

UNDERSTANDING RACE, MENTAL HEALTH, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE AMONG
BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS

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MAYA MILAN WILLIAMS

Lisa Y. Flores, Ph.D., Dissertation Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled:

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Presented by Maya Williams,

a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor Lisa Y. Flores, Ph.D.

Chair of Committee

Professor Francisco Sánchez, Ph.D.

Committee Member

Professor Christy Hutton, Ph.D.

Committee Member

Professor Kaleea Lewis, Ph.D.

Outside Committee Member

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation and my achievements in receiving this doctorate to my family. Thank you to my parents, Wanda and Joe, and my grandmother for being my biggest supporters and encouraging me during this process.

Lastly, I dedicate this work to all the Black students who make the brave choice to advocate for change and racial justice. This work is to advocate for you.

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“What I try to tell young people is that if you come together with a mission, and it’s grounded with love and a sense of community, you can make the impossible possible.”

– John Lewis.

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Maya Williams

Dr. Lisa Flores, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

Within the past decade, there has been increased attention to discrimination and racism toward communities of color. In response, many Black and African American adults engage in activism and civic disruption (Szymanski, 2012) to fight against societal structures that oppress marginalized communities. Conversely, activism can be physically and emotionally taxing, especially for people of color who engage in activism related to their racial/ethnic identity (Linder et al., 2019). At the collegiate level, there is a lack of research about the mental wellness of Black students who experience a hostile campus racial climate and advocate for changes at their university.

Utilizing a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach with a critical ideology and racial healing framework, this study explored how Black students engaged in identity-based activism take care of themselves when they experience general, race-related, and social justice-related stressors. Findings reveal that Black college students who engage in social justice experienced stressors due to institutional factors, like a hostile campus racial climate, and factors related to student life, such as navigating the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic racism. Furthermore, Black students are shifting the existing mental health stigma and are open to mental health support. Due to a lack of university support and access to Black and African American counselors, Black students seek help from their community and utilize self-coping strategies to support their well-being.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Within the past decade, there has been increased attention to acts of discrimination and racism toward communities of color. As such, there has been a spark of activist movements to fight for racial justice for people of color. From Black Lives Matter (BLM) to #SayHerName to Stop Anti-Asian and Pacific Islander hate, there has been national uprising and protests regarding the treatment of underrepresented groups, particularly the Black and African American community. When faced with racial injustice and prompted by racism-related events, many Black and African American adults engage in activism and civic disruption (Szymanski, 2012) as a means to not only cope with and find solidarity in race-related injustice but to actively fight against societal structures and systems in place to further oppress marginalized communities. We have seen activist movements regarding human rights and justice nationally and at the collegiate level. Many college students are aware of the systemic inequality on their campus and are eager to advocate for themselves and their peers. Students of color who experience racism and a hostile campus climate may be particularly motivated to advocate for changes at their university. However, engaging in social justice and activism can be physically and emotionally taxing, especially for people of color who engage in activist activities related to their racial/ethnic identity (Linder et al., 2019b). As such, it is essential to understand the unique stressors faced by students of color who engage in social justice and activist activities and how these impact their overall well-being.

Using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) underscored by critical ideology (Denzin, 2015) and a radical healing lens (French et al., 2020), this study expands the literature on the mental health and well-being of Black college students who

engage in acts of social justice and activism at predominantly White institutions. This chapter begins with an overview of diversity-related concerns on college campuses and a brief overview of contemporary activist movements. Additionally, this chapter describes the relationship between experiences of racial discrimination and mental health and well-being, particularly for students of color and Black students. The chapter concludes the research positionality and a brief description of the methodological approach used in this study.

College Diversity

One of the most recent trends within higher education is the increased diversity of college enrollment. Between 2000 and 2018, the percentage of college enrollment for 18–24-year-old people of color increased. Specifically, the rates of Black individuals enrolling in college increased from 31% to 37%, the rates of Latinx individuals rose from 22% to 36%, and the rates for American Indian/Alaska Native rose from 16% to 24% (College Enrollment Rates, 2020). While colleges and universities may look diverse within their student body, most colleges are unprepared for a campus that reflects racial diversity among its students. Most colleges lack inclusive teaching and curriculum practices in which students not only learn about topics of diversity and inclusivity but also read literature and textbooks from individuals with diverse identities. Also, many college professors, especially those with privileged identities (i.e., White, male), lack the necessary knowledge and skills to teach and interact with students of color. As such, when race-related conversations arise in the classroom, these professors are often unsure how to handle conversations and may react by ignoring the event or denouncing the

topic. Furthermore, while the number of students enrolling in college is increasing, there are still very few faculty of color teaching within higher education.

Colleges and universities frequently pride themselves on being a diverse space. They often use "inclusive" and "diversity" to endorse a melting pot of students from different cultural backgrounds and races. However, students of color often feel marginalized due to experiences of discrimination at their universities. For example, most college courses lack diversity within the classroom, resulting in many students being one of the few students of color in their class. As such, these students may be subject to more scrutiny from their professors because they do not blend in with the majority. There may be similar experiences within university housing in which students of color feel under a microscope because of their racial difference (Harwood et al., 2012). Accompanied with standing out, students of color may also experience microaggressions due to professor and peer bias and stereotypes (Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Within the classroom, students of color may be alienated or ignored by their professors and peers because of a perceived lack of competence or intelligence. Relatedly, students of color may face backlash for calling out acts of racism. These factors often lead to a particularly uncomfortable and often hostile campus environment for students of color. Therefore, while colleges and universities may promote a campus that values diversity and inclusion, the reality is anything but especially for students of color who attend predominantly White universities and institutions.

Predominantly White institutions (PWI) generally refer to colleges and universities whose undergraduate population is comprised of an overwhelming White majority. However, this simplified definition does not address the systems and ideologies

in place that value the White majority and further oppress historically marginalized individuals. As such, PWIs are defined as institutions that are rooted in and replicate the historical practices and policies of the majority White culture and work further to marginalize the identities and experiences of people of color (Bourke, 2016).

Campus Activist Movements

As a result of racial tension and a hostile campus environment, many students of color engage in civil disobedience and activism to advocate for change and justice (Logan et al., 2017; Ogunyemi et al., 2020). This has been on the rise since 2014 as a result of societal uproar regarding racial injustice and police brutality, and the Black Lives Matter movement. In 2015, the murder of Michael Brown sparked outrage and protest throughout Ferguson, Missouri. However, this activist movement did not stay confined to Ferguson; it sparked national outrage regarding police brutality and racial injustice on college campuses. One of the most notable movements to address racial injustice at the collegiate level occurred at the University of Missouri.

In response to racial injustice and a hostile campus climate, students at the University of Missouri advocated for institutional change. Concerned Student 1950 - reflecting the year that the university admitted its first Black student - was formed after a lack of administrative intervention and inadequate response to multiple incidents of racism directed at Black students (Pearson, 2015). Amid marches, die-ins, occupying campus spaces, and a hunger strike, Concerned Student 1950 also developed a list of demands which included the resignation of President Tim Wolfe, hiring more faculty of color, relevant mental health services, and several other items to dismantle racist and oppressive practices embedded within the institution. The protests ultimately ended

following involvement from Black football players and a refusal to play until Wolfe resigned (Pearson, 2015).

The national movement at the University of Missouri encouraged activism among other college campuses and universities, such as a walk-out at Ithaca College in response to a lack of response to racist incidents on the campus (Griggs, 2015) and a sit-in at Brandeis University to advocate for more Black faculty (Ransom, 2015). Relatedly, students at colleges across the United States advocated for racial equality in various forms, such as demanding culturally informed curriculum, required diversity workshops and training, renaming buildings named after individuals who were known racists, colonists, and slave owners, and actionable plans to continually dismantle systemic oppression within the university system (Black Liberation Collective, n.d.). Notably, across campuses, student demands highlighted a need for more mental health services for racial and ethnic minority students as well as more counselors of color. As such, many student protests resulted in actionable change.

In response to student protests, administrators at schools such as Claremont McKenna (Watanabe & Rivera, 2015), Ithaca (Lederman, 2016), Yale (Hartocollis, 2015), and the University of Missouri (Lahucik et al., 2018) resigned from their positions. Relatedly, several universities have renamed campus buildings and halls to reflect historical leaders of color (Sinclair, 2016). While previous student protests deemed fruitful and resulted in actionable change within the institution, engaging in activism is not free from risk and consequences. For some students, engaging in activism can serve as a severe risk to academic success and well-being. Some students at Syracuse

University found themselves suspended after participating in a sit-in to address a lack of university involvement in discriminatory events on campus (Anderson, 2020).

Engaging in activism can have serious negative implications on the well-being and stress experienced by students of color. In addition to the general stressors associated with being in college, students of color encounter stressors related to their racial identity, which can have profound negative implications on their well-being. However, students of color who are also engaging in activism on campus are dealing with many different stressors that their same-race and different-race peers do not deal with.

While college is often thought of as a time for finding oneself and developing your identity, for some student activists of color, this experience is coupled with negotiating an activist identity. Black students in leadership positions often take on the emotional labor and subsequent consequences associated with advocating for change; however, their universities typically reap the benefits (Jones & Reddick, 2017). As such, these students may find that engaging in advocacy efforts at their university can impact their health and well-being in various ways (Ballard et al., 2019; Jones & Reddick, 2017; Klar & Kasser, 2009).

Some evidence suggests that engaging in activism is associated with risky health behaviors, including substance use and drinking behaviors (Ballard et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2003), mainly as a means to cope with the adversity associated with activism.

Engaging in activism can be a challenging process because change happens slowly. As such, those engaging in activism may find themselves navigating toward substance use to cope. However, there has also been research to suggest a positive relationship between activism and well-being (Klar & Kasser, 2009), as engaging in activism can be a

protective factor against experiences of discrimination (Hope et al., 2018). Activism may also support a sense of belonging as students of color find community amongst like-minded individuals. Nonetheless, prior research indicates that activism may serve as both a protective factor for mental health and a risk factor (Ballard et al., 2019; Gorski & Chen, 2015; Hickson et al., 2021; Klar & Kasser, 2009; Linder et al., 2019a; Linder et al., 2019b). However, there is less research on the experiences of Black students involved in activism and the relationship between their racial identity, engagement in activism, and mental well-being.

Racism and Discrimination

Multiple studies have demonstrated a link between high levels of discrimination and racism and poor physical health and mental health among racial and ethnic minority populations (Carter et al., 2017; Huynh et al., 2012; Kessler et al., 1999; Paradies, 2006; Paradies et al., 2015; Pascoe & Richman, 2009; Pieterse et al., 2012; Schmitt et al., 2014). Experiences of racism are pervasive and can significantly impact the physical and mental well-being of Black Americans and African Americans (Huynh et al., 2012; Volpe et al., 2012), especially college-aged students (Pieterse et al., 2010; Prelow et al., 2006). Students of color are more likely to experience microaggressions related to their racial/ethnic identity (Blume et al., 2012; Ogunyemi et al., 2020) in the form of a lack of culturally inclusive curriculum, a lack of instructors of color, and exploitation of Black students for the appearance of diversity (Mill, 2020). Black and African American students are particularly vulnerable to overt and subtle racial discrimination on the individual and institutional level through interactions with peers and college faculty (Ancis et al., 2000; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Harwood et al., 2012; Mills, 2020).

Relatedly, experiences of racial discrimination can have significant implications for physical health (Black et al., 2015; Carter et al., 2017; Lockwood et al., 2018; Paradies, 2006; Williams et al., 2021; Volpe et al., 2021). Race-related discrimination has been linked to risky substance use behaviors (Blume et al., 2012; Gilbert & Zemore, 2017; Hurd et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2003; Pittman et al., 2017), larger waist circumference and higher body mass index (Bernardo et al., 2017; Volpe et al., 2021), sleep concerns (Slopen et al., 2016), illness and disease (Black et al., 2015), and cardiovascular disease (Lewis et al., 2014; Lockwood et al., 2018).

These findings indicate how pervasive experiencing racism and discrimination are for racial and ethnic minority groups, especially students of color. As such, students of color are particularly vulnerable to experiences of racism and discrimination at PWIs and the harmful impact on mental health and well-being. Relatedly, colleges and universities need to critically analyze how they support the mental health needs of their students of color and evaluate support services such as college counseling centers.

College Student Mental Health

Research has found that students who seek counseling services at their university and remain in those services may have better academic success, higher grade point averages, and higher graduation rates than those who do not seek services or drop out (Schwitzer et al., 2018). However, most students needing mental health services do not receive any treatment, especially on their college campus (Eisenberg et al., 2011), especially students of color.

There are significant disparities in the rates of Black and African American students who seek out services, receive services, and benefit effectively from those

services (Eisenberg et al., 2011; Lipson et al., 2018; USDHHS, 2001). According to the 2020 annual survey from the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors, roughly 14% of the clients seeking services at university counseling centers are Black and African American, whereas 60.1% are White. This may be partially due to factors such as a lack of education about mental health, the stigma about mental health and help-seeking (Fripp & Carlson, 2017; Goodwill & Zhou, 2020; Miranda et al., 2015), and a distrust of mental health professionals (USDHHS, 2001). However, this may also be due to systemic and environmental factors such as provider bias (USDHHS, 2001), lack of culturally informed counselors, lack of counselors of color (AUCCD, 2020), inaccessibility, and financial concerns. These may be especially pressing factors for students of color who attend PWIs (Miranda et al., 2015). As such, students of color engage in their own strategies to manage stress and mental health concerns.

Because of the stigma surrounding mental health among communities of color, many students keep things to themselves or choose to ignore or avoid coping, especially when it relates to experiences of racial discrimination (Masuda et al., 2012; Miranda et al., 2015; Utsey et al., 2000). Relatedly, many communities of color turn to communal supports such as religion (Bignall et al., 2015), confiding in friends and family (Lipson et al., 2018), and engaging in activism (Szymanski, 2012).

As noted, there is an increasing amount of literature that examines the mental health of students of color and Black students broadly; however, this literature is still significantly lacking. Relatedly, much less is known about the mental health and well-being of Black students engaging in social justice and activist activities, particularly at PWIs. This is especially concerning, given the current social and political climate. As

such, this dissertation addresses concerns about Black students' mental health and how they cope with stress related to being Black, a student, and engaging in activism at a PWI.

Positionality

As a qualitative researcher, it is essential to acknowledge my positionality and subjectivity within my research. This study's roots lie within my experiences of being a Black student activist. I am a Black Woman who has attended several PWIs, including the university where this study was conducted. I understand the nuances associated with holding marginalized racial identities and navigating academic spaces that have historically excluded my intersecting racial identity and gender identity. My activist orientation began to develop during my undergraduate experience at the University of Missouri during the 2015 protests as I engaged in walk-outs, protests, and educating myself. During this time, I also grappled with negotiating how my involvement in activism intersected with my identity as a Black Woman and a scholar. As such, I found myself navigating to spaces that provided community support and representation for students of color. Within these spaces, self-care and mental health practices were frequent; however, the lack of counselors of color and severe mental health stigma proved a deterrent. This is what has led me to pursue a career as a psychologist.

As a doctoral candidate at my alma mater, I actively advocate for the rights and well-being of the Black community through civil disobedience and via social media posts and virtual safe spaces for Black women. I also advocated for the health and well-being of students of color at the institutional level through my former assistantship at the Wellness Resource Center. In this role, I collaborated with students and student affairs

offices to develop and implement culturally informed initiatives and programming for students of color and underrepresented students. This position gave me the unique role of gaining insight into administrative policies and structures and how they work to maintain systems of oppression on campus. I was also able to build rapport with the students of color I collaborated and consulted with to inform programming, which provided me with a unique insight and allowed me to teeter between the world of the student and the world of the faculty and staff. As such, I must critically reflect on the power I hold within the study (Morrow, 2005).

My research interests reflect my lived experiences as a member of the Black community and vice versa. As such, my research is a form of activism. As a Black Woman and a mental health professional, I understand the needs of the Black and African American community and the barriers related to help-seeking. As a former and current Black student at the University of Missouri, I understand the additional challenges and risks associated with engaging in activism at a PWI. I also understand the benefit and positive implications of collective disruption and advocacy. Considering the field of psychology and counseling was created for a homogenous White majority, I acknowledge the value in informal and decolonial acts of self-care and wellness that communities of color have claimed.

Research Questions

My study is a contribution to the literature on college student activism and Black students' mental health by addressing the following questions related to the experiences of Black students at PWIs who engage in social justice and activism.

1. What are the unique factors that influence the mental health and well-being of Black students who engage in social justice activities at a predominantly White institution?
2. How do Black students who engage in social justice activities protect their mental health and well-being?

Theoretical Approach

Using a constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) approach, my study explores the mental health needs of Black college students who engage in social justice and activist activities. Two theoretical lenses guide this study: critical theory (Denzin, 2015) and radical healing (French et al., 2020). Used concurrently, these frameworks further explore the relationship between racial-identity-based activism and overall well-being among Black college students who attend PWIs. A critical–ideological paradigm analyzes the historical systems of power in place that shape a social reality (Ponterroto, 2005). Relatedly, critical – ideology works to challenge traditional notions of power and inequality to work toward social justice (Charmaz, 2017). A framework of radical healing highlights the individual and collective process of healing from racial trauma for people of color and indigenous communities (French et al., 2020). In concert with critical theory, radical healing acknowledges the oppression systems perpetuate race-related trauma and amplifies community empowerment and resilience. As such, constructivist grounded theory provides a methodological approach for a critical ideological paradigm and a racial healing lens.

Purpose of the Study

The current study will explore how Black students engage in identity-based social justice and activism and how they take care of themselves when they experience general, race-related, and activism-related stressors. Participants engaged in semi-structured individual interviews in order to understand how Black students describe their experiences of social justice engagement on campus. Grounded in the individual and collective themes that emerge from the data, this study provides a theory for understanding the mental health and well-being practices of Black students who engage in activism at a PWI.

The subsequent chapters of this dissertation include a review of the literature, a detailed explanation of the research design, and the study results. Chapter 2 explores the historical context of activism on college campuses. Additionally, the chapter highlights the factors that impact the mental health and well-being of the Black and African American community and details the theoretical underpinnings of this study used to explore Black student mental health. Chapter 3 provides a detailed explanation of a constructivist grounded theory approach and how this methodology will guide the proposed study through critical ideology and a radical healing lens. Specifically, this chapter describes sampling and participant recruitment procedures, data collection and the use of semi-structured interviews, and the use of a two-cycle coding process for data analysis. Finally, chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation detail the emerging themes of the study and overall findings.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In Chapter 1, I provided a brief overview of contemporary college activism and student of color's mental health. Chapter 2 describes the main ideas regarding identity-based activism and mental health among the Black community. Specifically, this chapter highlights three key domains which shape this study: campus climate, activism, and mental health. I begin this chapter with an overview of student perceptions of the university campus climate and its impact on students of color. Next, I briefly describe contemporary student activism within the past ten years. I specifically focus on activism-based efforts that took place on college campuses and preface advocacy for Black and African American students and faculty. Considering activism can take on many different forms, I define what activism means within the context of this study and detail these various forms along a continuum. Furthermore, I describe the various reasons why students engage in activism and its role for students of color and Black students. Next, I describe the unique stressors that impact Black mental health and well-being, as well as strategies for coping and help-seeking. Finally, this chapter concludes with a description of the theoretical underpinnings which guide this study.

Campus Racial Climate

Many college campuses pride themselves on being a diverse environment that draws students from all over the world. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the college enrollment rate for People of Color increased from 2000 to 2018 (College Enrollment Rates, 2020). Additional data from the American Council on Education indicate that there have been significant increases in the number of Students of Color that make up the undergraduate population, such that the percentage rose from

29.6% in 1996 to almost 50% in 2016 (Espinosa et al., 2019). Colleges and universities seem to increase the number of diverse students on their campuses; however, there is a difference between a perception of diversity in numbers and an integration of diversity and multiculturalism values on college campuses. Having a larger number of students of color may demonstrate the appearance of diverse backgrounds and cultures, but it does not necessarily demonstrate valuing diversity. Most colleges and universities do not provide training to their students or faculty in topics related to multiculturalism.

Relatedly, teaching practices and curriculum may reflect and continue to perpetuate the ideologies of a White majority. Many academic institutions, especially PWIs, do not actively incorporate values of multiculturalism within the institution despite rising enrollment among students of color. As such, students of color are often left vulnerable to the cultural ignorance of their White peers and professors in the form of race-related microaggressions, explicit discrimination, and a hostile campus climate (Ancis et al., 2000, Harwood et al., 2012; Ogunyemi et al., 2020).

Campus racial climate refers to the intangible perceptions and attitudes of the institution's environment, experiences of cultural and racial diversity, as well as interactions and expectations between various racial/ethnic groups (Hurtado et al., 1998; Hurtado et al., 1999). As such, the campus racial climate acknowledges how race and racial attitudes impact the college experience for students and faculty. Hurtado and colleagues' (1999) framework regarding campus racial climate posits that climate includes two domains: external and institutional forces. External forces include government policies, financial aid, and the social and historical perceptions of racial diversity. Comparatively, institutional forces include the racial history of the campus,

diversity among students and staff, and attitudes, biases, and behaviors between different racial/ethnic groups. As such, scholars have developed assessments and surveys to evaluate these domains and student perceptions of the racial campus climate (Hurtado et al., 2008). Campus racial climate plays a significant role in student experience; however, there are differences among perceptions of a positive racial environment and a negative racial environment.

Positive Climate

In discussions about campus climate, White students typically report more positive perceptions of their university campus compared to students of color (Parker & Trolian, 2020). However, some factors can influence positive perceptions of campus climate for students of color. For example, Museus and Yi (2018) found that among a sample of 870 College students at an East Coast PWI, attending a campus that is culturally engaging (i.e., sensitive to and promote the needs and values of students of color) had positive implications for health and well-being for all students, especially Black students. Specifically, universities with diversity among students and faculty display and encourage cultural competence, conversations about sociopolitical concerns, and student-focused promotes a sense of belonging.

Relatedly, having specific spaces and communities that celebrate diversity on campus, such as identity-specific groups and organizations, can have positive implications on the student experience. For example, Hoffman and colleagues (2018) conducted a qualitative study with 20 undergraduate students in the Midwest. They found that these institutional spaces, or subversive spaces, allow students of color to find a sense of belonging and a supportive community based on their identities. Additionally,

these spaces typically act as counter spaces and not only center historically marginalized groups but also allow for conversations about social justice. As such, students of color may find solace at the campus's Multicultural Center or African American Culture Center (Hypolite, 2020). This indicates that having a campus that actively acknowledges and celebrates cultural diversity can significantly improve the overall college experience for students of color.

Positive perceptions of the campus and the associated climate can promote better outcomes for students' sense of belonging within the campus culture, especially when race and ethnicity are investigated. For example, Mushonga and Henneberger (2020) investigated protective factors among traditional (18-25 years of age) and nontraditional Black students (26 and older). Their study found that Black students, especially nontraditional students, who believed that others viewed their racial identity group positively, felt more acceptance and belonging on their college campus and had positive mental health. A related study by Wei and colleagues (2011) found that racial and ethnic minority students who have a positive perception of their university's environment and campus culture have more persistent attitudes toward achieving success at their university. Furthermore, students of color who perceive their campus as having a commitment to diversity and inclusion may experience less of the adverse effects of discrimination and bias, which impact their sense of belonging (Hussain & Jones, 2019).

While there are reports of a positive campus climate for students of color, this trend is typically less frequent. It is important to note that the majority of the studies in which students of color had positive perceptions of their campus climate were located in more urban areas, which are likely to have more racial diversity. Hence, the students,

faculty, and administration at those universities may be accustomed to and accepting of racial and cultural diversity on campus and outside of the university environment. This is likely reflected within the physical representation of diversity as well as a culture of cultural competence and inclusivity. As such, less is known about the factors contributing to a positive campus racial climate at PWIs in less diverse areas.

Relatedly, the described studies do not focus on students who engage in activism at their PWI. This is an important distinction considering student activists advocate for changes within the university's culture. Students engaged in activism related to their racial identity are particularly less likely to perceive a positive campus climate. There are still gaps in the literature about the factors that promote perceptions of a positive racial climate for Black students and students who engage in identity-based activism. The proposed study was conducted in a predominantly White metropolitan area in the Midwest and focused on Black students who engage in activism related to their racial identity. The study contributes to the current literature surrounding belonging and campus climate by attending to promotive climate factors and Black student experiences.

Negative Climate

Many students of color have negative perceptions of their campus climate and find their university a place abundant with racial discord, segregation, and discrimination (Ancis et al., 2000; Offidani – Bertrand et al., 2019; Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Parker & Trolan, 2020; Wei et al., 2011). Specifically, African American students reported more racial-ethnic hostility, pressure to conform to stereotypes, less equal treatment by staff and faculty, more faculty racism, and less positive interactions with faculty (Ancis et al., 2000; Parker & Trolan, 2020). Regarding diversity and inclusion, Black students

typically have more negative feelings regarding their university's dedication and commitment to diversity (Hussain & Jones, 2019). Relatedly, Black students at PWIs experience adversity and challenges unique to their racial and ethnic identity and background (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). Black and African American students at PWI reported experiencing higher levels of environmental stressors, interpersonal stressors, and intragroup stress than their counterparts who attended historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007).

Since Black and African American students are the minority in sheer numbers, many students find themselves not fitting in or feeling out of place within their university environment. An individual's perceptions of fitting in, feeling valued, and connecting to their community, known as a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hussain & Jones, 2019), is a critical element of overall well-being (Lambert et al., 2013). However, students of color and Black students attending PWIs often report a lower sense of belonging at their institution due to experiences of racial discrimination (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hussain & Jones, 2019) that are both explicit and subtle.

Students of color may be exposed to overt and explicit forms of racism on an interpersonal level. In a study about student perceptions of commonplace racism and discrimination at PWIs, Harwood and colleagues (2012) found that students of color experienced interpersonal racism within university housing, specifically their residence hall. This was most commonly seen overtly with segregated spaces and the use of racial slurs and racial comments. However, the study also noted covert racism through race-based jokes and minimization and denial of acts of racism and discrimination both within

the residence hall and throughout the overall culture of the institution. Covert and subtle forms of racism are commonly referred to as racial microaggressions.

According to Sue and colleagues (2007), racial microaggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (pp.271). Microaggressions may manifest interpersonally through encounters with other individuals; however, they may also be apparent within the environment people of color have to navigate, such as academic institutions. Students of color, especially Black students, may be exposed to microaggression through informal segregation of campus buildings, a lack of racial diversity, and a lack of cultural competence among peers and faculty (Harwood et al., 2012; Harwood et al., 2018; Mills, 2020; Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2008). Exposure to microaggressions can create feelings of a hostile campus climate and can lead to mental and psychological distress, including low self-esteem, risk for anxiety, and risky substance use behavior (Blume et al., 2012, Nadal et al., 2014, Ogunyemi et al., 2020). This is particularly concerning for Black students, who are much more likely to experience racial microaggressions at their PWI compared to their peers (Ogunyemi et al., 2020).

Experiences of racial discrimination in the form of microaggressions can create a culture of hostility and racial tension, which can significantly impact the well-being of students of color. As such, an unwelcoming campus may lead to psychological distress, including a low sense of belonging and feelings of alienation among students of color (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hussain & Jones, 2019), which can significantly impact academic success (Campbell et al., 2019) and overall health and well-being (Ogunyemi et

al., 2020). However, a hostile campus climate may encourage students to advocate for themselves and demand racial justice at the institutional level.

Contemporary Student Activism

Contemporary activist movements regarding racism and racial inequality began with the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) in 2013 (Herstory, n.d.). The BLM movement was founded by three Black Women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, in response to the acquittal of a White police officer who murdered 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. Initially created online, #BlackLivesMatter provided a space and platform for political intervention, organization, support, and to call out injustice towards Black and African American individuals. As BLM gained viral momentum, activists and organizers took the movement to the streets nationally through protests, marches, and sit-ins. Furthermore, the BLM movement expanded and was used to call out racism and injustice towards other Black individuals who were murdered, including Sandra Bland and Tamir Rice. However, it was in 2014, following the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, that we saw this national movement impact social movements on college campuses.

In response to racial injustice and increased activist movements in society, 2014 marked a rise in university and college campus activism concerning racism. During this time, Black students at the University of Michigan utilized #BBUM (Being Black at the University of Michigan) used Twitter to describe their experiences with racism and discrimination and a lack of administrative intervention on campus (Cunningham, 2014). Particularly, students described a hostile campus climate and detailed demands related to racial diversity, culturally informed courses, administrative transparency, and financial

support in the form of scholarships and housing for Black students. At the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), Sy Stokes created a spoken word video to acknowledge a lack of Black male undergraduate student representation on the campus as well as issues related to graduate and retention posted during the undergraduate admissions timeline (Jaschik, 2013; Stokes, 2013). However, it was the demands and organization of Concerned Student 1950 at the University of Missouri which had a significant impact on college campus movements nationally.

Influenced by an uprising in Ferguson, Missouri, and the increased attention to ongoing racial injustice in society at large, Concerned Student 1950 was created to address institutional racial discrimination at the Missouri campus (Vandelinder, 2015). After insufficient acknowledgment of an incident of racism directed at a Black student on campus, the University of Missouri students organized online and offline in the form of Twitter hashtags and on-campus protests for several months. The protests and marches organized by Concerned Student 1950 served as a catalyst for students at other colleges and universities to organize and demand justice for students of color on their campus. Schools such as Yale University, Tufts, Brandies University, and many others participated in marches, sit-ins, protests, and digital activism to address systemic racism at their institutions. Over 80 colleges and universities created lists of demands, including increased representation of Black students and students and faculty of color, appropriate and representative mental health services, and a call for their institution to acknowledge systemic racism and injustice on their campus (Black Liberation Collective, n.d.). As a result, many universities implemented actionable changes such as removing university administrators, implementing diversity training, providing bias hotlines, renaming

campus halls and buildings, and increasing funds for scholarships and diversity initiatives (Sinclair, 2016).

Student activists' efforts continued through the Presidency of Donald Trump as national concerns and unrest related to racism increased. In 2017, White nationalists stormed the University of Virginia (UVA) campus purporting the Unite the Rite movement to promote white supremacist ideals and values. In response, over 300 UVA students, spearheaded by the Black Student Alliance, mobilized a protest to demand increased inclusion efforts and recruitment of Black students to the university, among other demands (Jackson, 2017). As a result, UVA agreed to meet demands related to safety policies for firearms and open flames and acknowledged the financial ties to the KKK (Bauer-Wolf, 2017). However, most demands, such as removing a statue of Thomas Jefferson, were refused.

In concert with national changes and movements for justice, the collective concerns of college students reflect national concerns regarding racial injustice. Most recently, college students advocated for themselves and their well-being at their universities around a pandemic of racism and public health crisis. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Black and Latinx students at a residence hall at Duke University were targeted by a racist incident regarding the murder of George Floyd (Bey & Boyd, 2021). In response, the Dean of Students and Associate Vice President for student affairs, John Blacksher, seemed dismissive of the incident, leaving students uncomfortable, hurt, and disappointed.

Engaging in activist movements is not without consequences for college students who advocate for institutional change. Students at Washington and Lee University fought

for the institution to change its name so it does not honor the discriminatory values of Robert E. Lee (Burke, 2021). Ultimately, those with voting power decided not to honor student requests despite significant pushback from the student body. This is a constant reminder for Black students on the campus that the institution was not created for them and that they are not welcome. At the top of 2020, more than 30 students at Syracuse University were suspended upon participating in a sit-in related to a lack of administrative response to racial and anti-Semitic events on campus (Anderson, 2020). This incident followed prior sit-ins and activism efforts led by #NotAgainSU, a student activism group advocating for student of color justice for the past year. Following hours of negotiation, Syracuse administrators agreed to several student demands, such as mandatory diversity training for new faculty, revisions to the code of conduct to include more severe punishment for instances of bias and discrimination, and increased funds for scholarships for students of color (McMahon, 2020). However, administrators were unyielding to demands such as disarming campus police and issuing statements acknowledging the university's oppressive systems and complicity in White supremacy (McMahon, 2020). Relatedly, studies have found that when applying for colleges and universities, students, particularly Black students, and students of color, who indicated interest and engagement in social justice and racial justice were seen as less favorable applicants (Thornhill, 2019). This may be especially cause for concern among college campuses that demonstrate less inclination towards changing the racial climate in their campus culture.

Students have power among themselves and their voices, as evidenced by actionable changes resulting from protests. Many student protests have resulted in the

resignation of campus administrators, campus-wide diversity training, and increased funds for students of color. However, protesting can be laborious and leave students vulnerable to suspension and academic consequences. Furthermore, while there have been changes due to protests, many of the student demands were not met or were refused to be implemented at the institutional level. The focus seems to be on placating students and not on changing the institution's culture or dismantling oppressive institutional policies and practices, both of which are necessary to promote student success. In addition to being exhausted by the physical and mental demands of engaging in activism, student activists may still experience feelings of frustration and hopelessness from their university. Relatedly, changes in institutional practices do not occur quickly, especially as they relate to the campus racial climate. Activists of color may continue dealing with the stressors of their campus culture. As such, it is essential to understand the general and unique stressors Black students who engage in activism face and how these stressors impact their overall health and well-being. This study not only focused on the mental health and well-being of Black students engaged in activism, but it also highlighted student-informed institutional-level supports that can be implemented.

Racial Identity- Based Activism

Broadly, activism can be defined as advocating for a cause, particularly regarding socio-political concerns, through various acts and behaviors (Corning & Meyers, 2002; Klar & Kasser, 2009). Relatedly, the goal of activism is towards action and change, particularly at the institutional and societal levels. Therefore, activism can be used to address a variety of social concerns, including racism and racial discrimination. As such, African American activism is "African American activism is an action aimed to decrease

and/or eradicate racism and its negative effects and to improve the everyday lives of African Americans and the African American community as a whole." (Szymanski, 2012 pp. 344).

Types of Activism

While engaging in activism is commonly thought of as attending protests and marches, activism can range from various activities. Specifically, activism can include acts that are low-risk and passive such as voting or signing a petition, as well as acts that are confrontational and disruptive such as attending a march or protest (Corning & Meyer, 2002; Klar & Kasser, 2009; Logan et al., 2017). This distinction and emphasis on various activities is critical when considering African American activism or activism related to racial identity. The remainder of this section will describe various activist activities, such as social media activism, active disobedience, low-risk activism, and existence as a form of activism.

Existence. For some individuals, holding a marginalized identity and persevering in spaces that reflect privilege is activism (Kluch, 2020; Linder et al., 2019). As such, when thinking about racial-identity-based activism, existence as a form of activism refers to the presence of racial diversity and racially diverse individuals in spaces that are historically and presently predominantly White (DeAngelo et al., 2016; Linder et al., 2019; Linder et al., 2019; Logan et al., 2017). This form of activism often requires little to no planning or action for students of color, but rather, the act of navigating predominantly White spaces disrupts the status quo whether or not purposeful by the student of color. However, labor goes into this form of activism and dealing with the emotional and psychological labor of being in a space not created for individuals with

historically marginalized identities. Relatedly, using one's voice and being authentic within one's culture works to disrupt the status quo (Linder et al., 2019).

Activist Orientation. Engaging in activism can manifest through seeking education and knowledge, engaging in policy work such as signing protests and contacting government officials, and integrating activism within daily life (Klar & Klasser, 2009). Activism within this domain can include educating oneself about systems of oppression that impact historically marginalized communities. This can include gaining knowledge through formal education, such as taking a course or reading a book. However, this can also include informal education, such as having conversations with community members and observing injustice within the world around them. Relatedly, within this domain, activism can include collectively seeking out and sharing knowledge to better understand systemic oppression and individual and collective experiences. Relatedly, this can include educating others and working with individuals to further personal education and broaden one's worldview to develop critical consciousness (Logan et al., 2017).

Engaging in activism at this level can also look like a commitment to and integrating activist ideals and values (Logan et al., 2017). This can also be considered everything you do (activities, values, interests) around activism. For some students, this might look like obtaining a degree in policy and leadership, serving in leadership roles within campus organizations, and serving as a student representative at university administration-level meetings.

Digital Activism. The use of social media within the realm of activism may be particularly unique to the Millennial generation, who were born during the development

of media and technology, and Generation Z, who grew up with social media and technology. This form of activism may involve more active participation, such as posting and re-posting social media about activism and advocacy. It may also include following social and political figures, collecting information, educating others, and sharing personal stories and narratives (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Logan et al., 2017; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). Relatedly, social media has been used to disseminate information about instances of racism and discrimination on campus as well as "organize and mobilize" protests via group chats and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, GroupMe, and Twitter (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017).

Scholars have found that youth engage in activism mainly through social media, including Instagram, Whatsapp, Tumblr, and Twitter (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017). Twitter has been particularly useful as a tool for activism, according to Bonilla and Rosa (2015). They found that activists relied on Twitter to gather information from multiple sources as well as disseminate information in a way that was quick and efficient. Similarly, scholars have found that Twitter was used to call attention to acts of injustice, display solidarity, and organize and strategize movements in response to injustice (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Hotchkins, 2017). Finally, using social media as activism expands contemporary ideas of what categorizes activism and provides a space for the individual and collective counternarratives of people of color to be publicized (Hotchkins, 2017; Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017).

Active Disobedience. The third category refers to more active and pervasive activism, such as participating in civil disobedience in the form of protests and marches.

Active disobedience values physically standing up for oppression and actively engaging to make a change. This type of activism involves more time, effort, and sacrifice from the individual. This form of activism can be riskier due to the engagement in disruption and concern for associated risks such as looting, violence, and police involvement.

Activist Fluidity. While engaging in activism can fall within various categories, it is essential to emphasize that activism is a spectrum and does not always fit perfectly within a category. Additionally, it is essential to note that engaging in activism along the spectrum is not mutually exclusive. For example, many students may simultaneously engage in existence as activism, digital activism, and active disobedience. Relatedly, activists may engage in various forms of activism for various reasons. For example, an activist may exclusively engage in social media as activism at a one-time point and engage in front-line activism at a later time. This caveat is important because various levels of activism can have different implications on well-being, especially for students of color.

Why Students Engage in Activism

Students of color engage in activism for many reasons, such as psychological and social factors, personal background, culture, identity, and previous involvement in activism (Hope et al., 2016; Watts et al., 2011). This next section will highlight the various reasons people of color may engage in activism and the associated benefits. This includes engaging in activism as a coping mechanism, as a form of resistance, and to evoke change.

Activism as Coping. One reason students may engage in activism is related to coping and dealing with discrimination. Navigating a campus climate that is

discriminatory towards students of color is one reason students engage in identity-based activism, particularly after major events that threaten racial justice, such as the election of Donald Trump as president (Logan et al., 2017). For example, Szymanski (2012) found that when African American students experienced increased racist events, they also engaged in more activism. Relatedly African American students who experienced more perceived racism and discrimination and engaged in more active coping styles were more likely to engage in activist activities overall. Similarly, in a study about Black men specifically, Hope and colleagues (2020) found that activism was used as a tool to cope with race-related stress due to experiences of discrimination as well as anticipated future experiences of discrimination. This may provide evidence that engaging in activism serves as a coping mechanism for race-based incidents for African American students specifically.

Activism for Resistance/ Survival. In concert with the spectrum of activist behaviors, many students of color on college campuses, particularly PWIs, engage in activism or resistance as a form of survival (Linder et al., 2019; Linder et al., 2019b). Studies have found that students describe their involvement in activism as involuntary and a responsibility they carry because of their identity (Linder et al., 2019; Linder et al., 2019b; Logan et al., 2017). Not only do some students of color and Black students have to navigate the college experience, but they also take on the additional role of being an activist, whether by choice or involuntarily.

Activism to Evoke Change. Students engage in activism to evoke change at the societal and institutional levels, frequently in response to a racist incident at their PWI (Linder et al., 2019; Szymanski & Lewis, 2014). Students engaging in high-risk activism

(i.e., protesting, marches) do so to use their individual and collective voice and body for advocacy. Rather than addressing structural and institutional systems that promote a culture of Whiteness and racism on campus, many college campuses placate or dismiss situations regarding racial injustice (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017) or make promises for funding or restructuring that do not amount to institutional change in a way that dismantles existing structures (Jones & Reddick, 2017). As such, for many students, protesting serves as a way for students to make their voices heard and amplify their feelings of hurt, anger, and dissatisfaction about racial injustice to ensure White peers and college administration are made aware (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017; Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017; Szymanski & Lewis, 2014).

Students of color may feel particularly compelled to engage in activism, especially regarding their racial/ethnic identity. While some student activists may consider their existence as a form of civic engagement, activist identities can encompass a variety of activities. Relatedly, students of color, in particular, may engage in multiple forms of activism, especially when an activist identity is particularly salient. However, engaging in activism can have implications for health outcomes, most positive and negative, especially for college-aged students. The following section will focus on the mental health and well-being of college students of color, the impact of racism and discrimination on health outcomes, and coping strategies and help-seeking.

Mental Health and Well-Being

Overall, experiencing discrimination negatively impacts physical and mental health and well-being (Martin et al., 2003; Paradies, 2006). Racial and ethnic minority populations have lower overall health and well-being than non-marginalized groups (U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2001). This may be related to experiences of racism and discrimination at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels. As such, experiencing racism is associated with poor mental health outcomes (Carter et al., 2017; Paradies et al., 2015). These outcomes included feelings of loneliness, symptoms of depression, and passive suicidality. Relatedly, studies have also found a relationship between discrimination and physical health (Paradies et al., 2015; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009), thus indicating how perverse and all debilitating racial discrimination and prejudice are for racial and ethnic minority groups.

The following section will describe the unique types of stress and stressors that impact the health and well-being of people of color. Specifically, I describe the impact of race and racism-related stress on mental health, mental illness, and physical health in this section. Additionally, I discuss the factors that impact help-seeking, such as stigma, lack of information, and bias within the medical field. Finally, I end this section with an exploration of the types of strategies for coping and informal mental health care that many Black and African Americans engage in.

Racism and Mental Health

Race-Related Stress. Historically marginalized communities often experience levels of stress that are explicitly related to their marginalized identity or multiple marginalized identities. This type of stress, often referred to as minority stress, uniquely differs from everyday general stress experienced by the majority group (Wei et al., 2011). Relatedly race/racism-related stress refers to stress related to racial identity and the experience of various events that uniquely occur because of one's racial identity. This can include covert or overt acts, lived or vicarious, daily or chronic, and independent or

collective (Harrell, 2000). Both race-related stress and minority stress encapsulate distinctly unique, pervasive, persistent stress resulting from incongruence between the dominant White ideology and the culture of marginalized communities (Meyer, 1995; Harrell, 2000). Relatedly, these types of stressors acknowledge not only personal and individual experiences related to stress but also the systemic and environmental structures which create a culture in which race-related stress and minority stress are prevalent.

Students of color at PWIs often face the typical stress associated with college adjustment and stress related to their marginalized or multiple identities. Utilizing the Black Student Stress Inventory (BSSI), Neville and colleagues (2004) explored the relationship between various types of stress and psychological adjustment among a sample of 260 Black college students. Their study found that in addition to psychological, interpersonal, and academic stressors, Black students are negatively impacted by race-related stressors. Relatedly, the scholars found that students who perceived higher stress levels within the three domains also experienced higher levels of psychological distress (Neville et al., 2004).

While minority stress can impact all marginalized identity groups, Black and African Americans report higher minority stress than other individuals of color on college campuses (Cokley et al., 2013). Experiencing stress related to identity and racial background can negatively impact psychological well-being among students of color, particularly Black students (Cokley et al., 2013; Pieterse & Carter, 2007). Among Black and African Americans, more exposure to racism and racist incidents is associated with poorer mental health outcomes (Pieterse et al., 2012). However, there is also evidence that exposure to racism and race-based injuries can lead to additional negative responses

and outcomes, including anxiety, depressive symptoms, and health concerns (Carter, 2007; Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Pieterse et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2019).

Research on African American college students has also found a positive relationship between experiences of racial discrimination with depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms, and lower levels of social support (Hurd et al., 2014; Prelow et al., 2006).

This suggests that students who experience racial discrimination are not only struggling with their mental health but are also not receiving support from others to aid with coping.

Racial Battle Fatigue. Racial battle fatigue (RBF) describes the behavioral, physiological, and psychological stress experienced by historically marginalized communities due to their racial/ethnic identity, particularly at PWIs (Smith, 2007). RBF highlights three integrated domains impacted by stress: psychosocial, physiological, and behavioral. The first domain, psychosocial, reflects the characteristics of psychological stress, which include feelings of anger and frustration, changes in mood, resentment, irritability, disappointment, anxiety, fear, hopelessness, and many others (Smith, 2007). Physiological stress can look like gastrointestinal concerns, insomnia and fatigue, headaches, racing heart, skin problems, shortness of breath, clenched jaw, and behavioral stress can manifest as changes in close relationships, substance use, changes in appetite, isolation from others, and neglect of personal and professional obligations (Smith, 2007).

The majority of research regarding RBF and higher education indicates that most people of color, especially those at PWIs, endure the symptoms of RBF (Hernandez & Villodas, 2020; Smith et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2011; Quaye et al., 2020). A study about Black student affairs educators revealed that this demographic experienced the physiological and psychological symptoms of RBF as a result of navigating the academic

workplace (Quaye et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that college students of color also experience symptoms of RBF, which negatively impact their mental health and well-being (Hernandez & Villodas, 2020; Smith et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2011). In a qualitative study about the experiences of RBF among African American college students, Smith and colleagues (2007) found that studying at a PWI was associated with experiencing symptoms of RBF such as frustration, anger, hopelessness, anxiety, and fear.

While most research about RBF has focused on people of color at PWIs in general, several studies focus on activism specifically. Gorski (2019) identified the relationship between RBF and engaging in activism. This study particularly revealed that for individuals with marginalized identities, engaging in activism and associated burnout was exacerbated by RBF, thus making it challenging to engage in activist activities. Relatedly, Doran and Hengesteg (2021) detail the challenges of advocating for racial and ethnic minority students while working within an institution rooted in Whiteness and the majority ideology. This indicates just how pervasive and impactful navigating racial discrimination can be.

While these studies provide insight into the relationship between activism and RBF, particularly for individuals at PWIs, this study focused on faculty and staff as well as individuals of various racial identities and not Black student activists. Less is known about the impact of RBF on Black students' overall well-being, particularly Black students who also engage in activism at PWIs.

Psychological Disorders and Trauma. Studies have found a positive association between perceived racism and serious mental health concerns among racial and ethnic

minority groups (Pieterse et al., 2010; Pieterse et al., 2012). Specifically, among Asian Americans, Latinx Americans, and African Americans, perceptions of racial discrimination were found to be associated with a multitude of psychological disorders, including major depressive disorder, agoraphobia, panic disorder, and others (Chou et al., 2012; Pieterse et al., 2010). Experiences of racism and discrimination especially impact African American and Black communities. For African American and Black individuals, experiences of racism and discrimination are strongly correlated with significant psychological distress and poor mental hygiene due to race-based injuries (Pieterse et al., 2012). Furthermore, exposure to racial discrimination has also been associated with higher odds of depression among African Americans (Hudson et al., 2016). While experiences of minority stress and race-related stress may impact mental health and mental illness, there has been some evidence to suggest further trauma-related symptomology and disorders associated with racial discrimination.

Research has found that experiences of real and perceived racism and discrimination can result in trauma-related symptoms among racial and ethnic minority college students (Pieterse et al., 2010). A racist event can include covert racism such as microaggressions, witnessing racial trauma (such as on the media or television), internalized negative stereotypes (such as devaluing one's own racial identity in favor of the majority White racial identity), as well as invalidation of one's experience and systemic and structural barriers (Carter, 2007; Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Williams et al., 2019). This exposure to racism or perceived racism can lead to a trauma response (i.e., fear, denial, shock, shame), resulting in symptoms aligned with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Chou et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2019).

To better conceptualize trauma as a result of racial discrimination and racism, prominent scholars in the field of psychology have identified theories of race-based traumatic stress (Carter, 2007) and racial trauma (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005). Race-based traumatic stress can be understood as "emotional or physical pain or the threat of physical and emotional pain that results from racism in the forms of racial harassment (hostility), racial discrimination (avoidance), or discriminatory harassment (aversive hostility)" (Carter, 2007, pp. 88). This conceptualization acknowledges that experiences of racism can significantly impact health and well-being, which is distressing but quite at the level of a clinical diagnosis or mental illness. Racial trauma understands the resulting pain of exposure to racism (acute and cumulative) and the associated symptoms as comparable to a diagnosis of PTSD (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Comas-Diaz et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2019). However, these terms are often used interchangeably to acknowledge how severe and pervasive the impact of experiencing racial discrimination can be and to distinguish between general trauma symptomology and symptomology specific to experiencing racist incidents (Roberson & Carter, 2021).

Experiencing race-based traumatic stress or racial trauma can manifest in several ways. Some related effects of race-based traumatic stress include cognitive effects, affective effects, somatic complaints, relational, behavioral, and spiritual (Bryant-Davis, 2007). This may include experiencing trouble with memory and concentration, paranoia, mistrust, hypervigilance, fear, nightmares, sleep concerns, and poor relationships (Bryant-Davis, 2007; Carter, 2007; Mosley et al., 2021; Roberson & Carter, 2021). These symptoms have been noted among adults of color in addition to emerging adults and

college-aged individuals of color (Hargons et al., 2021; Polanco-Roman et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2021).

While scholars in the field have identified and defined racial trauma in an academic sense, Black college students have their understanding of the concept. In their qualitative study, Hargons and colleagues (2021) explored how Black students at a PWI define and conceptualize racial trauma. Like academic scholarship, students understood racial trauma as frequent, intense, and chronic. Racial trauma is systemic, and its effects can be experienced within various contextual factors, including social media and academic institutions (Williams et al., 2021). This is especially concerning for Black students who attend PWIs, who are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of experiencing racial trauma on their mental and physical health.

Racism and Physical Health

Research has found an association between racism and physical health disparities among racial minorities (Paradies et al., 2015). A meta-analysis examining racial discrimination and physical health outcomes across 293 studies found that racism is significantly related to poor physical health (Paradies et al., 2015). Furthermore, some evidence supported a link between race-related discrimination and issues with obesity (Paradies et al., 2015). Relatedly, Hicken and colleagues (2018) found evidence to suggest that being vigilant was positively associated with a larger waist circumference and increased Body Mass Index (BMI) for Black women. Considering racial and ethnic minority groups are likely to be more vigilant or on guard for anticipated discrimination, this finding is concerning.

Additional research has found that experiences of perceived discrimination or acts of racism are associated with more occurrences of illnesses such as the common cold (Black et al., 2015). Among African American college students, research has found that greater exposure to discrimination and related events is associated with a lower resting heart rate variability (Hill et al., 2017). A lower heart rate variability is associated with arousal of the nervous systems and is often seen during times of stress, thus significantly impacting the body.

Experiences of discrimination and racism have also been linked to risky behaviors, particularly substance use (Desalu et al., 2019). Among Black and African American adults, exposure to stressors related to racial identity, such as acts of bias and discrimination, is associated with an increased risk for alcohol-related concerns (Martin et al., 2003). Similar effects have been found among emerging adults particularly. Research has found that among Black individuals, experiences of racial discrimination in emerging adulthood may exacerbate alcohol use through adulthood (Hurd et al., 2014). Relatedly, among college students of color, the greater experience of microaggression, the greater rates of underage binge drinking behaviors (Blume et al., 2012). Pittman and colleagues (2017) also found that experiencing minority stress was associated with risky drinking behaviors among Black college students. Specifically, more experiences of stress were associated with more risky drinking behaviors. The relationship between racial discrimination and alcohol use may be best explained as a mechanism of coping. It may be that students of color and Black students engage in alcohol consumption and risky drinking behaviors as a means to cope with the prejudice and biases they face. A similar relationship has been found by Lo and colleagues (2018) in which racial and

ethnic minorities were more likely to engage in cigarette use as a means to cope with mental health concerns.

Treatment and Help-Seeking

There are significant racial and ethnic disparities regarding mental health treatment. Overall, Black and African Americans are less likely to seek help and treatment for mental health and mental illness concerns than White Americans (USDHHS, 2001). Similar disparities exist among college health and wellness centers and counseling centers at the university level. White students are more likely to receive treatment for mental health concerns than students of color (Eisenberg et al., 2011; Miranda et al., 2015). Relatedly, racial and ethnic minority students have lower rates of treatment-seeking compared to their White peers (Miranda et al., 2015). Some common reasons for these disparities include external barriers to treatment, such as cost of care, access, and lack of clinician cultural competence, while some personal barriers might include stigma, lack of education, and preference for informal means of care and coping (USDHHS, 2001). The following section will further explore the external and personal barriers to mental health care among racial and ethnic minority populations.

External Barriers to Treatment. When discussing the barriers to treatment and help-seeking, it is essential to emphasize the role of oppression and external barriers which have an impact. A major external factor is the role of medical doctors and health professionals and cultural mistrust. A meta-analysis by Whaley (2001) found that the African American community has a cultural mistrust of mental health services and professionals. This may be due to a lack of knowledge about mental health professionals, concerns related to accessibility, and cost (Miranda et al., 2015). Relatedly, this may be

due to the perception that mental health services are for a White majority and not for people of color, considering that the majority of mental health professionals and their associated clients are White (Whaley, 2001). This may discourage many people of color from seeking treatment.

Despite being less likely to seek out mental health treatment, some people of color do seek out counseling and mental health treatment. However, disparities exist within the types of treatment people receive as well. Despite coming in for the initial appointment, Black college students are less likely than White students to receive a diagnosis for a mental health concern, maintain medication use, and receive therapy (Lipson et al., 2018; Miranda et al., 2015). Relatedly, among Black individuals who do seek out treatment for Major Depressive Disorder, they are less likely than Whites to receive treatment, particularly in the form of talking with a licensed mental health professional (Hankerson et al., 2011). This may be partly due to the stigma associated with a diagnosis or psychopharmaceutical medication and a lack of trust when talking to health professionals. However, this may also be due to differences in symptomology between Black and White people. As a result, health professionals may not accurately diagnose mental health concerns among this population and may not provide appropriate recommendations for treatment.

Another reason many students with marginalized identities are less likely to seek mental health treatment and services is a lack of counselors with a shared identity (USDHHS, 2001). In a study regarding the mental health needs of African American males, Lindsey and Marcell (2012) found that this demographic is particularly distrusting of mental health professionals in general. As such, this population is more comfortable

talking to someone they trust and have known for a while, such as family or friends. This may be due to a long history of medical exploitation and a lack of help provided to African Americans. Relatedly, their study found that when interacting with medical professionals, this demographic is more comfortable disclosing information to someone who is respectful of cultural differences, such as understanding slang and the experiences unique to being an African American male (Lindsey & Marcell, 2012). This emphasis on cultural competence in mental health and wellness is especially important for Black and African Americans to not only engage in help-seeking but continue ongoing treatment.

Concurrent with cultural competence, the racial identity of the mental health provider may impact stigma and trust. According to a report by Lin and colleagues (2015), 16.4% of active psychologists are people of color. Of that, only 5.3% identify as Black, compared to 83.6 % identifying as White. When looking at the number of counselors and social workers, less than 30% are Black, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020). Relatedly, AUCCD reported that 13.2% of staff at college counseling centers identify as Black or African American (AUCCCD, 2020). However, this number is reflective of all counseling center staff which typically includes administrative positions as well. Thus, the actual number of Black counselors and therapists available on university campuses is grossly low.

Personal Barriers to Treatment. While external barriers relate to environmental and systemic factors such as provider bias and lack of cultural competence, personal barriers focus on the internal thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs associated with formal mental health treatment and care. However, these personal biases are not independent but are significantly influenced by systemic factors, including overt and covert

discrimination. In response to a lack of racially diverse counselors and coping with racism received from predominantly White mental health professionals, personal biases may form as a protective factor.

Black and African American individuals have a high need for mental health services and support; however, many factors inhibit mental health help-seeking and treatment intervention. Many racial and ethnic minority groups have a stigma toward mental health and mental illness (Miranda et al., 2015). Notably, Black and African American young adults report higher rates of mental health stigma than other racial minority groups (DeFreitas et al., 2018) and their White peers (Goodwill & Zhou, 2020).

Masuda and colleagues (2012) also found that actively engaging in behaviors to conceal any mental health concerns from others, in addition to having a stigma about mental health, is associated with negative outcomes. Specifically, stigma about mental health and engaging in self-concealment was associated with lower help-seeking attitudes among Black college-aged students (Masuda et al., 2012). This may be because having a stigma towards mental health may encourage individuals to conceal any concerns, and seeking out help would be the opposite of this goal. Relatedly, for racial and ethnic minority populations, specifically Black and Latinx adult populations, there is a relationship between stigma and help-seeking behaviors (Fripp & Carlson, 2016). The more stigmatizing beliefs about mental health, the less likely a person of color is to engage in mental health services such as counseling or therapy (Fripp & Carlson, 2016). Relatedly, among students of color, more significant mental health stigma presents increased odds of suicidal ideation, planning, and attempt (Goodwill & Zhou, 2020).

There is also evidence to suggest a relationship between spirituality and mental health treatment. Among Black and African American congregation members, Neely-Fairbanks and colleagues (2008) found that this population was especially reluctant towards help-seeking for mental health and well-being. Relatedly, congregation members less educated about mental health typically had a higher stigma about mental health and less positive attitudes about help-seeking. Furthermore, Black and African Americans may be more likely to seek support from their church congregation and spiritual leaders due to a mistrust of healthcare professionals (Bignall et al., 2015; Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002).

While there are many personal and external barriers to mental health treatment, this does not indicate that people of color are not receiving support for their overall mental health and well-being. Instead, many people of color utilize informal sources of support such as community supports, self-medication, and individual coping mechanism.

Coping and Protective factors

As evidenced by the literature above, most People of Color, especially Black and African Americans, are not receiving adequate mental health care and treatment, or they are not receiving any formal treatment, thus, emphasizing the significant disparities in mental health help-seeking and treatment. Barriers such as cost of care, discrimination, and stigma may significantly dissuade racial and ethnic minority groups from seeking out and being receptive to formal mental health treatment; however, this does not mean that this demographic is not engaging in coping mechanisms. To cope with stress, discrimination, and mental health concerns, many Black and African Americans engage

in various forms of informal treatment and coping through community support and personal factors.

Spirituality. Research has found that Black and African Americans may turn to faith and religion to cope with mental health concerns (Lindsey & Marcell, 2012). A similar relationship can be seen among college students of color in which they are likely to rely on religion and their faith as a means of support (Harwood et al., 2018). Relatedly, engaging in spirituality may be a protective factor for Black college students' mental health and well-being (Mushonga & Henneberger, 2020).

Community. Having a strong sense of community and ethnic group identification can serve as a protective factor against psychiatric symptoms for African American women (Townsend et al., 2020). Relatedly, studies have found that racial identity can serve as a protective factor for Black students' mental health and well-being (Mushonga & Henneberger, 2020). Many undergraduate and graduate students of color are more likely to turn to informal sources of support, such as friends and family (Lipson et al., 2018). Research has found some gender differences in such that African American female students are more likely to turn to their community and seek out social support as a coping mechanism compared to African American male students (Utsey et al., 2000). This may, in part, be due to gender norms and stereotypes that discourage men from asking for help or disclosing their concerns in general (Lindsey & Marcell, 2012).

Substance Use. Evidence suggests that many Black Americans engage in substance use to cope with stress, particularly due to experiences of racial discrimination (Bryant-Davis, 2007; Desalu et al., 2019; Hurd et al., 2014). Specifically, a meta-analysis by Desalu and colleagues (2019) found evidence to suggest that Black Americans may

engage in problematic alcohol use to cope with experiences of racial discrimination. Consuming substances may be believed to have a calming effect that can distract from the pain associated with exposure to a race-based incident. In concert with coping with mental health-related concerns, students of color may engage in substance use behaviors to cope with racial discrimination. Blume and colleagues (2012) particularly found that among students of color, more frequent experiences of racial microaggressions are associated with an increased risk of binge drinking. Considering most colleges promote a drinking culture, students of color may already be engaging in alcohol consumption. However, experiences of general stress, race-related stress, and discrimination may exacerbate drinking behavior among students of color attending PWIs (Blume et al., 2012; Pittman et al., 2017).

Self-Coping. Some Black Americans cope by ignoring concerns or handling things themselves (Miranda et al., 2015), often through distractions such as hobbies (Lindsey & Marcell, 2012). When coping with individual encounters with racial discrimination, African American women have been found to engage in avoidant behaviors compared to problem-solving or seeking out community supports (Utsey et al., 2000). While this form of coping is often necessary, it can significantly impact self-esteem and life satisfaction in a negative way (Utsey et al., 2000). Protective factors for mental well-being among Black students may also include positive self-esteem (Mushonga & Henneberger, 2020). Regarding racial discrimination and trauma-related symptoms, studies have found that accepting or keeping the event to yourself was associated with increased dissociative symptoms (Polanco-Roman et al., 2016).

Activism and Mental Health

Benefits of Engaging in Activism

Engaging in activism can lead to social change and positively impact mental health and well-being. Among a national sample of self-identified activist adults, engaging in activism, such as voting and signing petitions, was associated with higher psychological well-being and overall flourishing (Klar & Kasser, 2009). Among college students, having an activist identity and commitment to engaging in activism and having intentions to engage in activism was positively associated with well-being; however, this sample was predominantly White and female (Klar & Kasser, 2009). However, some evidence has suggested a positive relationship between engaging in activism and well-being among racial and ethnic minority populations.

Hope and colleagues (2018) found that engaging in political activism can serve as a protective factor against racial and ethnic discrimination among Black and Latinx college students. Considering that increased experiences of discrimination are associated with poor mental health (Paradies, 2006, Paradies et al., 2015; Pascoe & Richman, 2009; Pieterse et al., 2012), political activism could also serve as a protective factor for mental health and well-being. Activism may also indirectly serve as a protective factor for collective racial trauma (Hickson et al., 2021). Through engaging in activism, individuals often collaborate with a diverse group of people to work towards a unified goal related to justice. As such, activism, particularly identity-based activism, can depict diversity within race and ethnicity, allow individuals to see themselves as agents of change, and promote a sense of belonging and connectedness (Hickson et al., 2021), all of which aid in positive experiences with health and well-being.

Risks of Engaging in Activism

While there are many positive benefits of engaging in activism, it is crucial to understand the duality of engaging in activism and the impact it has on mental health and well-being. Individuals may experience activist burnout, which can manifest in negative implications for emotional and physical health and an overall loss of hope in engaging in activism (Gorski & Chen, 2015).

Research has found a positive correlation between high-risk activism and risky health behaviors (Ballard et al., 2019). Specifically, scholars have found that young adults who engage in activism, such as protests and marches, are also likely to engage in substance use (Ballard et al., 2019). This could be because systemic and institutional change takes time and often does not result immediately after marching or protesting. As a result, engaging in substance use may serve as a coping mechanism for young activists (Ballard et al., 2019).

Black student activists may be particularly burdened by the emotional labor of engaging in activism. Black students who attend PWIs may feel additional stress and burnout due to their experiences navigating oppressive spaces while fighting for change (Jones & Reddick, 2017). Specifically, these students may deal with stubborn and uncompromising university administrators and failed promises of change and thus engage in the additional work of creating safe spaces and initiatives to support themselves and their fellow peers of color (Jones & Reddick, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

A critical ideology and a radical healing lens in concert with a constructivist grounded theory methodology guide this study. In concert with critical theory, radical healing acknowledges the oppression systems perpetuate race-related trauma and

amplifies community empowerment and resilience. These frameworks further explore the relationship between racial-identity-based activism and overall well-being among Black college students who attend PWIs. As such, constructivist grounded theory provides a methodological approach for a critical ideological paradigm and a racial healing lens.

A critical–ideological paradigm analyzes the historical systems of power in place that shape a social reality (Ponterroto, 2005). Relatedly, critical – ideology works to challenge traditional notions of power and inequality to work toward social justice (Charmaz, 2017). It acknowledges the existence of multiple worldviews and highlights the importance of the realities of both the research and the participants within qualitative research (Morrow, 2007). Relatedly, critical inquiry considers systems of power and oppression and works to dismantle oppressive forces by amplifying the voices of historically marginalized communities and utilizing research to evoke social change (Denzin, 2015). Critical ideology shares many assumptions and goals of radical healing.

This study additionally utilizes French and colleagues (2020) psychological framework of radical healing as a lens because of its application to communities of color. Radical healing refers to "being able to sit in a dialectic and exist in both spaces of resisting oppression and moving toward freedom" (pp. 24). This may be accomplished through five key elements: critical consciousness, cultural authenticity and self-knowledge, radical hope, emotional and social support, and strength and resistance. To engage in radical healing, an individual must reflect upon their own critical consciousness and ability to analyze their sociopolitical location within structural oppression as well as work towards action to reduce oppression (French et al., 2020). It is essential that there is optimistic belief, or radical hope, that justice can be achieved,

which is fostered through the persistence, strength, and resilience of communities of color. Finally, radical healing relies on the collective cultural and historical knowledge and wisdom of the community to promote liberation and freedom (French et al., 2020).

In concert with a framework of radical healing, this study works to disrupt traditional research design and implementation practices by centering Black students' experiences and incorporating their knowledge and expertise. This pairs well with a constructivist grounded theory methodology as this approach provides the foundation for radical healing. French and colleagues (2020) encourage researchers to inform their scholarship in radical healing in multiple ways. First, they argue for the use of multiple and varied methodologies and approaches to research rather than one specific approach. Within the research design and associated steps of analysis and interpretation, the proposed study will not only center on individual and personal experiences but also consider environmental factors and the role of systemic and institutional structures. It is not only a disservice to the study participants to ignore the role of institutional forces but also unethical to explore the relationship between identity, activism, and mental and physical health without critically analyzing the role of societal and institutional oppression. This is particularly relevant given the current racial climate within the United States and the history behind activism efforts on college campuses, especially PWIs.

This study further disrupts a Western European view of research by focusing on personal and relational liberation (French et al., 2020) through Black student activists' narratives and collective experiences. The study works to understand the relationship between activism and well-being in terms of coping and healing. Furthermore, the proposed study will focus on institutional and system factors that impact health and well-

being and the role of solidarity and community in engaging in racial identity-based activism. Finally, this study acknowledges Black students' individual and community healing practices and encourages actionable change at the institutional level.

Current Study

As discussed throughout this chapter, racism and discrimination negatively impact the mental health and well-being of Black Americans, particularly, Black college students. The campus cultural climate at PWIs often perpetuates institutional and systemic racism and discrimination, which complicates the unique stressors experienced by students of color. This experience of minority or race-related stress can negatively impact a sense of belonging, academic success, psychological well-being, and physical health. In response to a failure of adequate changes by Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity offices and a negative campus climate, many students of color and Black students engage in identity-based activism through various means, from social media posts and hashtags to protests and civil disobedience. While engaging in activism can work to promote mental health and well-being through an increased sense of belonging and connectedness, students engaged in activism may find themselves plagued by RBF and burnout. As such, the mental health and well-being of Black students engaged in activism are unique and deserving of further exploration and understanding.

With the rise of #BlackLivesMatter and other activist movements, there has been a flux of research about the Black community and communities of color. From this literature, we have learned more about the impact of race-based stress and racial trauma (Hickson et al., 2021; Hope et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2019) as well as developed

frameworks for anti-racism social justice and healing practices (French et al., 2020; Mosley et al., 2021).

While there has been some research related to the relationship between mental health and well-being and activism (Ballard & Ozer, 2016; Klar & Kasser, 2009; O'Conner et al., 2021), these studies did not focus on racial-identity-based activism, nor did they focus on Black student activists specifically. Relatedly, the studies focusing on Black students who engage in racial-identity-based activism explore the rationale for activism rather than the role activism plays in overall health and well-being. As mentioned, Black college students face unique stressors that their White peers do not face because of their racial identity (Harrell, 2000; Wei et al., 2012). Black students engaging in activism are not only impacted by these stressors, but they are also dealing with the stress and pressure that accompanies advocating and fighting for systematic and institutional changes. However, less is known about how Black students navigate their racial identity, activist engagement, and mental well-being when these factors conflict.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In Chapter 1, I provided an overview of college activism movements and the current state of mental health and well-being among the Black community. In Chapter 2, I explored the historical context of activism on college campuses, described activist activities, and highlighted the factors that impact the mental health and well-being of the Black and African American community, including stigma and bias. This chapter aims to detail the research design and methodology of the current study. Informed by relevant literature, this qualitative study explored the relationship between mental health and well-being and identity-based activism among Black students using a constructivist grounded theory methodology. Within this chapter, I explain the value of the chosen methodology and how it was used to inform the current study. Relatedly, I will present the research questions, sampling procedure, and data collection process. This chapter will conclude by describing the data collection process and how validity was maintained within the findings.

Constructivist Grounded Theory

Qualitative analysis is a common approach in counseling psychology, considering the overlap with assumptions of a constructivist paradigm (Morrow, 2007). Qualitative research studies allow for flexibility and meaning-making as derived from the experiences and interpretations of the participants. Relatedly, counseling psychology values a social justice agenda and acknowledges diversity among individual worldviews and perspectives.

As such, many published scholars within the field frequently use a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is a qualitative method of research that focuses on

theory development that is generated from the collected data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Rather than starting with a specific theory or framework in mind and generating data through hypothesis testing, a grounded theory approach develops a theory that is 'grounded' in the data through induction. Grounded theory disrupts traditional research methodology by bridging the gap between scientific theory and research (Charmaz, 2000). Since its development by Glaser and Strauss, researchers have adapted and modified grounded theory to reflect various philosophical perspectives and paradigms.

Constructivist grounded theory deviates from traditional grounded theory methodology because of conceptualizations of the role of the researcher. In concert with a constructivist paradigm, constructivist grounded theory posits that reality is dually constructed by both the participants and the researcher (Charmaz, 2005, p.130). This study focuses on the phenomena present, and the associated data is co-produced and co-constructed through interactions and relationships with the study participants (Charmaz, 2005; Charmaz, 2017).

Reflexivity

Considering the personal and professional interests and values of the researcher as well as the overall purpose of the study, a constructivist grounded theory methodology was most appropriate for this study. As a clinician, future counseling psychologist, and self-identified activist, I maintain a worldview that values the knowledge and expertise of the individuals and communities I interact with. This is aligned with a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm which acknowledges the individual construction of reality as fact and knowledge (Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Little is known about the mental health and well-being of Black students who

engage in activism, and a constructivist grounded theory approach allows for further exploration as interpreted by the participants. This approach supports a social justice framework by centering the experiences of Black students, a historically marginalized community, and amplifying their voices within the confines of academia. Relatedly, in this study, I address the greater institutional and systemic forces that impact the life experiences of Black students who engage in activism at a PWI.

My reflexivity plays an essential role in interpreting data and constructing meaning throughout the analysis process (Morrow, 2005). As stated by Charmaz (2020), "Constructivist grounded theory leads researchers to concentrate on what is happening in the research field, acknowledge that they are part of it, remain flexible, follow empirical events, attend to language and meaning, and take on moral responsibilities arising through their research, which can bring researchers into the public sphere" (p.165). Within constructivist grounded theory, I examine how I relate to the research and use that information to inform and interpret the current study's findings to promote social justice research and challenge the status quo of traditional research.

Research Questions

The current study asks the following questions related to the experiences of Black students at PWIs who engage in racial identity-based activism.

1. What are the unique factors that influence the mental health and well-being of Black students who engage in social justice activities at a predominantly White institution?
2. How do Black students who engage in social justice activities protect their mental health and well-being?

Research Design

Population

The sample for the current study includes students currently enrolled at Midwest University (pseudonym). Midwest University is a predominantly White public institution located in the midwestern region of the United States. According to enrollment records from 2020, the total student population is approximately 31,000, over 23,000 (75.9%) of whom identify as White (Division of Enrollment Management, 2020). Relatedly, approximately 6.5% (2,000 students) of the student body is Black. Midwest University was chosen as the location for the current study due to its history and legacy as a PWI and its associated reputation of institutional discrimination and student activism.

Midwest University was founded in 1839 by James S. Rollins, a known slave owner, and was funded by donations from slave owners throughout Missouri (Webner, 2014). The university remained restricted to White students until the 1930s when Lloyd Gaines and Lucile Bluford fought for admission to the university (Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center, n.d.). However, it was not until 1950 that the university admitted its first Black student, Gut T. Ridgel (Reid-Cleveland, 2015). While 1950 marked racial desegregation at the university, Black students faced continuous discrimination. Following years of racial injustice, such as the song "Dixie" and showcasing a confederate flag at football games, in 1968, The Legion of Black Collegians (LBC), the first Black student government in the country, was created (Legion of Black Collegians, n.d.). Since then, LBC has continued to advocate for Black students on campus and played a pivotal role in the 2015 campus protests against racial injustice, which sparked national activism efforts across college campuses (Brown, 2021).

Sampling and Participant Selection

Undergraduate students who engage in activism and attend Midwest University were recruited for this study. Participants for this study were selected through purposive sampling allows for the recruitment of a particular group, Black students, which is appropriate for the current study. I utilized my personal and professional networks to recruit participants from organizations and campus support centers geared toward Black students. This included specific Black student organizations as well as academic and social support centers at Midwest University. Additional participants were recruited through a snowball effect and word of mouth by campus administrators, staff, and students, given the sensitive nature of this study.

All participants self-identified as Black or African American, self-identified as engaging in social justice related to their racial identity and were currently enrolled at Midwest University during the time of the interview. The participants consisted of eight females, three males, and one non-binary participant, for a total sample size of 12.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Academic Year	Major
Daena	She/her	Second year	Animal Sciences
Lewis	She/her	Fourth year	English
Ivy	Any pronouns	Fourth year	Psychology
Michael	He/him	Second year	Engineering
Dwayne	He/him	Third year	Business
Susan	She/her	Third year	Psychology

Mikayla	She/her	Fourth year	Health Sciences
Laila	She/her	Fourth year	Health Sciences
T.J.	He/him	Second year	Business
Toni	She/her	Third year	Journalism
Jasmine	She/her	Third year	Business
Mac	She/her	Fourth year	Psychology

Data Collection

Data was collected from two 45-minute semi-structured individual interviews with each participant (See Appendix A and B). Aligned with a constructivist grounded theory approach, interview data were analyzed throughout the data collection process through constant comparison in which the participant experiences, views, and actions were continuously compared and contrasted to identify reoccurring themes and differences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As such, the protocol for the initial interview was designed to explore overall experiences related to activism and mental health, while the second interview served as a follow-up to further explore emerging themes. Interview questions for the second interview were developed to reflect the themes of the data and participants' experiences. Sampling and data collection ceased once saturation was met, all theoretical categories were identified, and no new categories emerged (Charmaz, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Data Analysis

Coding

Developing and constructing codes is pivotal in shaping the structure for further analysis in constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2005). Coding involves grouping pieces of the collected data into categories that summarize the collective meaning of those pieces of data. It is the process of actively studying the collected data, defining it, and uncovering its meaning (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Most importantly, coding serves as an explanatory bridge between the collected data and the emerging theory, as it provides insight into the explicit meaning of the data and how it is being interpreted (Charmaz, 2005). Coding for the current study included a two-step coding process beginning with an initial open coding phase followed by an axial coding process.

Initial Open Coding. The first phase of coding for the current study was initial coding. Initial coding follows the transcribed data and remains close to the participant's experiences (Charmaz, 2005). This coding phase aims to remain open and name the actions and experiences that emerge directly from the data rather than considering previously constructed categories or codes. The initial codes created often included the words of the participants within the developed code. Relatedly, these codes were typically short, simple, precise, and depicted actions to preserve the participant's perspective (Charmaz, 2005). While the purpose is to develop codes that best fit the data, ground theory acknowledges that the codes are not fixed and that there are additional ways to interpret the analysis. This methodology also acknowledges that the constructed codes will change and adapt as more data is collected and interpreted.

Coding during the initial phase occurs quickly in order to encourage new ideas and prompt researcher critical thinking. This stage of coding allowed the researchers to uncover gaps within the collected data and seek out avenues to fill the gaps. For this

reason, we also utilized constant comparison, a critical aspect of grounded theory, as data collection and analysis must occur simultaneously.

Axial Coding. Axial coding is the process in which the relationship between initial codes and categories is analyzed and constructed. This process involves making connections from the initial coding process to fully understand the unique properties of a larger emerging category (Charmaz, 2006). Furthermore, axial coding follows the development of an emerging category by conceptualizing the relationships between categories and codes to gain a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006). Within this process, we first identified the salient phenomenon that emerged from the initial codes and the circumstances that influenced it. Then, we identified the participant responses (e.g., behaviors, actions) and the outcomes associated with interacting with the phenomenon. Additionally, we considered the contextual factors and conditions that influenced the responses and strategies used by the participants.

Memoing

In addition to engaging in the process of coding data, the researchers utilized memos. Memos are short notes developed during data collection and analysis, which describe considerations regarding overarching categories that evolve from the data and the relationships between the various categories (Charmaz, 2005). Specifically, memos included each researcher's thoughts regarding the data collection process and reflections on participant narratives. Relatedly, memos captured the relationship between the research team and the participants. Through this process, we reflected on initial themes that arose from the data and developed new ideas and insights that were used to inform the written analysis. Furthermore, we used memos to capture comparisons within the data

and the insight that arose from new ideas and critical reflection. This method was utilized throughout the data collection process to aid in the early analysis of themes and codes.

Theoretical Sampling and Saturation

Informed by memo writing, theoretical sampling and saturation were used to collect data most relevant to the emerging theory. Theoretical sampling aims to refine and further construct meaning from the categories developed from the data until no new categories emerge (Charmaz, 2005). Relatedly, theoretical sampling allowed for refining and defining the emerging themes and helped focus and guide the analysis. The process of data collection ceased when saturation was met. Within the confines of grounded theory, saturation of the data refers to the phenomenon when collecting additional data does not lead to new insight or additional thematic categories (Charmaz, 2005). Instead, the data are saturated when newly collected data fits into the previously developed categories without offering new insight or analysis.

Journaling

A constructivist grounded theory approach emphasizes the role of the researcher as a co-interpreter of knowledge and meaning. As such, I engaged in journaling throughout the research study. I detailed my thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in addition to learned knowledge in a reflection journal. Relatedly, I reflected upon my role as a researcher and an activist and how these identities impact how I relate to the participants in the study and the associated experiences. This was further used during the data analysis process to check researcher bias which may impact the interpretation and the development of theoretical categories (Morrow, 2005).

Validity

Research Team. A team of scholars assisted with coding the collected data to reduce bias within the study and maintain truthfulness. The team included one doctoral-level scholar, one master's level scholar, and one undergraduate scholar.

Trustworthiness. Following the complete transcription of the interviews, participants were sent a copy of the complete transcript of their interview. This form of member checking was done to achieve fairness in how the participant's voice is being interpreted and decrease potential bias from the researchers (Morrow, 2005). Participants were asked to review the transcript for accuracy and were encouraged to add additional comments or elaboration. This process occurred following both the first and second participant interviews. Relatedly, to further maintain trustworthiness and credibility in the data, I utilized journaling and memo writing to maintain any researcher biases that may be apparent. In concert with constant comparison, these actions were used at the beginning of and in tandem with data collection to preserve the authenticity and veracity of the participants' narratives and perspectives.

Chapter 4: Findings

In Chapters 1 and 2, I highlighted the historical context of campus activist movements and the discourse surrounding mental health among the Black community. This dissertation explores emerging themes guided by the research questions: 1) What are the unique factors that influence the mental health and well-being of Black students who engage in social justice activities at a predominantly White institution? and 2) How do Black students who engage in social justice activities protect their mental health and well-being? The experiences and narratives shared by the participants in this study highlight the nuances of navigating mental wellness among Black students.

Five main themes answer this study's research questions and 11 sub-themes. When looking at the factors that influence the mental health of the study participants, the narratives revealed two main themes, institutional factors, and student life. Institutional factors refer to the ways in which the university system serves as a stressor due to the campus racial climate, unjust policies and guidelines, and treatment of students engaging in activist activities. Student life refers to the various factors associated with being a Black college student at a PWI, such as unequal expectations of Black students, navigating the sociopolitical climate, and inadequate mental health resources.

To answer the second research question about protective factors, this study revealed three themes, shifting mental health stigma, being your own therapist, and the campus community. Shifting the mental health stigma refers to how Generation Z is disrupting current narratives regarding mental health in the Black community. Being your own therapist acknowledges how the participants engage in self-empowerment practices, coping activities, and having a positive outlook to support their mental health. Finally, the

campus community highlights how the Black student community serves as a protective factor for mental health while trusting relationships allow for support and assistance in navigating life stressors. The remainder of this chapter will further explore each of this study's key themes and sub-themes.

Table 2

Summary of Study Themes and Sub-themes

Domain	Main Theme	Sub-theme
Factors that Influence the Mental Health and Well-being of Black Students	Institutional Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Campus Racial Climate b. Distress from the University c. Engaging in Activism
	Student Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Higher Standards for Black Students b. The Pandemic c. University as Inadequate
Protective Factors	Shifting Mental Health Stigma	
	Being My Own Therapist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Self-Empowerment b. Coping Activities c. Having Faith
	Campus Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The Black Community at Midwest University b. Trusting Relationships

Factors that Influence the Mental Health and Well-being of Black Students

Institutional Factors

The participants' narratives illustrate how factors associated with their institution impact mental health and wellness. Specifically, institutional factors refer to the campus culture and climate regarding race, administrative decisions and policies, and student activism and social justice activities. Experiences of systematic racism within institutional policies and the university culture significantly impact a sense of belonging, perceived support, and feeling heard by the university. As such, the participants often balance feelings of anger, frustration, and overall stress with navigating racism on their campus and feeling ignored by their university. The remainder of this section details three key subthemes that emerged from the analysis of participant interviews. These subthemes include the campus racial climate, distress from the university, and engaging in activism (see Table 2).

Campus Racial Climate. Participants in this study powerfully convey how experiences of racism and discrimination uniquely impact them as a student at Midwest University. The most frequent experience endorsed by the participants was experiencing microaggressions or covert acts of racial discrimination in their academic classes. Notably, they referenced encounters between them and their White professors and peers. For example, Toni, a junior studying journalism, described a situation where she was mistaken for another Black woman in her class. She recalled the feelings that came up for her during the event. Toni said, “She had come to distribute our press passes, and it came to our table, and she got mine wrong, and I was so unnerved because the girl she mixed

me up for, I don't look anything like her...it was just embarrassing, having to go up to her and say, this is not mine, and she was like 'oh I'm sorry.'”

Toni's experience navigating a microaggression in class was not an isolated incident for her or other participants. Instead, being at risk for racial microaggressions and racial stereotypes is an unfortunate reality for many Black students. Mac, a senior studying psychology, shared how racial stereotypes and assumptions impact her,

The very first thing that causes me the most stress is in my classes. Not only do we have imposter syndrome here on a White campus, but also, I have to deal with professors who, the only thing they see when they look at me is a Black girl. They don't see a scholar.

For many Black students, the source of stress associated with going to class is related to varying experiences of microaggressions, such as being mistaken for another Black student or the unfair stereotypes and assumptions placed upon them. However, many participants recalled situations in which racism occurred in other spaces in and around campus. Lewis, a senior English major, elaborated on how she was impacted by racism while working on campus. She explained,

I worked at one of the social justice centers, and I don't answer the phone anymore, because of have lots of different people that have decided to call in and call us slurs. Maybe to someone that might seem like a miniscule thing. But it's a really big part of my job that now I'm a little bit hesitant to do so every time the phone rings.

In response to racial harassment, Lewis noted feeling hesitant to answer phones out of fear of being the target of racist remarks. While feeling anxious was a common

response to experiences of racism for some, several participants noted feeling indifferent when experiencing racism directed at themselves. Ivy also recalled an experience in which they experienced verbal racism and discrimination related to their racial identity and their intersecting identities. Ivy said,

This is not just with me being Black, but also being Queer. Instances where I've had box braids, or I just been walking either directly on campus or right off campus where I've had people drive by and yell certain stuff at me. Sometimes just like the most random stuff that they'll say to me.

They continued to recall how they are desensitized to acts of overt discrimination when they are alone, but they have a different response when others are present. They said,

Most recently I was walking to Chipotle with my friend, we're both Black and Queer, but we were just walking, and these guys drove by and just started barking at us for some reason, and normally when it comes to certain stuff I don't really jump, but I was in a situation where I was with a friend that I do care about, so I immediately jump to protect him, and then I was like, 'damnit they probably thought that I was a scared of them'. No, I just saw it as a dangerous situation and wanted to help my friend.

Although the verbal harassment did not personally threaten Ivy, they recognized that it was a "dangerous situation" that could pose a possible risk to physical safety. Regardless of the response to racial harassment and racist microaggressions, the participants nonetheless acknowledge that they are negatively impacted. Susan, a senior studying psychology, also described how she is not only negatively impacted by racism,

but frequent racist encounters have happened to her since being enrolled as a student.

Susan explained,

I've had like at least one racist incident every semester so that's part of why I just like don't want to put too much energy in it. Because if I focus on it, I will ruin my energy and time and effort.

While the participants responded to acts of covert or overt racism and discrimination differently, they all acknowledge how these incidents are associated with varying levels of stress. Furthermore, the stress experienced may be related to risks to psychological safety, a sense of belonging, and a risk to physical safety. Lewis described how chronic and pervasive racism impacts her and creates a sense of uncertainty as a student. She said,

Almost every week, it's crazy, it's absolutely insane. You walk past the Black Culture Center and there's a stray cotton ball and you have to start wondering is that something that maybe fell from someone's pocket or is this a message that was intended to be sent to us.

Distress from the University. The participants also recognized how the university system directly impacts their feelings of distress, particularly regarding how the university responds to incidents of racism. The relationship between university policies and procedures and negative mental health implications was interwoven throughout the participant's narratives. Many participants noted feelings of disappointment and frustration regarding how the university responds to racial discrimination on campus. For example, Laila, a senior studying health science, recalled several instances throughout her time at Midwest University where “Something racially

charged occurred, yet nothing was said about it.” She further explained that she felt ignored by the university in these situations,

I think that just recognizing those things is like huge. Because a lot of times it feels like we're ignored. It feels like situations are ignored, or that they're pushed of as okay. But they need to make it clear that it's not okay.

In addition to campus-wide recognition and condemnation of racism, many participants cited dissatisfaction with the university-sanctioned repercussions for perpetrators of racial discrimination. Laila further mentioned, "If you're going to promote a diverse university, you can't allow those types of things to happen, or just give people a slap on the wrist for racially charged things that they have committed."

Not only were participants dissatisfied with the university's reactions to racism on campus, but they also expressed how university decisions related to social justice are detrimental to their overall mental health. Influenced by the pandemic of racism and demands for racial justice following the murder of George Floyd, several students advocated for the removal of a monument of a historical figure and known slaveholder that occupied the campus. Many participants shared their frustration that despite student-led arrangements to remove the statue, the university decided to keep it on campus. Ivy described their thoughts regarding the university's handling of the situation.

All they had to do is just say yes, and it was going to be removed and that would have helped a lot of the activism on campus. For Black students doing race-related social justice work, that would have been a win. It would have been like, hey they're listening to some extent, maybe not everything but they're listening to

something. But even when everything- all they had to do was say yes and they still said no. That was a metaphorical spit to the face.

Other participants cited the university's decision to change the structure and organization of identity-based centers on campus. Restructuring these spaces would not only limit student access to affinity group spaces, but it significantly impacted staffing issues and led to several staff resignations. As a result, many participants, like Toni, lost valuable mentors and support systems. She said,

Knowing that my mentors- it was getting so bad, to the point where they were considering leaving, that was a stressor for me. That my mentors didn't feel valued as Black people themselves to the point where they left. An administrator, a mentor, an employee of the university left.

Many participants also emphasized feelings of frustration related to the university not listening to them. Michael, a sophomore engineering major, said, "It's not as Black and White as they might think it is" when asked about the university's understanding of student needs. He added, "Even if you don't think it's that big of a deal, treat it as big as we think it is because you don't know how we feel about it for real, because you're not in our shoes."

Mac provided additional context as to why the university needs to show that they care about their Black students and the benefits of doing so. She said,

By caring about your Black students, you decrease our need to participate in social justice activities. Because you don't care about us and we're always having to prove that we care enough about something for it to change, that affects our

mental health in itself, the fact that we're always involved in some social justice issue, we're always at some protests, were always advocating for some issue.

Despite feeling ignored and lacking support from the university, many participants acknowledged attempts by the university to support Black students. However, these attempts are often devoid of student input and are not seen as supportive. Jasmine, a sophomore business major, acknowledged how the university attempts to support Black students when she said, "I think that when people try to help, they try to give you what they think will work for you." Dwayne, a junior studying business, furthers this point with his perspective. He said, "They want to help, they want to help Midwest University's Black students, but they don't want to listen to how they think they should be helped and that's Midwest University's biggest problem." Laila, Toni, and Ivy's narratives emphasize how the university's decisions and policies serve as an additive factor to student stress. These oppressive policies, coupled with ineffective initiatives to support students, leave them feeling frustrated, ignored, and distrustful of their university. As such, students are less likely to view the university as a source of support and may be discouraged from seeking out available resources. Lewis highlighted this issue when she said,

I don't think Black Midwest University trusts Midwest University, in any aspect of anything but particularly with their mental health. And why should they? Why should you trust the people that you think are plotting against you with something as precious as your own mental well-being?

The participants describe how the university implements policies and decisions that do not prioritize the overall well-being of its Black students. As such, they

experience frustration and disappointed in the lack of perceived support from their university.

Engaging in Activism. When understanding the relationship between engaging in social justice and activism and mental health, the participant's narratives reveal a complex relationship. While the participants recognized that engaging in activist activities had a positive impact, they overwhelmingly described activism as mentally and physically exhausting. Susan described how her experiences with social justice activities have both positive and negative implications for her mental health,

Engaging in social justice is such a hit or miss in terms of mental health. Because it's like 'yay, I'm happy that I'm supporting my community, I'm happy that I'm supporting other people, I'm happy that I'm doing this for not only myself'. But then there's that other part that's like, it's so mentally draining to have to keep reminding people that you mattered or it's so mentally draining when people want to argue with you.

Lewis shared a similar perspective about how engaging in social justice work is not synonymous with mental wellness. She said, "Yeah, I'm standing here, and I'm standing my ground and I'm telling you that this is wrong, and I'm taking this stance. That doesn't mean that I'm okay while I'm doing it." She also provided additional context that further complicates the relationship between mental health and social activism,

All of this happens in addition to regular life, you know, all of this happens in addition to breakups, and in addition to exams, and in addition to you know, homesickness, like all of these regular college student experiences that can put

you on crazy emotional roller coasters. And then you add in having to combat injustice every day that you exist.

Lewis acknowledges that engaging in activism on campus is not affiliated with the typical college experience but rather, it is additional labor. Despite knowing that social justice work is independent from the expectations of college students, many participants noted how they do not have the option to refrain from doing this work.

Jasmine explained how engaging in social justice and activism is tied to a sense of obligation. While discussing her involvement, she said,

There's things going on in this world that need to change. You kind of feel this inner burden to ease that or to change that. And participating in social justice is one way of alleviating that burden or changing the world. So it feels great. It feels great, but at times it can just be tiring. Like in the same way that it energizes me, it also kind of drains me at the same time.

Similarly, Lewis explained,

I will say that for a long time my engagement in social justice work just felt compulsory, because you know I'm Black all the time. I'm going to be encountering racism. You know, I'm a woman- I'm a Black woman. There's going to be things that I'm going to have to face. And that shit was not okay with me.

Ivy stated that the activism they are involved in feels like something they do out of obligation, "It's not something that I want to do, it's something that I have to do." They further elaborated,

I don't find joy in doing this, maybe some fulfillment but I don't find a lot of joy in doing this, because I'm of the mind that I shouldn't have to do with this. This

shouldn't need to be something that I need to be doing. So to constantly have like that thought in the back, back of your mind when you're doing this kind of work, it does make it make it a little bit more tiring.

The participants recognize that engaging in social justice and activism comes with risks and rewards to mental health. Social justice work is an additional burden unique to Black students who experience injustice because of their racial identity. Additionally, the constant fighting and advocating for Black lives is mentally exhausting independent of the stressors associated with being a college student. However, the participants note that engaging in social justice work creates a sense of fulfillment and autonomy over standing against systemic injustice. The following section will discuss how factors associated with being a college student impact mental health and wellness. Specifically, the next section will discuss higher standards of social performance for Black students, the impact of the sociopolitical climate, and the lack of appropriate mental health services for Black students.

Student Life

While the primary obligation of most college students is to obtain their degree, college, and university campuses provide an abundance of opportunities and resources for the students to engage in to maximize their college experience. As such, the life of a college student is often uniquely situated within their campus community and the climate it cultivates. Student life highlights the various expectations and associated stressors Black students encounter while working towards completing their degree. Specifically, this theme will describe three sub-themes, higher standards for Black students, the pandemic, and the university as inadequate.

Higher Standards for Black Students. Many participants described the additional pressures and burdens associated with being a Black college student. Specifically, they shared that Black students are not representing themselves but the collective community. For example, Lewis said,

The best way I can describe it, for me, is being on all the time. And that's in every sense of the word, you have to be on for your own protection, you have to be on for just the way that you're representing yourself- not only yourself, but you feel like you're representing your entire race at times. I never feel as though there's a moment in which anyone can catch me slipping. I have got to be on my "best behavior" because I am one of the people that others look to to try to use my behavior and anything that I say or do to dictate how they're going to treat other Black people. It's not a responsibility, I would ever want but that's just kind of how you feel in this environment.

Laila shared a similar perspective as Lewis and said, "Being a black student is all about being upheld, to a certain standard of excellence." She further elaborated, "Sad to say that you aren't really allowed to make too many mistakes and you aren't allowed to fall, too many times because white people see this as a sign of weakness for the whole entire community."

Black students not only have to consider how they are being viewed but also have the additional burden of representing the standards of the Black community as a whole. A unique pressure is placed upon Black students to prove their worth and successes to the White majority constantly.

Having to maintain a certain standard of excellence refers to both interpersonal factors, such as speech and communication, as well as tangible factors, such as academic success and co-curricular involvement. Michael described how he has had to learn to adapt his language and communication within his interpersonal interactions. Specifically, he shared how he engages in code-switching when interacting with White peers. He said,

I feel like I'm always having to switch something, like how I talk to people. I talk to my black friends different than my White friends for sure. And even being around new White people, how I talk to them. Because you code switch when you have to show them, 'oh you know I can't use my slang with you because you might think I'm stupid because I use it.' So I gotta adjust. It's trying to fit in while also not trying to fit in but be yourself. But it's hard to be yourself, when you feel like somebody else might look at you differently because of who you are so.

Other participants acknowledge the additional labor Black students must take on regarding their campus reputation and involvement. Ivy said, "You're constantly working. Whether that's on academics, whether that is at an actual job, whether that is working on making the campus safe for yourself and for other people. You are always working on something." Similarly, Dwayne shared how the additional work can be viewed as leadership to him.

The first thing that came to my head when I read that question was I know that I have to be a leader. And I think that a lot of other Black students at Midwest Univeristy may feel that way, especially being at a PWI you're already set at a disadvantage. So you have to do the extra stuff to really kind of stand out and that extra stuff means to be a leader.

Dwayne further expressed, “And those kinds of things take a lot of courage, especially for people who are young, who are already trying to figure out how to be independent going into this college life. I think that is hard.”

The participants' narratives highlight how Black students must constantly consider how they are perceived on campus, particularly by their White peers. Since they are frequently the minority in many spaces on a PWI campus, they are often seen as representing all Black students. As such, they must not only adapt to the cultural expectations of the White majority but also constantly work to defy stereotypes related to their behaviors, reputation, and communication. The following section highlights how the social climate of public health and racial injustice presented an additional stressor for Black students.

The Pandemic. Data for this study was collected following the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, all participants interviewed were enrolled as students for at least some portion of their time at Midwest University. Furthermore, all participants experienced at least one year as a student at Midwest University when the university mandated a quarantine across campus and had significant limitations to in-person classes, campus activities, and co-curricular involvement. During this time, many participants recalled the challenges of adjusting to being a college student during a public health crisis. Toni and Susan were both incoming first-year students during the height of the pandemic. Toni said, “I started during the pandemic as well, so that's a different layer as well.” She continued,

It was definitely challenging, especially with the limitations that the pandemic sort of set for us socially. School wise we were able to do classes, but it was

definitely challenging. Over zoom it was harder to connect with our instructors and harder to connect with our classmates harder to put names to faces. And it was definitely a challenge to do school during a pandemic, it was really easy to get burnt out with the mixture of the messages- news reports that are circulating about Covid all the time and the increasing cases increasing fears on my part.

Susan shared that being a student during the pandemic was “definitely frustrating,” particularly because of limitations in connecting to other students. She stated,

The first year, I definitely didn't get to participate in anything Black related simply because the school did not allow any meetings of any clubs or anything, so it was kind of hard being alone in a dorm that was predominantly White. Not really getting to talk to people who may have had similar instances as me.

Like Susan and Toni, many participants recalled some challenges with adjusting to virtual coursework; however, the lack of connecting to others presented the most concern. As mentioned in Susan's narrative, many students spent most of their time isolated in their dorm room, which hindered not just social interactions on campus but also their ability to build relationships with other Black peers. Lewis acknowledged how she was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as a co-occurring pandemic of racism. She said,

I'm a junior now, the first year especially, it was very marred by Covid, and so the first year there was not a lot of relationship building just in general. I didn't experience a lot of that, and that weighed heavy on my mental health just in

general, but especially knowing there was a lot going on in 2021 and 2022 especially in relation to racial justice.

Mikayla also acknowledged how increased social injustice and activism impacted her mental health and wellness. After describing how being a student during the pandemic presented challenges for her, she said,

But also just a lot of the social justice-ing that had happened around the world around the pandemic as well. I know for me it was like mentally exhausting to see Black people get killed like every day, and seeing the protests and all the stuff that was going on during that time.

Lewis and Mikayla describe how the social climate and increased attention to racial injustice served as a risk to their mental well-being. The participants were not only tasked with working towards a degree as college students but also coping with risks to their physical and psychological health and safety. Furthermore, many participants had to navigate these cumulative stressors alone without established campus support systems.

University as Inadequate. The university has various resources to support students academically and personally, including specific affinity centers, tutoring and career services, and physical and emotional health centers. However, the participant's narratives reveal how resources specific to mental health for Black students are often inadequate or nonexistent. One participant, Daena, a sophomore studying animal sciences, expressed uncertainty about the specific services available to students on campus. When asked about resources for Black mental health on campus, she said,

If you self-harm or you know are really going through something, I think they might have a crisis hotline? But you know a lot of people might not feel

comfortable doing that so I'm not sure how they could do something. I'm not sure if they offer therapy, maybe they do? Okay, see it's hard. I feel like I would have to really know what they provide. They might provide therapy.

Most participants also noted therapy as a service offered to students on campus. Specifically, the university counseling center was named as the only formal mental health service available for students. When discussing their views about mental health on campus, most participants noted significant barriers related to access and feasibility.

When asked about her experience with university mental health resources, Toni stated,

The only place I can really reach out to is the counseling center. But in the times I've spoken to them I haven't felt one hundred percent comfortable just because they record. They record your sessions and it's a limited intervention. So I never really felt comfortable saying everything I wanted to say.

Mac shared related hindrances regarding the culture of mental health and accessibility of services at Midwest University. She said, "The counseling center is always booked. If you're not in immediate crisis they're not going to see you for like a month so I feel like mental health is still taken like a joke here."

In addition to the structure of counseling services as a barrier, several participants noted the importance of cultural relevancy and the lack of Black-identified counselors available at Midwest University. Ivy stated, "But from what I understand, a lot of the counseling center has very, most of the counseling center is White people, so that can only do so much for you as a Black student."

While most participants had not utilized the university resource, those who did shared similar values about the counselor's identity. When asked about her experiences,

Susan, a junior psychology major, said, “I would prefer to have a Black psychologist/psychiatrist, but I know it's not a lot of them. That was one thing I requested, and I didn't get that both times. But, the options I got were still good.” She further explained why a Black mental health provider is important to her,

It's just there's always going to be certain things that I talk about related to my race that they just never really got. And it wasn't their fault, because it's kind of hard to get something, if you're not a part of it in terms of race related things.

Relatedly, Lewis stated, “Counseling didn't help, my counselor helped.” She explained that despite having prior experiences in therapy, she found that the identity of her counselor at Midwest University was what significantly led to her having a successful experience.

I had a Black female counselor for the first time in my life. I have been going to counseling and therapy for I don't know six, seven years and I never made any headway one because I'm extremely stubborn, but two because how am I supposed to trust this counselor that I have nothing in common with you know. So having this counselor, for one we didn't have to start with racism. And we didn't have to start with racism at Midwest University because she knew. We could talk about me, and how I was affected by these things, and how these things are very much occurring and present. But, starting with me.

Overwhelmingly, the participants endorsed an openness to formal mental health services such as therapy or seeing a mental health professional. Furthermore, many participants encouraged their peers to seek therapy and expressed non-judgmental views of the service. However, the participants are interested in services that are free from

structural barriers and that demonstrate cultural relevancy. When asked how colleges and universities can better support Black students' mental health, Toni mentioned the existing stigma. She said,

There already is a lack of Black mental professionals. There's a stigma behind mental health in the Black Community already that reaching out and asking for help is a sign of weakness and it indicates that something's wrong with you, things of that sorts, I know that stigma exists.

She followed up with, “I just wish that they would have a separate thing, a separate sector of the therapy services, the counseling services they provide here, specifically for Black students.” Toni's desire for specific counseling services for Black students demonstrates how the university services feel inadequate. The participants' narratives highlight how Black students want to utilize university resources, and many have succeeded. However, due to the lack of specificity, the counseling center is not a feasible first step for mental health support.

The following section will describe themes that answer the second research question, how do Black students who engage in social justice activities protect their mental health and well-being? In this section, I will highlight three main themes that emerged from the participant interviews (see Table 2). First, I will describe how the participants are shifting the mental health stigma in the Black community, which creates a sense of acceptance regarding mental health and mental illness. Then, I will highlight how the participants act as their own therapists and engage in self-reflection, positive thinking, and activities to manage stress. Finally, I will end by describing the role of the

Black campus community that serves as a protective factor retrospectively and during times of stress.

Factors that Protect the Mental Health and Well-being of Black Students

Shifting Mental Health Stigma

The participants' narratives highlight a nuanced approach to views about mental health in the Black community. Research has shown an existing stigma towards mental health and mental illness among communities of color, particularly Black and African American communities (USDHHS, 2001). All of the study participants noted recognition of the stigma and how pervasive it is within generations of Black families and the Black community collectively. However, there was an overwhelming agreement that the existing stigma was a barrier for the Black community. The participants also endorsed a generational shift and distancing of the stigma such that younger generations intentionally and unintentionally shift how the Black community views mental health now and in the future. When asked how the Black community views mental health, Ivy said, "I think for millennials and Generation Z, my generation, Black people in those generations are doing more work to address mental health, at least in their own personal lives." The notation that younger generations are changing perceptions of mental health was also exemplified by Mac, who shared her experiences with her mental health,

Coming to college, I met a lot more people who believed in mental health. I met a lot more people who are educated about the seriousness of taking care of your mental health, more than just self-care, taking a bubble bath, people who go to therapy, people who recommend therapists, who have been hospitalized like I have and it's like a different community. You can talk freely.

She further acknowledged how the mental health stigma showed up in her family. You know it's a cycle, you meet people who talk freely about their experience and you're like oh like we can talk about this? Because in my family back home, we don't talk about me going to the hospital, they just talked about the time where I had to go away for a little bit.

Jasmine referred to noticeable differences in how Black college students talk about mental health and what they are doing to support their mental health. When talking about her perspective, she said,

It comes back to stigmas, it comes back to assumptions and how the Black community does not really like talking about it [mental health], and hopefully now it's starting to become more acceptable. Some of my friends are like 'oh I'm going to therapy and it's actually really nice to have somebody to talk to'.

When asked about his views regarding mental health in the Black community, TJ also shared the generational differences between himself and his family when he said,

"It's a new in period, it's a new age. We're not the same generation as the last one."

Similarly, Daena said, "I feel like we are opening our eyes and seeing, 'hey, this isn't all right, we should change to this, we should grow as a community.' Definitely as a younger generation we're breaking a lot of boundaries." Not only did the participants note recognition of the generational differences, but they also expressed views about how things are changing.

The participants noted a recognizable difference in how their generation views mental health compared to their parents and grandparents. They highlight how there is a significant distinction in terms of how younger generations are not only talking about

topics of mental health more openly; they are also more accepting of various means of seeking help for mental health that would otherwise be stigmatized. Furthermore, the participants note distancing their generation from other generations and embracing how younger generations are making noticeable differences in mental health.

Being My Own Therapist

The participant's narratives illustrate a process of self-reflection of one's ability to navigate various stressors while recognizing systemic barriers and adversities. Being my own therapist encompasses the participants' experience of recognizing their unique mental health needs and determining the ways in which they can reduce overall stress and improve well-being. The remainder of this section details three key subthemes that emerged from the analysis of participant interviews. These subthemes include self-empowerment, coping activities, and having faith.

Self-Empowerment. A prominent subtheme from the participant's experiences was the ability to manage various stressors autonomously. Several participants emphasized their ability to recognize the need for strategies to manage stressors and the importance of prioritizing oneself. When asked about the process of dealing with stress, Laila, noted, "My first step would be to free up my schedule and find some time for myself. I try to do it myself, first of anything." Mac further acknowledged that prioritizing herself is her first step and a necessity for her well-being.

I've been on this little self-healing, self-love journey which I can thank a lot of my motivation for because if I hadn't already found out how to take care of myself before anything else, I would be burnt out trying to be a student, trying to be a

Black person in America, and then still feeling like you don't have a place to belong here on this White campus. But I take care of myself before anything.

Mikayla provided further context about how caring for oneself is often associated with internal awareness and identification of needs,

Figuring out what you need not just externally, because we need everything as college students, but figuring out what you need internally as well. What do you need more of to fill you, or what is something you like to do that you wish you could do more, you know just having something just for you, you know?

When prompted about his experience regarding how he copes with stress and mental health, TJ said,

It's looked like inner work, an inner deep dive into myself. Last year I would have described it as finding myself. But now I say 'you create yourself', you know.

When you say finding yourself, you're always there, you're always you, but what you have to do is take the hard looks and take the hard conversations and feelings and go through them and know that for you as a person, what do you want to do? how do you want to move? how do you want to operate? how is that going to impact your relationships? your school? In your life going forward?

Mac and TJ highlight that prioritizing oneself is not an inherent learned skill but rather something that is developed and continuously refined throughout the college experience. Taking care of oneself and doing "inner work" requires time, intentionality, and mental effort. Dwayne described how he manages stress by journaling. He said,

I journal. I journal a lot. It's some people that might say it's lame. I think that it's extremely important to anybody, no matter race, color, whatever, but especially if

you're Black- I think that it's important to journal because it does two or three things for me, it allows me to write down what I'm feeling in the moment. It allows me to, in that moment, think about how I want to remember this, why I want to remember this and then, when you go back to reflect, it allows you to see where you were at then versus where you are now and how you want to take in what you experienced then and whatever it was that you journaled about and helps you reflect on it and to become understanding of it. You're finding a new meaning in something that you already found meaning in.

There is a desire for growth and self-improvement interwoven into strategies for prioritizing taking care of oneself that is both present and future-oriented. For Dwayne, journaling provides a concrete way to engage in internal awareness and self-reflection, which impacts how stressors are managed at the moment and the lens through which future stressors are viewed. While many participants emphasized taking care of oneself in response to an adverse experience, Dwayne shared that he also uses journaling to promote positive experiences. He shared,

I like to mention that journaling is not just for when things go wrong, but you should also journal when something huge happens, when you have a huge achievement or when you accomplish something that you've really been trying to accomplish. I think those things need to be documented too just in case you're ever like 'man I don't know if I can do this', go back and look at it. 'Oh, I did this!', or 'I could definitely do this'.

Mikayla also acknowledged making time to "Applaud myself and certain things and try to hit different goals and milestones and really recognize that."

Overall, the participants utilize self-empowerment to identify what they need to cope with stress and prioritize time for self-reflection. Self-empowerment is a process that requires dedicated time, intentionality, and mental effort, all of which are necessary components for managing stress proactively and reactively. The following section will discuss how the participants use various activities to support their coping needs.

Coping Activities. As mentioned in the participants' process of self-empowerment, a result of self-reflection is often identifying what one needs to cope with stressors. While some needs were tied to an introspective reflection, others included engaging in activities to aid coping. Several participants explained that one of their strategies is related to basic human needs such as eating, sleeping, and personal hygiene. When asked about her strategies, Toni said, "Even just taking a shower like the act of taking a shower can be something done in self-care." She further explained how she would intentionally use her time in the shower to de-stress by playing music and opting for dimmed lighting. She said,

Just taking your time, I noticed that I would just like scrub my skin raw. And instead of that just taking my time. Just lather yourself up in soap, take a deep breath, let all the stresses of the day go in the shower.

Other participants described how they use physical activity to cope with stressors. For example, Daena explained that she went to the gym when she was overwhelmed with finals. She said, "I have a great stress relief. I love going to the gym I feel like that's definitely like helped me out." Michael also shared how he has relied on physical activity to relieve stress since he was young. He said,

From seventh, eighth grade I would just go outside, play basketball down the street from my house. And it was I guess it just came naturally so now I use it as like a stress, stress reliever so I'm not trying to go to the league or anything, I do it because I find it fun.

Daena and Michael explained that physical activity, such as working out or playing basketball, allows them to relieve best the stressors they experience. They also note that exercising is not only used to relieve stress, but they enjoy doing and having fun with it. Relatedly, TJ explained how walking helps cope with mental health. He said, "A lot of the time, like if I get anxious a walk will help a lot."

Finally, several participants explained how they listen to music as an activity for coping. Michael explained that besides physical activity, he spends time at the library on campus and listens to a specific playlist that comforts him. He said, "And that where I was allowed to like relieve my stress because it's quiet like just have my music and the night time is just soothing." For Michael, music serves as a way to self-soothe to relieve stress. Ivy, however, uses music as a form of meditation. They said,

I think that's also my form of meditation where I just let everything fall back while listening to that playlist. And sometimes I'll do it with my eyes closed, sometimes I'll do it when I had string lights, I used to have Christmas lights that were warm, warm toned. I would put those on, and I'll just stare and let my mind go blank and listen to the music. I think that's been my biggest way of coping with all the stuff that I've been having to do, taking those thirty minutes to sit back and listen to the playlist and just keep going.

These strategies serve as a way to disrupt the participants' daily stressors and allow them to make time for themselves. They can create a time and a space to engage in coping activities that are fun, stress relieving, and provide comfort for them. The following section describes the third sub-theme the participants engage in, believing things will work out in their favor.

Having Faith. One of the final sub-themes under being your own therapist is having faith. For the participants having faith referred to a belief that regardless of the situation or stress, things will work out in the end. For some participants, having faith was tied to their religious and spiritual beliefs. For example, Mikayla talked about what faith looks like for her,

I think a lot of times you just have to believe that things will be figured out and just have a lot of faith. I'm really close to my faith and everything like that, so I know that's what I rely on. Praying and reading my word every day and stuff like that.

Mikayla actively engages in religious practices such as praying and reading the Bible to have faith and bolster the belief that things will be figured out for her. Jasmine also talked about how she engages in religious practices similar to Mikayla. However, Jasmine also described how she uses her religious beliefs to gain perspective and remember her values. She said,

I keep bringing up faith but truly that's huge part of it, because once you take yourself out of your own little bubble like 'oh, this is going on, it's like freaking me out or I don't agree' faith reminds you of what really matters and all the basic

things that instantly clears everything up and puts things in their proper perspective.

Other participants describe how a shift in perspective helps them with their mental health. Specifically, Michael shared how he adjusts his worldview to maintain a positive outlook. He said,

It's all about perspective. So when it comes to me and my mental health, I kinda try to remember, even though I might be sad about something for five, ten, ten minutes, then, like probably a whole day if something can hold me down then next day I know it's a new day. On top of that, it's perspective. Like you could look at a rainy day, you could look at a rainy day and say it's a bad day, and then you couldn't wake up, walking around drowsy, probably tired and stay in bed. Or you could look outside see a rainy day and say it's a good day. Just like a sunny day.

Michael's strategy to gain perspective on situations serves as a way for him to protect his mental health during times of stress. He recognizes that finding the positive in a situation helps him and his overall mental health. Additionally, he acknowledges how he can allow himself time to accept that stressors may negatively impact his day by remembering that he does not have to allow negative life stressors to impact him the following day. Both Jasmine and Michael show how maintaining a positive perspective and outlook can be tied to having faith in the spiritual sense and without.

Another participant, Mac, shared how faith has shown up for her. When describing how she navigates feeling stressed, she described,

What are they like affirmations, I guess? Like ‘you are that bitch, you are a divine being everything that is yours will come to you, like you don't have to worry about it, like everything that I deserve I will get.’

Campus Community

The campus community is the second prominent theme regarding protective factors for mental health. This theme refers to the ways in which Black students who engage in social justice work utilize their connection to the large Black student population at Midwest University to support their mental health both proactively and reactively. This theme has two key subthemes: the black community at Midwest University and trusting relationships. The following two sections will further describe the role of connecting to the larger Black community and how trusting relationships provide support during times of stress.

The Black Community at Midwest University. Throughout the participant narratives, the role of a Black community on campus was prominent. Knowing and seeing other Black students on campus, regardless of the relationship, provided a sense of belonging and acknowledgment that other students understand what it means to be Black. Many participants commonly referred to the collective Black student population as a sub-community within the university. For example, Toni explained, “There's Midwest University, there's the entire student body which is relatively big and then there's Black Midwest University which is its own little community inside, within a large community.” Knowing that Black Midwest University exists and having opportunities to connect with other Black students on campus is a protective factor that positively impacts student

mental health. Dwayne shared why being around other Black students is a priority for him. He said,

When you're Black, you just automatically have a perspective on life that no one else but a Black person can take on and relate to you with. So to have those people on campus is like being back home with family sometimes, and that keeps me in good spirits all the time.

He further shared, "So I think that for Black mental health, for mental health in general, it's good to have people who you can understand, who you can relate with, who you share experiences with. That's key." Susan also noted how being around others who can relate to you supports her mental health, especially when it comes to engaging in social justice activities. She said, "I think meeting other Black students has helped a lot with the experience here in terms of social justice and in general, because you know that you're not alone." She continued, "You kind of keep each other sane."

Daena shared how having relationships with Black students has supported her in various ways. She said, "I definitely enjoy having friendships with people from different backgrounds, but I also enjoy having friendships with people who look like me because they understand me and they'd be able to empathize with what I'm going through." She further shared how she found support from other Black students following a racist experience she encountered.

I remember the Black Midwest University girls threw an event at a restaurant, and we all just met up, and we actually started talking about our instances like this, and I shared mine, and it just showed that when I'm going back to it, I'm not

alone, there's other people going through this and I just felt like it was a safe community.

Susan, Dwayne, and Daena's experiences exemplify how vital connection and understanding are. They also show how connecting with other Black students is unique and distinct from connecting with the larger PWI campus community. When reflecting on her relationships on campus, Toni also noted how having a Black community feels distinct for her on campus despite growing up in predominantly White areas. She said,

So coming to Midwest University, even though it is a PWI even more so than my high school, most of the people I interacted with were Black, I think I was just actively searching for that affinity space and once I found it, I just loved it and I didn't want to leave.

Similar to Toni's experiences, TJ said, "Being a Black student here for me has meant being around Black people lately." He also said, "I don't be with them, I be with my people."

A sense of comfort, ease, and support is associated with having a Black community on campus, which is essential for the participants. The participants find that actively communicating with Black students on campus supports them. However, they also find that merely being around Black students and being in spaces where Black students are is a positive factor for mental health and belonging. The following section further details how Black relationships support mental health and well-being during times of stress.

Trusting Relationships. While many participants described the importance of connecting to the Black community on campus, there was a key factor regarding how

relationships provide support during times of stress. Specifically, the participants explained how having a level of trust was vital for disclosing personal stressors. When asked about advice he would give other Black students struggling with mental health, Michael said, “Reaching out to somebody that you trust.” He elaborated,

Knowing that you have somebody there on your side to listen to you or if you need to call, like, ‘oh dang it's really bugging me, or getting me caught up right now, I can't even focus blah blah blah’, being able to call that person it's comforting in a sense, even if it doesn't feel like it in the moment, you feel like you're buggin them or you feel like no one's with you, just having somebody there in your space and your corner.

Concurrent with Michael's advice, Dwayne shared how relationships helped him manage stress related to being a first-year college student. Dwayne said,

I confide in my friends, that is the best way that I know how to do it, and maybe sometimes you kind of just take a step back from everything and just spend some time with yourself but really I look to my friends, I think, my friends, they get me to laugh, they get me to be relaxed, they get me to just kind of take a moment and just chill out and I'm thankful for my friends, because they help me do that, and maybe I'm also reciprocating the same for them that's how I deal with that.

Talking to close and trusting people provides comfort to express vulnerability and share about life stressors. Many participants referenced having close friends with whom they felt comfortable sharing personal stressors and acknowledged how their friends provide support and guidance for overcoming stressors. For Dwayne, that support

manifests as fun and laughter. However, for other participants, like TJ, support from friends may take a more active role. He shared,

So a lot of things that I hadn't really wanted to think about or face just started to kind of come to the surface and luckily I had my best friend throughout the entire experience to anchor me and helped me through a lot of it. But even if not her there were different people that I did trust to talk about certain topics and to get to help me recognize what was going on.

Jasmine also provided context about how she views the supportive relationships in her life. She said,

I always say kind of like the whole bucket mentality. We talked about this back in elementary school, about using your "buckets" to fill others' up. But you have to be poured back into, too. So for me it's going back to whether it's family, whether it's friends--going back to the people who can pour into me, mentorships or whatever it is.

Jasmine and TJ describe how trusting relationships are not exclusive to friendships but can manifest in other relationships, such as mentorship roles. This shows that it is not exclusively talking to friends about stressors; instead, it is most important to have meaningful relationships in which trust is at the root. Additionally, Jasmine and Dwayne note the reciprocal nature of trusting relationships. Providing support in trusting relationships is not uni-directional but rather a reciprocal process.

The importance of having trusting relationships was a significant factor in managing a variety of stressors, particularly ones specific to being Black. Toni described how she was able to find support from her roommates during times of stress,

There would just be so many times, where we just sit in our hallway and talk about everything. About being Black, about what Blackness means to us, about our family and I found that those were often ways to decompress. When things were stressful and sometimes it was weighing down on you, that so many people view your identity as a weakness, they view it in a negative light, it was very calming and nice to know there's always people, you can decompress with.

When reflecting on what helped her cope with being called racial slurs at work, Lewis recalled,

I just think back to the first day when we had that man call and start to harass me, I was the only one on the receiving end, and I hung up the phone, and immediately I had Black friends surrounding me, giving me hugs. We were making jokes and I laughed and smiled at a time that I know had I'd been alone it would have been nothing like that, you know. So I think that relationships not only give you a lot of support to do the hard stuff, but they give you- you can experience the joy that allows you to remember why you have to keep fighting.

It is relationships that are rooted in genuine trust and safety that serve as a protective factor for Black student mental health. Trusting relationships may take on many forms, but they all provide support to cope with life stressors and identity-based stressors. Trusting relationships are reciprocal and provide unconditional support and assistance in doing the "Hard stuff" while simultaneously providing joy and laughter.

Conclusion

Chapter 4 describes the overall findings of the current study. Factors related to university policy and procedure and the unique attributes of being a Black college student

during the pandemic negatively impact overall mental health and well-being. Furthermore, the lack of adequate mental health resources for students and a distrust of the institution as a support system discourage the participants from viewing the university as a protective factor for mental health. As such, the participants rely on skills for self-empowerment and their ability to identify appropriate supports and coping activities to protect their mental health. Younger generations of college students are individually and collectively shifting the mental health stigma in the Black community. They openly embrace conversations about mental health with their peers while promoting help-seeking through trusting relationships.

The final chapter of this study, Chapter 5, discusses the study's findings in relation to the research questions and the current literature. Additionally, I will discuss the limitations and implications of the current study.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In Chapters 1 and 2, I provided historical background about social justice and activism among college students. I also detailed the relationship between mental health and well-being and the Black community. In Chapter 3, I outlined the study design, and in Chapter 4, I described experiences with mental health among student participants who were attending a PWI. In this final chapter, I present this study's key findings and conclusion. I will begin this chapter by discussing the key findings concerning the research questions. Then, I will highlight the study's limitations and contributions to the field of counseling psychology in research and practice.

This study explored the mental health and well-being of Black college students who engage in social justice work at a PWI. The research questions that guided this study were,

1. What are the unique factors that influence the mental health and well-being of Black students who engage in social justice activities at a predominantly White institution?
2. How do Black students who engage in social justice activities protect their mental health and well-being? The findings of this study describe how Black students navigate institutional oppression and identify ways to support to protect their mental health and well-being.

The findings of this study revealed five main themes: institutional factors, student life, shifting mental health stigma, being your own therapist, and the campus community. The first theme, institutional factors, included subthemes of campus racial climate, distress from the university, and engaging in activism. The second theme, student life, included subthemes of higher standards for Black students, the pandemic, and the university as inadequate. These themes and subthemes collectively answer the first research question and highlight findings regarding factors that influence Black students' mental health and well-being.

To address the second research question, this study found three themes that represent protective factors for Black students' mental health and well-being. The first theme is shifting mental health stigma. The second theme is being my own therapist, which includes self-empowerment, coping activities, and having faith. The final theme, campus community, has two subthemes: the Black community at Midwest University and trusting relationships. The following section will provide an additional summary of this study's main themes and subthemes.

Factors That Influence the Mental Health of Black Students

The present study revealed that institutional factors and factors related to student life influence Black students' mental health and well-being. Institutional factors refer to how the university's culture, policies, and administrative decisions negatively impact and penalize Black students who engage in social justice and activist activities. Specifically, this study found that the participants were impacted by experiences of racism from peers and faculty on and off campus. The participants experienced stress by the lack of action and penalization for acts of racism and felt additional pressure to engage in activism

because of their racial identity. Additionally, the participants reported stressors related to being a Black college student. Specifically, they described a pressure to excel because they unintentionally represent all Black students, the challenges of navigating multiple pandemics, and a lack of culturally relevant mental health resources on campus.

Institutional Factors

The study's findings reveal that the mental health of Black students who engage in social justice and activism is impacted by systemic racism embedded in the university's policies and procedures and additional stressors associated with being a Black student during the pandemic. The participants experienced racism and discrimination on campus and through interactions with White peers and faculty. As such, participants described feeling stressed, vigilant, and mentally exhausted. This finding is consistent with existing literature regarding the impact of a negative campus racial climate. Black students often experience challenges related to their racial and ethnic identity specifically, regarding microaggressions, explicit discrimination, less equal treatment by staff and faculty, more faculty racism, and less positive interactions with faculty (Ancis et al., 2000; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Harwood et al., 2012; Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Parker & Trolan, 2020). As evidenced by the participants, experiencing racism on campus led to anxiety and impacted self-esteem, similar to findings from prior studies (Blume et al., 2012; Nadal et al., 2014; Ogunyemi et al., 2020).

The findings also found an overall distrust of the university and feelings of disappointment regarding how the university responds to racism on campus. Notably, there is a distrust of the university due to actions and policies implemented that seem inequitable and have significant implications for Black students. This was similar to a

study by Hussain and Jones (2019), who found that Black students had a negative outlook on their university's initiatives for diversity and inclusion. Not only did they express dissatisfaction with how the university responds to acts of racism on campus, but they also explained how the university implements policies and decisions that negatively impact Black students' mental health and well-being on campus. Jones and Reddick (2017) similarly found that Black students engaging in activism often experience disappointment due to failed promises and initiatives for change. Thus, they develop spaces and opportunities for safety and support for themselves and their other Black peers.

Engaging in activism has positive and negative implications for Black students' mental health and well-being. Similar to previous studies, the participants noted that engaging in social justice and activism allowed them to see themselves as agents of change for their community (Hickson et al., 2021), which has positive implications for mental health and well-being. Despite this, the participants noted significant negative implications for mental health, such as mental fatigue and exhaustion from having to advocate for oneself among White peers and the university system. Furthermore, the participants described their involvement in social justice and activism as an obligation and an additional burden they take on due to their racial identity. Studies by Linder and colleagues (2019a, 2019b) similarly found that college students engaging in activism do so out of responsibility and obligation because of their racial identity.

As mentioned by one of the participants in the current study, Lewis, engaging in activism and social justice activities is in addition to formal and informal responsibilities as college students. While it may be fulfilling for the participants to engage in activism, it

is additional work and labor that is further associated with mental exhaustion and risks to mental health and well-being. Similar to the current findings, previous studies found that Black students who attend PWIs and engage in social justice work may experience additional activist burnout and adverse emotional health outcomes (Gorski & Chen, 2015), mainly related to the oppression experiences from engaging in activism (Jones & Reddick, 2017). Klar and Kasser (2009) found that having an activist identity among college students was positively associated with well-being among primarily White and female students. However, participants in this study often had adverse reactions to an activist identity and did not consider themselves as such. It may be that for Black students, an activist identity is not associated with well-being as much due to the lack of autonomy regarding being an activist. Instead, it is an involuntary obligation because of their racial identity.

Student Life

Data from this study revealed that Black students feel pressure to be seen in a positive life because they represent the entire Black community. They described feeling like they could not make a mistake otherwise risk proving stereotypes about Black people. Furthermore, the participants describe having to constantly engage in work both in the academic sense with their performance in classes and co-curricular activities by engaging in leadership opportunities. As such, in addition to engaging in activism and experiencing distress from their institution, Black students are working harder to overcome stereotypical views and assumptions made of them by their White peers and their PWI. The feelings of anger, frustration, resentment, disappointment, anxiety, and fear endorsed by the participants in this study show how they experience racial battle

fatigue (RBF; Smith, 2007) in various ways due to navigating student life at their PWI. Gorski (2019) found that activist burnout was worsened for faculty and staff of color when coupled with RBF. Therefore, when coupled with activist burnout, the adverse effects of engaging in activism may be equal to or outweigh the positive implications, particularly for Black students.

Considering the time in which data were collected for this study, the participants described how multiple pandemics, a pandemic of public health and a pandemic of racism, negatively impacted their mental health and well-being. First, the participants explained how they experienced difficulties adjusting to the expectations of being a college student during the pandemic, particularly regarding virtual schooling. Additionally, they described how the pandemic presented challenges for developing social relationships and connections, particularly with other Black students on campus. A study by Jones and colleagues (2022) similarly found that many Black college students experienced stress and low mood due to the pandemic. Furthermore, the participants in this study described the stressful impact of the concurrent pandemic of racism and the exhaustion associated with witnessing police brutality, the murder of Black individuals, and overall racial injustice. The exposure to instances of racial injustice and navigating personal experiences of racism on campus may further contribute to experiencing RBF. The participants in this study recognized the utility of formal mental health resources such as counselors and therapists. However, their distrust of the university, counseling center policies, and racial makeup of the counselors proved campus resources inadequate and inaccessible. Previous research has found that compared to students of color, White students are more likely to receive mental health services (Eisenberg et al., 2011;

Miranda et al., 2015). Additionally, college counseling centers are comprised of primarily White staff and clinicians, with only 13.2% of staff at college counseling centers identifying as Black or African American (AUCCCD, 2020). It may be that Black students intentionally refrain from using their university's mental health resources as a way to protect themselves from invalidation, ignorance, and a lack of support.

Protective Factors

The findings revealed that Black students protect their mental health and well-being by shifting the mental health stigma, utilizing self supports, being their own therapist, and connecting with the community. While the participants in this study acknowledge that the Black community holds biases regarding mental health, they actively reject the mental health stigma and openly discuss mental health and wellness among their peers. Additionally, the participants act as their own therapist by finding ways to engage in self-empowerment regarding their mental health, utilize self-coping activities and strategies, and believe that there is hope that their stressors will not be everlasting. Finally, this study found that the participants relied on relationships with other Black people on campus and trusting relationships to support their overall mental health.

Stigma

Previous research has found an existing stigma regarding mental health and help-seeking among the Black and African American community (Fripp & Carlson, 2017; Goodwill & Zhou, 2020; Miranda et al., 2015). College students, particularly Black and African American young adults, report much higher mental health stigma rates than their White and non-White peers (DeFreitas et al., 2018; Goodwill & Zhou, 2020). However,

the current study found that while Black students were aware of the mental health stigma in the Black community, they did not hold this belief themselves. Instead, many participants described how older generations of Black individuals hold these stigmatized beliefs while their generation works to dismantle them. Furthermore, the participants in this study openly encouraged conversations about mental health, particularly among their friends and other Black peers. This finding contradicts previous research that suggests Black college-aged students not only hold a stigma about mental health but also conceal any mental health concerns from others (Masuda et al., 2012).

Previous studies also suggest that when compared to White Americans, Black and African American are less likely to seek out treatment and help for mental health and mental illness (USDHHS, 2001), which may also be tied to holding stigmatized beliefs about mental health (Fripp & Carlson, 2016). The participants in this study were open to various forms of help-seeking, and several shared their experiences going to therapy and seeing a counselor. However, the participants noted several barriers to help-seeking, particularly within the university context. The participants noted barriers to accessing the university's counseling services as it is a resource that is frequently overbooked or only available to students in crisis. Similar to the findings of Lindsey and Marcell (2012), one barrier endorsed by the participants was provider distrust, particularly related to session recordings and session limits. However, the most significant barrier to help-seeking was the racial identity of the provider. Notably, both participants who had previous experience in therapy as well as those who did not explain that if they were to seek a mental health professional in the future, it would have to be someone who shared their racial identity and, ideally, other intersecting identities. This was an important factor due

to the participant's previous experiences having to educate non-Black mental health providers or being concerned that providers that do not share their identities will not understand them and thus will not be helpful.

Being My Own Therapist

To protect their mental health and well-being, participants in this study recognized their ability to manage various stressors and implement actions to best help themselves. The participants described how they engaged in self-reflection to understand their struggles and problem-solve to determine strategies for managing stressors. Concurrently, the participants maintained a perspective and viewpoint that "things will be figured out" to promote positive thinking and support mental health. For some participants, this strategy was dually tied to their religious and spiritual beliefs, which research has found to be a coping strategy for mental health among college students of color (Harwood et al., 2018) and a protective factor for Black college students (Mushonga & Henneberger, 2020).

Previous studies reported that many Black Americans coped with stressors by handling things themselves or turning to distractions is a common occurrence (Miranda et al., 2015; Lindsey & Marcell, 2012). Furthermore, a study by Utsey and colleagues (2000) found that African American women, particularly, may cope with racial discrimination through avoidant behaviors, which can negatively impact self-esteem. The current study found that strategies for handling mental health challenges independently were adaptive rather than maladaptive coping methods. Participants described prioritizing time for themselves to engage in self-reflection and problem-solving as a way to empower themselves to cope with stressors rather than avoid them. Similarly, activities

for coping, such as engaging in hobbies or prioritizing basic needs (sleep, hygiene), were not used to avoid stressors but rather as a way to regulate oneself and ease the negative impact of stressors.

The current literature seems to present strategies of self-coping as maladaptive; however, this study found that various self-supports are adaptive, particularly given the barriers the participants face. Utsey and colleagues (2000) suggest that African American women, in particular, are less likely to seek out community support or problem-solve when faced with racial discrimination; however, participants in this study described seeking support from their community following experiencing racial discrimination. Participants were less likely to keep instances of racial discrimination to themselves and shared that they often warned others in the Black community about their experiences.

Community

Throughout the participant narratives, having an established community was an essential protective for mental health and well-being. Specifically, having a community of individuals who shared their racial identity provided a sense of belonging while having trusting relationships served as a form of help-seeking. This was particularly relevant during racial discrimination, in which the participants described being around other Black students or talking to Black friends as a way to cope with and process racism. Additionally, participants described relationships as reciprocal and that these relationships not only provided help during stressful times but also provided joy and laughter.

Previous research by Townsend and colleagues (2020) regarding Black student mental health similarly found that having a strong sense of community was a critical

protective factor among African American women. Relatedly, previous research has found evidence to suggest that racial and ethnic group identification can be a protective factor for mental health and well-being among Black college students (Mushonga & Henneberger, 2020; Townsend et al, 2020). Studies have also found that students of color are more likely to turn to informal sources for support and help-seeking, such as friends and family (Lipson et al., 2018; Utsey et al., 2000). Similarly, this study found that the participants felt more support and trust confiding in their friends and family because of the reciprocal relationship. As evidenced in the study data, the participants described an overall distrust of their university as a system and the mental health resources they provide. It may be that the participants not only believe that their university does not provide culturally competent services but also do not trust the university to support them and validate them in the ways they need. As such, participants prefer to rely on the support they are confident is "pouring into them" and supportive.

Conclusion

The participants experienced many stressors from their university related to the campus racial climate and how the university implements policies that promote racial injustice. As such, participants feel obligated to engage in social justice and activism and fulfill their role as college students. However, navigating societal racial injustice and the COVID-19 pandemic creates additional stress and barriers to college success. Black students also felt a sense of responsibility to represent themselves on campus and the entire Black community. The students recognized the need for mental health support but found the resources available at a PWI inadequate. This is coupled with the overall distrust of the university system due to the explicit and implicit harm they have caused.

However, it is essential to note that while the students are less likely to turn to their university for mental health support, they are utilizing other resources to protect their mental health and well-being.

This study found that the participants are actively shifting the mental health stigma in the Black community. They acknowledge that mental health literacy and knowledge need to be improved among the Black community, and they are also willing to openly talk about mental health and help-seeking services with their peers.

Additionally, Black students are identifying how they can control their mental health and well-being and are willing to engage in critical self-reflection for self-improvement. They first turn to self-empowerment strategies before identifying the appropriate coping activities to manage stress and poor mental health. Black students have identified ways of self-coping with stress, building up their tolerance to stressors, and working towards healing and overall positive mental health. Concurrently, Black students recognize the power of community connection and having trusting relationships with other Black individuals. Knowing there is a community they can rely on provides a sense of belonging and awareness that they are not alone in dealing with life and race-related stressors. Not only does having and connecting with the Black community provide comfort and validation at the moment, but it also provides a sense of joy and hope to persevere in the future, knowing that they are not carrying the burden alone.

Critical Ideology and a Framework of Radical Healing

While rooted in constructivist grounded theory, this study was additionally guided by a critical ideology and a radical healing lens. These frameworks were not only implemented throughout the study's development and implementation. However, they

were utilized to interpret the results and the relationships between activist involvement and well-being among Black students who attend a PWI. Both a critical ideology and framework of radical healing recognize the power of amplifying the voices of historically marginalized communities to dismantle systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Denzin, 2015; French et al., 2020). While a critical ideology acknowledges multiple realities and challenges systemic inequality (Charmaz, 2017), radical healing provides a framework specific to communities of color to resist systems of oppression while simultaneously healing from them (French et al., 2020). It was evident that the participants' narratives demonstrate the ways in which they work to challenge institutional oppression within the university. Additionally, the participants negotiated how they worked towards healing from the burden of existing within an oppressive system.

A framework of radical healing acknowledges "being able to sit in a dialectic and exist in both spaces of resisting oppression and moving toward freedom" (French et al., 2020, p. 24) through five key elements, which are critical consciousness, cultural authenticity and self-knowledge, radical hope, emotional and social support, and strength and resistance. Through critical consciousness, the participants demonstrated how they navigated their campus environment. Not only did they endorse a constant questioning of and reflecting on the university policies and decisions, but they also demonstrated how they rejected them. This process of resistance occurred through how they interpreted and discussed their anger and disappointment with their university and their engagement in activism and social justice activities to promote change. The participant's development of critical consciousness and engagement in social action was not fostered independently

but rather through a collectivist mindset and having garnered emotional and social support from the Black community. While the participants relied on self-knowledge and self-empowerment as a tool for growth and awareness, they also recognized their need for community support and connection. The role of the community additionally fostered a sense of radical hope and resilience to continue to fight against oppressive forces and find joy and laughter throughout the process.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study provided insight into the mental health and wellness nuances of Black students who engage in social justice at a PWI. However, there are limitations to the generalizability of the current study, given the unique history of race-related student activism at the university where participants were recruited. Midwest University is a predominantly White public institution in the midwestern United States and home to the first Black student government, the Legion of Black Collegians (LBC), which was created to amplify the voices of Black students on campus (Legion of Black Collegians, n.d). The university was also the site that ignited nationwide protests against racial injustice in 2015, in which LBC played a pivotal role. Additionally, participants were interviewed following a rise in protests and activist movements in response to a nationwide pandemic of racism. During this time, mental health was not only low but there was also a significant need for appropriate mental health services (Jones et al., 2022).

While the unique history of race-related student activism at Midwest University may present limitations to generalizability, the study findings provide significant insight into the mental health needs of Black students who engage in race-related social justice at

PWIs. Future studies may benefit from focusing on students who do not attend a PWI but rather a historically Black college and university (HBCU), as students attending an HBCU may face different stressors from their university. Furthermore, future studies would benefit from examining private institutions where university policies and procedures may follow varying guidelines.

Another limitation of this study was the sampling method. Participants for this study were recruited using both purposive sampling and snowball effect. Recruitment for this study was explicitly communicated to affinity spaces such as the Black Cultural Center and academic majors such as Black Studies. However, this presents challenges in recruiting participants who do not occupy affinity spaces frequently. Additionally, with snowball sampling, participants determine whom they share study information. These methods were used to recruit Black students specifically; however, it may pose limitations regarding the representation of the population. Finally, the majority of participants in this study identified as Juniors and Seniors. Given the sociopolitical climate and the university's response, it may be that upper-class students have a longer history with social justice at the university as compared to first and second-year students.

Implications

Higher Education.

There are several implications of the study for higher education and the field of counseling psychology. Within the system of higher education, Black students face a multitude of stressors related to the campus climate and administrative decisions from the university. Notably, the participants in this study felt ignored and not cared for by their institution. As such, institutions of higher education would benefit from openly

acknowledging systemic racism, particularly within the confines of the institution. Not only do the participants want their university to openly acknowledge that racial injustice occurred on campus, but they also want the university to condemn racism in their communication to students publicly and how they administer repercussions to perpetrators of racism and discrimination.

Additionally, the participants called for their university to openly listen to Black students to meet their needs best and show support. Universities would benefit from collaborating with Black students, particularly regarding campus-level decisions and policies that directly and indirectly impact the Black student community. This collaborative process should be ongoing and proactive to ensure that Black students feel heard by their university, trust the resources and policies implemented by the university, and feel a decreased need to engage in social justice and activism.

Finally, the university would benefit from providing specific mental health resources and supports for students. The participants noted that a barrier to seeking services at the counseling center is the lack of Black counselors. Universities would benefit from hiring more Black mental health professionals and providing mental health services in affinity spaces such as the Black culture center. Additionally, the university should provide specific training regarding Black student mental health, particularly to students and staff who occupy affinity spaces. The participants shared that they are more likely to turn to their community and trusting relationships rather than formal resources they are unfamiliar with. Many participants also acknowledged how they not only openly discuss how racism impacts their mental health but also how experiences of racism are mass communicated as a way to warn other Black students. Providing training related to

helping a friend or helping a student with various stressors could provide more specific resources for students. Opportunities for community support, such as healing groups or critical dialogues facilitated in affinity spaces, would also benefit Black students.

Additionally, services such as peer counselors or on-campus text lines housed in affinity spaces may be relevant and resources for self-support, such as interactive activities and digital workshops.

Counseling Psychology

This study also provides several implications for the field of counseling psychology. First, the stigma regarding mental health is not limited to the Black community but also how the field views the mental health of the Black community and coping styles. Presently, Black mental health is viewed from a deficit perspective in research and practice. This is particularly apparent in interpretations of the use of self-support instead of formal services that the Black community gravitates for. This study demonstrates how Black students utilize self and community support in adaptive ways to promote self-care and self-healing. Black students, in particular, are finding ways to build resilience and promote positive mental health for themselves and their community because of the established trust, validation, and support. As such, more research should investigate how formal mental health services, often rooted in colonialism and systemic oppression, are not culturally relevant for the Black community, particularly Black college students.

Additionally, mental health professionals should critically reflect on the biases and ignorance within their clinical practice. Many Black students shared that they do not believe a White provider would best support their mental health needs because of the lack

of shared identity. As such, non-Black providers would benefit from broaching conversations of race with Black clients, particularly to gauge levels of trust and rapport. Within clinical practice, providers can further acknowledge the role of community support and provide spaces for community support and healing. Additionally, mental health professionals should assess the impact of race-related stress and racial trauma when working with Black students regarding conceptualization and treatment planning. Within clinical practice, providers should specifically assess the severity of symptoms and strategies for coping rather than making assumptions about how Black students navigate various stressors. Furthermore, mental health providers would benefit from providing psychoeducation about racial trauma and race-related stress as an intervention.

The field of counseling psychology would additionally benefit from integrating a framework of radical healing in clinical training and clinical practice. The participants in this study presently engage in many self and community supports that promote a framework of radical healing. However, most clinical training programs only provide skill development in traditional talk therapy, which emphasizes the role of the individual. Training programs and training for continuing education would benefit from teaching about the five elements of radical healing and how to actively integrate them into clinical work both during conceptualization and in the session.

Finally, this study highlights implications for social justice and advocacy among counseling psychologists. Participants in this study described how university policies and decisions negatively impact their mental health and well-being. They further experience distress because of their engagement in activism, which is out of obligation rather than desire, and the perils of fighting a system that also provides one's education. Counseling

psychologists can work to amplify the voices and experiences of Black students who engage in social justice by advocating for policy changes at the university level and among university mental health resources.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Project: Understanding Race, Mental Health, and Social Justice Among Black College Students

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee [pseudo-name]:

Interviewee participant number:

Script: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This project focuses on the experiences of Black students who engage in activism and their perceptions of mental health and wellbeing. This will be the first of two interviews with you. Each interview will last approximately 45 minutes. Today's interview will be more of a conversation to learn more about your experiences. The second interview will serve as a follow up to this one.

Since this study is about mental health, we may be talking about some things that are more sensitive in nature. You can share what you are comfortable sharing. If you choose not to answer a question that is okay too. Also, you can choose to terminate the interview at any time without any consequences. To ensure that I have an accurate understanding of our conversation today, this interview will be recorded. If there is something you do not want recorded, please let me know and I will stop the recording. Once the interview is recorded, it will be transcribed, and I will send that transcription to you. This is to ensure that I have an accurate understanding of our conversation and that I am not misrepresenting you. Your responses, this recording and the transcript will remain confidential. Your real name and any identifying information will not be associated with this interview, instead you will be assigned a pseudo-fake or a fake name. Would you like to pick one? Or I can assign one if you would like? [pause for participant response]. Do you have any questions before we begin? [pause for participant response].

[Begin recording]

1. Tell me about your time here as a student.
2. What does it mean to you to be a Black student at Midwest University (MU)?
3. What are some sources of stress for you that are specific to being a Black student at MU?
4. What does stand against racial injustice look like for you and other Black students at MU?
5. Tell me about your most impactful experience standing up for self as a Black student at MU.
6. What comes to mind when you think about Black mental health?

7. What has your mental health and wellbeing been like since starting as a Black student at MU?
8. How does your experience standing up for yourself impact your mental health and wellness?
9. How do you deal with stress related to being a Black student at MU and standing up for yourself?
10. What strategies do you use to determine which method of coping you should use?
11. What is something I did not ask you or we did not talk about today that you think we should have talked about?

[Stop recording]

That concludes today's interview. I want to thank you again for participating in this study. As mentioned at the beginning of this interview, this information will remain confidential and any identifying information will not be associated with your response. Instead, I will be using the pseudo-name _____. I will also be sending you a transcript of the interview today to make sure I am accurately understanding your experiences. At that time, I will also be reaching out to schedule the follow up interview. Do you have any questions?

Appendix B

Follow Up Interview Protocol

Project: Understanding Race, Mental Health, and Social Justice among Black College Students

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This project focuses on the experiences of Black students who engage in social justice and their perceptions of mental health and wellbeing. This is the second of two interviews for this study. This interview will serve as a follow up to this one.

I sent you the informed consent sheet previously so just want to reiterate you can share what you are comfortable sharing. If you choose not to answer a question that is okay too. Also, you can choose to terminate the interview at any time without any consequences. This interview will be recorded to ensure I have an accurate understanding of your experiences. Once the interview is recorded, it will be transcribed, and I will send that transcription to you. Your responses, this recording and the transcript will remain confidential, and I will use the pseudonym _____. Do you have any questions before we begin?

[Begin recording]

1. How does your race-related social justice involvement align with being an activist?
2. How do you decide whether or not to engage in race-related social justice?
3. How does engaging in social justice impact your mental health?
4. How do relationships with other Black people (students, faculty, staff) at MU impact engaging in social justice?
5. How do relationships with other Black people (students, faculty, staff) at MU impact Black mental health?
6. How do you know/how would you know when you're struggling with your mental health?
7. What are some reasons you would seek out mental health care?
 - a. If you were to seek out mental health care, what would be your first steps?
8. What are some reasons you would not seek out mental health care?
9. How do you feel about the ways the Black community view mental health?
 - a. What do you wish was different?
10. What advice would you give to a Black student at MU who was struggling with their mental health?
11. What advice would you give to other Black students who want to engage in race-related social justice at a Predominantly White Institutions?
12. What do you think colleges and universities need to know to support the mental health and wellbeing of Black students who engage in social justice related to their race?

[Stop recording]

That concludes today's interview and this study. I want to thank you again for participating in this study. As mentioned at the beginning of this interview, this information will remain confidential and any identifying information will not be associated with your response. Instead, I will be using the pseudo-name _____. I will also be sending you a transcript of the interview today to make sure I am accurately understanding your experiences. I'll reach out once the study is complete to see if you would like a copy to read. Do you have any questions?

Appendix C

Information and Informed Consent

Project Title: Understanding Race, Mental Health, and Social Justice among Black College Students

Principal Investigator/Researcher: Maya Williams, M.A., Ed.M.

IRB Reference Number: 2090307

Thank you for your interest to participate in a Research study conducted by Maya Williams for the completion of her Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology at the University of Missouri. This study is interested in understanding how Black students take care of themselves while engaging in social justice activities on their college campus. You have been asked to participate in this study because you are 18 years or older, self-identify as Black/African American, and engage in social justice related to the Black/African American community. Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop being in this study at any time. Aside from the initial screening interview to confirm eligibility, which should take less than 10 minutes, this study will involve completing two separate 45 – minute interviews or a total of 90 minutes. You will be asked a series of questions about your race and ethnicity, involvement in social justice, and life stressors. If you agree to participate in this study, in order to assure that your responses are captured accurately, the interviews will be audio or video recorded. Recordings will be used strictly for transcription purposes and only accessible to the research team. All transcripts and recordings will remain confidential and kept in password protected files. For your time and effort, you will be compensated \$35 dollar virtual visa gift card upon completion of the first interview and an additional \$45 dollars virtual gift card upon completion of the second interview.

There are minimal risks to this study. The potential risk is that you may experience discomfort sharing and discussing certain aspects of life. The research will provide appropriate resources to any participant who may inquire about therapeutic resources. You may be concerned that your identity may be known to others however, the researcher will also take precautions to maintain your confidentiality. While there are no explicit benefits from participation in this research study, you may enjoy the opportunity to share and reflect upon your experiences.

Your participation in this study is confidential. You will be given a pseudonym to protect your identity. I will ensure that no clues to your identity will appear in the final write up and any quotes from your interview will be anonymous. The information you provide will be kept confidential and only the research team will have access.

The results of the research study will be presented in Maya Williams's dissertation which will be seen by her doctoral committee. The study may be read by future University students and may be published in a research journal.

If you have questions about this study, you can contact the University of Missouri researcher, Maya Williams, at (773) 420-6325 and mmw5g8@mail.missouri.edu). If you

have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or muresearchirb@missouri.edu. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. If you want to talk privately about any concerns or issues related to your participation, you may contact the Research Participant Advocacy at 888-280-5002 (a free call) or email muresearchrpa@missouri.edu.

VITA

Maya Williams was born in Chicago, Illinois. She attended the University of Missouri – Columbia and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Sociology. Afterward, she attended the Teachers College, Columbia University in New York City, and graduated with a Master of Arts and Master of Education in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. She began her doctoral studies in Counseling Psychology at the University of Missouri – Columbia in 2019. Maya received the American Psychological Association Minority Fellowship Program in 2021. Clinically, her interests include multicultural counseling, culturally informed interventions, and identity exploration among college students. Maya is passionate about outreach programming and created Nurturing Minority Wellness, a program of the MU Counseling Center that supports the mental health and wellness needs of students from underrepresented communities.