking point for me in the class occurred when a cohort-mate stated that they "didn't have to prove anything" to us. The distress of this twice a week 8:00 am course became too much. I had nothing left to give.

As my distress had become too much, I remember a particular day leaving class early. I do not remember how much time was left. I did not ask for permission from the instructor. I was upset, crying and depleted. I needed to be away from that space. As it was close to the end of the semester, I remember being worried about making sure I could successfully complete the final assignments for the other courses I was enrolled in as well. I gathered my things and left. Later that evening, a friend who was also enrolled in the course, sent me a message asking to stop by. They had shown up to check on me as they knew how difficult the course had been and in particular how challenging the silence

of my peers had been for me. It was then time for that peer to make an appeal to me. I remember they brought me a gift and asked me to take a step back for myself. They reflected upon how the course had gone, sharing that I had attempted to make the conversations comfortable and meaningful, but that I had given 100 percent of myself for people who were not even willing to take a single step toward me. I could see that they were right. I had never struggled in this way before, and I accepted no further progress would be made with the little time we had left in the course.

The Impact

The events surrounding this critical experience shifted my worldview and my perspective of myself greatly. As someone who had grown up and been primarily socialized in predominantly White spaces, this was the first time I had felt this feeling. Throughout my life I had never been one to generalize. I have of course experienced racism and othering, but never in what seemed to be such a blatant and unified way. At this point, the impact of my critical experiences began to come together to provide an undesired clarity. It was not supposed to be this way. I was not supposed to be shut out by my peers and I was not supposed to be devalued by my instructors. I had seen White people do better. I was at a loss for how little my White peers and Instructor were willing to engage. Throughout the course I found myself being in the minority of my Black peers who felt that we needed allyship from our White peers. I was confused by my stance and was unsure of how we ended up where we were. I knew what I had to be aware of, but I never imagined it would take on this form. I had learned the same lessons that all Black children had learned, heard the stories and the foretelling's. This, however, was my moment of realization. That my Blackness would always come first, and that to some, it

would always serve as a deterrent. A reason to disregard, to move away, or around. As a result, I became fearful, withdrawn. I sought safety in isolation and spent less time with peers outside of class. Some became upset that I disengaged from program functions, passing on attending annual picnics, or program meetings. I was frustrated by the response to my struggle, but I simply accepted it as an inability to understand my experience. It was my perspective that someone who understood, would not seek to put me in such spaces.

Critical Events of Year Three

The most difficult of the critical events shared within the current project is one that took place with, at the time, the faculty member that I trusted most in my graduate program. In the summer between my second and third year of graduate school I had a meeting with a faculty member to reflect on some of the experiences that I had within a course taken in the spring semester of my second year. Those events have been shared within the retellings of critical events of year two of the current project.

This story carries on from that point. Toward the end of spring semester of my second year there was a day when I was feeling overwhelmed to the point where I believed I would not successfully complete the semester if I did not take a break from attending the multicultural course I was enrolled in. As such, I composed an e-mail to the instructor of that course. In writing the e-mail I chose to be honest about how I was feeling and why I would need to miss class that day. I do not have the e-mail to refer to, but I can remember sharing details of the extent of the impact the class was having on me. I remember sharing that I was having difficulty sleeping, eating, and overall caring for myself. I remember speaking to the attendance policy that was outlined in the syllabus

taking accountability for the absence and acknowledging the risk that I may lose points for not attending that day. The e-mail that I composed was very honest, very vulnerable, and received a very short response.

I remember receiving an e-mail from the professor of that course stating that I needed to be in class that day as we would be discussing a topic that I had asked to discuss (i.e., Whiteness/White privilege) and that if I were not in attendance, that I needed to meet with the professor in their office at a time they had allotted. I remember interpreting the response as cold and dismissive. My wellbeing and the concerns that I had expressed for my academic success in other courses was not acknowledged. While I cannot be sure what the professor wanted to speak with me about in that meeting, the message that I received from the e-mail response was that my wellbeing was something that I did not have the right to prioritize. I did not respond to that professor's e-mail. While my memory does begin to blur at this point of the story, I believe I went about the rest of my day as usual, attending my other classes ensuring that I would be in a place to complete requirements for final presentations and assignments.

That same day, as I had not responded to the professor whose class I skipped, I received a phone call from the trusted faculty member. I do not remember if I watched the phone ring, or if I simply received a notification for a missed call. I do remember, knowing with certainty, that the trusted professor was calling me to tell me that I needed to go to class. As such, I did not return that phone call. Being that it was just a few days until the end of the semester, the trusted professor and I set up a meeting in the summer to discuss my progress and touch base.

When I arrived to the meeting we discussed, among other things, the missed call. The professor informed me that they called to tell me that I had to go to class to which I responded, “I know”. We began to discuss my reasoning for not going to the class and what my experience within that course had been like. The professor reflected on “hearing things” about the course and was interested in understanding my perspective. I remember telling them that I experienced the course as “traumatic”. Fairly immediately the professor responded by addressing my word choice. They shared that it was a strong word to use, and I informed them that I was aware and that I used it intentionally. As I reflected on the course, I remember becoming emotional and crying as I recalled different events that took place. The conversation continued on, moving into the realm of a problem-solving discussion. The professor was curious about how the course could be made better and what could be done differently. I do not remember if I was able to provide true feedback. I do not remember having ideas to contribute, or if I ever provided any conceptualization of concrete ways to improve the course for others. I do remember the professor throwing out an idea that they seemed to feel strongly about. They shared a sort of baseline point for the future of the course, stating that whatever we were able to come up with that there was a need for the course to be taught by a tenured faculty member. I remember not really understanding why that would be a necessity. To my question, the faculty responded that was because “it only takes one distressed student of color for someone to lose their job.”

Generally speaking, when I am having a conversation and someone says something that does not land right, I do not say anything. I take the time to process later on, simply absorbing the blow in the moment. In this instance, I did not do that. I cannot

remember the exact formulation of the question or confused utterance I offered at the time, but I do remember seeking clarity to the effect of asking what they meant by that statement. The response was, “[a higher-level administrator within the college] is very sensitive to those issues.” At that point I halted any pursuit of clarity. While I felt confused to hear this perspective coming from this trusted individual, I felt I had a clear understanding of the lane we had entered into and did not want to go any farther.

The Impact

In reflecting on this event, I can share that I did not leave the meeting upset. In actuality I do believe I concluded the conversation with the faculty member sharing that I was okay. While I had the clarity in the moment to know that I did not want to pursue that line of conversation any further, I did not have the clarity to understand the impact that the statements made would have until I left that meeting.

I soon found that I could not get those statements out of my head, “It only takes one distressed student of color for someone to lose their job”, this “[authority figure] is very sensitive to those issues”. There was so much that continuously circulated through my mind. So many questions, so much uncertainty. I found myself questioning the support I had received from this individual and the topics we had discussed. This was a faculty member who had us over to their house to discuss the impacts of redlining and wanted to take students on a trip to the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee. I could not make sense of what felt like mutually exclusive truths.

The distress that I had felt during my second year was only compounded. I began to have a physiological response whenever I was on campus. As I moved closer to

buildings in which my courses were held my heart raced and my skin crawled. I was struggled under the weight of what I had encountered and was I may encounter going forward. I operated in a state of perpetual fear.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Thematic analysis was selected as the method of analysis for the current work. Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis were followed to arrive at the final themes. Six phases of data analysis were completed. These include, 1) becoming familiar with the data via transcription, re-reading, and re-watching of interviews, 2) generating notes and beginning to tag data with codes from an initial review of the data, 3) evaluating codes to determine if unified themes arise, 4) analyzing themes to determine the appropriateness of fit to the initial tags and codes generated, 5) refinement of themes through clear labeling to begin to tell a clear story from the gathered data 6) selection and presentation of data. Completion of these phases of analysis resulted in three themes, each of which was supported by additional subthemes. These discovered themes highlight the most important messaging that surrounded my experiences as a Black woman pursuing a doctoral degree in the field of school psychology. The themes reflect a summarization of the lessons derived from analysis of the shared critical experiences.

Theme 1: Black students must be able to expect that their leadership see them. At a minimum leadership must attempt to do so.

I chose to pursue higher education at the university of Missouri because there was a certain standard that I felt entitled to hold the institution to. It was my belief that higher education is pursued as a result of a desire to improve and make progress. As such, I enrolled in the School Psychology program with an expectation of personal and professional growth. This expectation resulted from the personal assumption that such growth would be a shared value of the entirety of my graduate program, faculty and students alike. Through the peer debriefing sessions, this theme arose. As we discussed

the shared experiences, a consistent theme of expectation was present. I expected to be seen.

“Well, we talked about how we can't expect understanding because [White faculty and students] haven't had our experiences, but, I haven't had other experiences of marginalization, and I can understand that... and I'm not White I don't have access to that, so maybe that is super meaningful in this conversation, but I always want to be able to expect, which I know I can't expect, but I want to expect empathy, though... that you would be able to figure out how to. I don't know...”

(PD Session 8)

Within the quotation from a peer debriefing session, I discuss with peer debriefer number eight, my desire for more from the instructor. We discussed the limits of perspectives and the ways in which we might not be able to expect that our leaders understand us or our experiences. The quote reveals a tension between feelings of being unable to expect understanding and wanting, or perhaps needing, to be able to expect that. As a student I often found myself baffled by the lack of perspective taking that seemed to surround many of my academic experiences. I wanted to be able to expect more from the people we had entrusted with the task of leading us on our journey.

“my expectation was very much that [Instructor] be better I don't know... be able to step out of that [perspective] and so that's interesting because I never have reflected on the fact that, [Instructor] was on the same level that they were you know, I very much was like you're an instructor and you need to be better but it's that part... maybe you're not and that's actually really terrifying.” (PD Session 8)

While it is appropriate to hold space for the varying identities and backgrounds that individuals in leadership positions bring with them as they instruct courses, advise students, and lead programs and colleges. It is also appropriate to expect that just as we as students are expected to go forth and become the leaders of our field, that we would need to be led by individuals who are able to expand their perspectives in order to expose us to new ways of thinking.

Isolation. A subtheme that arose revealed that if individuals in leadership positions are unable to attempt or consider the ways in which their leadership or instruction impacts Black students, or students of other marginalized identities, harm may be inevitable. In many ways that harm can quickly result in isolative consequences. Within another peer debriefing session, a peer and I discussed the impact of engaging in activities that did not seem to take this into account:

“I remember too feeling like... embarrassed. That my peers can go back... I remember [peer] was talking about a family farm from like 1400, I don't know... and also fear. I had talked to a friend who shared that a woman they knew only had to go back two generations and then slavery was there and so that... that's not even something that I want to... really want to explore.” (PD Session 2)

It would be inaccurate for me to assert with certainty that my instructor did not consider the impact of assigning us to explore our cultural roots via presentation. I can only speak to the lack of consideration that seemed to exist.

“you're asking us to reflect on our culture and I felt that I didn't know my culture and there's historical context that makes that to be true, and so... I remember I did that question mark. And I shared that these are things that are part of my family

and my life and that kind of thing, but that I can't tell you where I'm from or you know beyond where my dad and mom are from. Really, I remember feeling... always on display in that class and that the vulnerability that was there wasn't necessarily, I don't know, recognized by the Faculty in that situation.” (PD Session 3)

The feelings of isolation were the result of multiple factors. As a Black student I was often one of only a few students who did not identify as White. In many cases, I was enrolled in courses comprised solely of my cohort, at which point I was the only Black person in a room with seven White peers and a White instructor. This became more difficult to navigate in instances when the topic of conversation was centered on aspects my identity. A lack of a sense of allyship from the stance of instructors or peers only magnified the feelings of facing my academic journey alone. In reflecting on critical events of year one. I shared feelings associated with the lesson on cognitive assessment.

“I also remember feeling like I was the only one who was saying anything, and I think that added to the “Am I insane?”, “Am I hearing this right?”, “Am I...”, what's going on here? I think I was questioning myself a lot, because I was who was being talked about right, so maybe this is something that I can't accept because I feel too close to it? And is this something that I need to accept?... That was so wild to experience, and I think... I've had that happen, where in undergrad people would say, “well you're only here because there's a quota and not that you necessarily belong”, but I've never had it taught to me by a teacher, which is why it felt so different.” (PD Session 6)

To be placed in situations such as these reminded me of the space I was entering into. Spaces that historically were not meant for me and had not yet evolved to the point where othering was not embedded within the curriculum. Speaking my truth, would mean a certain level of discomfort for the majority of individuals in the room. Withholding my truth would mean forfeiting my integrity and continuing to negotiate my identity for the comfort of others. That choice would come at the expense of myself and the already marginalized children we sought to serve. As such, existing in this space in some ways required taking the risk and learning to lean into intermittent isolation.

Theme 2: Exposure to Embedded Inequities Resulted in Barriers of Responsibility and Exhaustion.

Within any academic journey there will be barriers that impact a student's progress which are out of anyone's control. For this reason, my narrative has not included details of events that were challenging and even tragic that serve as trying parts of my personal life. Within the current narrative, it is important to acknowledge the fact that all students will be challenged. Life takes, and gives, and circumstances change. Though, grief, loss, and challenge are inevitable, inequity is not. Peer debriefing interviews revealed the current theme of barriers that resulted from excisable inequities. In speaking with peer debriefer number three, our conversation led me to understand the differences between my experience and that of my White peers.

“It highlighted the privilege of choice for me because when we walked into that classroom, we were the topic of discussion. So, it's easy to not engage in a conversation when they're not talking about your identity and I feel, I guess solidarity, with any marginalized identity so even if it wasn't "Black people

week" I feel the need to be on my game and engaged in case anything happens because we are all marginalized and I have to be supportive in that sense. That wasn't something that when... At 9:00 when we walked out of that room, I feel like our White peers were able to shed that conversation and move on whereas I carried that with me for the rest of the day. We don't get to leave it behind ever.

So that was another thing that was highlighted for me that choice." (PD Session 3)

Noticing the differences in patterns of engagement was frustrating and seemed to highlight a level of permissiveness from faculty. In response to students of color requesting engagement, the instructor of the course seemed to provide an outlet for White students to continue to remain silent.

"In certain classes teachers will call students in... and [they] can't make them talk and I'm aware of that. But so, if every day Helen is asking the other students or whoever... at some point I might look at someone who has never opened their mouth in my class and say "hey I just wonder if you have anything that you've been thinking about or anything that you want to contribute to the conversation" you know? "I value your perspective and I think it could help us move this conversation forward." ... So, things like that as opposed to... I know one day in class, the professor had said. "well, they're journaling" or "I am getting this feedback because of the other assignments in this class", so for me that was an undercut. You undercut the students in class who are asking their peers to engage with them and you're setting a standard that you guys don't have to engage. "you told me, so you don't have to tell anybody else" which is unrealistic to everything in our profession, right? When you're in a meeting you're not going to get to pull

your supervisor aside and write them a note and be good to go. You're going to have to open your mouth and engage and there are going to be times when that looks difficult, and I think that was my expectation that she would have been more authentic about that. I appreciate that you're journaling but don't act like we all aren't journaling too... that bare minimum isn't going to be good enough and, in the field, it's not going to be good enough and that's I think truly it... You're going to have to have this hard conversation." (PD Session 3)

Responsibility. The subtheme of responsibility emerged from the data by way of perceived acceptance of White silence. This quickly became a barrier of responsibility for me as a student. As mentioned in the initial quotation I felt a certain level of responsibility to ensure conversations surrounding marginalized identities were carried out in a particular way. From my perspective there were very obvious gaps in the instruction and a level of care that was absent. These missing components left room for the potential for harm in the profession we were all trying to gain entry to if not addressed. As this was not addressed by the individuals in the critical events shared, it became my duty to address it. In discussing this in a peer debriefing session I shared my belief for a need for allyship. I attempted to insert meaning into conversations we were having, sharing from a space of vulnerability the differences in the amount of power we held. I felt that it was my responsibility to attempt to get my peers to a space where they were willing to see the world from another perspective.

"I was trying to call in White students. I was saying, it can't come from me... For certain people in this world what I say is never going to matter, and so I need you to engage, right? And I remember having that conversation and just, I think just

realizing that it was a choice for people and that. In this setting it was a choice that people weren't going to select and just feeling... somebody said... they were saying they're capable. "I'm capable of recognizing and standing up and stepping in when I need to, but I don't need to right now". And I remember I didn't say it, but I carried it with me throughout the class, and it was just clear that... you can't because you already don't see it. I've already witnessed you miss the moment so I'm trying to call you in so that you can recognize it. Because, we've had classes together, where the Professor teaches that people of color are less intelligent, and you didn't say anything. And so, that would have been a moment where, if you were capable and recognized these moments, where you would have been able to say something. So, I remember in this class feeling like okay, you have however many weeks to help people see it, so that you're not the only one who sees it, and you're not the only one who says something. And then it can come from somebody that it matters when it comes from them. And just recognizing that some people in that class felt that they had a level of expertise that they didn't and that made them feel comfortable in their silence." (PD Session 2)

Ultimately, the lack of engagement and misplaced confidence led to feelings of confusion. The experience of these critical events left me feeling somewhat lost with regard to my purpose. Deterred from my original plan, I felt unable to pursue my initial interests as my White peers did. I did not feel I had the luxury to explore areas of interest and instead felt a duty to question the gaps and blatant inequities as they existed within my training.

“I think that was another thing too for me that was really difficult is that I don't know, I guess, I felt some kind of responsibility in that class to seize the moment of, we have all these people here and let's learn some things. I need you to understand that you're already missing things and you don't recognize that and that's the level we're trying to get to that's the goal.” (PD Session 5)

While some would perceive this as a choice, or something that would develop into a passion of mine. I would assert that this is far from the truth. More than an interest, it felt like a task that I was assigned. I was interested in developing expertise in other areas, but I felt an inescapable duty to show up in a way that I believed necessary.

“I did not come into Mizzou talking about I want to do, social justice... any race... I wanted to talk about mental health, I wanted to talk about academic interventions. This is something that was almost mandated for me through my experiences.” (PD Session 8)

Exhaustion. At a point, the responsibility that I felt became somewhat of a distraction. It was difficult to find the balance between the responsibility I felt to limit harm, and the desire to be successful in my own academic pursuits. As I made progress in my program, the critical events shared began to compound resulting in a sense of an ever-present, ever-fatiguing concern. A lack of buy-in, and mutual investment eventually brought about the feeling that the efforts to make change were futile.

“Like you said, they're telling us to focus on one thing and we're saying, I can't focus on this successfully and fully if this barrier is still... always haunting me and then you focus, you're like okay I just need to get out of here at this point

that's, all I can do. But you're still worried about the students coming after you.”

(PD Session 8)

At some point I became resigned to what seemed to be the reality that the changes I was hoping for were not going to take place. The values that I held and assumed would be shared within my academic community, were not echoed in a way that allowed for meaningful progress at the stage of my program. In discussing the critical events of year two and year three I reflected on moments where I was resigned to the fact that I did not have anything more to give.

“So, I remember just feeling... Getting to a place where it was clear we're not going to get anywhere.” (PD Session 2), “I didn't know what else to do” (PD Session 1) “the peak of my desire was just to just let me finish and like leave me alone, really.” (PD Session 1)

Theme 3: Adhering to politics of respectability did not alleviate the activation of stereotype threat.

Of the themes derived from the current work, this is the most personally meaningful. Participating in peer debriefings in conjunction with the reflexive journaling that accompanied the current work revealed to me the importance of understanding the complexity of our identities. In the retellings of the critical events of this story I attempted to share events in a way that revealed the essence of my experiences while remaining considerate of the other parties in my story. I obscured identities to the best of my ability, yet the current theme still spoke to the importance of complexity that arises as varying identities interact. The current theme highlights the interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of betrayal. With regard to the theme of interpersonal betrayal there

was a sense of trusted relationships reaching a fork in the road when personally tangible issues of race arose.

“...the complexity of a person that wanted to take us to the national civil rights museum, but also told me it only takes one distressed student of color for someone to lose their job. How do we, you know hold space for both things and realize that this is something that you have to be intentional and active about always and that these little things you do can very easily be... just deteriorate... I don't know how to really explain it. I think that was definitely my biggest betrayal in this program and I realized it doesn't matter, who I was. I was a Black woman at the end of the day. Because in that multicultural class that was being referenced, I felt I was very reserved. I was very much like go easy on them, you know, bringing them in, be gentle... “it's okay, that you have this background, but we're here now, and we can do better” very coddling. But then to be seen as a liability anyway was mind blowing, identity shattering, all of the things that you could think of. Really broke me all the way down.” (PD Session 4)

The response to my concerns was difficult to process due to some of the educative experiences I had. Relationships in which these topics had previously been easily explored were now dismantled. It seemed that issues of race and racism were okay to discuss when the issues existed “out there”. When issues of race arrived in the front yard of my academic program, it seemed to trigger systems of defense very quickly. I believe this acted as a moment of activation of stereotype threat. Defined as, “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that

would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (Steele, 2003, p. 253). In conversation with peer debriefer number one I discuss the cues that informed me of my standing.

“I remember feeling like, “Oh I’m a liability” you just told me I am someone, like you said, I’m a threat to people's feelings of security in their position and so that was something that was also really scary for me because I mean, I know, generally, as a Black person, there are those stereotypes and those stigmas but... to feel that I had a good relationship with someone and then, no matter what I’m still a liability was... it was a lot to experience.” (PD Session 1)

There was a two-fold realization in that while I was realizing that this trusted individual had a certain perceptions of a group that I was a member of, I was also realizing that this individual held these beliefs about me.

“There was just a moment where I kind of understood. At least in my reflection on the experience I remember feeling like [trusted faculty member] drew a line in the sand and put me on the other side of it whether [they] realized it or not.” (PD Session 1)

Though the most meaningful betrayals took place within my relationships with faculty, there were also interpersonal betrayals that occurred within my peer relationships. In processing the messages received from the multicultural course, I reflected on the lessons learned in relation to my peers.

“I learned how much energy I was putting into being someone who wasn't scary... wasn't the stereotype. It didn't matter if we were friends and we went out to dinner, and we did projects together and we helped each other and whatever else... at the end of the day. I wasn't worth engaging in that conversation. So that

was a really big lesson that I took from that class and had to heal from and figure out how to go on in life with this new perception of myself... that to be Black is always going to be first and even if I have a relationship with someone, I still have to be ready for that to come up that that's how they see me.” (PD Session 3)

Intrapersonal Betrayal. The reflection of what I perceived to be interpersonal betrayals also revealed the ways in which I engaged intrapersonal betrayal. In reflecting on the experiences, I had within my graduate program, I became aware of my tendency to engage in respectability politics. A tendency to attempt to make others more comfortable with my identity by ensuring I showed up in very particular ways.

“I think its genuine... I do like to be happy and have fun and be kind and stuff, but I do think that there is an extra layer to it. That I won't allow myself to be tired, because if I show up and I'm like this, then maybe people are going to think I have an attitude, or something along those lines, and so making sure that I exert that energy anyway even when I don't have the energy to give and so that's been another lesson.” (PD Session 5)

Ultimately, through my experiences, I became aware of the patterns of behavior I would engage in. During my third peer debriefing session, I reflected upon the outcome of engaging in respectability politics. I learned that remaining small for the comfort of others, served no one, and was actually harmful to my self-perception.

“I think, honestly, this is maybe not the answer you're looking for, but it feels really freeing. One thing that I've been reflecting on a lot with regard to this program and even as it relates to this experience is... to be who I am and you're going to take it how you take it ... I think through this, I was able to shed the

responsibility of molding a good person in your mind. It's just a weight lifted off. I don't even know that it was something that I was super conscious of until after multicultural and processing things, but I just... I don't have to smile at you, if I don't want to smile. I don't have to exert the energy to have a pleasant conversation with you if I don't have the energy... And kind of letting go of the angry Black woman kind of thing. If that's how you want to view me that's how you view me, but I learned that at the end of the day there's nothing I can do to make you view me differently. I have to be who I am and that's just so much easier for everybody right? I think that's what I took out of it. That's not my assignment, that's yours if that's how you view me. I'm going to be who I am.”

(PD Session 3)

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The current work set out to explore select critical experiences of a Black woman pursuing higher education. During a time of heightened racial tension in our nation, the retelling of these experiences as a graduate student offered the potential to shed light on the ways in which inequities in our nation are far reaching and ever present. Three themes resulted from peer debriefing interviews that took place during the data collection phase of the project. The initial theme discusses the impact of the choices of others, while the latter two focus on the impact of events and personal choices made throughout graduate school.

Theme one provides insight into the ways in which I experienced feeling a lack of understanding and perspective taking. It was supported by the subtheme of isolation, which revealed itself as a result of not being seen. A lack of perspective taking, or acknowledgment of individual experiences was found to result in the creation of silos. Throughout the experiences shared, as a Black woman, I was often the only or one of few people of color present. As such, when limited perspectives are presented, or considered, those who do not identify with the majority of the group can be left to feel isolated or othered. Though I do not believe that was ever the intention of any of the individuals I interacted with throughout my program, the experience was potent and frequent enough to arise to a level of importance within the data.

Theme two speaks to the ways in which experiencing inequity led to feelings of responsibility and exhaustion. A continued exposure to what I experienced as inequities resulted in expenditure of effort to combat those narratives. While initially innocuous, to

respond to and challenge takes a toll that appeared in the data as a subtheme of exhaustion.

Lastly, theme three showcased an inevitable and invaluable lesson learned. That censoring yourself in hopes of being more palatable or less misunderstood is futile. This theme highlighted the activation of stereotype threat and unpacking the realization of such phenomena within oneself.

Limitations

Within the current work, many of the barriers and stressors of my experience were discussed due to the overarching purpose of the work. A limitation of the current work is found in the absence of discussion of the protective factors that existed. While my pursuit of graduate education proved challenging due to the narratives shared, there were many instances in which I was able to find pockets of community, safety, and support.

Additionally, the selection of experiences shared was made based on the inescapable nature of the events. The events shared took place in mandatory courses, and unavoidable relationships with professors, or faculty members. The goal of the work was to target experiences that were imbedded and could have been avoided. As such, similar experiences that took place throughout my graduate experience, but were not imbedded in mandatory ways were overlooked. This is to say that the current work focused on inequities and critical events that took place in the academic realm. However, the absence of stories within the professional (i.e., work or practicum experiences) and social realm (i.e., experiences as a student in the community) by no means suggests that these spaces were safer.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) method was used in partnership with a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework to explore this topic. The narratives shared and challenged in peer debriefing sessions reflected core tenets of the framework in several ways. The overarching alignment with the framework evident throughout the narrative is the tenet that speaks to the ordinariness of racism. As previously shared, the current work defines racism as, “a system of dominance, power, and privilege based on racial-group designations; rooted in historical oppression of a group defined or perceived by dominant-group members as inferior, deviant, or undesirable; and occurring in circumstances where members of the dominant group created or accept their societal privilege by maintaining structures, ideology, values, and behavior that have the intent or effect of leaving non-dominant group members relatively excluded from power, esteem, status, and or equal access to societal resources.”(Harrell, 2000). Racism is distinguished from notions of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination in that these constructs can be enacted based on a range of traits (Harrell, 2000). The critical events shared showcase the ways in which racism entered into my experiences in ways that were accepted and, in some cases, invisible to those who identified differently than myself. I will not speak to the intent behind the events experienced. However, without question these events had the effect of either perpetuating the notion or making me as Black individual feel disqualified from deserving equal power, status or, access all the while negatively impacting my esteem.

Through the retelling of my beginning years in graduate school it was evident that my experiences did not align with the social construction thesis. Rather, instruction at

times emphasized the dissimilarities of races, indicating differences in intellect across racial groups were simply an accurate reflection of varying ability rather than rooted in any meaningful historical context. These events also lend themselves to the tenet which expresses a benefit based on proximity to Whiteness. I cannot say why a majority of my White peers chose to remain quiet during times where problematic or difficult topics arose. In many ways though, whether intended or not, peers benefited from allowing such things to be taught or refusing to engage in difficult conversations. By maintaining their silence, the risk of distancing themselves from Whiteness by challenging the system was eliminated.

Additionally, the tenet that speaks to the ways in which a tendency to differentially racialize showed up within the narratives in close connection to the tenet that encourages reflection on intersectionality and complexity of identity. Within my relationships in my program, many of the faculty were able to have meaningful conversations about race and racism. They were able to speak to the ways in which communities of color, including the Black community, was actively marginalized. While this is true, it seemed that these conversations were better handled when they were considered separate from our program. We could critically discuss the consequences of and meaning behind things such as redlining, the 2016 presidential election, and the many ways in which disproportionality shows up in schools. We could not however, discuss the contradictions as they existed within curriculum and relationships within our program.

More specifically, within the critical events of year three that were discussed, a trusted, high-power individual who was capable of leading such conversations, was also

able to dismiss the concerns of “distressed student(s) of color” in alignment with and/or protection of their group membership. Though identities of others were obscured throughout the retellings shared, this example establishes the connection the CRT tenet that speaks to the importance of understanding intersectionality and the complexity of identity. Important to understand within oneself and as one interacts with others, it is incredibly important to be aware of the natural alignments that arise as a result of the identities we hold and the ways in which we may challenge or maintain these alignments.

Conclusion

The initial theme of the current work revealed was comprised of expectation and isolation. This was summarized as a need for leadership to be able to see their students. The importance of perspective taking and willingness to attempt to view the world from another lens is an important factor when considering the ways students of color are supported. I expected those around me to be able to provide equitable support and reflection on my experiences. The absence of this perspective taking resulted in isolation via lack of consideration of what things may be like for students who do not identify with majority group membership.

The second theme revealed a theme comprised of inequity, responsibility, and exhaustion. The burden of inequities does not simply dissolve when uncovered if they are not addressed and taken on in meaningful ways they will persist or be taken on by individuals who are unable to ignore them. Within the current narrative, this showed up within the theme of feelings of responsibility that led to eventual feeling of exhaustion when buy-in from instructors and/or peers was vague or absent.

Lastly, the third and final theme was comprised of betrayal of others and betrayal of self. The need to critically reflect on identities personally held, as well as identities external to self is crucial in developing meaningful progress and mitigating instances of harm. Failure to engage in this work allows for the possibility of trapping yourself or others based on unmerited, and unfounded, assumption.

Implications

The themes derived from analysis speak to areas of need that could be supported for Black students as well as students of other marginalized backgrounds. These themes lend themselves to action steps that can be taken by faculty, staff, or students. The initial theme highlights the need for leadership to acknowledge and create space for the perspectives that differ from the master or status quo narratives. For instance, critically reviewing the voices that are typically amplified, and naturally serve as foundations to the curriculum. If singular perspectives are shared and upheld as true without consideration of other possibilities, a space is created for individuals to feel isolated or invalidated in their identities or experiences.

The second theme highlights a need for leadership to address barriers as they are identified. While leadership can take the form of the assumed leader who serves as faculty or advisor to students, leadership can also be enacted by students who hope to support fellow students as allies. Addressing barriers may not result in an immediate removal or remedy, however, it is important that the burden of problem solving is shared.

Theme three serves as an action step for those experiencing barriers or marginalizing events. Still, it can serve as a lesson for those who commonly exist in spaces where their identities are a majority of what is represented. For those who identify

with experiences of marginalization, there is a lesson in unlearning the habit of displaying appropriateness or palatability to become accepted. My tendency to attempt to shrink, or assimilate, only harmed myself and did not protect me from experiencing racism or othering. The lesson for those who are in the position of being one of many is that we do not ask the few to fit in in ways that are betraying to themselves. That when we are in the position of being a majority, we create space for differing identities without presumption of charity or meeting quotas.

As previously mentioned, the critical events that were shared were selected because of my belief that they were avoidable. Though I have grown personally and professionally as a result of the stories told, I would hope that students who come after me would be able to say that their experience was different. A core tenet of Critical Race Theory is that racism is an ordinary, or commonplace phenomenon. This tenet intends to speak to the pervasiveness, rather than the acceptability of racism. The current work presents the challenge to faculty, students, and staff, of making racism in academia less ordinary.

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