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## Research Article

# Black Female Counseling Students' Experiences of Racial Microaggressions

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Discrimination and racism are factors identified in previous studies, but there is little research on the experiences of Black women in counseling programs in the U.S. This qualitative, phenomenological study examined the experiences of racial microaggressions at a Southern university among Black female counseling graduate students. The study recruited five women through purposive sampling. Themes revealed the impact of racial microaggressions on the individual participants, as well as illuminated the greater impact of racial microaggressions on campus climate. Findings suggest that training opportunities and mentor programs for counselor educators and students would improve campus experiences for Black female graduate counseling students. The authors conclude by discussing the implications of these findings through the lens of the current socio-cultural context.

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The future of higher education is ambiguous amidst the socio-cultural context in which we currently exist. This underlines the need to understand and give voice to those communities who face discrimination, oppression, or even erasure. The effects of racial microaggressions accumulate over time, contributing to increased rates of anxiety, fatigue, stress, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, obesity, depression, and mortality<sup>[1][2][3]</sup>. Experiencing microaggressions is more likely with the addition of intersectional identities<sup>[4]</sup>. This specific study highlights the experiences of Black women in graduate counseling programs to emphasize the initial and lasting effects of interpersonal discrimination.

Microaggressions are defined as interpersonal slights and insults directed toward a minoritized individual, whether intentional or unintentional<sup>[5]</sup>. Microaggressions can cause psychological distress, frustration, avoidance, confusion, resentment, hopelessness, and fear<sup>[6][7][8][9]</sup>. Whether verbal or nonverbal, these incidents occur in academic and social

settings on campuses<sup>[10]</sup>, however, they can happen outside of conscious awareness, and perpetrators dismiss them due to their frequency<sup>[5]</sup>. Academic microaggressions imply intellectual inferiority, while social microaggressions indicate that students do not belong in one or more campus environments<sup>[10]</sup>.

According to Sue<sup>[5]</sup>, there are three distinct types of microaggressions: microinsults, microinvalidations, and microassaults. A microinsult involves rudeness or insensitivity and demeans a person's racial heritage or identity<sup>[5]</sup>. Microinvalidations are communications that exclude, negate, or dehumanize the psychological thoughts, feelings, or reality of a person of color<sup>[11]</sup>. A microassault is an explicit racial action characterized by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended recipient through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions<sup>[5]</sup>. The subtle nature of microaggressions prevents perpetrators from recognizing their participation in creating psychological dilemmas for minoritized individuals, leading recipients to experience disparities in education, healthcare, and employment<sup>[12][5]</sup>.

## Racial Microaggressions

Racial microaggressions are common, create distress, and impact the mental health of persons of color<sup>[13][7]</sup>. Students who experience racial microaggressions reported higher levels of stress and a greater risk for depression and anxiety than others<sup>[12][8][9]</sup>, highlighting mental health burdens<sup>[6]</sup> and major challenges to student retention<sup>[14]</sup>. Previous studies from Southern universities have addressed the adjustment experiences of Black women in graduate programs, obstacles faced by Black women in higher education, strategies to overcome those obstacles, and factors associated with Black student motivation and achievement<sup>[15][16][17][18][11][3]</sup>. Discrimination and racism were factors identified in those studies; however, there is little research on Black women in counseling graduate programs experiencing racial microaggressions.

Racial microaggressions fit under seven broader themes: *invisibility*, *criminality*, *undesirability*, *sexualization*, *foreigner*, *environmental invalidations*<sup>[19]</sup><sup>[20]</sup>. *Invisibility* involves the treatment of people of color as if they have lower status or are not visible or seen as a real person<sup>[11][20]</sup>. *Invisibility* may include delegitimizing one's experiences or dismissing them outright. Social isolation is another variety of invisibility for people of color that can significantly impact the experience of discrimination<sup>[21]</sup>.

The *criminality* theme involves treatment as if one is aggressive, dangerous, or a criminal<sup>[20]</sup>. Both men and women reported this theme, but male respondents and African Americans reported experiencing this more frequently<sup>[22][20][23]</sup>. This finding is consistent with the stereotype that African American men are aggressive or criminal<sup>[24][23]</sup>, and that African American females are antagonistic<sup>[25]</sup>.

*Undesirability* involves the treatment of people from a specific **racial** background as all the same, incompetent, incapable, low achieving, and dysfunctional<sup>[26][20]</sup>. Special treatment would be the only reason individuals from that race might attain success. According to Torres-Harding et al.<sup>[20]</sup>, African Americans reported higher levels of this microaggression type when compared with the other racial groups.

The *sexualization* theme treats people in an overly sexual way, subjecting them to sexual stereotypes<sup>[20]</sup>. Sue et al.<sup>[5]</sup> indicated that this is a microaggression often reported by Asian American women. Other

studies suggest that this is true for many women of color, and women report being sexualized more frequently than men<sup>[27][28][20]</sup>.

The *foreigner* theme involves making another feel they are not a true American, or do not belong due to their racial background<sup>[20]</sup>. Latinos and Asian Americans reported more occurrences of this microaggression when compared with African Americans and multiracial individuals<sup>[20]</sup>. A recent example of this theme in action is the social isolation and increase in hate crimes directed towards Asian Americans, along with increased discrimination experienced by Black adults compared to White adults during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>[21]</sup>.

*Environmental invalidations* involve negative perceptions that come from recognizing that people from one's **racial** background are absent from work, school, or community settings or from positions of power<sup>[20]</sup>. There are unique ways to experience each of these themes, and they can have a negative impact on a person's identity and self-worth.

### Socio-Cultural Context

Universities often have a mission statement promoting the cultivation of a diverse and inclusive campus, but the reality is that campuses often mirror the greater social climate<sup>[29][30]</sup>. However, students of color reported that microaggressions made them feel unwanted, invisible, or ignored in academic and social settings, discouraging them from accessing student services. Experiencing microaggressions has been associated with increased symptoms of depression and thoughts of suicide<sup>[7][31]</sup>. Studies also suggest that exposure to subtle prejudice and stereotyping hampers students' cognitive processing and academic success<sup>[32]</sup><sup>[33]</sup>.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been part of higher education, law, and social movements for decades<sup>[34]</sup>. CRT makes the argument for promoting social justice to understand historical racism and counteract the systemic racism of today<sup>[35]</sup>. Practicing race consciousness and utilizing CRT to name the impacts of racial injustice acknowledges the experiences of people of color. However, the theory has been the topic of debate in the U.S. during recent years, and there have been attempts to pass laws that ban teaching CRT in schools<sup>[34]</sup>.

The Supreme Court's decision to strike down affirmative action policies<sup>[36]</sup> in higher education will

impact future generations of students. There is a likelihood that student experiences of microaggressions, as well as overt discrimination, will increase across campuses with fewer policies of support in place. Furthermore, universities are dissolving their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs due to pressure from the government<sup>[37]</sup>, similarly impacting minoritized students negatively. There is a need to raise awareness regarding how microaggressions operate, manifest in society, and impact people of color to create the educational strategies needed to eliminate them<sup>[5]</sup>.

### *Campus Climate*

Students of color on college campuses have reported a sense of hostility and lack of belonging far beyond feeling disconnected from their peers on campus<sup>[14][6]</sup>. Students reported not only experiencing microaggressions in classrooms but also when seeking counseling services or other university assistance<sup>[15]</sup>. When reporting negative, racially motivated incidents on campus, students felt their concerns were quickly dismissed or ignored and that peers continued making racist jokes and comments, despite explanations that they were offensive<sup>[38][22]</sup>. Peers or faculty shut down other students who attempted to discuss race and racism in courses<sup>[39][11]</sup>. Findings revealed themes of segregation, lack of representation, campus response to criminality, cultural bias in courses, tokenism, and pressure to conform<sup>[22]</sup>. The experiences of Black students on college campuses can be problematic both personally and academically.

Perceptions of a hostile racial climate have been associated with lowered academic motivation and a reduced sense of belonging<sup>[14]</sup>. These instances of invalidation send the message that the experiences of students of color are not important and have no place in academia. Furthermore, students of color also experience microaggressions in settings that may be unexpected. Mental health counseling programs follow standards that include teaching students about the effects of stereotypes, various forms of discrimination, and racism according to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs<sup>[40]</sup>. Yet, the retention of Black counseling students is low, and Black women report experiencing either no support or not enough support from counseling faculty and peers<sup>[41]</sup>. Black women counseling students in one study described feeling isolated, discriminated against, and treated differently than their White peers<sup>[41]</sup>.

## **Methodology**

This study used transcendental phenomenology, as this qualitative method focuses on the lived experiences of the participants, considering the participant the primary source of knowledge<sup>[42]</sup>. Procedures include identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out researcher experiences, and collecting data from participants who have experience with the phenomenon. The topic of racial microaggressions can be vulnerable, and the research team wanted to prevent biases and preconceptions based on stereotypes from influencing data analysis to the extent humanly possible. Through transcendental phenomenology, the researchers sought to maintain data purity, enabling participants to share their lived experiences in their own voices individually, as a group, and in their own writing.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Empowerment theory and social constructivism were the frameworks used to guide the research and understand the participants' perspectives. Empowerment theory guided the inquiry by focusing on individual and organizational strengths that have helped participants cope with their environment<sup>[43]</sup>. Empowerment theorists believe that individuals must acknowledge systemic oppression to improve the lives of those affected by racial discrimination.

Social constructivism is a theory that emphasizes multiple realities, views, and actions<sup>[44]</sup>. This study aimed to understand experiences of racial microaggressions from the participants' point of view, so it was necessary to emphasize within the results how participants make sense of their experiences and their feelings.

### *Research Questions*

1. What are the lived experiences of Black female graduate students in a counselor education program who have been the target of microaggressions at a Southern university?
  - a. How do Black female counseling graduate students at a Southern university describe the ways in which they have been impacted by microaggressions?
  - b. How do Black female counseling graduate students at a Southern university describe their perception of the impact of microaggressions on campus climate?

## Participants

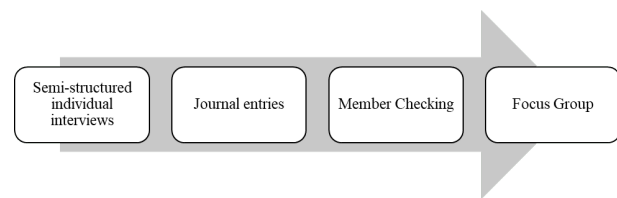
Participants were identified through purposive<sup>[45]</sup> and chain sampling<sup>[45]</sup>. Participants were identified as Black women of various ages who were attending graduate school in the counseling program at a Southern, public university and had experienced racial microaggressions while enrolled at the university. Pseudonyms replaced participants' identifiable information. Following the completion of an informed consent document, a demographic form gathered background information to ensure eligibility.

## Data Collection

Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews, journal entries, and a focus group to explore the phenomenon at hand<sup>[46]</sup>. Initial interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed prior to follow-up interviews. See Appendix A for the semi-structured interview protocol.

During the member checks, participants were able to make any necessary corrections to their statements or share more of their experiences based on the emerging themes. Following transcription, the research team began analyzing and coding the data. Participants completed journal entries between the initial interviews and the follow-up focus group. The prompt read, "Describe any thoughts, feelings, or experiences you have had since the initial interview concerning racial microaggressions."

Focus groups allow participants to comment in relation to others' experiences, which can create the potential for new topics and themes to emerge<sup>[47]</sup>. The audio-recorded focus group lasted two hours and was held only after all individual participant interviews. The focus group protocol included the following: 1) Review of themes derived from the individual interviews (loneliness, anger, advocacy, fear, invalidations), 2) How do you feel your identity development has been impacted by the experiences represented in the themes, and 3) What other experiences, if any, would you like to share? Figure 1 below shows the data collection procedures.



**Figure 1.** Data Collection Procedures

## Data Analysis

Transcendental phenomenology approaches data analysis with a specific structure<sup>[42]</sup>, and this project followed that structure. Data were transcribed to gain a sense of participant experiences, and then the process of horizontalization began. Within the horizontalization process, the researchers identified all significant, relevant statements about how the participants experienced microaggressions<sup>[42]</sup>. The next step of the phenomenological reduction process is grouping quotes into appropriate clusters of meaning<sup>[42]</sup>.

Within phenomenological data analysis, the researcher can utilize imaginative variation to consider ways of analyzing the data<sup>[44]</sup>. The researchers looked for different conclusions or variations of interpretation to rule out alternative explanations. From this comes a structural description or the conceptual aspects of an experience<sup>[42]</sup>.

The purpose of phenomenological studies is to describe the essence of an experience by looking at the "what" and "how" of the experience<sup>[42]</sup>. The textural description explains what the experience was like as described by participants. The structural description includes a description of how the experience happened and participants' reflections on the setting and context in which racial microaggressions occurred<sup>[16]</sup>. Individual textural descriptions lead to a composite, or group, textural description. Similarly, individual structural descriptions lead to a composite structural description.

Textural and structural descriptions become synthesized to describe the overall essence of the lived experiences of participants<sup>[42]</sup>. This provides a detailed account of what the participants experienced and the context for how the participants experienced it. The phenomenological researcher's goal is to offer the reader an understanding of the core phenomenon as described by the participants<sup>[44]</sup>.

## *Research Team*

The primary researcher served as the semi-structured interviewer and focus group facilitator. This researcher identifies as a Black woman and, therefore, fits the requirements for participation in this study. Due to this overlap in experiences between the primary researcher and the participants, this individual took care to avoid influencing or directing participant experiences. Memo writing and journaling allowed the researcher to process preconceptions and discuss these notes during data analysis with the external auditor and peer debriefer.

The second researcher served as an external auditor. While they are a neurodivergent, transgender individual, this researcher identifies as White and acknowledged the unique experiences of Black female graduate students due to intersectionality. The third researcher and peer debriefer identifies as a White woman and recognized that their experiences were vastly different from those of the participants. Moustakas<sup>[42]</sup> described the significance of researcher reflexivity when conducting phenomenological inquiry. All researchers made efforts to bracket biases or assumptions to let the data speak for itself.

## *Trustworthiness*

In seeking methodological rigor, this study utilized triangulation, dialogic engagement, and thick

description to provide credibility. Triangulation occurred via the collection of multiple data sources, including interviews, journals, member checks, a focus group, researcher journals, and peer debriefing<sup>[48]</sup>. Seeking saturation via thick description and prolonged engagement assisted in striving for transferability<sup>[48]</sup>. To demonstrate dependability, the research process has been transparently detailed, enabling other researchers to repeat the study<sup>[48]</sup>. Confirmability occurred using an external auditor to verify data analysis while considering research reflexivity.

## **Results**

All five participants identified as Black females (ages 23–46) enrolled in a graduate counseling program who had experienced racial microaggressions on campus. Two of the participants were master's students, and three were doctoral students. Four of the participants identified more specifically as African American, while the fifth participant identified as Afro-Caribbean.

Six themes emerged from the individual interviews and focus group about Black female graduate students' experiences of racial microaggressions: devaluing messages, anger, awareness, loneliness, fear/safety, and advocacy. Similar themes emerged from the journal entries: devaluing messages, fear/safety, and advocacy.

Theme	Participant	Statement
Anger	Danielle	"I feel like I take on the anger...of every other Black person in that moment"
	Samantha	"yes, I'm like perpetually pissed off and nobody understands why"
	Tasha	"it did bother me that this person viewed this group that I belong to this way"
Awareness	Danielle	"either they're racist and they know it or they're racist and they don't know it"
	Jessica	"I think deep down the intentions are the best here, so I rest on that"
	Tasha	"aren't concerned to educate themselves about stuff"
Loneliness	Danielle	"be a Black person in a field where no other Black people are"
	Jessica	"It's this weird balance between being invisible and hypersexualized"
	Samantha	"they'll ask the White person what they want even if they came behind me"
	Sarah	"When you get to the level of pursuing your doctorate, there's not a lot of Black females"
Advocacy	Danielle	"I'll probably respond by choosing to educate that person, which is what I strive to do"
	Jessica	"it's just nice to be acknowledged, like I think that would help a ton and maybe just check in"
	Samantha	"just feels good for her to like get some of it"
	Sarah	"I've had some professors here that have really helped me and motivated me"
	Tasha	"I just feel like Black people need to be seen as people first"
Devaluing Messages	Danielle	"I just don't want to be the angry Black woman...that stereotype is an inconvenience"
	Jessica	"They refused to look at me...they would talk to everyone except for me"
	Samantha	"I had a guy literally tell me, I can't take you home to grandpa"
	Sarah	"You'll get those students that want to question you simply because you're Black"
	Tasha	"this person went on and on saying really horrible things about Immigrants"
Fear/Safety	Danielle	"I don't even have a man or kids and whenever I do, I'm already afraid for their safety and they don't even exist"
	Jessica	"just a bunch of people that look the same and it kinda can be frightening if you don't look like them"
	Samantha	"I don't know why, I don't want to make a stink"
	Sarah	"I'm hesitant to share more in classes because I'm not always sure how it's gonna be received"
	Tasha	"I didn't want to bring attention to my accent"

**Table 1.** *Individual Interview Themes*

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

**Table 2.** *Journal Entry Themes*

Theme	Participant	Statement
Anger	Danielle	"...and I got madder and I said something."
	Jessica	"I wanted to pick my chair up and throw it at her"
	Tasha	"..just like holding it together because I wanted to, like you say, go off so badly"
Awareness	Danielle	"Sometimes I feel like we have even more pressure to educate people because we have a degree"
	Jessica	"I can't accept the ignorance"
	Tasha	"So, I'm like what do you not understand about the consequences of racism?"
Loneliness	Danielle	"...the higher up you go, you always by yourself"
	Jessica	"I didn't know who you were, you changed your hair so much"
	Tasha	"It's a lonely place, though"
Devaluing Messages	Danielle	"You know, it's like this idea that I'm supposed to be a watered-down Black woman"
	Jessica	"I guess I'm not on the full Black spectrum that they want me to be on"
	Tasha	"Every time I have a meeting at a school, I face so much condescension"
Fear/Safety	Danielle	"People don't realize I have a right to feel uncomfortable around an old White person because those are the same old White people that oppressed my grandparents..."
	Jessica	"...but just being around White people with guns...I was like there's only a matter of time before I'm fired. I just always felt that way"
	Tasha	"You're gonna put me in a position to feed into stereotypes that you already have about me"
Advocacy	Danielle	"My degree isn't in breaking injustice"
	Jessica	"I just have to learn how to stand up for myself every single time I go to the hospital 'cause I know someone is going to try me"
	Tasha	"...because I choose to advocate for him, and I will advocate for him in ways that I probably never would have..."

**Table 3.** *Focus Group Themes*

### *Devaluing Messages*

All participants expressed a range of incidents that fall within this theme, and the ways in which this impacted their experience of campus climate. Four of the five participants described experiences where they assumed another person was trying to compliment them, but they ended up feeling offended by the interaction. The women described communication related to being pretty for Black girls, or that they were very articulate. They would leave the interactions feeling that the implication was that Black women are not pretty or intelligent when compared to others. Participants also described receiving much more explicit messages of

undesirability, including messages relating to colorism, sexualization, and xenophobia. These interactions left the women feeling unwelcome and unwanted in class, on campus, and at work.

### *Anger*

Participants described feeling a range of emotions, from irritation to rage, while interacting with peers, professors, and co-workers. Participants expressed this by recalling that they felt mad, angry, pissed off, or frustrated in response to someone or something that occurred. Participants described feeling this emotion when others would say harmful things, or when they saw upsetting things on the news, like the police



shooting an unarmed Black man. The participants also tied this theme to the stereotype of the angry Black woman, if they expressed themselves.

### *Awareness*

Participants discussed how awareness of others impacted campus climate. These experiences ranged from a general lack of awareness, or ignorance, to what seems like a lack of desire from others to educate themselves. They described peers in their classes who simply did not know any better and were truly ignorant. They also described others attempting to argue with the participants in scenarios when the participants were much more knowledgeable on the topic. The individuals choosing to argue, they felt, could have easily taken the time to educate themselves on the topic instead, but chose not to. Participants also described feeling used to answering questions by those who knew little about a subject but did not want to take the time to do their own research. This lack of awareness led to participants receiving devaluing messages.

### *Loneliness*

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

### *Fear/Safety*

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

### *Advocacy*

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

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

## **Discussion**

There is little research that exists on Black women's experiences in graduate school at predominantly White academic institutions (PWIs). Themes identified in this study corroborate racial microaggression themes identified by Torres-Harding et al.<sup>[20]</sup> The data also support the identification of negative stereotypes held about Black women<sup>[25]</sup>. The experiences described in this study support those described by students of color on other university campuses, including feeling unwanted, silenced, or invisible<sup>[7]</sup>. Participants shared feeling viewed by others as dishonest, overly aggressive or the angry Black woman stereotype, and overly promiscuous or as incapable of being raped. This aligns with previously published research regarding the fear of stereotype threat<sup>[49]</sup>.

While the women in this study described feeling hostility from peers or co-workers, they did not express a desire to withdraw from the university. However, one participant described feeling as though it would not make sense for her to continue taking classes if she had to take courses with one peer who singled her out. Another described taking a day off from classes as a way of coping with a negative experience during the previous class, and all expressed that they felt they could not or should not participate in class at times. When these women received negative messages of worth and value (subtly or explicitly) that they do not belong, their response was to disconnect, avoid, and be silent.

The results of the current study highlight the pervasive nature of racial microaggressions. This is especially important for counselor education programs because one may assume these types of experiences could not or would be less likely to happen in a counseling program. These participants were relied upon to educate others in their graduate program regarding race but were dismissed when they brought concerns to faculty members. Despite CACREP<sup>[40]</sup> standards and the

American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) emphasizing multicultural competence as an important part of being a professional counselor, there exists a large gap between proposed best practices and the knowledge and skills necessary for addressing the experiences and unique needs of racially diverse students in higher education.

Currently, the U.S. Department of Education is removing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, calling them harmful and wasteful<sup>[50]</sup>. The Trump administration recently issued a memo instructing schools to halt any practice that treats people differently because of their race while also forbidding classroom lessons on racism<sup>[51]</sup>. Students have long felt the impact of their lived experience being denied, but institutions of higher education have an opportunity to advocate for students of color.

### *Limitations*

Limitations of this study include: the voluntary nature of the study, the limited number of available participants who met the criteria for participation, and the sensitive nature of the topic discussed. Participants all attended the same university and were part of the same department on their campus. Their stories were uncomfortable to share, and participants were concerned about confidentiality due to the environment being a PWI.

### *Implications for Counselors and Counselor Educators*

The competencies outlined by the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) suggest that counselors have knowledge of the ways in which race, racism, stereotyping, and powerlessness impact self-concept and self-esteem<sup>[13]</sup>, as well as worldview and help-seeking behavior<sup>[52]</sup>. Data from the current study suggest that racial microaggressions impact individual students and the overall campus climate or environment. This aligns with the counseling literature that clearly supports the detrimental impacts of experiencing racism<sup>[1][3]</sup>, leading to a loss of academic esteem<sup>[13][2]</sup>. Counselor education programs need to continually seek student feedback and take proactive steps to adequately support students of any intersectionality<sup>[4]</sup>. If students are frequently experiencing microaggressions with peers and faculty, counselor educators need to understand the impact on motivation, health, stress, and help-seeking behaviors.

**Mentoring.** Results from other research studies have found that mentor relationships are a critical part of the experiences of Black women at predominantly White universities<sup>[53]</sup>. Participants in the current study expressed gratitude for individuals they identified as mentors, and all suggested that beginning a mentoring program on campus would be beneficial to Black students. Specifically, the participants in the current study all expressed a need for and appreciation of mentors who can relate to their experiences. A more diverse and representative faculty and administration would help with this and allow students to connect with a mentor when they enroll in graduate school. Participants also suggested that simply checking in with them and asking what their experience has been like is very meaningful to them. This helps them to feel seen and validates their campus experiences as Black women.

While mentorship is pivotal, microaggressions are frequently committed by course instructors<sup>[54]</sup>. Frequently, microaggressions in classroom settings relate to the intellectual capability of students<sup>[5]</sup>. Classroom climate directly impacts academic outcomes and student attrition, which has further implications for the overall campus climate. Individual professional development for course instructors should include approaches to culturally responsive andragogy<sup>[54]</sup>, combined with concrete accountability and assessment procedures.

**Advocacy.** There needs to be an emphasis on awareness and understanding of multiculturalism that begins with institutional leadership to transform the existing climate of a campus<sup>[30]</sup>. As previously stated, microaggressions impact physical and mental health, as well as academic and social involvement, and an understanding of the impact should be a requirement. The participants in the current study agreed that awareness and education are vital and begin with campus leadership. The participants suggested training and multicultural education for those in leadership positions so that they are more aware of the experiences of Black women on their campus and can be advocates for them as well.

Within counselor education, multicultural competency is an ethical priority (ACA, 2014), and the AMCD<sup>[52]</sup> has provided a list of competencies for culturally responsive counselors. The AMCD also states that skilled counselors should have knowledge of discriminatory practices at the social and community levels that affect the population they are serving so they can provide appropriate interventions<sup>[52]</sup>. Given the atrocities

against Black people highlighted across the Black Lives Matter movement<sup>[34]</sup>, such as the murder of George Floyd<sup>[55]</sup>, it is even more crucial. How can counselor educators train counseling students in multicultural competence if educators do not have the skills themselves?

**Affirming Spaces.** The participants in the current study also encouraged multiple safe spaces around campus and ideas for signaling inclusivity, such as multi-language signs, lactation rooms, pride flags, gender-neutral bathrooms, and spaces that allow for safe cultural expression. On-campus counseling centers, student health centers, and academic resource centers may be pivotal in providing protective factors to support the mental and physical health of Black students in higher education<sup>[12][13]</sup>.

Participants also identified other things specific to their campus needs, like a space to get their hair done or having products that are for Black women. For students of color, support groups offered through the campus counseling center could assist in combatting the impacts of internalized racism, such as low self-concept<sup>[13]</sup>. This study's participants expressed gratitude for the focus group space, as this gave them an opportunity to share with and relate to other Black women in graduate school.

### *Recommendations for Future Research*

Two participants did not attend the focus group or complete journal entries. One of these women reported receiving the highest number of devaluing messages (105). The feelings they experienced during the interview process may have led to their avoidance of the focus group and journals. Further research into recruitment and retention strategies for Black women in graduate programs would lend to a deeper understanding of their experiences<sup>[53][30]</sup>.

Another development was the incredulity expressed by participants. Further research could explore the use of incredulity as a protective factor against microaggressions or other negative experiences. Lastly, exploring the experiences of Black men in more depth is important. The participants in the current study described complicated relationships with Black men, feeling protective of them and desiring to advocate for them, but also disappointed that they did not often feel it was reciprocated. Future studies could further explore those relationships.

## **Conclusion**

Prior to this study, there had been little exploration of Black women's experiences of racial microaggressions in the South, and only limited research currently exists regarding Black women's experiences in graduate school at PWIs. This study revealed themes that corroborate the racial microaggression themes identified by Torres-Harding et al.<sup>[20]</sup>. Participants in this study reported experiencing devaluing messages, anger, awareness, loneliness, fear/safety, and advocacy. Furthermore, this study also supported the identification of negative stereotypes held about Black women by Jacobs<sup>[25]</sup>.

Findings from this study suggest that racial microaggressions directly impact Black graduate-level students, as well as the overall campus climate or environment. Counselor educators, current clinicians, and counselors-in-training must understand the ways in which Black women experience daily life. Counselor education programs and counseling supervisors need to continually seek student feedback and proactively take steps to adequately support students of any intersectionality through faculty mentoring, provision of safe campus environments, and increased education and awareness of institutional leadership.

## **Appendix A. Interview Protocol**

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

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