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# Black student leaders' race-conscious engagement: Contextualizing racial ideology in the current era of resistance

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## Abstract

Black youth of the current generation are creating new definitions of engagement that vary from the nostalgic reverence to the activism of Black student leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. Because today's student leaders are engaged in navigating predominantly White institution (PWI) norms, this research sought to contextualize the racial attitudes of Black student leaders through race-conscious engagement. While some Black students may not function under an activist label, they are nevertheless committed to social change and realize their involvement through a salient Black identity. Racial ideology survey items from the multidimensional inventory of Black identity (MIBI) which operationalizes the multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI) were utilized directly as interview protocol items. This transformation of a model normally conceptualized through survey methodology was informed by critical race theory (CRT), which affirms the importance of the counternarratives of students of color. By creating critical discourse regarding the reasoning behind their racial attitudes and marginalization within the PWI environment, participants were able to elaborate on the influence of current social issues on their engagement efforts. Findings reveal the juxtaposition between individual and collective beliefs as students challenged dominant White norms in their representation of the Black student community.

## Keywords

racial ideology, racial identity, PWI, engagement, resistance, activism

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The 1950s through the 1970s, an era most known for sit-ins and demonstrations, stands out as a notable time for Black students' role in activism and resistance on college campuses. During that time, Black students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) were central to the battle of integration (Peterson, Blackburn, Gamson, Arce, Davenport, & Mingle, 1978). Because Black students were at the forefront of the civil rights movement (CRM), there appears to be a revered commemoration of engagement regarding that time period (Ellis-Williams, 2007). Individuals who see the CRM through this romanticized lens might perceive today's Black youth as comparatively silent in regards to the fight for social justice. However, data from the 2015 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey revealed that political and civic engagement across the nation's college student demographics reflects the highest levels in 50 years since the survey's inception. Sixteen percent of African American student respondents reported "a very good chance" of participating in student protests and demonstrations, an increase from 10.5 percent reported in 2014 (Higher Education Research Institute, 2016; Zinshteyn, 2016). This increasing connection to social movements prompts the need for research that provides a nuanced understanding of the motivating influences behind students' involvement in challenging injustice in the current sociocultural context.

The current generation of Black students, more specifically individuals defined as millennials, challenges the "then and now" comparison of commitment to social justice due to a novel collegiate landscape. Black students navigate subtle forms of oppression known as racial microaggressions (Gusa, 2010; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000), that while not analogous to the overt prejudice of the CRM era, create structural constraints that Black students must navigate. In order

to examine how current Black students create their own narratives of resistance, the higher education community must first negotiate the language between activism and engagement. Student activists can be defined as individuals committed to and actively engaged in social change (Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, & Barnett, 2005). Although engagement is seen as in line with the democratic ideals of a university, activists (particularly students of color) who problematize an institution's oppressive practices are often viewed as disruptive to the functioning of university life (Martin, 2014). Due to current institutional climates that foster more concealed racist ideologies, higher education community members need to engage in more critical reflection on the emotional labor behind the engagement decisions made by the Black students whom they seek to support.

Challenging today's institutional racism involves a complex web of decision-making for today's marginalized student communities. When students of color avoid being labeled as emotional threats by choosing when to not speak out against PWi racist practices, they must deal with the notion that they are reproducing those inequities. In contrast, when they do speak out against injustice, they often face realized consequences for actively resisting racialized practices (Evans & Moore, 2015). Because some students reject public acts of resistance and choose more subtle ways of challenging institutional racism, their efforts are often viewed as the antithesis to activism. As Evans and Moore (2015) stated, this construction "ignores the time and emotionally laborious process of decision making about how and when people of color will respond to racist institutional arrangements" (p. 449). In this paper, I explored what I deem as race-conscious engagement, in that while some Black students reject the consequences of an activist label, they are nevertheless committed to social change motivated by a salient

Black identity. Race-conscious engagement may better explore the emotional negotiations that Black students at PWIs make in challenging the oppressive practices within those spaces. The purpose of this study was to utilize case study methodology to explore the racial ideologies of Black students<sup>1</sup> who provided critical reflections of the emotional labor behind their engagement decisions. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do Black student leaders within a PWI utilize race-conscious engagement to challenge campus inequity?
2. How do Black student leaders express their emotional management in resisting institutional racism through reflections of their racial beliefs?

### Relevant Literature

In order to contextualize the race-conscious engagement of Black students in predominantly White spaces, connections can be made to scholarship that explores the dominant norms associated within those contexts. Additionally, researchers who study the engagement efforts of marginalized students must also consider the emotional costs of resistance to PWI inequities. This section highlights literature on the effects of White ideologies on racial consciousness and examples of everyday resistance strategies that students employ in managing their emotional responses to such environments.

#### Predominantly White Institutional Norms of Whiteness and Racial Ideology

Racial ideologies must be understood in the context of the influence of institutional environments. In a comparative study relating racial identity to institutional context, Cok-

ley (1999) identified historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as producing students with greater African self-consciousness and a nationalist ideology focused on the unique Black experience. Compared to their PWI counterparts, Black students at PWIs within Cokley's study exhibited a greater inclination toward assimilationist and nationalist ideologies related to college racial composition. It was assumed that these philosophies, centered on commonalities with the dominant group, were employed as a survival strategy or attempt to avoid militant labels. In order to make meaning of these findings and advance understanding of racial ideology within the current context, scholars must consider the norms of Whiteness under which other racial groups must function. Normative messages that center on the privileges and entitlements of Whites as superior are embedded in numerous aspects of PWI functioning (Gusa, 2010; Patel, 2015). Furthermore, as postracial arguments increasingly construct diversity discourse in ways that downplay the role of racism and instead focus on embracing social differences (Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Berrey, 2015), those messages fail to acknowledge Whiteness as a privileged norm (Hamer & Lang, 2015). Because normative White frames often remain unchallenged, attempts by students of color to contest such structures are met with extreme resistance (Moore & Bell, 2011). Therefore, the study of racial ideology as related to students of color entails their core beliefs as well as an examination of the techniques students utilize to resist the very PWI norms that shun race consciousness.

#### Racial Consciousness and Everyday Resistance

Tripp (1991) studied previous eras of Black

<sup>1</sup> In acknowledging the heterogeneity of the Black political landscape in America, the interchangeable use of Black and African American terminology does not imply inclusiveness of various African panethnic immigrants. The study's multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI) theoretical framework (Sellers et al., 1998) centers on the collective memory of oppression felt by native-born African Americans of the United States. The contestation felt by these two distinct groups (Alex-Assensoh, 2009) is beyond the scope of the study. Therefore, the terms Black and African American focus on how racial consciousness is manifested for native-born African Americans through a "linked fate" of racial oppression.

students to explore various students' relation to either collective or more individualistic strategies to reduce social inequities. Research related to this ideal focused on an increase in Black individualism, which was assumed as distancing oneself from collective stereotypes (Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2001). Individuals who utilized a traditional lens to study discourse on resistance defined the ideal as necessitated by visible and collective action (Evans & Moore, 2015). However, due to the uncontested norms of power and racial privilege in White institutional spaces, some individuals employ acts of everyday resistance. Everyday resistance relates to the concept of tempered radicalism (Kezar, Bertram Gallant, & Lester, 2011; Meyerson & Scully, 1995); institutional members often engage in unnoticed actions to challenge organizational inequities in order to maintain their status and emotional health. The concepts of tempered radicalism and everyday resistance recognize that resistance can exist on a continuum of various actions and behaviors (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004) depending on the associated risks. From a critical perspective, people of color within systems of higher education must make decisions on how to react to racism or inequities based on how their reaction will be received within a frame of White norms. Evans and Moore (2015) elaborated on the ability of individual strategies to minimize the emotional labor of White spaces: "These thoughtful actions are engaged as strategies to both succeed within these institutions and simultaneously reject the personal reification of racial denigration and stereotyping" (p. 450). By investigating the emotional frameworks that guide students' racial consciousness, current scholars can perhaps better understand how students fulfill their efforts to be engaged in resisting racist ideologies.

**Theoretical Framework**

In order to explore how Black students uti-

lize race-conscious engagement to challenge norms of Whiteness at PWIs through acts of everyday resistance, I framed this study with the multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI) and critical race theory (CRT). Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, and Chavous (1998) conceptualized the MMRI (see Figure 1) by combining early work that recognized universal processes of group membership and scholarship of the 1960s focused on the unique Black experience. Acknowledging self-concept as situational and stable, the authors of the MMRI posited that individuals create qualitative meanings about group identity (Sellers, Shelton et al., 1998). They theorized the MMRI to explore how one's stable beliefs about race interact with situational cues to determine how one behaves in various situations.

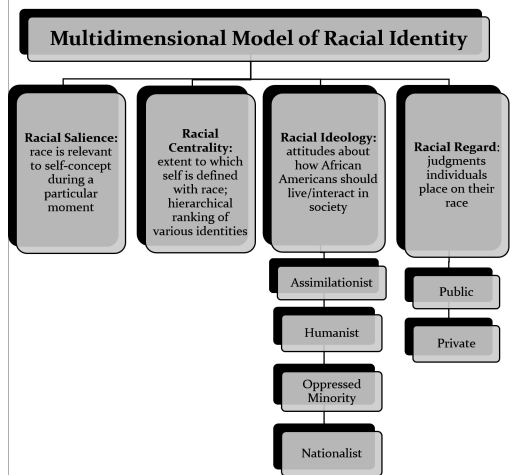


Figure 1. Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (Sellers et al., 1998)

Based on a phenomenological perspective of racial identity in that individuals place hierarchical meaning on race in conjunction with other core identities, this paper is part of a larger study that sought to explore the multidimensional racial identity of Black

student leaders. Through case study methodology that provided a systematic qualitative study of the MMRI dimensions of salience, centrality, ideology, and regard, the study explored the effects of institutional norms and situational cues of race in various spaces on Black students' racial identity. This paper focused on the ideology dimension, the component centered on participants' beliefs in how Blacks should interact with others based on individual and societal norms. Racial ideology provides a specific lens on racial consciousness based on four philosophies: assimilationist, humanist, oppressed minority, and nationalist. Previous studies suggested either a de-emphasis or concentration on race in order to achieve a healthy identity (Sellers et al., 1998). However, the authors of the MMRI advocated that there is no optimal ideology due to differences of racial beliefs and the sociological environments that influence the African American experience. The multidimensional inventory of Black identity (MIBI) (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997) operationalizes stable constructs of the MMRI (centrality, ideology, and regard) through Likert scale survey items combined with experimental methods to measure the situational component of racial salience (Shelton & Sellers, 2000). The overemphasis on surveys does not allow for a more critical consideration of the complexity of race (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008). For example, if a student chooses the response "strongly disagree" to answer the survey item "Blacks would be better off if they adopted Afrocentric values," the researcher fails to capture the subjective factors and rationale behind the rejection of that form of racial consciousness. Instead, what if students engaged in reflective dialogue to explain how the adoption of Afrocentric values was framed in the PWI context?

Because through this study I sought to move beyond the bounds of the dominant paradigm that quantifies race, I utilized CRT to resolve the tensions within this paradigmatic shift. CRT asserts racism as a foundational principle of institutional ideologies and practices, rejects dominant ideologies such as race neutrality and objectivity, and centers social research on the experiential knowledge of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Because the MMRI conceptualizes racial identity from a phenomenological approach, CRT served as a theoretical lens in acknowledging the importance of counternarratives that relay students' lived experiences (Morfin, Perez, Parker, Lynn, & Arrona, 2006). Particularly related to challenging a dominant narrative of race neutrality, CRT informed the ways that the study sought out the narratives of Black students in their everyday resistance and strategies utilized to navigate PWI norms. Through in-depth discourse in response to ideology survey items, a group of Black students provided nuanced understandings of how their engagement, not confined to activism as collective or overt action, was driven by a race-conscious perspective.

## Methodology

I designed this research as an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) conducted at a public PWI in the South; the idea of the PWI as a bounded system as a whole included the role of various institutional factors that interact with students' racial identities. Given the pseudonym Unity University, the institution had a Black student enrollment of less than four percent at the time of the study<sup>2</sup>. Because the situational component of environmental influence is essential to the premise of the MMRI, it is important to note that the Black population in Unity's surrounding city only represented a slight increase at seven

<sup>2</sup> The enrollment profile code listed for fall 2013 is "Black Only + 2 or more/1 Black."

percent. The Black student body at Unity has historically faced issues of campus racism, hate speech, and has continuously challenged the presence of campus traditions and symbols that affirm White ideologies. Purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) was established through the recommendation of student affairs professionals to secure student leaders who could provide substantial knowledge of this racialized campus culture.

In order to maximize in-depth dialogue and prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the sample selection process involved attainment of highly visible and involved Black student leaders. This selective group represented a heterogeneity of racial perspectives from individuals entrenched in the work of making a significant impact in various spaces across Unity's campus. Six Black juniors and seniors were selected (given pseudonyms Dennis, Bruce, Greg, Ron, Angela, and Amira). I based the sample on the students' involvement in mainstream (predominantly White; i.e., student government and class council) and racially-based organizations (i.e., Black student associations and National Pan-Hellenic Council fraternities and sororities). Participants were involved in both mainstream and racially-based organizations with the exception of Angela, who as a self-proclaimed activist, chose to base her involvement exclusively in Black organizations. Although all students desired to break leadership barriers for Black students, Angela's decision to aggressively challenge social injustice as an activist provided an additional lens of forms of resistance.

A variety of data collection methods were utilized to conduct a systematic study of the stable and situational components of the MMRI, including interviews, observations, and reflection journals (Creswell, 2014; Hays & Singh, 2012). These methods allowed for triangulation of the data. Interview discourse on participants' racial beliefs was enhanced

by observational data; in turn, participants were able to provide written reflections between interviews. In order to explore the stable components of the MIBI, each student participated in four individual interviews lasting on average 90 minutes. I designed the interview protocol by utilizing the verbatim 56 MIBI survey items as open-ended questions, to be stated to participants who responded with insightful reflections. Rather than responding on a Likert scale survey, participants created discourse as to why they did or did not associate their racial beliefs with the corresponding item. For example, under the assimilationist philosophy, I recited survey items such as, "A sign of progress is that Blacks are in the mainstream of America more than ever before" to participants. The purpose of a protocol designed with verbatim MIBI constructs was to push participants beyond a numeric representation of their beliefs to reflect on their experiences in the PWI context. Subsequently, after given the MIBI prompt, students articulated their response through critical discourse that explained the ways that they agreed or disagreed with each statement. This transformation of the MIBI to create open-ended discourse contributes to the normalized study of racial identity, specifically in allowing me to explore MMRI concepts from a naturalistic perspective. For the purpose of this paper, I focused the selected data set on students' discourse corresponding to the 36 ideology survey items.

Separation of each MMRI dimension was intended to allow for an in-depth analysis of each identity component. Preceding work on the eight centrality survey items established the significance of participants' Black identity (Jones, 2014); data reflecting the 12 racial regard survey items will be presented in subsequent work. Data analysis was completed utilizing transcripts and informed by observational field notes, reflection journal entries, and research memos. Transcripts were analyzed through content analysis, an analytical

tool of sense-making and data reduction to determine themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Content analysis allowed me to make meaning of participants' individual and collective reflections that outlined how their various racial perspectives were influenced by the PWI environment. I examined the critical discourse that participants created within each dimension and also considered the interaction between dimensions (i.e., the relationship between the situational component of racial salience within the environment and their stable racial beliefs). Specifically for racial ideology, themes were identified within each of the four ideology philosophies (assimilationist, humanist, oppressed minority, and nationalist); this systematic study departed from the customary analysis of the MIBI through statistical representations. Looking across the discourse, themes allowed insight into how participants realized engagement and resistance related to campus inequities. Therefore, analysis served as a transformative application of the MIBI, detailing the emotional frameworks behind students' racial attitudes and engagement choices, rather than a composite survey score of those attitudes.

### Findings

Participants in responding to survey items outlined the racial consciousness that hinders or facilitates an inclination toward each ideology philosophy. The following themes were drawn across the four ideology philosophies (see Appendices A through D). In order to contextualize strategies related to race-conscious engagement and activism, the findings reflect students' declarations of the emotional cost associated with those positions through examples of everyday resistance.

#### Resistance Through Integration into White Organizations

Assimilationist discourse provided the great-

est variance between the ideal of race-conscious engagement and the customary ideal of activism. With Angela as the exception, all students chose to actively seek out leadership positions in mainstream organizations to dispel Black stereotypes and work within a system of privilege and power to challenge the lack of Black representation. Although they maintained a connection to the Black student community through Black organizations, they stressed the explicit decision to provide Black representation in organizations such as student government. Within White spaces, they often avoided direct confrontations through the strategic process of rising above racist comments. Although perhaps not aligned with an activist approach, participants described emotional management as a form of resistance. During a campus incident when White students shouted "nigger" at him, Bruce's friends encouraged him to react. Bruce reflected, "At that stage one man sharpens another obviously. You can't just always respond to ignorance—it's hard. You have to stick your hand out against oppression and reach it towards being neighborly." Participants defied the barrier of Whiteness as property, an ideology that outlines the benefits of being White including the right to exclude in spaces deemed for Whites (Patel, 2015). These leaders saw their ability to manage emotions as a means to asserting their rightful place in all campus spaces.

Related to the emotional management of people of color in navigating White spaces (Evans & Moore, 2015), participants broadened their focus in taking advantage of the resources of power and prestige offered within those organizations as a pathway for future Black student leaders to follow. Their ability to manage emotions within White spaces that fundamentally excluded students of color was a form of resistance in empowering themselves by working for the greater good. Race-conscious engagement was illustrated in the ways participants refused to accept the



lack of Black students in mainstream organizations, which ultimately disadvantaged the Black community from participation in the power capacity of those groups.

By contrast, Angela illuminated resistance as her active involvement solely in Black organizations. Within this emotional framework, she defined resistance to the tacit racism embedded in institutional culture as the ability to shelter oneself from the constraints of those spaces. Angela reflectively confronted the notion of integration as a conscious resistance:

Why are you not down for Black people? If I don't think your motives are pure ... then I'm upset like why would you even want to be a part of what hates you? If you're not gonna try to go in there and try to change it.

From this perspective, mainstream engagement was viewed as an individual choice of personal gain absent of a race-conscious focus. Angela elaborated that the Black student community upheld the expectation that its members would not allow racist dialogue to occur without confrontation. She defined this resistance with several examples, such as speaking up in class as the only Black student and simulating a sense of racial discomfort for White students. Although her viewpoint exemplifies empowerment in the ability to overtly challenge racism, it also denotes a dichotomous perception of White appeasement versus provocation that made mainstream engagement undesirable. Choosing not to react to racist behavior by affirming one's rightful place in demonstrating Black excellence was viewed as reifying White privilege.

Discourse on system representation within the PWI context relayed the need for broader considerations of individual versus collective action; participants saw their presence in mainstream organizations as a collective gain for the Black student community. Dennis and Amira, as members of a military-influenced

organization that historically lacked diversity, were constantly seeking opportunities to increase the influence of students of color in leadership positions. Even after receiving hateful comments on social media due to her high status in the organization, Amira viewed her standing as the possibility for collective change, proclaiming, "My whole rationale is that I want to get on the inside so that I can be the one making those decisions that affect people on the outside." Although "taking one for the team" was seen as noteworthy, participants also recognized the negative connotation in creating representation in exclusionary spaces; Bruce rhetorically asked, "It is important to get in the system, but at what cost?" Participants functioned within White spaces in which others believed in the cultural inferiority of people of color, but their resistance lied in challenging those belief systems through counternarratives of excellence. In securing positions normally secured by White students, these Black student leaders asserted that in their excellence they should not be seen as an exception to Black students but as establishing the norm. Resistance to racist ideologies functions within a White frame that reaffirms people of color as inferior when responding with emotion (Evans & Moore, 2015). Dennis emphasized that disrupting the status quo included not just the ability to outwardly challenge but also to provide a positive Black male image.

### Challenging Predominantly White Institutions' Colorblindness as Resistance

Understanding of the low hierarchical value of Black lives caused dissonance in participants' ability to interpret experiences through commonalities with other student groups. Due to a heightened sense of the racial hierarchy represented in their interactions, the fallacy of the race-neutrality message on campus was amplified. Race neutrality is encompassed by colorblindness, a tool of White privilege that downplays the relevance of

race and stalls racial progress by focusing on surface commonalities rather than systemic social inequalities (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). From a CRT perspective, a humanist viewpoint that embraces colorblindness exemplifies inequity. By resisting a humanist perspective, participants rejected a colorblind approach through counternarratives of lived experiences with racism. Dennis reiterated: "There's a time when you're just hit right in the face with—wow I'm a Black male ... so many preconceptions are made before you even open your mouth." Participants as familiar with the stigma of Black inferiority were cognizant of the racialized consequences of attending a PWI.

Although Greg believed that students of color should join organizations based on their interests, he also saw the need for the onus to be placed on the dominant group to put value in diverse perspectives beyond an "all are welcome" rhetoric. In his interactions with members of his organization that brought musical acts to campus, he challenged their resistance to diversity discourse with the assertion that including students as experts of certain musical genres could increase the organization's impact. Greg described campus racial dynamics as a Venn diagram, in that individuals focus on the outer variance rather than trying to find commonalities between racial groups. Because this variance had more far-reaching material and emotional costs for students of color, Greg, along with other participants, questioned the intent of diversity as an expressed institutional value. Greg's account of the lack of the dominant group's interest in diversity directly relates to the notion of PWIs as historically embodying education as an exclusive entity of prestige and entitlement (Patel, 2015) reserved for Whites. But in understanding that through their race-conscious engagement they were significantly exposed to White norms, participants felt empowered with experiential knowledge that would allow them to be more intentional

in how they disrupted those spaces. Angela realized that attending such a prestigious university not only afforded her access to a network of resources but also the advantage of developing coping mechanisms to deal with White supremacy. Angela proclaimed, "That's another big reason why I encourage going to a PWI. You learn the difference between the system and the individual." In studying the manifestation of racial prejudice embedded in institutional life, she was able to focus on the masking of unopposed racial ideologies, which was the true concentration of her activism efforts.

Participants' dedication to Black consciousness as varied from a humanist perspective again calls attention to the power of advocating for greater Black representation in mainstream organizations. Related back to the ideal of PWI attendance as an advantage to White students, participants who chose involvement in mainstream organizations were empowered by viewing the decision as the opportunity to tap into the benefits of such an association. Bruce questioned the limitation Black individuals placed on themselves by being confined solely to Black organizations. He probed, "Why put yourself in a position to attend a school where you know you're going to be outnumbered if you don't seek to make an opportunity of it?" Bruce's reflection represents the nuanced perspective of participants who viewed race-conscious engagement as a means of creating impactful change in the campus community. In contrast to Angela's insistence that Black student leadership should remain in Black organizations, by infiltrating mainstream organizations these individuals realized the increased power capacity that could be secured in those spaces to ultimately benefit the collective. Greg viewed being able to overcome organizational barriers meant to exclude in order to reap their benefits as maximizing his PWI experience. He expounded on utilizing White spaces to expand Black influence:

I have nothing against Black organizations like NAACP and organizations like that are great. They do hold power, but I feel like to get power that will last it is worthwhile to get into those mainstream organizations. To get that foothold and spread from there.

Participants' desire to push racial boundaries exemplified a renewed integration mindset challenging what was once accepted to present a new Black norm.

Gusa (2010) distinguished the ability of PWI norms to set the standards under which other racial groups must function. In exhibiting heterogeneity of racial consciousness through their reflections, participants emphasized the complexity of White norms that often encourage a race-neutral perspective. As a form of resistance, Amira attempted to create an "I am beauty" campaign inclusive of multicultural as well as predominantly White sororities; she sought to challenge dominant normed beauty standards and to encourage sorority members to disrupt the customary practice of seeking solidarity within one's group. Amira elaborated:

Because they don't know about stuff—like hey don't touch my hair! Let's come to this program about why natural Black hair is so important. One of my Asian friends, she always complains about getting ridiculed for her eyes ... just as much it doesn't make you feel pretty for someone to be up in your hair, that opens up the dialogue.

This example reiterates the everyday resistance to PWI norms in which participants were engaged. Although the decision of organizational involvement is an individual choice, it is essential to consider the structural constraints of White spaces that often condone exclusion without requiring those in power to take accountability (Hamer & Lang, 2015).

### The Value of Black Lives as Expressed Through Media

During data collection, the nationally publicized murder of Trayvon Martin, a Black teenage male, transpired. The semistructured nature of interviews allowed me to include discussion of how the trial had personally impacted participants and how they planned to move forward with the influence of this sociocultural event in their leadership roles. The Black–White dichotomy of racial attitudes in America evidenced through the event further transformed participants' race-conscious engagement. Angela, who was attending a national student activist meeting when she heard the verdict results, suffered the full extent of the event's emotional trauma:

So whenever it came in not guilty—man that was the worst. We were screaming! It was like you told me my mother had just died. I fell to the ground, it was awful. I was like ya'll need to send me home—I quit—I'm not doing this anymore.

Many Black students looked to Angela as the most outspoken campus activist, almost within an obligatory sense, to lead the charge moving forward into action. Angela spoke of how her responsibility to the collective group was emotionally taxing, and such events in the larger sociocultural context made her question the effectiveness of her efforts:

I still feel like I haven't had a chance to process what happened. I was sad and would love to get mad about it, but I don't have time. They were like what are we gonna do now? I don't know—I did what I thought I needed to do. I felt all we had to do was get Zimmerman arrested and the rest would be handled. They [America and the justice system] didn't care about us.

Angela recognized that a not guilty verdict was necessary to avoid complacency in the emotionally laborious work of fighting White supremacy. She motivated herself forward in knowing that, particularly in the PWI context of Unity, her unceasing dedication to

the Black collective was more so needed than a personal break to process her emotions. In this sense, she rationalized the process to perhaps avoid the feeling of powerlessness often associated with activist burnout (Gorski, 2015).

Angela's narrative highlights the absence of space for emotional self-care in the presence of devoting one's physical and mental well-being to an activist agenda. Activism in her arena was embodied by a selfless commitment to group empowerment that required constant self-reflection, as personified in her leadership style. She spoke of the town hall following the verdict during which she utilized the fishbowl discussion method, a design of individuals within a circle speaking freely after she posed a question and rotating in order to create free-flowing conversation. Angela's definition of activism was evolving as people-based to empower other Black students; she resolved that although their counternarratives might not fit the typical activist description, they were nonetheless essential in challenging White racist patriarchy.

For participants, the inferiority assigned to Blacks was realized through a nation that broadcasts the murder of Black males but declares the killer not guilty. Bruce indicated that this tragedy fueled a renewed focus for Black students, declaring, "It was a wake-up call. Reminding me that the margin of error is weak ... I've always been willing to fight but now I'm realizing how real it is." It is important to note that although activism and what is described as "working within the system" through mainstream organizations had two distinct connotations, participants were all describing Black student leadership as an instinctive responsibility to the group. Bruce elaborated on this commitment to the Black collective through representation:

That's why me succeeding at all cost in anything that I put my hand to— that's my way of making a statement of fighting back. I'm not going out there saying

... I'm doing A, B, and C but I did it on my own. I had support of a lot of people behind me.

This speaks to the misconception that Black students might have of their peers who choose to integrate White organizations as an act of personal gain. Bruce emphasized that through his leadership he envisioned himself as paving the way for other Black leaders, in that he was trying to establish a norm of success rather than being seen as an exception to Black male stereotypes. In this sense, his affirmation of excellence signified his resistance against and understanding of a system of exclusion based on White norms. His reflective leadership stood as a tactic of hidden, everyday resistance (Evans & Moore, 2015), in that it empowered him to succeed and manage the constant barrage of stigmatization he faced in White spaces.

The reaffirmed low regard for Black lives inevitably framed interactions through a lens of racial consciousness and made it difficult for participants to embrace the notion that racism experienced by other groups was comparable to the Black struggle. Relating a campus racial hierarchy to campus interactions, Ron noted that other minoritized groups did not live the reality of Blacks being viewed as an imminent threat. His form of resistance to the ideal of Black inferiority was to empower others to overcome exclusionary spaces. He reflected:

That's kind of the reason I forced myself to do some things. I forced myself to do [Unity traditions], and forced myself to work at the [alumni center]. I thought Black parents are gonna come and they'll ask 'Do Black students come here?' Well you see me— your child is in good care.

Ron's narrative signifies a consciousness of the need to assist other Black students in combating the racism that often left them feeling outcast and excluded. In the context of the White framing of Black bodies as threats, particularly for Black males, several

participants named the fact that other students of color often did not view themselves as oppressed as a barrier to creating allies. Dennis elaborated, “I don’t really feel a connection with Hispanics and that’s just me. I have Hispanic friends but I don’t feel—you’re my brother ... I would like to think that being a Black male is pretty unique.” Participants viewed the maintenance of separate racial spaces, fueled by the influence of a White conservative worldview that kept Black identity at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, as a hindrance to coalition building.

The pervasiveness of White norms was influenced by the increasing use of social media that dictates youth resistance; social media has recently played a significant role in the ability of students of color to challenge social injustice (Carney, 2016). Related back to the Trayvon Martin verdict, participants were faced with the complex decision of when and when not to engage with their peers on racial matters. Ron spoke to the complexity of utilizing social media as an outlet to share his lived experiences as the opportunity for his peers to affirm their racist ideologies:

I just wanted to be heard. We just want you to listen to the side of the story that not all Black Americans feel is heard. There’s a reason why Barack Obama said Trayvon Martin could have been me. Someone had a [Facebook] status and I said the only thing unjust is the fact that there’s still not racial equality. And then someone commented ‘the only reason why the story got so big is because Obama said something’ ... I commented and said if you think that racism still doesn’t exist, then you have other issues.

Participants were intentional in either choosing to ignore social media racism or challenge racist White peers. Bruce deemed them as “social media trolls” in that they never verbalized racist attitudes in the presence of Black individuals on campus. This further empowered students with a new outlet to reveal concealed racism. Although some

characterize “hashtag activism” as having little value comparative to “real” activism, social media allows individuals a platform to contest issues such as police brutality and racialized bodies (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Social media provided an alternative for some Black students who might not choose an overt resistance to racism to speak out against oppression and yet still be emotionally invested.

### Need for Heterogeneous Perspectives of Activism and Resistance

Participants indicated that the lack of a clear definition of Afrocentrism caused a further divide among Black students. They recognized that an extremist approach has the effect of disengaging others, and at Unity this meant disengaging White peers as well as other Black students. Several participants referred to Angela and what they considered to be “over the top” activism, with Amira even describing Angela as being “too much” in her Afrocentric persona. Angela acknowledged that her commitment to continual Black consciousness was an unceasing effort:

It’s really hard for people like me to understand who live in Blackness. In my mind wherever I am I’m talking about what it means to be Black. You’re gonna understand who I am, is not a question. You have a problem with that, handle it. But that’s not even a productive way for everybody to live their life.

Amira further elaborated on the confines of activism that made it an unattractive choice:

It’s always nice to know about your roots. But I don’t think you should be one completely different person and then ‘I have to embrace Afrocentrism.’ And you turn into a completely different person that you don’t even want to be. If you’re not a Marcus Garvey type person, then don’t follow that path. Because you’re only gonna be unhappy.

The misconception of activism as contentious and removed from more subtle forms

of resistance demonstrated the need for Black leaders to deconstruct resistance as an either-or dichotomy.

With the exception of Angela, all of the participants held a leadership role within mainstream organizations, an action she strongly opposed. Due to her recent interactions with the Dream Defenders<sup>3</sup> Angela engaged in new critical reflection regarding heterogeneous Black engagement:

Everyone has a role in the movement ... we definitely all have a responsibility—how we choose to act in that responsibility is different. People ask me all the time—who did you like better Malcolm or Martin— I don't like either one of them better because they were both needed. If it would've been just one or the other we would have gotten nowhere.

Within this reflection, Angela challenged preconceived notions of mistrust toward those integrating organizations and created space to consider the variance of Black advocacy. By further combating comparisons of the then and now of activism that made current activism so misunderstood, several students noted the romanticized narrative of the civil rights era. They struck down the ideal that social injustice resistance equates to total rejection of things not centered on Black culture. Ron and Greg questioned the applicability of “over the top” blueprints of the past, not likely to be effective in an environment of institutionalized White norms. Bruce also described his temperament as avoiding “standing on a public podium” to directly challenge racism. Although they chose varying outlets of resistance, students all spoke to the need for a blueprint more reflective of the current era. Angela added further critique:

People have been taking blueprints from the civil rights period—but in the

narrative that America tells it. I didn't even know all the critiques of the Black Panthers until I read Assata's [Shakur] and Angela's [Davis] autobiography. We have to figure out how to invent a new wheel, it's not about reinventing like going through the old wheel.

Participants unanimously asserted that the Black collective should not form a separate political force but work in multifaceted ways to challenge racial injustice.

The complexity of a divided Black America caused participants to interrogate the division that negatively affected the Black student community. Greg repeatedly asked the rhetorical question “Where did we go wrong?” by reflecting on the evolution of the self-love of 1980s hip-hop to the current influence of overpaid rappers that lack a meaningful message. He equated collective negative Black values with the difficulty of having influence on his Black peers. Frustrations with the apathy they often witnessed in their peers propelled these students to be consciously engaged in reflection on how to best tackle the constraints of PWI exclusions that remained unchallenged. Their awareness accentuated the union of individual and collective action, in that they sought new opportunities of resistance with the Black student community at Unity in mind.

## Discussion and Recommendations

The current study explored Black student leaders' engagement efforts in a specific PWI context; findings revealed their persistent navigation of dominant norms at Unity that assert Black inferiority and negotiation of Black student community expectations. Although students all felt a strong connection to Black group identity, many felt constrained in the perception that resistance should be overt, collective, and disruptive to

<sup>3</sup> A national activist organization seeking justice through organized, nonviolent resistance.

be valuable. The false narrative of the lack of activism from the current generation contributed to this disconnect amongst the Black student community at Unity and encouraged participants to be strategic in their efforts. Participants expressed how their engagement within mainstream, exclusionary spaces was indeed intended to collectively represent their Black peers, despite others' perceptions. These findings highlight how these Black student leaders negotiated their emotions in response to the institutional racism of Unity's White norms and exemplified leadership through a salient Black identity.

Related to the structural constraints of the PWI environment, this study called into question the continuous reliance on Likert scale surveys to provide insight into the complexity of students' racialized experiences. The MMRI is operationalized through statistical representation of the MIBI, allowing researchers to generalize racial identity across institutional contexts. The methodological decision to conduct this research as a case study within the PWI setting allowed alignment with the purpose of qualitative research in providing detailed descriptions that posed opportunities for transferability to similar institutional contexts. To this end, in-depth exploration of a specific context highlighted the situational component of the MMRI framework (Sellers et al., 1998), in that racial consciousness is influenced by perceptions of a particular environment at a given time. Given the dismal percentage of Black students at Unity, this framing allowed for an institutional scan of PWI inequalities that affect Black student leaders' connectivity in a variety of situations. This study moved away from the customary statistical representation of MMRI dimensions operationalized through the MIBI. Such an innovative approach of creating direct discourse empowered participants to verbalize their racial consciousness rather than limiting their responses through survey assumptions, which adds to the richness of racial identity research.

Several significant implications and recommendations arise from this study for research and practice. Cokley (1999), in his study on racial ideology, indicated that Black students at PWIs showed a greater inclination toward assimilationist and humanist ideologies. The current study sought to expand the MMRI phenomenological foundations by allowing students to express their racial ideology beliefs rather than be confined to survey responses. Students' counternarratives exhibited how as Black student leaders, they combined assimilationist and nationalist perspectives to resist racist ideologies and manage the emotional costs associated with their chosen forms of resistance. PWIs function on a narrative that asserts integration and inclusiveness. Such discourse frames student engagement for students of color as an individual choice and influences perceptions of collective action. For participants within the study, this message caused further misunderstandings of the heterogeneity of Black engagement. Research that stops short of holding PWIs accountable for protected inequities disguised as race neutrality fails to interrogate institutional racism and the harm individuals endure due to PWI "structural violence" (Hamer & Lang, 2015). The nature of the study in transforming MIBI survey items into qualitative discourse points to the need for future research that explores the fluidity of racial consciousness within institutional contexts. Further research needs to be conducted that utilizes the voices of Black student leaders who challenge inequitable practices within specific contexts rather than generalized studies across varying contexts in order to hold the individuals who create policies accountable.

This study also recommends that student affairs professionals who support Black leaders' efforts facilitate greater communication about the emotional taxation of both an activist and race-conscious engagement position. In disrupting the disconnect between

the nature of activism and more understated approaches to resistance, student leaders within this context upheld the need for greater dialogue to break down such confined definitions of what Black engagement should look like. Angela even mentioned that activists function within a dichotomous frame of either working within the system to effect change or not, declaring that such restrictive framing does not allow for both. Evans and Moore (2015) emphasized that emotional management of racism for people of color includes decisions of how to respond, an understanding of how decisions will be interpreted within a White frame, and the feelings associated with particular responses. Black student leaders who continuously face this daunting process in navigating institutional racism face the possibility of racial battle fatigue. This concept relates to the emotional, physiological, and psychological stressors associated with fighting microaggressions in White spaces (Smith, 2008). Because students might have limited knowledge of the wide range of coping strategies to combat these stressors and the complexity of resistance, higher education professionals can empower students through various dialogue and engagement opportunities.

Lastly, professionals as advocates for students can design programs around the heterogeneity of Black engagement as well as emotional management; those efforts possibly can eliminate perceived judgment of what resistance should look like from the very community and programs designed to support them. Due to the fact that students are not just engaged in overt acts of resistance on campus, the higher education community must also address the evolving role of social media in students' engagement. "Hashtag ethnography" (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015) provides students the opportunity to utilize a Twitter hashtag to connect to a common cause of resistance. Social media as a space of resistance is an example of increased opportunity for

students, who may fear the realized consequences of physical activism, to get involved. Because these alternative venues can create a sense of empowerment for students to act out their racial consciousness, student affairs professionals must generate greater dialogue about the consequences as well as benefits of social media activism on campus. By moving away from previous definitions that so firmly confine activism, we can perhaps start to loosen the tension that is created when students' race-conscious engagement efforts do not precisely fit into that theoretical box.

### Conclusion

Research on Black student engagement must continue to make connections to the framing of education as a White property right, emphasizing the ways that activism is co-opted as an inferior act of emotion and thus perceived as a threat (Evans & Moore, 2015; Patel, 2015). In line with the theoretical underpinnings of CRT that call for counternarratives as evidence to institutional racism as the foundation of the PWI experience, this study created the space for Black student leaders to engage in that disruption. Although the juxtaposition between individualism and collectivism as effective strategies perhaps will always permeate Black student communities in PWI spaces, students in this study indicated that both have meaningful purpose. As we seek to understand the emotional frameworks of Black consciousness students utilize to navigate dominant White norms, we must empower them to utilize heterogeneous tactics to do so. As Black students seek to establish a voice distinct from generations before them, we must loosen the constraints of the past so that their endeavors can reflect the cultural realities at present.



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## Appendix A

### ASSIMILATIONIST CODING

Assimilationist Coding		
Survey item	Theme	Subcodes
<p>* Blacks who espouse separatism are as racist as Whites who also espouse separatism.</p> <p>* A sign of progress is that Blacks are in the mainstream of America more than ever before.</p> <p>* Because America is predominantly White, it is important that Blacks go to White schools so that they can gain experience interacting with Whites.</p> <p>* Blacks should strive to be full members of the American political system.</p> <p>* Blacks should try to work within the system to achieve their political and economic goals.</p> <p>* Blacks should strive to integrate all institutions that are segregated.</p> <p>* Blacks should feel free to interact socially with Whites.</p> <p>* Blacks should view themselves as being Americans first and foremost.</p> <p>* The plight of Blacks in America will improve only when Blacks are in important positions within the system.</p>	<p><i>Dominant normed social interactions</i></p>	<p>Whites as accepting, negative imaging prescribed to Blacks, discomfort of social relationships, role of teacher to dispel stereotypes, freedom to interact with Whites, cultural stigma of interracial relationships, interactions paralleled to taking part in a game, advantages of attending a Predominantly White Institution, persistence of jokes/microaggressions, choosing battles in racism</p>
	<p><i>Black advancements and system representation</i></p>	<p>Barack Obama as symbolic/disconnected to change, endurance of Black plight, negative imaging highlighted, positive imaging silenced, prevalence of Black/White disparities, politics of Black representation, system not made for Blacks, ideals of activism to fight against the system, Blacks left out of the American dream, other races as advocates/allies, appeal of self-interest and personal gain</p>
	<p><i>Challenging diversity rhetoric</i></p>	<p>Freedom to advocate through Black organizations, moving past complacency to social change, seeking integration to follow interests, cyclical barriers to increased diversity at PWIs, need for role models/trailblazers, inauthenticity of integration motives, diversity efforts restrained due to racist foundations, traditions based on dominant White norms, stigma of Historically Black Colleges and Universities as less prestigious</p>
	<p><i>Norms of Black group connectivity</i></p>	<p>African American connectivity at the forefront of identity, assimilation into American culture, embracing racial identity within core identities, Black separatism as different from racism</p>

Appendix B

HUMANIST CODING

Humanist Coding		
Survey item	Theme	Subcodes
<p>* Black values should not be inconsistent with human values.</p> <p>* Blacks should have the choice to marry interracially.</p> <p>* Blacks and Whites have more commonalities than differences.</p> <p>* Black people should not consider race when buying art or selecting a book to read.</p> <p>* Blacks would be better off if they were more concerned with the problems facing all people than just focusing on Black issues.</p> <p>* Being an individual is more important than identifying oneself as Black.</p> <p>* We are all children of a higher being, therefore, we should love people of all races.</p> <p>* Blacks should judge Whites as individuals and not as members of the White race.</p> <p>* People regardless of their race have strengths and limitations.</p>	<p><i>Socially prescribed imaging</i></p>	<p>Black lives as having low hierarchical value, racial values socially constructed, socialization of negative Black values, social stigma of interracial marriage, social status as conditional for interracial acceptance, beauty standards based on White norms, dichotomy between Blacks and Whites of resilience and weakness</p>
	<p><i>Individualism versus group orientation</i></p>	<p>Black norms/values lead to outliers, utopia ideal as naïve, religious influence on identity, ascribed versus affirmed group identity, moving beyond group stereotypes, disconnect associated with avoidance of self-identifying as Black, automatic inheritance of Black stigma, Black and Whites judged on group stereotypes/generalizations</p>
	<p><i>Black advocacy</i></p>	<p>necessity for Black advocacy due to lack of concern by others, Blacks understanding plight and oppression, supporting Black culture/business as consciousness and connectivity</p>
	<p><i>Challenging notions of inclusion</i></p>	<p>conflicts caused by dissonance from dominant White norms at Predominantly White Institutions, checkbox of diversity as a false reality, individual versus systemic racism, comparison of Blacks and Whites as Venn diagram with little focus on commonalities</p>

## Appendix C

### OPPRESSE MINORITY CODING

Oppressed Minority Coding		
Survey item	Theme	Subcodes
<p>* The same forces that have led to the oppression of Blacks have also led to the oppression of other groups.</p> <p>* The struggle for Black liberation in America should be closely related to the struggle of other oppressed groups.</p> <p>* Blacks should learn about the oppression of other groups.</p> <p>* Black people should treat other oppressed people as allies.</p> <p>* The racism Blacks have experienced is similar to that of other minority groups.</p> <p>* There are other people who experience racial injustice and indignities similar to Black Americans.</p> <p>* Blacks will be more successful in achieving their goals if they form coalitions with other oppressed groups.</p> <p>* Blacks should try to become friends with people from other oppressed groups.</p> <p>* The dominant society devalues anything not White male oriented.</p>	<p><i>Impact of White institutional space</i></p>	<p>working together as temporary with no change in culture, Whites question impact of slavery, claims of reverse racism when focus is deviated from White norms, White standard as assumed, stigma of joining White organizations, various social identities at conflict</p>
	<p><i>Manifestation of racism and racial profiling</i></p>	<p>Trayvon Martin murder and court case showed lack of understanding across cultures, Blacks seen as threats, role of social media in perpetuating stereotypes/racism, some Blacks deny presence of racism, Black injustice as unique and institutionalized</p>
	<p><i>Influence of racial hierarchy</i></p>	<p>competition amongst races of which group experienced worst oppression, lack of knowledge in making comparisons, reflecting on discrimination of other minorities, oppression rooted in White supremacy and patriarchy, desire to preserve social status above others, oppression of other minorities normalized in America, immigrants' acculturation different than African Americans, minority groups fight for resources/power</p>
	<p><i>Forming coalitions with other groups</i></p>	<p>Blacks use self-reliance due to lack of acceptance, education needed to build understanding between groups, difficult in finding a joint issue, joining with others to strengthen Black flight, others can relate to oppression, finding commonalities, small steps to connect and create change</p>

Appendix D

NATIONALIST CODING

Nationalist Coding		
Survey item	Theme	Subcodes
<p>* It is important for Black people to surround their children with Black art, music and literature.</p> <p>* Black people should not marry interracially.</p> <p>* Blacks would be better off if they adopted Afrocentric values.</p> <p>* Black students are better off going to schools that are controlled and organized by Blacks.</p> <p>* Black people must organize themselves into a separate Black political force.</p> <p>* Whenever possible, Blacks should buy from other Black businesses.</p> <p>* A thorough knowledge of Black history is very important for Blacks today.</p> <p>* Blacks and Whites can never live in true harmony because of racial differences.</p> <p>* Whites can never be trusted where Blacks are concerned.</p>	<p><i>Inequality of power structures</i></p>	<p>Blacks engrained as part of U.S. system, detriment for Blacks to form separate political force/focus on race, activism by Whites legitimized, lack of funding for HBCUs, lack of blueprint to mobilize, reality of power structures necessitates participation in White spaces</p>
	<p><i>Black principles and engagement</i></p>	<p>need to pass cultural knowledge through generations, complacency/rejection of Black history focus, lack of Black history/connectedness related to self-esteem deficiencies, sense of entitlement, knowing culture while affirming individuality, influence of Eurocentric values</p>
	<p><i>The then and now of activism</i></p>	<p>romanticized narrative of the civil rights movement, understanding individuals' different roles in the movement, questioning a shift in advocacy and Black values, lack of integrity of Black media, need for celebrities to advocate positive Black values, disconnect on meaning of Afrocentrism, need to hold Black business to higher standard, esteeming Black culture</p>
	<p><i>Divide based on racial differences</i></p>	<p>divide of Black men and women through interracial marriage, racial differences inhibit harmonious Black/White relationships, becoming desensitized to racism, segregation remains intact, Black-on-Black crimes, perception of individuals not committed to Black causes</p>