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THE RESILIENCE OF BLACK FEMALE LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND  
RACIAL MICROAGGRESSION

By

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THE RESILIENCE OF BLACK FEMALE LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND  
RACIAL MICROAGGRESSION

ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of Black female leaders in higher education and their encounters with racial microaggression. Additionally, the opportunity to understand the effects of racial slights within the workplace as either a mid to senior level leadership was also explored. Regardless of the multiple diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) trainings within higher education, Black female leaders are experiencing their share of racial inequality based on their race, gender, or both (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019). The unique experiences of racial microaggression encountered by Black women, aligned with the framework of both the Black feminist theory and intersectionality theory respectively. These theories were used to illustrate the daily occurrences of racial microaggression, within the workplace settings, where Black female leaders are not always seen as an equal to their White colleagues. Results of the study revealed that stereotypes can create a discomfort within the workplace, especially for a mid or senior level leader who is expected to remain professional regardless of their experiences with racial slights. The educational accomplishments of each participant, in addition to their professional years of experience, have been questioned or undermined either by their colleagues or subordinates. Participants expressed their experience of emotional distress caused by racial microaggression, along with a wage gap as part of their lived experience as they navigate the impact of microaggressions. Recommendations include dismantling racial microaggression

within the workplace with more in-depth DEI training, along with promoting accountability towards colleagues who partake in racial slights within the workplace.

*Keywords:* Black female, racial microaggression, Black feminist theory, higher education, intersectionality

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Racist incidents or experiences can be comparable to an established notion of trauma when there is an overt and distinct event that is caused directly by an individual (Davis & Ocampo, 2005). Traumatic events or experiences may not result in long-term impairment for most individuals, however, it is normal to experience traumatic events across the lifespan, where the response will vary based on the individual (Conover et al., 2015). The experience of a Black person who encounters daily verbal insults relating to their race, culture, or appearance, can stem from both stereotypes and racial microaggression (Davis & Ocampo, 2005). Acts of racism can be subtle, where the perpetrator may or may not be aware of their remarks towards a group of marginalized people. Discrimination, prejudice, or antagonism directed towards an individual of a particular racial or ethnic group and a part of a marginalized community is considered to be racism (Miles & Brown, 2003). The action in being unpleasant in an insidious way or toxicity can be caused by actions of racism, where stereotypes are utilized towards a person of color, is a form of racial microaggression (DeAngelis, 2009). Discriminatory racist biases that occur without awareness in ambiguous situations are considered to be aversive racism (Pearson et al., 2009). Aversive racism focuses on the thought process of white individuals who believe, as well as declare, that all people are created equal, while simultaneously entertaining subconscious racist mannerisms (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Dovidio and Gaertner (2000) described aversive racism as subtle racial behaviors towards any ethnic or racial groups who rationalize their aversion to a particular group by utilizing stereotypes. The motivation for the change is thought to be implicit or subconscious.

Racial microaggressions are considered stereotypes evidenced as subtle, yet offensive comments, non-verbal behaviors, or actions directed towards a marginalized group (Pittman, 2012). Additionally, racial microaggressions experienced within the workplace can create an unsafe environment, where people of color can be negatively impacted by these encounters (Pittman, 2012). While the United States of America elected their first Black male President in 2008, who served two-consecutive terms, racial microaggressions were still experienced both within and outside of the White House (Olds, 2011). Regardless of the job title or position, a person of color is not exempt from racial microaggression and they have to navigate how to remain professional within the workplace environment without responding (Isom, 2015). Systematic racism is where people of color are placed at a disadvantage in regards to policies, structures, and institutions in society (Phillips, 2010). Additionally, systematic racism stems from the colonization within the United States, where Indigenous people were removed from their lands, while people of African descent (Black people) were enslaved (Phillips, 2010).

Employment sectors are one of the institutions which carries out systematic racism, where both racial microaggression and racial macroaggression are projected (Wilson & Ross, 2001). Macroaggression is the act of racism towards everyone from the same population, while microaggression applies to an individual (Wilson & Ross, 2001). Experiencing this within a work environment, where the knowledge of systematic racism and oppression exist, may cause a form of discomfort (Sarkis, 2020). Additionally, the identity of a person of color (Black person) where their identity may be compromised due to this type of experience, could possibly interfere with their professional responsibilities. As a member of a marginalized group (minority), they may not feel encouraged to seek support or understanding, if the belief is that they do not belong

or would not be heard. The effects of systematic racism run deep in terms of dehumanization and breaking people down, which can serve as a form of defeat (Sarkis, 2020).

The opportunities for social mobility for Black people have continued to progress within the 21st century for the better, however, the actions of racial discrimination, gender discrimination, and overt racists within the workplace are an on-going issue (Dovido & Gaertner, 2000). Systematic oppression (New, 2001) is described as individuals from marginalized groups being intentionally disadvantaged compared to the dominant group (race, gender, language, or class). Subsets of systemic oppression include racial stereotypes and racial microaggressions, which contribute to a narrative against Black people. Additionally, enduring this type of racism, either unconsciously or consciously, can prevent substantial opportunities towards a Black person's professional growth (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019). These experiences may vary for each individual, resulting in a type of dissonance on how to proceed without jeopardizing their profession (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019). Additionally, DeCuir-Gunby et al (2019) indicated that marginalized groups have been victims of unjust experiences caused by racist actions that hindered their chances to either participate or advance within the workplace due to systemic oppression.

This researcher has experienced discriminatory practices, which were an attempt to demoralize her character. For example, the researcher was exposed to the following scenarios: you are smart for a Black girl, you do not belong here, you could not possibly understand this dialogue, grabbing a purse while on the elevator, you speak well for a Black person, you are an oreo (white on the inside and black on the outside), how did you get an education, or your hair is so different can I touch it? Racial microaggressions experienced within the workplace can cause an uncomfortable work environment, where one's confidence can decrease due to an inability to

express concerns without sounding like it is a complaint (Pittman, 2012). Support may not be available because the topic of race or discrimination is often uncomfortable for individuals who may not experience these types of situations (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

The term racial microaggression was coined by Chester Pierce in 1970, who personally witnessed a plethora of insults and slights against Black people (Pierce, 1970). Individuals who participate in racial microaggressions are taught to believe that stereotypes are true (Rieker et al., 1995). Additionally, the insults towards Black women have heightened stereotypes about this population when speaking of their race and gender (Holder et al., 2015). Racial microaggressions towards Black women can initiate an opportunity to possibly share similar experiences with other Black women, however, encountering these types of experiences may create a form of unwelcomed distress within the workplace (Collins, 2015). Smith et al (2016) found that racial microaggressions can cause physical health problems, which can in turn mitigate anxiety, depression, emotional distress, or mental breakdowns. Stanley (2009) indicated that Black women within the workplace have to navigate through racial microaggression based on two given factors: being a woman and being Black. Additionally, Black women may not have the support or luxury to express their mental health concerns without the worry that they may be perceived as incapable of keeping their jobs (Stanley, 2009).

### **Experience of Black Women**

Black women in leadership positions within their workplace are often held to a different set of expectations than their white male or female counterparts and if the experience of racial microaggression is encountered within the workplace, then they may not feel comfortable sharing their encounters (Collins, 2015). Additionally, their ability to produce effective work is often overlooked, due to their gender or race and the persistent sexism and racism in society



(Collins, 2015). For example, in 2020 Senator Kamala Harris, a Black woman, ran for the Vice-Presidential spot during the 2020 campaign. Multiple media outlets focused more on her race and ethnicity than her ability to perform as a productive Vice President of the United States (Mosley, 2020). According to Mosley (2020), Black women have been pre-judged based on either their race, gender, or both before learning about their ability to perform as a professional. Senator Kamala Harris became the first Black female Vice President of the United States. DeGruy and Randall (2018) denoted that the focus on race and gender regarding Black women or marginalized groups, can entice more discussions within and between these groups based on their shared unique experiences.

Jacqueline Ann Berrien headed the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission under President Obama from 2009 to 2014. Prior to this appointment she was a lawyer and the Associate Director Counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (*President Obama Announces Pick to Head Equal Employment Opportunity Commission | whitehouse.gov*, 2015). According to Jacqueline Berrien, The Equal Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is to educate the public on fairness towards all demographic groups in the workplace, as well as technical assistance to mitigate all types of employment discrimination, including systematic discrimination (Fox, 2011). Under the leadership of Ms. Berrien, the EEOC took action against systemic employment practices and work rules that discriminated against classes of people on the basis of religious beliefs, disabilities, sexual orientation, and ethnic origin.

On March 6, 1961, former President Kennedy signed Executive Order 10925, which required government contractors to take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed and that employees are treated fairly during employment without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin (EEOC, n.d.). Subsequently, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (CRA) was

signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. One of the reasons the CRA was written into law was due to persistent employment discrimination against marginalized groups' race, color, religion, national origin, and sex (EEOC, n.d.). Additionally, Title VII was passed during the same year, which prohibits the retaliation against an individual who may be willing to file a possible discrimination lawsuit (EEOC, n.d.). The CRA was established to support fairness for Black people, and other marginalized groups, within the workplace. However, there is still work to be done because discriminatory situations are still experienced within the workplace. Additionally, the CRA includes the restriction of discriminating against a person's age, disability, or family medical history (EEOC, n.d.). Therefore, it is unlawful to treat marginalized groups unfairly while engaging in hiring or compensation, regardless of one's color, race, religion, or gender (EEOC, n.d.).

Since the signing of Title VII, employment rates for Black Americans overall have steadily increased (EEOC, 2015). According to information from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics of 2019 (BLS), Black women made up about 53% of the labor force. Additionally, during the period from 1972 to the early 2000s employment opportunities for Black women gradually increased, however, there is still room for improvement regarding their experiences within the workplace (Davis & Ocampo, 2005). When reviewing the attainment of higher education, 24% of Black women have attained their bachelor's degree or higher in comparison to 72% of all women (*Black Women Statistics*, 2018). Additionally, 10% of all Black women have attained a graduate degree in comparison to 13% of women from other races (*Black Women Statistics*, 2018). In the United States, during the early 20th century, Black women were less likely to work in occupations that may be considered white collar and were more likely to hold service jobs. In the year 2018 about 64% of working Black women held white collar jobs in

comparison to 71% of women from other races. White collar occupations include but are not limited to jobs in the field of management, business, information technology, office administration, legal, and education (Black Women Statistics, 2018). As demonstrated in both Table 1 and Table 2, Black women who worked full-time all year in 2018 had median earnings of \$36,695 (35%) in comparison to \$42,238 for women of other races. Only 26% of Black women made \$50,000 or more in 2018 compared to 48% of women from other races and 29% of Black women were living below the poverty level compared to 14% of women of other races (Black Women Statistics, 2018).

Table 1

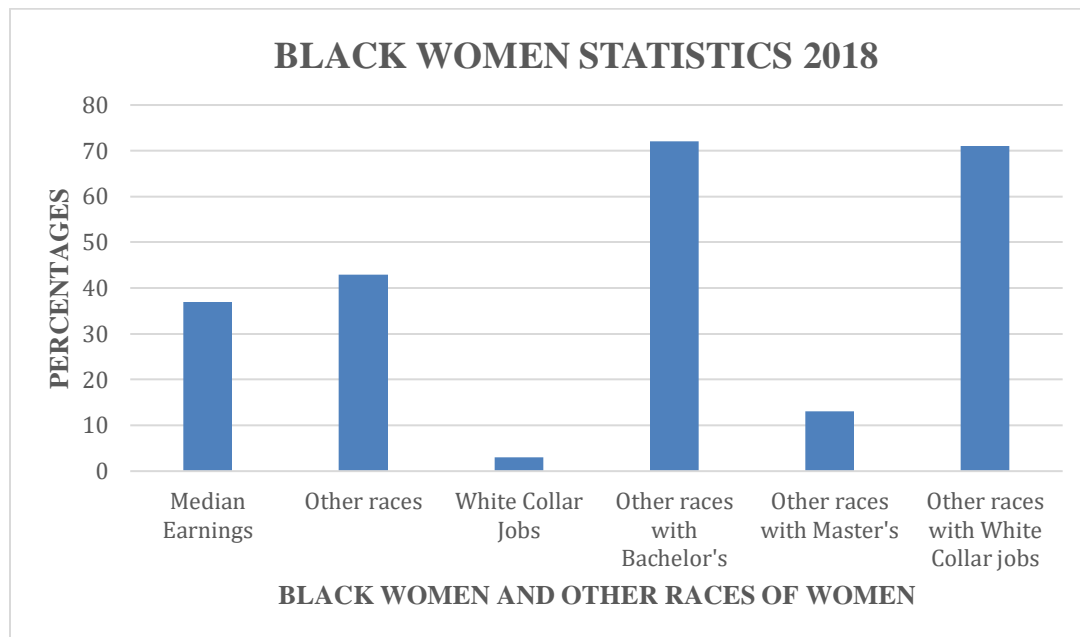
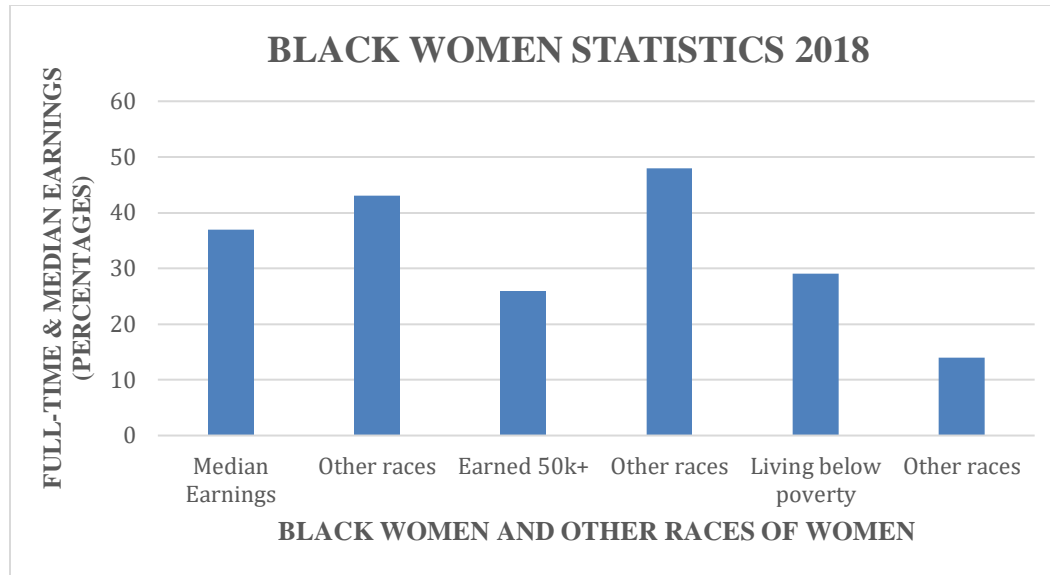


Table 2



Experiences stemming from racial microaggressions, can negatively impact Black females within the workplace due to the unjust stereotypes projected towards them from individuals of other races (Smith et al., 2016). If a Black woman is in a position to defend herself from an accusation from a colleague who may be non-Black, she may not be willing to defend herself due to the concern of being called aggressive or angry (Collins, 2015). Professionalism is a requirement within the workplace and Black women who encounter unprofessional behaviors from other colleagues can experience internal trauma due to their feelings being minimized (Collins, 2015). The climate of the United States in 2020, heightened due to racial tension, police brutality, and the pandemic that impacted citizens overall (Thomas & Haynes, 2020). Additionally, vocal opinions and rhetoric from former President Trump (#45), encouraged overt discrimination towards people of color (Graham et al., 2019). Inadvertently, Black women have been a targeted group, where public humiliation has taken place towards their professionalism, body-image, opinions, or firm stands regarding their decisions within the workplace (Nelson,

2018). Therefore, unfortunate occurrences of the images of Black women within the media, perpetuates a narrative that may not represent all Black women.

To add to the societal milieu, former President Trump demonstrated racial microaggression when he called a former Black woman from his administration a ‘low life dog’ (Nelson, 2018). During the 2020 pre-election time period, President #45 described California Senator, Kamala Harris, as a ‘monster’ during an interview after the Vice-Presidential debate (Summers, 2020). The term monster has been previously used to describe terrorists, murderers, or major natural disasters (Summers, 2020). As Summers indicated, if managers rely on the example of former President Trump's pattern of attacking Black women, which can promote negative connotation, or condone such behavior, then these same managers may not recognize the occurrence of microaggression within the workplace as an important factor to address.

### **Statement of the Problem**

A result of systemic racism, cis-gender Black female leaders who are employed in higher education facing racial microaggressions present as an important problem for exploration. The experience of cis-gender Black women with racial microaggressions within the work setting, more specifically a collegiate work setting in the United States, has not been explored (Townsend, 2020). Black women experiencing racial microaggression, also includes the outcome of remaining silent when encountering unfairness out of concern for being viewed as the angry Black woman (Corbin et al., 2018). However, it appears that the experience regarding racial microaggression by Black female leaders in higher education as well as available support from upper management seems to be scarce within the workplace (Corbin et al., 2018).

The experiences of racial microaggressions within the workplace may be faced by a Black person, or any person of color, who is expected to remain professional without rebutting

(Corbin et al., 2018). The expectation that a Black woman should remain patient when encountering a form of racial microaggression can present a discomfort and hesitation to share their concern with senior management (Collins, 2015). Due to the intersectionality of being both Black and female, Black women working in a predominantly white department have experienced concurrent oppression in ways that cannot be understood by other identity groups (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Additionally, due to this type of oppression, a multiplier effect may be experienced, which entails an increase of different factors (sexism, racism, or social classism) (Stanley, 2009). For example, if racism is encountered along with sexism, then the multiplier effect may be experienced for this specific population.

The experience of Black women within workplace settings, as well as historical trauma, contributes to an expectation that they remain silent when dealing with challenges amongst their white counterparts or colleagues (DeGruy-Leary & Robinson, 2018). DeGruy-Leary and Robinson (2018) indicated that the voice of the Black female has been silenced in the past (Cook, 2014), supporting the assertion that Black female leaders in higher education experiencing racial microaggressions should be further explored. Dealing with issues of racism and inequality, while not feeling supported within the workplace, may cause work-related stressors, which can cause this population to cope in silence (Hall et al, 2011). Multi-generational trauma experienced by Blacks of African descent, referred to as DeGruy-Leary's (2005) concept Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), can lead to an untreated and undiagnosed stress disorder caused by the experiences and aftermath of slavery.

Historically, during slavery time, Blacks in America were not allowed to read, be independent, or speak per the demands of their oppressor. Healing from past wounds, while trying to move on from present wounds does not provide the opportunity to heal (Degruy-Leary

& Robinson, 2018). Additionally, Black women experienced their family members (husband, children, etc.) being separated or sold and were not allowed to express themselves verbally, emotionally, or physically without putting themselves or other family members in danger. The on-going experiences of oppression and institutionalized racism in the US has encouraged Black women to remain silent when experiencing distress or challenges (Degruy-Leary & Robinson, 2018). If a Black female leader is experiencing this type of discomfort within the workplace, their leadership style and ability can be compromised, especially if they do not feel supported by management or fellow colleagues.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of cis-gender Black female leaders in higher education relative to racial microaggressions and to explore how they perceive these experiences impacting their role as a leader. Stereotypes within the workplace, where an individual may not feel supported when expressing their concerns, is a common factor regarding racial microaggression. Additionally, this study provided additional insights on how to manage and navigate stereotypes within the workplace. Black women experience unique racial microaggressions compared to Black men or other people of color and learning more about their experience within the academic setting could be beneficial in the field of higher education (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Historically, European standards of beauty (hair and body image) have been complex factors of discrimination that contribute to systemic racism (Lewis & Neville, 2015). A Black woman may feel inadequate in comparison to their white colleagues, and this could possibly compromise their ability to believe in their professional ability within the workplace (Lewis & Neville, 2015). A Black female leader's morale or self-confidence can diminish due to racial microaggression and if they are unable to rely on support

due to their experience, this could negatively impact their professional development (Crenshaw et al., 2013).

The experience of being the only Black woman or individual within the workplace can be challenging where they are unable to share their concerns or experiences with the concern of being judged or condemned. Black women are highly emulated due to their culture and disposition, however, at the same time they have been highly disrespected and are expected to remain calm or unbothered regardless of the situation (Walley-Jean, 2009). This study focused on the lived experience of Black female leaders in higher education and how they are able to proceed regardless of challenges encountered.

### **Research Question**

According to Creswell (2013), phenomenological research consists of central questions where both objectivity and hypotheses are restricted. The researcher focused on a central question that focused on the exploration of a central phenomenon and the sub-questions will narrow the focus of the study (Creswell, 2013). The research focus for this study was: examining the experience of Black female leaders in higher education with racial microaggression. RQ1 was the central question and RQ2 used to explore the experience of each participant.

RQ1: What is the lived experience of Black female leaders in higher education with racial microaggression?

RQ2: How do Black female leaders in higher education perceive the impact, if any, of racial microaggressions on their role as a leader?



## Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework defines the relevant variables for a study as well as maps out how the variables are relatable (Jabareen, 2009). Additionally, a conceptual framework should be constructed before collecting and analyzing data in the research study. The researcher's personal experiences, connections, and interactions with other Black professional women within higher education, along with the apparent gap in literature regarding racial microaggression, prompted the exploration of the experiences of professional leaders in higher education. The researcher has worked in higher education for the past five years and experienced racial microaggression on multiple occasions, where they were unsure if reporting their concern would negatively impact their position. The concern when experiencing racial stereotypes within the workplace environment along with discrimination, has caused distrust towards management due to the lack of available support regarding these encounters. Feeling isolated, as well as living up to the expectation to fulfill the current job responsibilities while experiencing this type of discourtesy, has served as a survival mechanism for the researcher within the workplace. There are different types of racial microaggression encountered within the workplace and as a leader the expectation is to remain professional regardless of a situation. Additionally, racial microaggression experienced by Black women within the workplace is a daily occurrence where this population has become more accustomed to acclimating to this type of environment, instead of expressing their concerns (Hinchliffe, 2020). A main concern is that managers are not recognizing that racial microaggressions exist in the workplace and not holding employees accountable for discriminatory behavior, is one of the main factors to explore.

The relevant variables in this study reflect the four themes of Collins' Black feminist theory (2006), which was used as the theoretical framework lens for this study. Sociologist,

Patricia Collins explicated four themes within Black feminist theory regarding the experiences of Black women: (a) the lived experience as a criterion of meaning or the knowledge gained by Black women based on their experiences; (b) the use of dialogue or establishing important bonds and relationships since contentious or oppressive situations can seldom cause isolation; (c) the ethic of caring which incorporates the use of expressiveness, empathy, or emotions by understanding the unique experiences of the Black woman; and (d) the ethics of personal accountability which lacks objectivity. Collins stated that these themes expressed by Black women may vary due to the differences in region, class, age, ethnicity, and sexual orientation which can individually impact the lives of these women (Harnois, 2010). The impact or experience of racial microaggression may not be the same for every Black woman within the workplace. Black female leaders experiencing racial microaggressions can be discouraged to progress professionally if support is seen to be lackluster (Dunn et al., 2019).

This study was informed by literature about racism, unfairness, and rejection, within the workplace, as well as the lack of support when experiencing this type of circumstance (Hinchliffe, 2020). According to Delgado and Stefancic (2017), the permanence of racism stipulates that it saturates every aspect of life within America through socialization, laws, and media. The researchers also indicated that one racial group holds more privilege and power over another group, which allows marginalized groups to feel inferior. Black feminist and intersectionality theory served as the theoretical framework for this study.

### **Intersectionality of the Black Woman**

According to Crenshaw (1989), class discrimination, gender, and race are all aspects of the same systematic of hierarchy, based on the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. The experience of a Black woman, cannot only be grasped in terms of being both

Black and a woman, hence why one of the reasons the term intersectionality was coined (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw argued that being both Black and female should be considered independently while understanding that intersecting identities can deepen or reinforce one another (Crenshaw, 1989). Black women are positioned within structures of power in different ways than White women. For example, white feminist is a tag that has gained popularity to criticize feminists who avoid issues of intersectionality (Moon & Holling, 2020). However, critics of the Black feminism movement, would argue that divisions along the lines of race or gender can weaken the strength of the overall feminist movement and anti-racist movements (Reynaga-Abiko, 2015). This study gained insights into the lived experience of Black female leaders in higher education who encounter a form of racial discrimination or racial stereotypes, while attempting to remain steadfast and professional within the workplace.

The emergence of intersectionality is challenging the notion that gender is the primary factor in determining a woman's fate (bell hooks, 1984). Historically, during the 19th and 20th centuries, Black women in the United States were excluded from the feminist movement (bell hooks, 1984). This disputed the ideology of earlier feminist movements, which were led by White middle-class women, who suggested that women were homogeneous and shared the same life experiences. White-feminists eventually recognized that middle-class White-women experiences were different from Black, poor or disabled women, and began to research the significance of gender, race, and class in order to determine the female overall experience (bell hooks, 1984).

Historically, the experiences of Black women in the United States created disadvantages because Black women were not seen as equals and treated unfairly, which was a normalized expectation within society (Holder et al., 2015). Racial oppression, which could be social,

internalized, systematic, or institutionalized, can promote unjust treatment or cruelty within the workplace (Clarke & Collins, 2000). Black women experiencing racism within the workplace along with limited support from senior management (supervisor or manager), can find it challenging to be comfortable in vocalizing their professional needs and aspirations (Clarke & Collins, 2000). Black feminist theory, which was coined by Collins in 1991, centralizes as well as validates the intersecting dimensions of both race and gender based on the unique experiences of Black women. Additionally, Black women may code-switch within the professional setting to find ways to relate to their non-white colleagues in order to be perceived a safe or non-confrontational (Doss & Gross, 1994). Code-switching embraces the dominant culture or using a certain vernacular around certain groups of people, while switching back to a more authentic self around people outside of the workplace for example (Cheeks, 2018). The lived experience of Black women within the workplace where they may feel unsupported can possibly cause fear of being ostracized or alienated by their colleagues if they choose to speak their concern (Cheeks, 2018). For example, a Black woman could be affected by issues within the Black community (police brutality, etc.) and their feelings may not be acknowledged or emotions towards an issue be misunderstood by colleagues who may not share the same perspectives (Cheeks, 2018). The self-awareness of Black women regarding their experiences of microaggressions in the workplace in comparison to their colleagues, who are from a different race within the workplace, can disrupt sleep patterns, reduce their sense of “psychological safety,” and diminish their ability to contribute fully at work (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019). The lack of support or understanding within the workplace of the Black woman and their intersectional identity, may cause distress and lower job performance (Crenshaw et al., 2013).

This theoretical framework helps to conceptualize and understand the experience of a person, group of people, or social problem affected by different types of discrimination or disadvantages. The theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw et al., 2019) considers overlapping social identities and their related systems of oppression, domination, and discrimination. In the case of this study, the double oppression is women of color, particularly Black women and their experiences as a member of a marginalized group regarding their race and gender identity in academia (Crenshaw et al., 2013). For example, a White woman, or a White-passing heterosexual woman who is an immigrant, may have a more positive experience within the workplace, than a Black or Brown woman who is also heterosexual and possibly an undocumented immigrant (Crenshaw et al., 2019). Examination of people's overlapping identities and experiences helps to understand the complexity of prejudice (Crenshaw et al., 2013). Complexity of prejudice would include sexism, racism, or classism for example (Crenshaw et al., 2013).

### **Assumption, Limitations, Scope**

The impact of racial microaggressions towards Black women, due to biases or discrimination from other racial groups, can act as a trigger for stress, depression, mental exhaustion, or anxiety (Collins, 2015). The negative perception that has been projected throughout televised media platforms, continues to spread the narrative about the stereotypes of Black women (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019). Due to the aforementioned factors, the assumption of this researcher was that Black women have experienced racial microaggression within the workplace, especially as leaders within the field of higher education. Additionally, the researcher assumed that support would be required for each participant, while speaking about their

experiences with racial microaggression. Therefore, the researcher was able to remain both calm and objective, where there was no distress detected.

Participants in this study included Black female leaders who currently work in higher education in the northeastern region of the United States and have attained at least a bachelor's degree, which is usually a requirement to work in higher education. The leadership position ranged from mid to senior level (Assistant Director, Vice President, Dean, etc). The researcher was interested in participants whose results from this study could be broad, yet applicable to different types of individuals regarding racial microaggression (Brennan, 2001). The results from this study provided insight on how to manage situations where racial microaggression is experienced within the workplace and how support can be provided.

Post Traumatic Slavery Syndrome (PTSS) (DeGruy-Leary & Robinson, 2018) is a theory that explains the etiology of many of the adaptive survival behaviors in African-American communities throughout the United States and the diaspora. PTSS is in part generated from the consequences of multigenerational oppression of Africans and their descendants resulting from slavery. According to DeGruy-Leary and Robinson, the experience from slavery predicated on the belief that Blacks from African descent are inherently/genetically inferior to Whites is a central tenet of PTSS (2018). Additionally, the experience of institutionalized racism continues to perpetuate these injuries (DeGruy-Leary & Robinson, 2018). Participants in this study have experienced PTSS and continued to participate in the study because they believed their story should be shared. Fortunately, each participant did not change their mind and the researcher did not have to recruit more participants. Due to the pandemic the country is experiencing since 2020, conducting interviews via a video communication platform was ideal, and Wi-Fi glitches did not occur during each interview.

### **Rationale and Significance**

This study is important due to the lack of focus on the experience of Black women in higher education and the intersectionality of race and gender (Stanley, 2009). The importance of learning about Black women leaders in higher education and their experience regarding racial microaggressions could assist others to become more familiar with these experiences and how to navigate their professional environment (Crenshaw et al., 2013). The opportunity to share their lived experiences, can assist other Black female leaders on how to navigate through challenges such as racial microaggression within the workplace. Additionally, understanding racial microaggressions experienced by Black female leaders in higher education can assist in dismantling biases and stereotypes within the workplace, which can encourage Black women to seek support without hesitation. Findings from this study could promote inclusivity and cultural awareness to minimize biases, discrimination, and stereotypes within the workplace (Gephardt et al., 2016). Creating formal training opportunities to educate staff about how unconscious and conscious biases result in exclusionary practices in the workplace, could be a great start towards dismantling racial microaggression.

According to Byrd (2014), individuals can hold multiple identities and in return can create multiple connections within the workplace. Connections and relationships are key factors that promote a healthy work environment (Byrd, 2014). Black female leaders who may feel unsupported or inferior based on their race, could experience unfortunate distress where their leadership ability is compromised. The opportunity to understand the experiences of Black female leaders within higher education can create new perspectives on how to be patient, self-aware, and avoid personal biases within the workplace. The findings from this study could assist others to understand the causes of racial microaggression towards Black female leaders. The

success of people is based on their capabilities, merit, and commitment and should not be based on race and gender.

### **Definition of Terms**

The relevant terms for this study are provided in this section.

*Black:* A diversity of preferences regarding identity that can be considered a person to be of African descent. Additionally, Black is a racialized classification of people, as well as a political and skin color-based category for a specific population of people with shades from mid to dark brown (McAdoo, 2007).

*Cis-gender:* refers to people whose gender identity and expression matches the biological sex they were assigned when they were born (McGeeney & Harvey, 2015).

*Intersectionality:* Asserts how different aspects of both social and political identity discrimination overlaps or intersect. It identifies how interlocking systems of power affect a marginalized population within a society and takes these relationships into account when working to promote social and political equity (Crenshaw, 1989).

*Marginalized population:* A term derived from Critical Race Theory that indicates a population is not considered to be mainstream regarding their social, economic, cultural, or political life, where they are considered to be underrepresented (Teranishi, 2007).

*Post Traumatic Slavery Syndrome:* A term coined by researcher Dr. Joy DeGruy, who describes the multigenerational trauma and injustices experienced by African-Americans caused by slavery (2018).

*Racial microaggressions:* Verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, be it intentional or not, where hostility is caused by derogatory negative racial insults towards people



of color. Those who inflict racial microaggressions may be unaware that they may be causing harm to another (Sue, 2010).

*Systematic racism:* is a form of racism that is embedded as normal practice within society or an organization. It can lead to such issues as discrimination in criminal justice, employment, housing, health care, political power, and education, among other issues

*Sexism:* A prejudgment or discrimination based on a person's sex or gender. It has been linked to stereotypes and gender roles, which may also include that one sex or gender is superior to another (Lorber, 2012).

*Stereotype:* An overgeneralization or belief about a particular group of people. While such generalizations about groups of people may be useful when making a prompt decision, they may be erroneous when applied to particular individuals, which causes the act of prejudgment (Myers, 2001).

### **Conclusion**

The contributions of the literature in the field of higher education provided relevant information regarding the experiences of Black professional women, however, there is a gap regarding experiences with racial microaggressions and support where they are free to express their concerns without consequence (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). The struggles of Black women may be similar to their White female counterpart within the workplace, however, Black women face inequality caused by race, gender, or both (Hall et al., 2011). Historically, the voices of Black women were silenced, as they were not seen as equal to their white counterparts. Additionally, the progression both professional and academically continues to increase, however, there are still biases encountered due to both race and gender.

These factors are one of the main reasons, Black women in senior leadership roles navigating and managing racial microaggression should be further explored (Dovido & Gaertner, 2000). Examples of leadership roles are Vice Presidents, Vice Provost, Deans, Assistant Deans, Associate Deans, Directors, Assistant Directors, Associate Directors, or Tenured Faculty from either academic house (Academic or Student Affairs). Additionally, the multiple identities a Black woman possesses could positively or negatively impact their professional growth (Petitt, 2009). Examining the lived experience of Black female leaders working in the northeastern region of the United States with racial microaggression can provide an understanding of the biases and discrimination they encounter within the field of higher education. The lived experience of racial microaggression can bring light towards dismantling this overall behavior. Chapter Two focuses on the literature review regarding racial microaggression, as well as both the conceptual and theoretical framework of the research. Additionally, Chapter Three discusses the methodology used in the research study and data analysis of the findings are shared in Chapter Four. Lastly, Chapter Five includes recommendations for future research based on the final findings from each interview.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The primary focus of this phenomenological study is to examine the lived experience of cis-gender Black female leaders and racial microaggression in the field of higher education. The historical factors regarding Black women and their professional experiences will vary based on their cultural environment, gender discrimination, prejudices, or lack of support within the workplace (Miles, 2012). While there is significant research available regarding Black female leaders within higher education, literature regarding the impact of racial microaggression for this population seems to be scarce (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). Examining the lived experiences of Black female leaders with racial microaggression can help understand the development of identity in an oppressive society by overcoming barriers (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). Additionally, navigating through both sexism and racism within the workplace may impact Black female leaders' leadership style, as well as confidence (Miles, 2012).

The intricate complexity of racial microaggressions, as well as the different types of racial microaggressions experienced, will be highlighted throughout this chapter. Developing this understanding can create a safer work environment, where it can assist employees from engaging in racial microaggression behavior. Racial battle fatigue or RBF is an experience where people of color are reliving certain situations which can be a form of PTSD (post traumatic syndrome disorder) (Smith et al., 2016). The conceptual framework helps to shape the view of racial microaggression based on the experiences from Black women as explored in this study. It is imperative to understand and explore the racial discrimination towards this population and the role it plays in racial microaggression. Additionally, adding to extant literature available regarding the experiences caused by racial discrimination towards Black women, further

guidance is made available on how to navigate within the workplace without immediately becoming reactive. Also, the opportunity for learning about the experience of racial microaggression as a Black woman and leader in higher education, could eliminate the silo effect. Black women's experience regarding racial microaggression will vary due to their intersectionality, cultural and socioeconomic background (Carastathis, 2014).

### **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework illustrates what the investigator expects to discover through their research (Jabareen, 2009). The specification of the variables that would be explored within research assist in defining the nature or relationship of the topic. For example, the variable racial microaggression represents stimulus while the Black female leaders represent the response. The variables within the research would provide clarity of the kind of statistical treatment that will have to be used to analyze the relationship (Jabareen, 2009). Constructing a conceptual framework before collecting data, enables the researcher to remain diligent throughout the research by remaining focused on the future findings of the research topic by identifying the specific problem, which provides direction for the study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Black Feminist Theory**

The lens of Dr. Collins' Black Feminist Theory (1991) and Dr. Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory (1989) provides a fundamental foundation for understanding the lived experience of Black women in America regarding racial microaggression within the workplace. Black feminist theory was coined by Patricia Collins (1991), who stated that this theory centralizes and validates the intersecting dimensions of both race and gender based on the unique experiences of Black women. The following four themes are included as a part of Collins' Black

feminist theory regarding the experiences of Black women (2006): the first theme is the lived experience as a criterion of meaning or the knowledge gained by Black women based on their experiences. The second theme uses dialogue or establishing important bonds and relationships since contentious or oppressive situations can seldom cause isolation. The third theme is the ethic of caring which incorporates the use of expressiveness, empathy, or emotions by understanding the unique experiences of the Black woman. The fourth theme is ethics of personal accountability which lacks objectivity. Collins (2006) has stated that these themes expressed by Black women may vary due to the differences in region, class, age, ethnicity, and sexual orientation which can individually impact the lives of these women.

As a leading theorist, Collins (2006) defined intersectionality as an explorative method which highlights connections of race, class, gender, and social constructs. Additionally, this theory can be viewed as an extension of the intersectionality, where it grants the opportunity for Black women to communicate their unique experiences that may vary from other racial groups of women. The core of the Black Feminist Theory is to focus on the different experiences of a Black woman's personal development, as well as professional growth. The voice of Black women historically in the United States of America has been silenced, which in return has conditioned them to remain quiet when experiencing disrespect or distress within the workplace (DeGruy-Leary & Robinson, 2018). Speaking up may lead to job insecurity or deem as a complainer and not a team-player. Due to systematic oppression, the lived experiences of Black women will differ from those who have a degree of privilege, such as straight white males, who may partake in form of racial microaggression (Hall, 2016).

Hill Collin's (1991) Black Feminist Theory stated that Black women will not be able to be empowered until intersecting oppressions such as, racism, sexism, and classism are

eliminated. The experience of racial microaggressions by Black females can negatively impact their job performance, especially if support is inaccessible and not feeling heard (Moody & Lewis, 2019). Black women within the workplace may not have managers who are willing to understand the challenges encountered relative to racism, sexism, or the negative impacts affecting the Black community. Black women have been held to higher standards in comparison to their white male counterparts, however, are presumed to be less qualified regardless of their credentials (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Black women within the workplace are expected to be excellent, about three times as good to be recognized for their work in comparison to their White male or female counterparts (Hall et al., 2011). The definition of socialization is the process of learning to behave in a way that is acceptable to society (Macionis, 2014, p. 126). The fundamentals of this theoretical framework along with the socialization of this population within the workplace provides a lens for understanding their lived experience. The intersectionality of Black women is imperative to this study due to the double oppression encountered within the workplace (Crenshaw et al., 2013).

### **Intersectionality Theory**

The term intersectionality was coined by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), who identifies as a Black feminist. Originally, this theory focused on the exploration of the oppression of women of color within society, however, it has expanded to include social identity, race, and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality provides a lens for understanding regarding instances where oppression is prevalent (Crenshaw et al., 2013). Crenshaw's theory focused on the experience of gender and race as well as racial battle fatigue that can develop while living in the United States (Smith et al., 2016).

The framework of gender-related racism was developed by Collins and Essed (1992), who explained that the oppression experienced by Black women derived from racist perceptions of gender roles and disregarded. Black women as a group possess a unique angle of vision within the social world (Dunn et al., 2019), due to their position within the intersecting hierarchies of class, gender, and race. Additionally, based on the everyday experiences of Black women, their standpoint is marked by an intersectional understanding of oppression and a legacy of struggle against such oppression (Harnois, 2010).

The perception of Blacks within the workplace is that they lack intellect and are possible criminals (Collins & Essed, 1992). The constant reminder from other racial groups stating that they are dominant, can allow Blacks in the workplace to feel unsupported (Carastathis, 2014). The experience of the constant banter of racial microaggression, regardless if it is consciously or unconsciously, can negatively impact a person of color within the workplace where they may find it challenging to prosper due to their discomfort (Isom, 2015).

Black feminist theory incorporates the intricacy that Black women experiences regarding racial microaggression (Stanley, 2009). The oppression that Black women encounter in regards to both gender and race, especially within the workplace, may create a distress where they may feel unsupported to share their concerns. Black women's experiences are similar to both Black men and White women regarding racism and sexism (Louis et al., 2016). As well as experiencing lower pay rates in comparison to their white male peers, which could prohibit promotional advancement (Taylor, 2019). Additionally, Black women experience specific oppression that is unique based on the intersection of their race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). The intersection of both race and gender interlocks the oppression Black women may encounter within the workplace (Stanley, 2009), which includes gender and race cannot be viewed separately. These

experiences will be unique for Black women, however, the similarity of their encounters with discrimination can be solely based on their intersectionality (gender and race) (Stanley, 2009). The Black Feminist Theory and the Intersectionality Theory provide lenses for understanding the Black women's experiences regarding racial microaggression.

### **Review of the Literature**

Throughout the country, as well as around the world, individuals engage in conversations regarding race, inclusion, or diversity. The opportunity to engage in this type of conversation which could be uncomfortable, can possibly encourage others to learn how impactful discrimination can be when encountered (Washington et al., 2020). Additionally, dialogues such as racism, sexism, or socialism, can pave the way for meaningful anti-racist actions within the workplace. Discussions regarding race can be uncomfortable for some and a person of color who is aware that candid talks with colleagues can mean they could either face or need to call out microaggression (Washington et al., 2020).

### **Racial Microaggression**

Microaggressions are common everyday slights and comments that relate to various intersections of one's identity such as gender, sex, or, race among other factors (Pierce, 1970). Microaggressions can be used unconsciously by individuals who hold prejudices or beliefs that may be demonstrated consciously or unconsciously through verbal interactions. Although these types of communications typically appear harmless to observers, they are considered a form of covert racism or everyday discrimination (Pierce, 1970). Microaggressions are experienced by most stigmatized individuals and occur on a regular basis. The stress caused by this experience for individuals on the receiving end can be easily denied by the individual committing them (Sue et al., 2019). Members of the dominant culture may not be cognizant of the harm they are



causing, where the repetition of stereotypical phrases towards a member of marginalized groups is subtly demeaned. The dominant culture is positioned to be considered normal, while the marginalized group seems to aberrant due to their disapproval of what is being said. The experience of microaggression can cause the individual to remain silent, as they may feel isolated by the dominant group that may not recognize their error in this matter (Sue et al., 2019).

Due to the history of the United States, the social construct of Black women or people of color is not equal to their white counterparts (Pettit, 2009). The public witnesses the societal injustices or public acts of aggression towards people of color via news outlets or social media platforms (Louis et al., 2016). Where generalization is applied, the narrative that is spewed depicts an entire race to be threatening to society (Louis et al., 2016). Such a depiction contributes to the race relations in this US between different ethnic groups. Racial microaggressions are subtle statements towards people of color (Louis et al., 2016). Examples of racial microaggressions are “you are the whitest Black person I know” or “you speak like a white person” or “you are pretty for a dark-skinned girl”. Another example would be holding tighter to your belongings in the presence of a Black person which indicates they are either there to harm or steal. Another example could be saying, “I don’t see color”, which could allude to a person of color that they are not seen (Pittman, 2012). Racial microaggressions can allow a person of color to feel both unsupported and invisible in space where they should feel supported and safe (Pittman, 2012). To some, racial microaggression may seem to be harmful because the intention is not to be disrespectful, however, researchers have described that the experience can affect their emotional state due to encountering negative exchanges on Black people (Davis, 2014).

According to Harrison and Tanner (2018), there are three different types of racial microaggressions that have been encountered by Black people or people of color. Microinsults

are defined as subtle verbal or nonverbal communication that can be both rude and insensitive towards a person's racial heritage and identity. Examples would be, "not attempting to say someone's name because it's unfamiliar" or "implying that someone is a foreigner and does not belong due to their darker skin tone." Another example could be a White person sharing their view that a Black person got their job due to Affirmative Action. The assumption is that a Black person is not seen to be valuable or qualified to receive their job on their own merit (Harrison & Tanner, 2018). Microinvalidations are interactions where Black people's experiences are invalidated (Harrison & Tanner, 2018). Examples include invalidating someone's feelings by saying "that the one causing the offense did not mean it like that" or "inappropriately telling someone that you have friends of their race" or "staying silent when something should be addressed or corrected" (Barratt, 2020). Incidents where a White person accuses a Black person of being racially hypersensitive instead of acknowledging that the situation is deemed as racial oppression is another form of microinvalidation. The act of minimizing the experience of a person by defining it as 'sensitivity' is both disrespectful and dismissive (Harrison & Tanner, 2018). Lastly, microinsults are defined as subtle communications that overtly use racial slurs (Harrison & Tanner, 2018). Examples would be "using racial epithets, such as nigger" or "displaying swastika signs" or purposefully serving a White person before a person of color in a restaurant" (Barratt, 2020).

It is imperative to understand the impact of racial microaggression towards Black female leaders in higher education, as the lack of support or safe space when experiencing these encounters seems to be unavailable. To recognize that racism exists within society, can also assist to acknowledge the different types of racial microaggressions that serve as a reality for Black people overall (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Racial microaggressions can pose threats or

assaults towards people of color, which has been downplayed or ignored (Harrison & Tanner, 2018).

### **Identity**

An individual's self-concept and values are all closely related to identity formation, which is a complex process where humans develop a clear and unique view of themselves as well as their identity (Olson, 2019). Individuation is also a critical part of identity formation, specifically factors such as race and ethnicity also play a role. Individuation expresses the general idea of how a thing is identified as an individual thing that "is not something else" (Olson, 2019). Therefore, this includes how an individual person is held to be different from other elements in the world or how a person is distinct from other persons. One's self-concept or self-identity is a collection of beliefs about oneself and generally, self-concept embodies the answer to "Who am I?" (Ross & Wilson, 2002). Additionally, self-concept is detectable from self-awareness, where it is the extent to which self-knowledge is consistent to one's attitudes and dispositions. Self-concept also differs from self-esteem: self-concept is a cognitive or descriptive component of one's self, while self-esteem is evaluative and opinionated (Ross & Wilson, 2002).

Black women's identity within the workplace may not be a full representation of who they truly are due to their comfort level amongst their colleagues and superiors. The experience of discrimination within the workplace, while remaining silent could interfere with their self-esteem and how they choose to identify themselves within the workplace (Wilson & Ross, 2001). For example, a racial slur or stereotype emphasized towards a Black woman, where she is unsure how to address the situation out of fear, could subconsciously force her to alter how she should present her identity. This form of a survival tactic could deter Black women to fulfill their true professional potential. Additionally, not feeling supported after experiencing a form of

microaggression, could possibly lead to an interference regarding their self-worth or self-concept. Black women experiencing a form of microaggression within the workplace may possibly question their self, as in their self-esteem or their self-knowledge if they feel that their identity should be compromised in order to appease the same individuals that caused the distress.

Workplace identity refers to work-based self-concept, constituted of a combination of organizational, occupational, and other identities, that shapes the roles individuals adopt and the corresponding ways they behave when performing their work in the context of their jobs and or their career (Miscenko & Day, 2016). Recognizing that each individual worker has the right to their own identity within the workplace, should be acknowledged as well as respected. If an individual no longer or never felt comfortable within their identity within the workplace due to microaggression, then this can possibly interfere with fulfilling their expectations within their job requirements. The discomfort experienced within the workplace can introduce multiple factors of distress when encountering unwanted slights from co-workers on a daily basis (Miscenko & Day, 2016). In order to appease the expectation of the workplace and gain success, people of color (including Black women) have learned how to assimilate within the workplace culture by playing by their rules. A strategy for success is to downplay their differences (Black women), which is usually utilized by marginalized groups (Cheeks, 2018). Underrepresentation within the workplace is a factor people of color experience, where they may not be able to relate to another individual regarding their distress, discomfort, or identity when experiencing microaggression (Cheeks, 2018). Microaggressions are experienced by most stigmatized individuals or minorities and occur on a regular basis within the workplace (Williams, 2019).

The term minority is a group of individuals who are signaled out from others based on their physical or cultural characteristics and receive unfair treatment as collective discrimination

(Warminska, 2001). The existence of a minority in society implies the existence of a corresponding dominant group enjoying higher social status and greater privileges (Warminska, 2001). Therefore, the importance of connectivity and understanding regarding minority identity assist in planting seeds of rapport. Shared experience or trustworthiness can enable an individual experiencing discrimination within the workplace to not feel isolated. Granted, every person of color may not relate to the experience of another relative to microaggression, however, the ability to possibly share the experience with another person of the same racial background could make the discomfort less poignant (Warminska, 2001). Diversity within their (minority) identity group, creates a recognized safe space where indirect support is possibly available and identity may not need to be compromised due to experiencing racial microaggression (Llopis, 2014). The lack of cultural integrity can enable racial microaggression within the workplace, where a person of color's identity may seem not align with the culture of their department/organization. If diversity is not valued or there is lack of cultural inclusion, not only are their identities minimized, so are their experiences regarding microaggression (Llopis, 2014). Additionally, an employee may lose their identity if their workplace environment feels forced and unnatural.

### **Black Women in the Workplace**

According to Holder (2015), Black women in corporate America also experience racial microaggression like Black women in the field of higher education. Additionally, Black women have developed a high level of pride in themselves and their cultural ancestry, which allows them not to always respond or believe the stereotypes addressed within the workplace (Holder et al., 2015). Black women progressing to leadership roles within academia has slowly increased in the 21st century, however, women of color in leadership roles are still underrepresented (Miles, 2012).

Despite the stereotypes encountered by Black people, Black women have continued in striving to earn a postsecondary degree as per the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2019). According to a NCES study (2019), Black women are starting to outpace other groups in earning degrees, even though Black women make up about 12.7% of the female population in the US, they consistently make up over 50% of the number of Black people receiving postsecondary degrees in comparison to other racial groups. According to the NCES data from 2000-2001 to 2015-2016, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to Black students increased by 75% and there was a 110% increase of Associate degrees earned. In addition, the number of Black students enrolled in master's programs, doubled from 1996 to 2016. Knowledge of these statistics can assist in dismantling the stereotype that Black people are uneducated, lazy, and incapable of attaining an education (Katz, 2020). Despite attaining degrees at such a high rate, Black women are still making less than their white counterparts. In 2018, Black women made 62% in comparison to their White male counterparts. On an average, Black women can earn less than 38% than white men yearly and 21% than white women (NCES, 2019). Black women with either a bachelor's or master's degree may not always see the fruit of their labor in terms of wages due to working in low-paying occupations (healthcare and education).

Black women who are highly educated, such as those working as physicians and surgeons, are making 54 cents for every dollar their White non-Hispanic male counterparts make (Smith & Joseph, 2010). The disparity of inequity in pay speaks volumes regarding the experience of Black women within the workplace regardless if it is a low or high paying field (Smith & Joseph, 2010). Hostile work environments caused by discriminatory practices can affect the livelihood of a Black woman (Hall et al., 2011). Wage disparity or discrimination that

are reported to the employer may not always receive fair treatment and in return, a job is lost.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was established to enforce and administer civil rights laws against workplace discrimination (EEOC, n.d.). Black women historically have encountered unfairness within the workplace and are expected to continue with their job responsibilities regardless of their current emotional state (Smith & Joseph, 2010).

### **The Perception of Black Women**

Black women have dealt with the ‘angry’ stereotype for years, enforced by a White privileged agenda to keep their voices quiet. Often labelled aggressive or too assertive, Black female professionals are regularly subjected to tone policing, which is a type of a silencing tactic used by oppressors throughout history (Barratt, 2020). Uninvited questions regarding a Black woman’s hair are a form of microaggression. The implication that their natural hair is unprofessional or messy because it does not meet the standard western hair type (European-influenced) is a form of racial microaggression (Barratt, 2020). Standards of beauty have been defined by physical appearance, skin color, and hair, which has affected Black women (Robinson-Moore, 2008). Due to the European standards of beauty and style, Black women are required to oblige by this standard within the workplace, where their confidence and self-pride are compromised (Robinson-Moore, 2008). Regardless of cultural backgrounds, Black women that choose to wear their natural hair (no relaxer) or an attire that may reflect their ethnicity, it is often not accepted within the workplace (Patton, 2006). The inability to embrace a particular style or look, can cause discomfort within the workplace, especially if support is absent (Robinson-Moore, 2008). The socialization and interactions standards were important factors of this study because racial microaggressions derives from stereotypes, where it has been vocalized within the workplace (Robinson-Moore, 2008). Black women encountering the backlash of not

fitting into the standard norm of beauty, can interfere with their professionalism within the workplace (Robinson-Moore, 2008).

Discrimination based on skin color, also known as colorism, or shadeism, is a form of prejudice or discrimination in which people who are usually members of the same race are treated differently based on the social implications which come with the cultural meanings which are attached to skin color (Jones, 2001). The belief that someone with any degree of lighter complexion is considered more beautiful or valuable than someone with dark skin (Branigan et al., 2017). Colorism can be considered the cause of many forms of microaggressions within communities of color due to the history of race in America (Hochschild, 2015).

Historically, dark-skinned individuals are deemed to be inferior, incompetent, and ugly, which was heavily promoted during slavery (Robinson-Moore, 2008). Darker skinned tone individuals would be overlooked to their lighter-toned skin counterparts due to the characteristics where they have been ranked within society (Robinson-Moore, 2008). Based on society's standard of beauty, a darker toned individual may not be accepted, as they could be perceived as a threat (Patton, 2006). The Euro-American beauty standard, along with the Euro standard body mass index (BMI) has been promoted to be the utmost standard to acquire (Robinson-Moore, 2008). Additionally, this societal created standard of beauty can affect the self-esteem of Black women who may possess darker skin tones, where society has expressed that they are not accepted (Matthews & Johnson, 2015). Due to this type of discrimination, racial microaggression experienced by Blacks or people of color, where they may not feel comfortable to contest what is being said to or about them may allow them to feel unsupported (Matthew & Johnson, 2015). The narrative from media platforms regarding the images of Black women, may cause Black



women to feel hideous or ugly because of the perceived notions that their beauty does not qualify as standard (Robinson-Moore, 2008).

Hair texture, as well as body images that are unique to Black women may not align with the Euro-American standards and can fuel inferiority within the workplace (Dunn, 2019). Additionally, the message received by Black women can allow them to internalize why they may not be good enough based on society's norms regarding their appearance (hair texture, physical, skin tone) (Dunn, 2019). Black women with darker complexions tend to be devalued by society due to the multiple stereotypes created and eventually repeated (Dunn, 2019). For example, regardless of race, darker-skin tones are usually associated with evil, or badness, and this type of stereotype can negatively impact an individual's experience within the workplace (Dunn, 2019). The difference between Euro-American beauty standards and Black women's physical attributes, are factors that can possibly fuel racial microaggression.

Additionally, Black women who choose to wear their natural hair can be vulnerable if the chosen hairstyle does not meet the professional requirements (Randle, 2015). Historically, there have been reports of discrimination towards Blacks and their natural hair (women who wear their hair in its natural state), where Blacks have been unsupported or attacked due to their choice (Campbell, 2018). According to Campbell (2018), a case was dismissed in 2016 because a Black woman's job offer was rescinded due to her resistance in cutting her locs (dreadlocks) per the request of the employer (2018). The employer was under the impression that locs could get messy, which made their request valid. Marketing strategies that have been implemented throughout the years in promoting relaxed hair, where Black women have the option to change their hair texture to appease the expectation of their employer (Campbell, 2018). Braids, cornrows, or afros have not been accepted by many organizations and their reasons were

defended in court as per the EEOC records (Campbell, 2018). Additionally, the second wave of the natural hair movement (early 2000s and beyond) encouraged more Black women to be both proud and unapologetic to wear their natural hair or protective hairstyles (Griffin, 2019). The experiences of Black women within the workplace regarding their natural hair has caused distress, due to the anticipation of the reactions from their colleagues that their hair is unacceptable (Griffin, 2019).

Early in the year of 2019, the New York City Commission on Human Rights declared protection of residents' legal rights to wear their hair in locs, afros, braids, as well as other culturally specific styles (2019-Press-Releases, 2019). The city's residents are to be protected from being fired due to this type of discrimination. Title VII of the Civil Rights Acts (CRA) prohibits employment discrimination based on color, race, sex, religion, and national origin. The argument from the New York City Commission on Human Rights is that natural hair or any natural hairstyle is inextricably tied to race, which falls under the Title VII protection (2019-Press-Releases, 2019).

The C.R.O.W.N. (Create a Respectful and Open Workplace for Natural Hair) Act is a California law which prohibits discrimination based on hair styles and hair textures by extending protection for both categories under the FEHA and the state of California Education Code (CBS News, 2019). CROWN is the first legislation passed at the state level in the United States to prohibit such discrimination (CBS News, 2019). The hope is to get this passed on the Federal level, as it is important to support people of color within the workplace. According to the Commission, bans or restrictions on natural hair or hairstyles associated with Black people are often rooted in white standards of appearance and perpetuate racist stereotypes that Black hairstyles are unprofessional (2019-Press-Releases, 2019). This type of narrative towards Blacks

within the workplace, can cause distress, anxiety, and depression (Randle, 2015). Black women are more likely to experience a form of anxiety over their hairstyle decisions than White women within the workplace (Mcgill et al., 2017).

The spoken language of Black people is presumed that they are loud, obnoxious, and unable to provide an articulate conversation (Lewis & Neville, 2015). The assumption that Black people are incapable of communicating articulately has been applied by their white counterparts within the workplace (Lewis & Neville, 2015). The communication style of White people is usually defined as refined, polite, less emotional, as well as articulate (Lewis & Neville, 2015). The overall assumption of the communication style of Black women within the workplace can inadvertently create preconceived biases, which may encourage racial microaggression. Black women within the workplace that experience both gender and race discrimination are confident that they can carry out their responsibilities, however, they are usually in an atmosphere where they are expected to constantly prove themselves (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). The societal perception of Black women, Black women within the workplace, as well as the factors of Euro-American standardized beauty, aligns with the purpose of this study, to examine the lived experience of Black female leaders in higher education experience with microaggressions.

### **Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF)**

Racial battle fatigue (RBF) was coined by Critical Race Theorist William Smith in 2008 and originally applied to the Black male's experience in America, however, he expanded RBF to describe the overall negative racially charged experiences of people of color (POC) within the United States. Smith (2017) identifies RBF as: "cumulative result of a natural race-related stress response to distressing mental and emotional conditions, which emerged from constantly facing racially dismissive, demeaning, insensitive and/or hostile racial environments and individuals."

(Smith et al., p. 75, 2011). Additionally, RBF can be described as a public and mental health illness, where it stems from both racism and microaggressions (Smith, 2017). Smith has stated the following: “one must not look for the gross and obvious, but the subtle, cumulative mini-assault is the substance of today’s racism” (Smith et al., p. 75, 2011) Other factors experienced from RBF are ulcers, depression, anxiety, loss of confidence, or psychological distress and could possibly lead to long-term illness or possibly death (Smith, 2017).

Racial microaggression and RBF are interchangeable due to the fact that stereotypes are untrue and anticipating this type of encounter can become exhausting. For example, a Black woman being called aggressive because she is deemed as overreacting to a situation or her hair is perceived as wild because it looks unkempt (wearing an afro) can cause distress due to the microaggression encountered within the work environment. Racial battle fatigue (RBF) is experienced by individuals who experience unwanted slights, and they are not in the position to speak up without worry of losing their position.

### **Conclusion**

Microaggressions are common, everyday slights and comments that relate to various intersections of one’s identity such as gender, sex, or, race among other factors (Pierce, 1970). This study explored the lived experience of Black female leaders in higher education who have dealt with racial microaggressions and as leaders in their respective roles. The historical factors regarding Black women in America regarding their intersectionality, which includes both sex and race are elements of this research lived experiences. Collin’s Black feminist theory centralizes and validates the intersecting dimensions of both race and gender based on the unique experiences of Black women within the workplace (1991). Racial battle fatigue (RBF) stems from the experience of racial microaggression, which can impact a person of color’s job

performance, due to mental or physical distress. Additionally, both workplace identity and minority identity are factors which include the self-concept of an individual within the work environment. If self-concept is compromised, then this could negatively impact their professionalism, which could be caused by the experience of racial microaggression and in some cases, racial battle fatigue. Chapter (3) three described the methodology of the study, the techniques used to conduct the research as well as analyzing the data. Chapter (4) four provided a detailed description of the findings of the study, while chapter (5) five included a discussion surrounding the current research, implications of the research and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHOD

This chapter focuses on the purpose of the study, the methodology, the research questions, as well as the research design. The participants in this study worked in the northeastern region of the United States, as a current professional leader in higher education. Recruitment information (flyer and email) was available for participants, who chose to volunteer their time to a virtual face-to-face interview by sharing their experiences. Additionally, the researcher utilized a specific software program to analyze the data from each participant in order to establish the findings and emergent themes gathered from the data collected.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of cis-gender Black female leaders in higher education relative to racial microaggressions and to explore how they perceive these experiences impacting their role as a leader. This study may provide additional insights on how to manage and navigate stereotypes within the workplace. Black women experience unique racial microaggressions compared to Black men or other people of color and learning more about their experience within the academic setting could be beneficial in the field of higher education (Lewis & Neville, 2015). This phenomenological study examined the lived experience of Black female leaders with racial microaggressions in higher education. The experiences of Black women and their professional experiences as leaders in higher education will vary based on history, cultural environment, gender, age, as well as many other factors (Green, 2018). While there is research available regarding Black female leaders within higher education, this study on racial microaggression can add to understanding their lived experience (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011). The number of Black women attaining

leadership roles in the field of higher education continues to increase, however, concerns about challenges regarding race, gender, or ethnicity as they progress could stagnate their professional growth (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011).

### **Research Questions and Qualitative Design**

The qualitative research design for this study used the methodology of phenomenology, which focused on understanding the lived experience of Black female leaders in higher education who experience racial microaggressions. The two research questions for this study included:

RQ1: What is the lived experience of Black female leaders in higher education with racial microaggressions?

RQ2: How do Black female leaders in higher education perceive the impact, if any, of racial microaggressions on their role as a leader?

Creswell (2014) defines qualitative research as an inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological tradition of inquiry which explores a social or human problem.

According to Creswell (2015), exploration of the lived experience allows researchers to examine participants without assumptions or preconceived notions. Therefore, applying a phenomenological methodology is appropriate for this study. Phenomenology is a form of qualitative research that focuses on the study of an individual's lived experiences within the world (Creswell, 2015). As a research methodology, phenomenology can be uniquely positioned to help higher education professionals to learn from the experiences of others. The key methodological differences between two of the major approaches to phenomenology are: transcendental and hermeneutic.

Transcendental phenomenology studies the intrinsic structures of consciousness through the contents of experience that is transcendent to the structures of consciousness (Yee, 2018). Intentionality is explained in terms of the contents of experience rather than the object of the experience (Yee, 2018). Hermeneutic focuses on subjective experience of individuals and groups (Miles et al., 2013); an attempt to unveil the world as experienced by the subject through their own life world stories (Miles et al., 2013). Understanding the experiences of Black female leaders and microaggression is essential for conducting a phenomenological research. The transcendental methodology will enable the researcher to focus on the responses from the participants, while minimizing the researcher's biases and judgments (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Ethically, the researcher was responsible for checking their biases throughout the research, where objectivity remains consistent. Additionally, the researcher was responsible for following the informed-consent process and respecting both the participant's confidentiality and privacy (Hammersley, 2013). Transcendental phenomenology is considered to be the central task in obtaining a clear as well as an undistorted description of the ways things appear in intentional consciousness (Tassone, 2011). Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology examines the intrinsic structures of consciousness through one's experience, which is transcendent to the structure of consciousness. According to Edmund Husserl, the phenomenological method is considered to be a reflective study of the essence of consciousness as experienced from the first-person perspective (Tassone, 2011). The researcher was interested in understanding the lived experiences of each participant, which will vary based on their introspective and emotions caused by the experience.

Qualitative research consists of structured and unstructured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation (Creswell, 2015). In this study, the researcher conducted unstructured



interviews, to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of each participant in the study regarding racial microaggressions as a leader in higher education. An unstructured interview or non-directive interview is an interview in which questions are not prearranged (Creswell, 2015). These non-directive interviews are considered to be the opposite of a structured interview, which offers a set number of standardized questions (Creswell, 2015).

An unstructured interview is usually utilized for qualitative data gathering because of its detailed approach in describing the experiences and personal knowledge of the participant (Wethington & McDarby, 2015). This contrasts the method of structured interviews, which focuses on collecting measurable data using a set of standardized questions (Segal et al., 2006). An unstructured interview allowed this researcher to build rapport with the participant by having a holistic dialogue (Wethington & McDarby, 2015). Additionally, unstructured interviews can be particularly useful when asking about personal experiences. Phenomenological studies are considered to be a school of thought or the first person's point of view, which emphasizes the focus on a participant's interpretation of their own experience within a research topic (Tassone, 2011). Additionally, their experience was examined through a detailed description gathered from the participant's responses, with the goal of understanding their lived experiences (Johnson, 2010).

### **The Phenomenological Breakdown**

Transcendental phenomenology serves as a philosophical approach, where it grants additional dimensions for the researcher to seek understanding of the human experience (Moustakas, 1994). Seizing and using the philosophical tenets such as noema, noesis, noeses, noetic, and epoché in a meaningful way can be a challenge, given their complexity (Moustakas, 1994). However, the intentionality of a participant's experience is the focus versus the object of

their human experience. Epoché, which is a suspension of judgement or refraining from any form of a conclusion from the researcher, will be utilized during the interview process (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher was able to refrain from confirmation bias, which occurs when a researcher forms a hypothesis or belief and uses respondents' information to confirm that belief (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, the researcher sought to minimize cultural biases, assumptions about motivations and influences that are based on the same cultural lens, through the application of epoché. Therefore, leading questions and wording, which is elaborating a respondent's answer by putting words in their mouth (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010), will also be avoided.

Quality questions asked by the researcher at the right time, while remaining cognizant and focused on sources of bias, can encourage the truest respondent perspectives (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010). Bias in qualitative research can be minimized if the researcher knows what to look for and how to manage it. Transcendental research design is appropriate for this study because it will allow the researcher to gain additional insight regarding the participants' perspective based on their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The research design will enable the interviewer to explore the different experiences regarding racial microaggressions within the field of higher education as Black female leaders. Learning about the lived experience of Black female leaders in higher education relative to racial microaggressions could provide various perspectives from each participant due to their different job titles and leadership responsibilities.

The objective of phenomenology is to provide a direct investigation and description of the conscious experience without theories regarding the participant's causal explanation free from unexamined preconceptions (Husserl, 2015). The experience of each participant may be similar, yet unique and learning about their story may allow the researcher to understand their thoughts in addition to their experience regarding racial microaggression. Additionally, the

science of the essence of consciousness is centered as the defining trait of intentionality when approached explicitly in the first person (Husserl, 2015). Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological epoché, or bracketing, focuses on blocking any form of bias or assumptions to explain a phenomenon in terms of its own inherent system of meaning before commencing a phenomenological study.

The researcher created a list of their personal characteristics such as: gender, age, ethnic or national identification, spiritual belief system, and their personal experience with racial microaggression. Understanding how these characteristics might bias the researcher during the interviewing process, assisted the researcher to be more aware of this in order to be fair to the research and participants respectively (Tufford & Newman, 2010). What the participant chose to share, was their unique perspective, as well as experience and the researcher was responsible for respecting what was shared while remaining objective. During the interview it was important for the researcher to set aside assumptions and beliefs (Moustakaks, 1994). The act of setting aside all current thoughts, beliefs, and judgement is abstaining from biases, which is imperative within qualitative research (Creswell, 2015), demonstrated epoche' in this study. The specific role of the researcher is attempting to obtain thoughts or feelings of the participant being interviewed, while protecting participants' data.

The researcher communicated the expectations of the interview where the participants was encouraged to express their concerns or interests. Researchers viewing a phenomenon with a fresh perspective, along with an open mind can result in acquiring new knowledge derived from the essence of the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). The responsibility of the researcher was to remain unbiased and also to share the importance on why being unbiased is an intricate factor within the research with the willing participants. The idea of utilizing the created

bias checklist to remain unbiased during the interview process is imperative towards the integrity of the research. Open lines of communications between the researcher and participants, where the participants were advised that their experience and responses is what matters towards this research. Additionally, they had the opportunity to check their responses for possible edits through a process of member checking (Creswell, 2015).

Illuminating what has been experienced, is described as a textural description, which examines the different narrative of the participants' perceptions of the phenomenon and arrives at a description of the structure. Additionally, the textural description will be a representation of the true essence of the participants' experience and the textural structural description will be generated for each participant (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). The textural description is a narrative that explains participants' perceptions of a phenomenon. The researcher described the experiences of the participant's by using verbatim excerpts (in vivo coding) and quotes from each participant's interview. There is a great number of unique details required for data analysis and both horizontalization and reduction analysis processes would be utilized within this study (Given, 2008). The researcher stepped outside of their personal understanding through bracketing in order to view the data uniquely. It was imperative for the researcher to treat each interview as its own dataset within a qualitative study. Horizontalization is treating all data equally, where the preliminary coding process and grouping are listed by every quote relevant to the participant's experience under investigation (research). The process in avoiding redundancy is to reduce and eliminate every quote. Additionally, the researcher determined if the quotes are important to the participant's lived experience and if there is an option to deplete to its latent meaning. The end goal for the researcher was to separate the vague expressions or overlapping of similar responses of the experience from redundant information shared.

### **Site Information and Population**

The population of interest was cis-gender Black female leaders who currently work at a four-year public or private higher education institution with a minimum of two-years of experience in a leadership position located in the Northeastern region of the United States. The researcher planned to explore the lived experience of Black female leaders who are geographically in the same region, Northeastern region of the United States. The participants self-identified as cis-gender Black females and currently resides in the Northeastern region of the United States. Additional selection criteria will include serving at least two-years within their leadership position in an institution of higher education (e.g., Dean, Assistant Dean, Academic Dean, Associate Dean, Vice President, Vice Provost, Tenure faculty, Directors, Associate Directors, or Assistant Directors). The researcher looked for participants who have shared experiences as leaders in higher education, but vary in characteristics and in their individual experiences.

### **Sampling Method**

Phenomenology uses criterion sampling, in which participants meet predefined criteria (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The researcher used a criterion sampling method, where participants meet predefined criteria (Patton, 1990, p. 177). The participants' experience with racial microaggression and leadership roles are an important factor of the criterion sampling in this study. The most prominent criterion is the participant's experience with the phenomenon under study and can reach saturation with fewer than 10 (ten) participants (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Saturation is a core principle used in qualitative research. It is used to determine when there is

adequate data from a study to develop a robust and valid understanding of the study phenomenon (Hennink & Kaiser, 2019). Data saturation is the point of the research process where there is no new information discovered within the data analysis or can lead to redundancy regarding data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The interviewer recognized when saturation has been achieved due to the repetition of the responses and there is no additional new information to be attained or coding is no longer required (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

The researcher was interested in the lived experiences of Black female leaders with racial microaggression in higher education who are located in the Northeastern region of the United States. The recruitment process utilized the researcher's social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook's Higher Education Closed Groups, which include NASPA African-American knowledge community, Black Girl Doctorate, BlackNJSAP (Black NJ Student Affairs Professional), and Women of Color in Student Affairs. Additionally, the researcher will send out communication to the current e-board members from the American Council on Education (ACE) Women's Network, which is a professional organization serving to advance and support women in higher education. Detailed instructions via a flyer, which included the requirements for the recruitment process, as well as the expectation from each willing participant regarding the interview (Patton, 1990, p. 177) were sent to potential participants.

### **Instrumentation & Data Collection Procedures**

The researcher created a flyer to recruit interested participants and the qualifications of the research were also included. Communication, such as the researcher's both personal email and social media platforms were sent through the following platforms: email, social media, and professional higher education organizations. Based on the responses from the interested participants, a follow-up message explained the purpose of the study, which included the consent

letter, and available interview date and time. Participants in the study were informed that the study is voluntary, and they are not mandated to continue if they choose to no longer participate (See appendix). The virtual platform, ZOOM (voice over internet protocol or VOIP), was used to conduct the interviews, where a required password log-in will be available for the participant to enter the ZOOM the meeting. Participant's responses were recorded by a program called Temi ©. Temi, which works in tandem with ZOOM, is an audio transcription application program that can send an email communication of the interview to both the researcher and participant. Member checking procedures restating or summarizing information shared by each participant will assist to determine accuracy (Creswell, 2015). Transcript review through member checking in a qualitative study allows the participants to review their responses for accuracy. Participants were advised that a follow-up email will be sent to their attention, should the researcher require additional information or if edits are required for their responses.

The standard of confidentiality is to protect the privacy of all involved, by maintaining ethical standards and integrity, while building a trusted rapport with each participant (Baez, 2002). A privacy statement was presented to each participant before the interview began and only the interviewer will have access to the information shared. The responses remained in a secured password protected filing system via the researcher's personal Google drive where encryption was utilized when sending pertinent information over the internet. The responses were reviewed by the researcher after the member checking process was completed by each participant. Accuracy and minimization of biases were required in order for this study to remain with full integrity and each participant were given the chance to add more insights towards their responses if deemed fit. Additionally, if at any time a participant is no longer interested, then they had the option to no longer continue as a participant in this study.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis includes the process of cleansing, transforming, and organizing valid and useful information where it can assist the researcher in understanding their information shared by each participant (O'Connor & Gibson, 2003). Transcendental phenomenological research examines the contents of the experiences of the participants instead of the object of the experience (Perry, 2013). For this study, the researcher utilized Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological research. Transcendental phenomenology is considered to be the central task in obtaining a clear as well as an undistorted description of the way things appear in intentional consciousness (Tassone, 2011). Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology examines the intrinsic structures of consciousness through one's experience, which is transcendental to the structure of consciousness. According to Edmund Husserl, the phenomenological method is considered to be a reflective study of the essence of consciousness as experienced from the first-person perspective (Tassone, 2011).

Coding in a qualitative study is symbolically assigning a summative attribute for a portion of the language-based data, which would include interviews (Saldana, 2015). The researcher engaged in descriptive, value, and in vivo coding when analyzing participant responses using the NVIVO application. Saldana's (2015) descriptive coding is part of the first cycle coding, which involves perusing through participant data and coding passages according to the topic. Descriptive codes often summarize the topic of the data to aid the researcher's analysis (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2016). Value coding is attempting to exhibit the inferred values, beliefs and attitudes of participants (Saldana, 2015). In doing so, the researcher discerned patterns in the participant's world views. In vivo coding is coding terms and phrases used by the participants themselves, where the objective is to make the attempt to provide the participants a voice within



the research (Saldana, 2015). The researcher created memos during the interviews with each participant, which serves as an integral part of the interview process. According to Saldana (2015), qualitative research is inherently reflexive, as the researcher can delve deeper into their topic and it is imperative that they are able to chronicle their own thought process. The researcher gained the opportunity to highlight their own subjective interpretation of data, without compromising the research overall. The program, NVIVO, assists qualitative researchers with the analysis, organization, and discovery of insights generated from the qualitative data (McNiff, 2016). The researcher stored the transcripts received from each participant's interview in NVIVO. The investigator discovered descriptions of each participant's experiences, which can help to understand the phenomenon of this topic. Eventually, the codes generated from an interview will be shared with the participant involved to review accuracy and if there are additional thoughts or sentiments that were added to their responses.

### **Limitations of Research Design**

There were a few factors relative to limitations in this study regarding characteristics of design or methodology that can impact or influence the interpretation of the findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Additionally, qualitative research is a perspective-based method of research, where the responses were measured, since there is no option to measure data mathematically because qualitative is opinion based, rather than results. Participants may have more control over the content of the collected data due to the analysis process, where recording, coding, and categorization is involved by the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Due to the pandemic in the year 2020-2021, the investigator was concerned about participants possibly being furloughed or currently unemployed (Whitford, 2020); therefore, recruitment could have been difficult. Additionally, since many people were working remotely (at home) during the pandemic, their

WIFI connection may not be as reliable (Polk, 2020) as it would be if connecting through ZOOM from their place of employment.

Generalizability is the measure of how useful the results of a study are for a broader group of people and if the results can only be applied to a specific population, then the results can have a poor generalizability (Carminati, 2018). Qualitative methodology can provide the opportunity to obtain detailed information to explain possible complex issues. Gathering data based on interview responses can provide more insights regarding the study, however, data collection can be time consuming. The interviewer was cognizant of their biases based on their own personal experience to avoid compromising the study. Additionally, generalizability is not an outcome sought through phenomenology, rather the intent is to gain insight into the lived experience of the participants (Leung, 2015).

An important factor regarding trustworthiness of the researcher's interpretations in qualitative research is to compare one participant's description of something with another participant's description of the same thing for accuracy purposes (Elo et al., 2014). There are four factors qualitative researchers are to establish relative to trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The first factor is credibility, where it is imperative to establish within a research due to the fact that it is seen as a criterion toward trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility provides the confidence that the researcher remains in truth of the findings from each participant. The extent to which a research study is both accountable as well as believable, along with particular references to the level of agreement between the researcher and participants are the main indicators of credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The second factor is transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which indicates the degree to which the findings have applicability in other contexts. The researcher is

to provide a thorough description of the research topic, and the participants willing to share their story or experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher collected descriptive details of data and report them effectively with precision where the reader is able to make judgement due to transferability. This is considered to be a thick description within qualitative research (Elo et al., 2014). Thick description is used to characterize the process of paying attention to contextual detail in observing and interpreting social meaning. Social meaning in this case will include understanding the interpretation of social life through the study of the targeted population, Black women who are leaders in higher education and their experience with racial microaggression, such as their mannerisms, thoughts, or external feelings regarding the circumstance (experience) they choose to share (Elo et al., 2014).

The topic explored in this study is not new, however, racial microaggressions affect Black women uniquely as they intentionally navigate through the disrespect from colleagues without losing their jobs. The results of this qualitative research may be transferred to the context or settings based on the experiences shared from the participants. Black female leaders in higher education located in the Northeastern region of the US can provide new perspectives of their experiences within racial microaggression.

The third factor of trustworthiness is reliability, where validity is acquired based on the consistency and measure of the questions asked during the interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants who choose to share their story, should have their story shared with no errors. Dependability refers to the consistency and reliability of the findings and the degree to which research procedures are documented, allowing someone outside the research to follow, audit, and critique the research process (Streubert & Carpenter, 2007). The researcher ensured that their methods and measurements are targeted to measure exactly what they want to know from each

participant. Dependability is relative to trustworthiness because it establishes the findings of the research as both consistent and repeatable. The researcher verified findings based on consistent raw data that will be collected. It is important for the researcher to not misinterpret what has been shared by the participants in order for the research topic to remain valid by following up with the participant for clarity purposes (Elo et al., 2014).

The fourth factor is confirmability, which is the degree of neutrality in the findings of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher utilized NVIVO®, which is a qualitative coding analysis software that can assist researchers organize findings. Confirmability in qualitative research assumes that the researcher brings a unique perspective to the study (Nowell et al., 2017). The researcher was responsible for analyzing and confirming the participants' responses derived from the data by using the reflexivity technique (Elo et al., 2014). Reflexivity technique is useful in qualitative research because it is usually an attitude the researcher adopts when collecting and analyzing data unbiasedly (Nowell et al., 2017). The confirmability criterion of trustworthiness may be the easiest one to establish because it explains the decisions that are being made in the research process. These details can help provide valuable insight for readers to understand how the themes will emerge from the data (Nowell et al., 2017).

### **Ethical Issues**

The importance of attending to ethical concerns when conducting research studies include informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. In this study, the researcher communicated via email how this study will be managed and how each participant's identity and responses will be protected. Participants were not required to continue with this study if they believed that they could no longer participate. Confidentiality was used as a means to protect the privacy of each participant by assigning a pseudonym (ie: person A), while building both trust

and rapport during the interview process. In addition to the informed consent form, the researcher was cognizant about maintaining ethical standards and integrity to align with the expectation of confidentiality, which will be further explained to each participant (Nowell et al., 2017).

This study was reviewed by the University of New England's Institutional Research Board (IRB), where approval was required before the researcher began the recruitment process. Additionally, participants were advised that their participation and responses would remain confidential, through the use of a pseudonym. The researcher took the necessary cautionary steps to protect the identity of each participant (pseudonyms). Participants were never subjected to harm in any way. Interviews took place via ZOOM based on the participants' availability, and to be respectful of their time and willingness to participate. Participants were provided a consent form, which explained in detail the expectations of the study; and they were advised that their privacy would be protected (see Appendix page). Resource contact information were available for participants who may or may not have experienced a trigger while sharing their encounters regarding racial microaggression. Triggers are anything that remind an individual of previous trauma (Danies & Anglin, 2016). To be triggered is to have an intense emotional or physical reaction, such as a panic attack, after encountering a trigger (Danies & Anglin, 2016). Due to the similarity of the researcher's race as well as gender and the research population, the researcher did not provide misleading information and biases based on the findings from each participant by avoiding assumptions towards their responses. Additionally, the researcher remained objective without projecting (vocalizing) their assumptions based on the experiences of participants, to avoid biases. It was imperative for the researcher to be considerate of the

population willing to participate in this study, by being intentional in protecting their rights, their privacy, and honoring their informed consent agreement (Price et al., 2020).

### **Conclusion and Summary**

Examining the lived experience of Black female leaders in higher education with racial microaggressions provided an unique perspective within the workplace. The researcher followed the guidelines of Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology methodology approach, while utilizing the guidelines of epoché/bracketing in order to minimize bias throughout the this study. Transcendental phenomenology brings added dimensions to the study of human experiences through qualitative research.

The recruitment process took place via the researcher's personal social media platforms as well as their professional email account, where one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted via ZOOM. Data was analyzed using the program NVIVO, which assists qualitative researchers to analyze, organize, and discover insights from qualitative data where deep levels of analysis of data are required. Saldana's (2015) descriptive coding is a first cycle method of coding which involves perusing through qualitative data and coding passages regarding the topic. The researcher was aware of the importance in protecting the privacy of each participant as they willingly shared their lived experiences regarding racial microaggression as a leader in higher education. The standard of confidentiality was to protect the privacy of all involved, maintaining ethical standards, integrity, while building a trusted rapport with each participant, which was explained in the consent form. Chapter (4) four addressed the results/findings from the study. The next chapter will also provide the results of the descriptive analysis, which includes the themes or categories emerged from phrases or sentences collected from the interviews.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

Racial microaggression are considered stereotypes evidenced as subtle, yet offensive comments, non-verbal behaviors, or actions directed towards a marginalized group (Pittman, 2012). Racial injustices experienced by people of color, and in this case Black people in America, are important factors to take into consideration in relation to racial microaggression. Black women leaders in higher education ranging from mid-level to senior-level positions experience their own unique microaggression within the workplace. Additionally, navigating through racial microaggression can provide a disconnect between the leader and their colleagues, as the visibility of both their intersectionality aligns with the components of the Black feminist theory. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of Black female leaders in higher education and racial microaggression. The two research questions for this study were:

RQ1: What is the lived experience of Black female leaders in higher education with racial microaggression?

RQ2: How do Black female leaders in higher education perceive the impact, if any, of racial microaggression on their role as a leader?

This chapter focuses on the lived experience of eleven (11) interviewees with racial microaggression as current Black female leaders in higher education. Each shared experience provided additional insights regarding the different incidents caused by active stereotypes encountered within the workplace. Interested participants had the opportunity to schedule an interview based on their availability and were encouraged to sign the consent form, where it indicated that this process was voluntary.

The findings were captured through one-on-one interviews based on what each participant chose to share regarding their experience as a leader in higher education with racial microaggression. The following analyses were based on the overall demographics of the participants. As Green (2018) wrote, the experiences of Black women and their professional experiences as leaders in higher education vary based on history, cultural environment, gender, age, as well as many other factors.

### **Analysis Method**

The researcher utilized Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological research methodology. Transcendental phenomenology is considered to be the central task in obtaining a clear as well as an undistorted description of the ways things appear in intentional consciousness (Tassone, 2011). Transcendental phenomenological research examines the contents of the experiences of the participants instead of the object of the experience (Perry, 2013). Transcendental methodology enabled this researcher to focus on the responses from the participants, while minimizing the researcher's biases and judgments (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The researcher was intentional in remaining objective during each participant's interview, regardless of the shared experiences stated. The aim of the researcher was to remain impartial, while acknowledging their own experience or preconceptions to operate in an unbiased approach as much as possible (Canter, 2021). Additionally, the responses from each participant may have been similar, but their stories of their encounters introduced a unique experience regarding racial microaggression.

The recruitment flyer, which was posted via the researcher's social media platforms, provided the required criteria in order to become a participant. The researcher's email address was listed and began to receive emails from each participant, who shared that they were



interested in participating. The consent form was immediately sent to their email address, which required their signature based on the expectation of this research. The researcher interviewed all participants via ZOOM within the timeframe of three (3) weeks, and they had the opportunity to read their transcriptions for editing purposes and member checking. Participants were advised that they had the right to stop at any time during the interview should they experience any triggers from speaking about their encounters regarding racial microaggression. Racially traumatic events have been linked to experiencing racial identity threats and available resources can provide further support based on specific needs (McCluney et al., 2017). During each interview, the researcher shared two social media Instagram (IG) pages, which specifically focused on mental health for Black women or women of color. The participants were grateful for this resource and were still willing to share their story. The researcher provided a brief description of this study, which was to learn the lived experiences of Black female leaders in higher education within the northeastern region of the United States.

### **Data Collection**

Interviews were conducted via ZOOM for no more than an hour and each participant was reminded that their signed consent form was received and currently stored in the researcher's password protected Google Drive file. The researcher shared with each participant that their interview would be recorded by the application named Temi © and immediately after the interview, a file of their transcript would be emailed directly to their attention. There were twelve (12) research questions asked, to which each participant shared their experience without hesitation. Additionally, each participant shared their appreciation of the questions, as it allowed them to dive deeper into their encounters with racial microaggression.

The researcher received a small edit request regarding a transcription from one participant and did not receive further follow-up emails regarding edits from the other ten participants. The researcher submitted each transcript to NVIVO, which is a qualitative data analysis application, where the overall common experiences were discovered based on the collected data (Saldana, 2015). The researcher was able to analyze each experience, and subsequently identified relevant codes from which themes emerged. NVIVO provided the ability to import data in file format, where codes and capturing ideas eventually created themes (Saldana, 2015). Once it is discovered that new data is not presented, saturation is reached.

Saturation is a core principle used in qualitative research. It is used to determine when there is adequate data from a study to develop a robust and valid understanding of the study phenomenon (Hennink & Kaiser, 2019). Data saturation is the point of the research process where there is no new information discovered within the data analysis or can lead to redundancy regarding data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The interviewer recognized when saturation was achieved due to the repetition of the responses where no additional new information was attained (Fusch & Ness, 2015). NVIVO coded terms and phrases used by the participants themselves, where the objective was to make the attempt to provide the participants' voice within the research (Saldana, 2015). NVIVO allowed the researcher to organize the data, which are the transcripts from each participant. Data analysis includes the process of cleansing, transforming, and organizing valid and useful information where it can assist the researcher in understanding their information shared by each participant (O'Connor & Gibson, 2003). The researcher was able to review and explore the data, to create codes and then eventually identify themes. Emerging themes were created based on the common experiences encountered by all participants.

## Presentation of Results

Demographic information includes each participants' educational level, years of experience in higher education, as well as in their current position. Direct quotes from each participant's responses to the posed interview questions are included to provide the voice of each participant and convey the lived experience of Black female leaders in higher education relative to racial microaggression. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym starting with the letter Q and followed with a numerical number. The importance of respecting the identity of each participant and maintaining their confidentiality aligns with the code of ethics within this research (Hammersley, 2013). The emerging themes based on either race, gender, or both were discovered throughout the interviews were: stereotypes about Black women, behavior from non-Blacks within the workplace, and racial microaggression experienced.

Participant Q1 identified as a Black woman with a Master's degree and shared after the interview that she was interested in pursuing a doctorate degree. Participant Q1 has worked in higher education for 13 years, has worked 8 years in her current position as Assistant Director, and is the only Black woman within her department in the state of New Jersey. Participant Q1 works mostly with White females and her current supervisor once served as her professional mentor. Participant Q1 shared she experienced racial microaggression, but initially was not familiar with the term microaggression. Participant Q1 shared about the recent events regarding police brutality, such as the George Floyd case (the year 2020) and the current pandemic (the year 2020). She was able to recognize in more detail the social injustices encountered within her department. Examples of her racial microaggression experiences entailed: "I don't see color" or "You are the whitest Black person that I know". The stereotypes shared regarding Black women in higher education were being seen as a support staff, instead of a Director or as their equal.

“Best to remain quiet in situations where their opinions do not matter, while their colleagues’ are heard without judgement”. Participant Q1 recently recognized the unconscious bias from their supervisor and recently found the courage to speak out on their concerns regarding treatment within the department.

Participant Q1 mentioned their decisions are undermined by their subordinates at times, where this does not happen with anyone else. The supervisor of the department seems to pick on the Black student workers the most in comparison to the White student workers. Participant Q1 is adamant about remaining as a strong representative for other Black students or students of color to help protect them from racial microaggression. Participant Q1 also recognized the mentorship of their supervisor began to deteriorate the more she became interested in other professional avenues that does not include the mentoring relationship. For example: Participant Q1 shared that she is seeking to expand her knowledge within higher education, outside of their department and this includes seeking comradery from other Black colleagues. The recognition of control from the mentor/mentee relationship, where support is only provided if it benefits the mentor/supervisor, has become intolerable for the participant.

The lack of support when insubordination transpires or the assumption that they are the support staff instead of Assistant Director, while their white colleagues are not treated the same, falls under the question of “Do you believe you are treated differently due to race, gender or both?” and in this case, it is based on race. Participant Q1 did not feel like she belonged within her current workspace because she is either silenced when providing directives or her supervisor mentor does not believe she is equipped in her position. The participant was previously performing the assistant director duties, without the title and pay. She eventually brought this

concern to her supervisor and Human Resources, where she was then promoted to Assistant Director. The lack of support from their supervisor/mentor became minimal due to this. Participant Q1 was promoted to the Assistant Director position prior to this interview, however, she is still seen as the supporting staff and this is not corrected by her supervisor. She commented:

*“my supervisor was scheduled for surgery, which meant that I would be in charge in her absence, instead sharing what was needed. She second guessed my ability to actually do my job as an assistant director because I am only capable of certain things. This was witnessed by other colleagues, which encouraged them to undermine my directives, as their director” Also, due to the fact that it seems like she can no longer control me, I feel bullied at times, but not comfortable sharing this due to the lack of support that I receive now.”*

As a result of this incident, Participant Q1 understood the significance of speaking up, even if she believed there would be no support. She was being compensated for the role originally hired for, however, after the promotion to Assistant Director, the scope of responsibilities increased to reflect a higher job function, but the pay-rate does not align. The supervisor was not happy that this concern was mentioned to the Human Resource Department. This participant shared they were already performing the job duties. Additionally, she recognized that her title may have changed on paper, but the duties were not necessarily aligning where she was not getting compensated correctly. The control effect from the supervisor/mentor relationship, enabled her to realize that she is only good enough when it befits the supervisor and her professional growth means nothing to her. The feeling of being underappreciated, as well as dealing with the racial injustice due to stereotypes experienced within the workplace encouraged this Black female leader to seek new employment opportunities when the time is right. Participant Q1, also shared that they would be

interested in pursuing a doctoral degree, which would place her in a better position to become more marketable within higher education.

Participant Q2 identified as Black of African Descent, with a master's degree and located in New Jersey. She is the current Director within her department for the past two (2) years and works predominantly with women of mixed races. She has worked in higher education for 16 years and mostly with white male colleagues. Racial microaggression has been experienced throughout their time as a leader within the workplace and she shared the following:

*“There is a higher standard of perfection expected than my white male counterparts and if I choose to speak up then I am deemed as difficult.”*

*“The stereotypes of Black women being angry, aggressive, or difficult to work with, seems to take precedence when dealing with a Black woman.”*

Regarding one of the research questions, which stated: “How have these experiences affected your interactions with your non-Black co-workers?” Participant Q2 indicated that she is expected to remain professional at all times, while her male counterparts are not held at the same level of expectations. The same for White females, as well, but it is different because the stereotypes towards Black women are focused more instead of her actual ability in doing her job.

Participant Q2 shared that she has been dismissed by older White male colleagues who refused to acknowledge her leadership role and capabilities. Additionally, the University Police Department (UPD) was called by a professor who did not believe that she worked at the institution, when she was there to pick an item up for a student within his classroom. Thankfully, the university officers were already familiar with Participant Q2 and the faculty member never addressed their error or apologized. Participant Q2 commented the following:

*“As a Director, I am usually seen as the support staff, and not as a leader. If I am acknowledged as a leader, then I am not respected as such where my directives or suggestions are undermined.” Stereotypes such as being lazy, sassy, or good enough for a water cooler conversation, has allowed me to always be intentional on being both guarded and prepared no matter what.”*

Participant Q2 has been mistaken for a student because it is usually a surprise that she is an administrator, who is both articulate and knowledgeable. The surprise from white colleagues is a norm that encourages Participant Q2 to never allow the stereotypes to negatively impact her job as a leader in higher education. She is expecting to experience a form of racial microaggression within the workplace, which helps her not to respond. Granted, experiencing a form of racial microaggression can happen daily, nonetheless, she does not have the flexibility to mess up or give any reason that she does not know what she is doing. Participant Q2 have always felt that she is under a microscopic watch, while her other non-Black colleagues do not have the same type of experience.

A conclusive factor shared by Participant Q2, is that representation matters both for employees and students, as students of color can relate to others in administration who look like them. It is usually helpful when a student is able to connect with an administrator, who has the ability to connect with them holistically. Participant Q2 emphasized the following: “I have to be cognizant of my leadership ability regardless of experiencing racial microaggression and I make it my point to not to respond to the biased views of others” Participant Q2 also added that support for all students is a requirement even if she does not receive the same as a Black administrator within this field.

Participant Q3 identified as Black with a doctorate degree and located in the state of New Jersey. She has worked in the field of higher education for 18 years and recently was promoted to Vice President within a new department within the past year. Participant Q3 shared their mentorship relationship with their former supervisor, within the same institution and how the relationship changed after her promotion. Another colleague, who is a White female and currently has a mentoring relationship with this same supervisor, has received more support regarding the promotion that she did not receive in comparison to Participant Q3. Participant Q3 was slightly surprised and shared the following:

*“I was surprised after receiving my promotion to Vice President, that my mentor was not as supportive but continued to express how my colleague (White female) deserved it the most. I have the credentials and have been in the field of higher education for 18 years. I did not experience the same trajectory as my mentor and I continued to hear from other colleagues that my mentor would speak about my work, and the unfairness about my promotion.*

The aggression and bully-like actions from the former supervisor at this institution caused Participant Q3 to experience racial microaggression at an increased level prior to her promotion. She came to the realization that the former supervisor no longer had control over her and has worked against her since receiving the promotion. Participant Q3’s belief that if she was a man then she would not receive this type of aggressive treatment or visible disdain regarding her promotion. The trope of Black women consists of five (5) different factors of stereotypes, which continues to be represented via television, magazine, or any form or entertainment outlet (Boom, 2015). The unfortunate stereotypes regarding Black women include the following four tropes per Participant Q3: the sassy one, the jezebel, the mammy, and the angry Black woman which has



encouraged racial microaggression towards Black women within the workplace. Sassy is usually defined as being outspoken, one who speaks their mind and is clear about their goals. The jezebel, is usually hyper-sexualized, while the mammy serves as the happy servant or support system as presented via caricatures displayed during and after slavery. A Black woman who is passionate or expressive with their thoughts, is considered to be angry or aggressive. These four tropes have been used against Black women, who may not fulfill any of these stereotypes per Participant Q3. Participant Q3 shared that it is helpful to become familiar with the stereotypes towards Black women, as this could prepare them when dealing with racial microaggression within the workplace. She also added the following:

*“It is best to remain educated on the literature on Black women or Black people in general. In doing so, you can avoid falling in the trap of the stereotypes that do not pertain to you, regardless of your skin tone. Education in your past, will enable you to be better prepared for the present or future.”*

Therefore, ensuring one is educated on these matters can avoid Black women responding to stereotypes that do not apply to them. Education on past literature, can serve as preparation for the present or the future per Participant Q3.

The researcher inquired what the participant thought about what can be done to decrease the occurrence of racial microaggression toward Black women in higher education: Participant Q3 responded that she does not believe there is hope in decreasing racial microaggression because if an individual is unwilling to check their biases, especially when attending a diversity, equity, and inclusion training (DEI), then they may continue to project stereotypes. Participant Q3 concluded with the following statement: “the more a Black woman is educated on race, injustice, and stereotypes, then she is already ahead and should not allow the microaggression to

affect her role as a leader, or a professional for that matter.” The focus according to Participant Q3, is to remain resilient in spaces where issues cannot or will not be fixed. The goal is to navigate through adversity with perseverance.

Participant Q4 identified as African-American, with a Master’s degree and located in New Jersey. They have been in their current position as Dean/Associate Vice President for five years within their department and have been in the field of higher education for 40 years. Participant Q4 has been treated differently depending on the situation. Additionally, she has been undermined by her subordinates when directives are given. Due to her current stature size of 5’2, she is challenged and not taken seriously. Additionally, she is seen as an ineffective decision-maker and less confident. For example, if a White male, disregarded directives, Participant Q4 believed that they would not encounter this type of disrespect or dismissive behavior within the workplace. Participant Q4 also added: “Being stern in my stance, gives the impression that I am either aggressive or angry, when I am doing my job as a senior leader in my field.” The stereotypes of Black women that have been encountered by Participant Q4 such as, being well-spoken, being knowledgeable, or the surprised reaction that she is not a supporting staff member, are daily occurrences experienced within the workplace. As a current senior level leader in higher education, managing different personality types is expected, however, while working in predominantly White spaces, can cause discomfort.

Participant Q4 elaborated on her encounter with being uncomfortable, where she felt responsible for making non-Black colleagues feel safe in her presence. The choice to address such concerns, has created accusations of either being aggressive or confrontational, even as a senior-leader. Regardless of this type of experience, Participant Q4 elaborated on her priority as a senior-leader:

*“However, in my position regardless of what I am experiencing, I am responsible for providing the utmost support and service for students, parents/guardians, in addition to my staff.”*

In addition to their experience as a leader, Participant Q4 shared that being aware of the stereotypes about Black women could be helpful on how to approach microaggression: “The energy exerted when dealing with these types of experiences cannot be returned, instead, stay one step ahead by understanding that these stereotypes exist, but do not necessarily apply to you, as a Black woman.” Based on her conclusive perception, Participant Q4 counts on the idea that some individuals may not know how to be racially sensitive and the current events, especially regarding George Floyd and police brutality, may have allowed non-Black employees to recognize that there is an issue regarding racial injustice, which can give them an insight to the reality of Black people.

Participant Q5 identified as Black, with a master’s degree (currently pursuing a doctorate) and located in New Jersey. She currently serves as an Associate Director within her department for two (2) years and worked a total of 13 years in higher education. Participant Q5 shared the importance of speaking up for yourself, especially if there is a recognition regarding pay gaps in comparison to other colleagues. For example, Participant Q5 chose to pursue a Doctorate degree to make herself more marketable due to being overlooked for a promotion to a White male colleague. Participant Q5 elaborated on the disparity encountered within the workplace regarding gender, race, as well as professional credentials. The importance in speaking up and requesting the rationale of a decision made regarding a promotion is important to understand. In this case Participant Q5 shared the following about the decision on why she was passed over on a promotion:

*“I was passed over for a promotion to a white male colleague who did not have a Master’s, while I already completed my master’s program. Also, I took the liberty to inquire the rationale regarding this decision and it was said that they did not want to upset and lose this employee.”*

Participant Q5 emphasized the unfairness of the gender wage gap, as White male specifically are paid more in comparison to Black women, and they may not have the required credentials to hold senior level positions. The unfairness shared by Participant Q5 is that she holds a master’s degree and is currently pursuing a doctorate, while her White male counterpart is currently pursuing their master’s with less experience. Participant Q5 feels indispensable and is adamant that things will not change for the better, hence her pursuit in attaining an additional degree.

Participant Q5 also believes that Black women within the workplace are expected to give 100%, while not being compensated at a fraction of the cost, is unacceptable, especially at her institution. Participant Q5 is a mid-level leader and directives have been ignored, where there has been no type of support when this concern is shared with managers. In addition, Participant Q5 has expressed her petite stature, has encouraged others to speak over her, especially when giving directives. She is not fearful in speaking up, however, when she does she is deemed as a problem or too sensitive. Participant Q5 experiences as a mid-level leader in higher education regarding directives being ignored, has motivated her to do the following:

*“Due to the stereotype of being difficult, I strive to always be prepared, as being both Black and a leader is not always respected.”*

The importance of speaking up and taking pride in your academic accomplishments should be celebrated, even if it is not respected within the workplace. Speaking with both grace and compassion intentionally, can pacify the possible response from non-Black colleagues to believe

that the stereotypes that Black women are difficult are not always 100% true. Participant Q5 stated the following regarding her academic credentials, within the workplace:

*“A Black woman can have the professional experience, academic credentials, and drive, but she will not be paid equally to both her white male and female counterparts, which is disheartening.”*

Currently, there are two (2) other colleagues who are mid-level leaders and are being paid more than Participant Q5. Participant Q5 inadvertently overheard this information and immediately addressed her manager about the pay disparity. Sharing this concern about unequal pay for the same amount of work in comparison to her non-Black colleagues, was an uncomfortable situation, nonetheless, she believed a sound answer was deserved. Additionally, her current institution has been accused in the past regarding pay disparity regarding race, and her manager redirected her to the Human Resources department. Participant Q5 elaborated the concerns her colleagues shared regarding their work:

*“I work along with two other colleagues, (white male and white female) and I have the most students in my cohort, while the other two have about half the amount. We do the same thing, yet, I am getting paid less and they are complaining about their current pay. I took the liberty to speak with the supervisor to gain the rationale and there were crickets.”*

The final sentiment from Participant Q5 about Human Resources and diversity, is that this department should be more intentional regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion training (DEI). These trainings, according to Participant Q5 are surfaced and there needs to be more initiative where everyone is heard and supported. Participant Q5 chooses to remain focused on her students, which makes her job worthwhile, regardless of the encounters of racial microaggression

within the workplace. There is opportunity available to teach and lead students, especially students of color, about adversity or unfairness. Participant Q5 is purposeful in using her challenges as a form of motivation, where her students are taught on how to navigate through different challenges. Participant Q5 believes that racial microaggression can be better understood if non-Black colleagues are placed in real-life scenarios during DEI training, where it can serve as teaching moments. Racial microaggression could be addressed if the situations are relatable, where the need to connect better with colleagues is acknowledged.

Participant Q6 identified as African-American, with a Juris doctorate (JD) degree and located in New Jersey. She is currently the Associate Vice President within her department for the past two (2) years and worked in higher education for a total of seven (7) years. In response to experiencing racial microaggression as gender based, she stated, “race and gender affects every level of our lives, as it is embedded in the structure of our institution, therefore, it (gender) affects the way they function”. Participant Q6 has experienced a plethora of encounters within the workplace regarding racial microaggression, where her White male counterparts are involved. Participant Q6 directives have been ignored and have been silenced while leading a meeting with predominantly White male employees. The stereotype of being seen as aggressive or difficult remains prevalent with Participant Q6 because she does not believe it is fair when speaking up she is deemed as either difficult or sensitive. Additionally, she believes that it is challenging for White male colleagues to understand her perspective, because it is not their experience. Participant Q6 does not appreciate being silenced or disrespected within a meeting, especially when it is her subordinates partaking in this type of behavior. Participant Q6 shared the following about speaking up without worrying about the stereotype of being aggressive:

*“I had to speak up to share that I am the Associate Vice President, and I need you all to listen to me. Granted they were shocked, but it is not my responsibility to focus on how they choose to respond to my voice.”*

Participant Q6, shared the sentiment that the word diversity is more about the inclusion of different races, it also entails the action of hearing everyone’s concerns because inclusion matters. Based on the job responsibility of Participant Q6, it can be both time consuming and exhausting to constantly educate colleagues on racial microaggression, while experiencing it within the workplace. Participant Q6 focuses on different approaches regarding diversity knowledge, as well as cultural differences within the workplace. Diversity can be deemed as a racial situation, when in actuality, there is more dimension which should be explored further within her institution.

Participant Q6 continues to keep her focus on creating or providing opportunities for new professionals within the institution. The professional goal for Participant Q6 is providing guidance and support for colleagues coming behind her. For example, the experiences regarding racial microaggression within the workplace, can provide additional insights on how to navigate without losing integrity. Participant Q6 believes the importance in creating opportunities for future colleagues, especially of color because support and guidance are important factors to consider. If they happen to experience racial microaggression within the workplace, then they will be better prepared due to the time invested towards working with them. Participant Q6 is a firm believer that your voice is valuable and no one should silence themselves to appease another. Participant Q6 shared the following sentiment regarding diversity and Black women:

*“There is an agreement that more Black women in senior level leadership, along with serious training could shift how we speak about diversity.”*

Participant Q7 identified as Black with a master's degree, and is located in New Jersey. She is currently the Assistant Director within her department for the past three (3) years and worked in higher education for the past five (5) years. Participant Q7's current institution is also their alma mater, where it has been challenging for administrators to see her as a fellow colleague. Additionally, she is often mistaken as a student, which makes the challenge in serving as an Assistant Director more difficult to be taken seriously. Participant Q7 has become accustomed to working in predominantly White spaces, and is very cognizant of her facial expressions, due to the stereotypes of Black women either being sassy or difficult. Participant Q7, has witnessed White female colleagues display facial expressions of disgust during a meeting and have never been asked if they were 'angry' instead they were asked if they are ok. Participant Q7 has made it her point to never feel comfortable in White spaces, especially if she is the only Black person present.

Participant Q7 works predominantly with women and has been treated differently based on age and race. In her experience, she has been told that she looks young, which has been difficult to be taken seriously as an administrator. The surprised reactions from fellow non-White colleagues who realize that Participant Q7 is not only an administrator, but she is also knowledgeable and professional, no longer upsets her. Participant Q7 has been told that she is cute, while providing directives to her subordinates. Additionally, she works with women from different racial/cultural backgrounds, however, she has recognized within the past three to four years that White female colleagues assume that she is unfriendly. Participant Q7 deems it to be unfair to be accused of being aggressive when speaking up or providing a directive, while her White female counterparts are not met with the same concern. Participant Q7 elaborated further in regards to speaking up due to specific stereotypes:



*“It can be very condescending and dismissive and due to my direct nature, I hesitate to defend myself because it can lead to an issue. In my experience, White female colleagues are not reprimanded or accused of being aggressive when they choose to speak up.”*

Participant Q7 reflected that the advantage to working in higher education is being a representation for students of color, however, the disadvantage is the lack of support when dealing with microaggression. The lack of support when encountering a form of racial microaggression, where responding could possibly work against you as an administrator, can lead a person to feel safer in a silo. The discomfort in working in predominantly White spaces, where Participant Q7 is unable to be her true self because there is worry that she will be perceived as problematic due to stereotypes about Black women is difficult. Participant Q7 stated that Black women are expected to be some type of savior, but never the leader. Additionally, as leaders they are expected to deal with all forms of adversity, which includes racial injustice, but are immediately seen or assumed as the supporting staff.

Regarding the impact of racial microaggression within the workplace, Participant Q7 stated that the choice should be to keep going because the focus within higher education is the students. Students seek guidance and students of color, rely on representation to gain that additional understanding and support. The intentionality of Participant Q7 is making her style of communication purposeful and that overall support is provided for all of her students. Participant Q7 concluded her thoughts regarding biases and racial microaggression:

*“In order for non-Black colleagues to understand how racial microaggression affects Blacks, they should be more intentional on how to communicate without judgement, while checking their biases willingly.”*

Participant Q8 identified as Black with a master's degree, and is located in New Jersey. She currently is an Associate Dean within her department for six (6) years and worked in higher education for 22 years. Participant Q8 is very intentional when speaking about topics that she is most passionate about, due to the predominately White spaces within her department (institution). Participant Q8 works mostly with women and has been mistreated racially throughout her career in higher education. Participant Q8 has experienced racial microaggression on multiple occasions, to the point that she has become accustomed to it. Additionally, she is vocal about her discomfort, but selective on which concerns to share out loud. Participant Q8 has been asked about her daughter's hair texture and hair styles, which included if it is washed daily. One colleague called her daughter's hairstyle the mickey mouse look and Participant Q8 corrected her and shared that they are called afro-puffs. The tone of the White female colleague was more condescending, instead of an actual inquiry. Participant Q8 has stated that these types of inquiries are shared during meetings, where she is the leader, and her directives or concerns are dismissed with further questions. Participant Q8 was more frustrated with the line of questions regarding her daughter because it was not the time or place for this type of discussion, and the meeting prolonged longer due to this. The lack of respect or boundaries are common behaviors experienced by Participant Q8, who is a senior-level leader. Participant Q8 elaborated on the following regarding her response to a White female colleague regarding her daughter's hair:

*“If I had a Black daughter I (White female colleague) would do her hair every day. I said, “We are not dolls, we are people!” “My child has choices on hairstyles that are appropriate but that does not mean she needs to get her hair done every day.”*

Participant Q8 stated that she believes some White women may feel the need to find different ways to bond with her, but instead their biases speak on their behalf. Additionally, there was an incident where a fellow White female colleague pointed out that their institution is predominately White and it is lacking diversity. Participant Q8 responded that she was already aware of this and asked if this same concern would be shared with a non-Black colleague. There was no response, however, Participant Q8 recognized that some not all White female colleagues are intentional regarding their biases or may speak out of line due to plain ignorance. Participant Q8 shared during the pandemic last year (2020) all employees were working remotely, and a fellow White female colleague gave her a bar of soap, which was called 'Black Gold'.

*“During the pandemic last year (2020), we were working remotely and a White female colleague decided to gift me a bar of soap called ‘Black Gold’ because she believed that I am Black gold”. I declined the present because it was best in doing this, then to be perceived as angry if I chose to speak my truth.”*

Participant Q8 decided it was best to keep her concern to herself to avoid the angry stereotype. Participant Q8 shared that she believes this colleague meant well, but it can be exhausting to find different approaches to have a teachable moment, when it may not be accepted.

Participant Q8 chooses to remain cautious when in predominantly White spaces, due to the stereotypes of Black women being angry. Speaking fast or passionately, can be deemed as threatening, especially when not smiling, per Participant Q8. Additionally, she identifies as an internal processor, where she remains in deep thought to avoid making rash decisions. If she is not smiling, then the assumption is that she is angry, and this type of experience has caused Participant Q8 to make her non-Black colleagues comfortable in her presence, while she is uncomfortable.

*“I am unable to be expressive without being judged for being aggressive”. Does processing mean having an attitude?”*

The inability to express herself freely without the concern of being judged or seen as aggressive, all while internally processing her thoughts, has been an ongoing situation for Participant Q8. Participant Q8 also elaborated on the type of Black woman that is accepted within the workplace. For example, there is a fellow Black female colleague who has been with the institution for more than 25 years and she is deemed to be easier to deal with. She is deemed by other non-Black colleagues as less direct and timid in comparison to Participant Q8. Participant Q8 touched on the following regarding her disposition as a leader:

*“I am responsible for their comfortability at my own expense because I do not fit in the comfort realm of their expectation.”*

Participant Q8 concludes that one of the most important factors as a leader in higher education, is to “focus on the bigger picture, which is retention”. Even though she may feel unheard, she is still responsible for her students and providing the representation that is needed for marginalized students is one of her many priorities.

Participant Q9 identified as Black, with a master’s degree (currently pursuing a doctorate degree) and located in New Jersey. She has been a director for the past three (3.5) and a half years within her department and worked in higher education for a total of 20 years. Participant Q9 shared the importance of having more Black women in higher level positions, such as President, Vice-President, or Vice-Provost, where they are able to connect or recognize that there is a need for support regarding racial microaggression and Black women. Additionally, Participant Q9 indicated her main focus is her students, as they deserve to receive the utmost support regardless of any encounters with racial microaggression. Participant Q9 indicated that

having a Black person or a person of color as the Chief Officer of Diversity or Equity does not represent the entire concern of racial injustice within the workplace, as more people of color should be included in the decision making. For example, addressing issues that are real, where the Black woman's voice is heard and recognized through their own lens or perspective, could help non-Black employees to have a better understanding. Participant Q9 has stated that the lack of diversity within the senior level of her institution (President, VP roles) does not provide the full opportunity to witness the daily racial microaggression occurrences experienced by mid-level leadership. Participant Q9 elaborated on the importance of representation at the senior level:

*“There is a form of privilege where racial microaggression is not directly experienced, so the concern is not an immediate reality. As if (racial microaggression) it does not exist and can be swept away”.*

Participant Q9 added that white women see her as a threat until they choose to get comfortable where she is deemed as safe. Participant Q8 chooses to go above and beyond, to avoid the assumption that she is problematic and an eager team-player. Participant Q9 stated that she deserves to be in her current position, “but feels responsible for their (White women) safety when I am the one feeling attacked.”

Participant Q9 was supportive of the focus of this study because “this study can help others know that they are not alone and there are some approaches or guidelines on how to survive racial microaggression.” The act of being undermined or accused of being aggressive because her thoughts have been shared out loud, has motivated her to remain in a silo. Participant Q9, believes recognizing the inequalities experienced within the workplace should begin from

the top (senior level). “In my experience, there are mostly White male in these spaces and they, for the most part, do not understand how to support or understand Black women.”

Participant Q10 identified as Black of African descent, with a master’s degree, located in New York, and shared that they are now interested in pursuing a doctorate after the completion of this interview. She has been a director within her department for two (2) years and worked in higher education for 5 (five) years. As the only Black woman in her department, which consists of White females, at times she feels unheard or silenced. Participant Q10 shared that they are treated differently based on race and have become accustomed to having their directives ignored. Due to the silo effect, Participant Q10 is uninterested in building relationships amongst her non-Black colleagues. Participant Q10 avoids personal conversations, such as hair for example when around her colleagues and shared the following, “The awkward feeling where they (White colleagues) want to be familiar with me, but I am hesitant to speak because I do not want to be seen as the aggressive or an angry Black woman.” Participant Q10 expressed why remaining in a silo is best:

*“The stereotypes that we (Black women) are angry or intimidating because we are not smiling, is exhausting. Also, I was told my presence can be intimidating and I am unsure how since I am the only Black person in my department. I also consider my approach to avoid the stereotypes projected onto Black women when passionately speaking. But White women are not held to the same level of scrutiny in comparison to Black women in my experience. I am unable to be my true self for fear of losing my job because others will feel unsafe or uncomfortable.”*

Regarding diversity and decreasing the occurrence of racial microaggression toward Black women in higher education, Participant Q10 shared:

*“Diversity is wanted but they (Whites) don’t want us to be different. To get to the bottom line, they also need to understand that every Black woman is not the same, and there should be more Black women in senior levels to help other Black women feel understood and supported.”*

She stated that diversity is wanted within her institution but there is a continual overt and covert reticence in behavior and word(s). Participant Q10 mentioned that their institution uses the term diversity because it sounds good, but the work to make the institution actually diverse is not a priority. Diversity should not only include racial awareness, also how the approach on addressing different situations without judgement or assumption, should be taken into consideration. In the meantime, Participant Q10 does not anticipate any type of productive change and in the meantime, she chooses to remain intentional on her moves, to avoid being accused of a stereotype that does not apply to her.

Participant Q11 identified as African-American with a master’s degree, and located in Pennsylvania. She has been a director within her department for two (2) years and worked in higher education for a total of six years. Participant Q11 currently works in a predominantly White institution, with mostly White female colleagues. In her experience, White female colleagues try to interact or bond, but it is usually based on a form of stereotype. For example, asking if Participant Q11’s hair is real or how often it is washed while attempting to touch it, is a bonding attempt mixed with stereotype. Due to the nature of Participant Q11’s job responsibilities, she educates students regarding racial injustices, but has been chosen to also speak to colleagues about racial injustice, which can be challenging.

Participant Q11 elaborated on the opportunity to educate others about accountability because non-Black colleagues that partake in a form of racial microaggression are not willing to admit they demonstrate this.

*“not all (White female or male) are open to taking accountability of their biases. Due to the stereotypes of being angry or being seen as a supportive staff, “I have to be direct and stern in my stance in order to prove that I am worthy to do my job”. “I have been undermined and dismissed by my White male supervisor and I have never seen him share the same type of concerns with my other non-Black colleagues.”*

Participant Q11 indicated that she is not hesitant in remaining stern and direct in her stance in order to prove that she is qualified in doing her job. Participant Q11 has been undermined on many occasions by her White male colleagues and has been unsupported by her supervisor when this type of concern is mentioned. Additionally, her supervisor has expressed his concern regarding her sternness, but this is not addressed to her fellow White colleagues (female or male). Participant Q11 does not feel supported within her department, however, she refuses to allow these types of occurrences to impact her professional responsibilities. Participant Q11 have been told that they look too young to be a director or receive astonishing looks from non-Black colleagues when asked if she has a master’s degree. Another example of a failed bonding opportunity experienced by Participant Q11, is a White female colleague sharing that they do not see color, while waiting for a response.

*“If I strive to get things done unapologetically, then I am deemed as angry. I look too young to be a Director, and the astound look when I share that I have a degree never ceases to amaze me. Randomly during a staff meeting, a White female colleague shared*



*that she does not see color. What am I supposed to say to that? If I respond, then I am the aggressor, right?”*

Participant Q11 chose not to respond because she is intentional on which battle to choose when encountering dialogues can possibly lead to an uncomfortable situation. Participant Q11 shared that it is challenging to change the mindset of others who may not recognize that their biases are prevalent. Participant Q11 elaborated why diversity on the senior level is important:

*“All Black women are not the same and if there were more of us in senior level positions, then maybe we can get better support within our field.”*

Participant Q11 is a firm believer that representation matters, and her goal is to make sure that her students feel heard, as well as supported. They (students) may not understand the impact of racial microaggression, nonetheless, as long as she is in this position, then they (students) will have a representative that is willing to listen, guide, and support.

*“Representation matters and my goal is to make sure that my students feel heard, as well as supported. They may not understand racial microaggression, nonetheless, as long as I am in this position, then they (students) will have a representative that is willing to listen, guide, and support.”*

Therefore, Participant Q11 is adamant about being transparent with her students, where her experiences with racial microaggression can become teachable moments.

### **Emerging Themes**

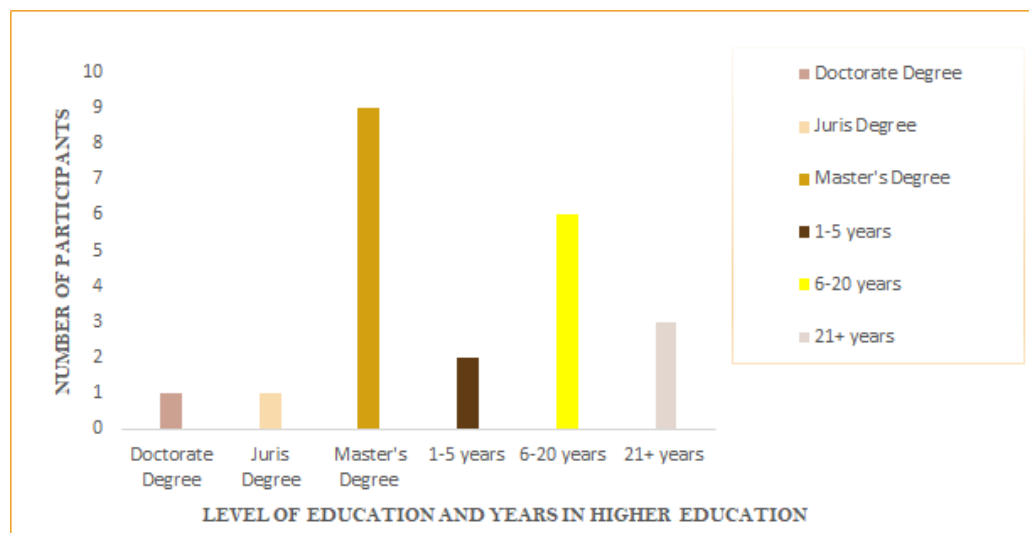
The four following emerging themes arose from the coded interviews while using NVIVO: stereotypes about Black women, behavior within the workplace, and racial microaggression experienced. The two research questions for this study included:

RQ1: What is the lived experience of Black female leaders in higher education with racial microaggression?

RQ2: How do Black female leaders in higher education perceive the impact, if any, of racial microaggression on their role as a leader?

Textural description is the illumination or the opportunity to shed light regarding an experience, which examines the different narrative of the participants' perceptions of the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Each participant experienced racial microaggression as a leader within the workplace of higher education and their perceptions about this topic varied based on their particular encounters. Additionally, textural descriptions are a representation of the true essence of the participants' experience and a textural structural description was generated for each participant (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). The reduction process, where the researcher provided equal value towards all participants to eliminate repetition, or the same type of responses is called horizontalization. Pseudonyms were used to protect both the identity and current institution of each participant. The following figures include a breakdown of the 11 participants based on their level of education, racial demographic, years of experience, and leadership position within higher education. Figure 4.1 is the participant's level of education and years of professional experience in higher education. These factors are important to include because it provides a more intricate understanding of the participant's background and professional leadership level.

Figure 4.1

*Participants' Level of Education and Years in Higher Education*

Additionally, Figure 4.2 includes the participant's racial and gender demographic, as a current Black female leader in higher education. The importance in understanding the demographic, which consists mostly of White females, males, or a mixture within the office setting, provides unique insights regarding their experiences with racial microaggression. Participants' years of experience in higher education ranges from 5 to 40 years, with either a Master's, Doctorate, or JD degree, and leadership roles range from mid-level to senior-level (Assistant Director to Vice-President). The participants mostly work in predominantly White spaces with a mixture of male and female white colleagues. The racial demographic is an important factor within this study due to the unique experiences encountered by each participant regarding racial microaggression. Additionally, working in predominantly White spaces, which can either include mostly women, mostly men, or a mixture can provide in depth insight regarding racial microaggression and gender within the workplace. Figure 4.2 highlights the overall racial demographics of each participant.

Figure 4.2

*Participants' Racial and Gender Demographic as a Black Leader in Higher Education*

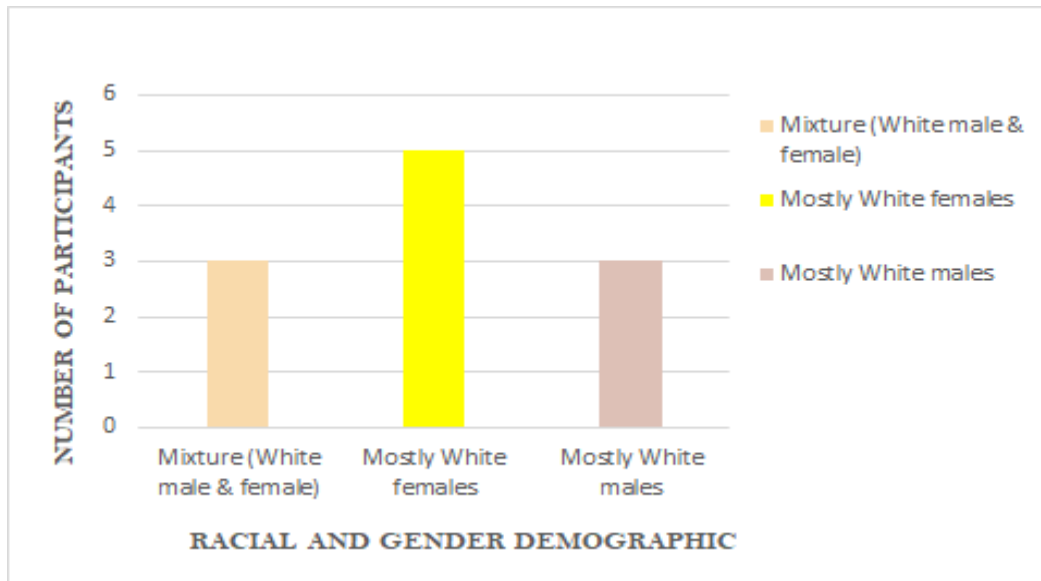
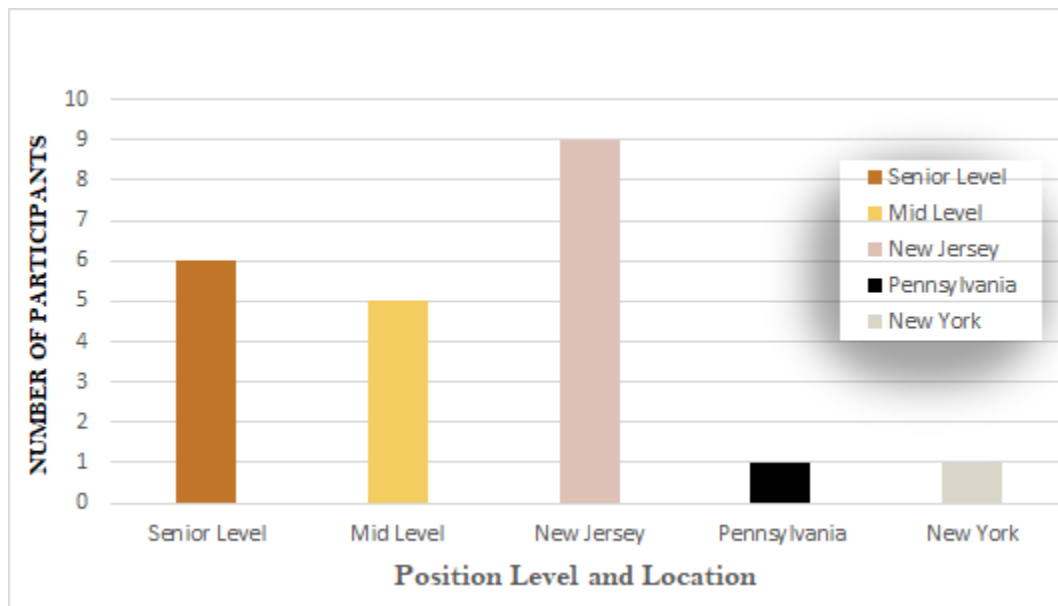


Figure. 4.3 includes both the location and professional level. Based on the participants' shared experiences regarding racial microaggression, the significance of their professional leadership level (mid or senior level) incorporates how they navigate effectively as a leader. The data obtained from each participant's interview aligns with the following two (2) research questions: Do you believe that you are treated differently due to your race or gender, or both at your work? Have you experienced microaggression as racially based? Gender based? Both.

Figure 4.3

*Participants' Location and Professional Level*

All eleven participants were located in the Northeastern Region of the United States from three different states, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York. The years of experience within higher education ranged from 5 to 40 years, where racial microaggression has been experienced at least during the first-year within their current position. The positions ranged from Assistant Director, Associate Director, Director, Dean, to Associate Vice-President, which included similar experiences, yet through different lenses regarding gender, race, or both.

The researcher recognized common themes regarding the behavior of each participant within their professional settings, which is illustrated in Table 3. All of the participants shared how they navigated through predominantly white spaces and the common behaviors shared below by the participants will be elaborated within the different themes:

- Theme 1: Black is not a monolith
- Theme 2: Navigating in White spaces
- Theme 3: Performance as a leader instead of a supporting staff

- Theme 4: Reservation on speaking out against racial microaggression

The participants reflected on their views regarding stereotypes about Black women. Some of the common tropes that appeared in their comments include the angry Black women, who are either sassy, aggressive, intimidating, or hard to work with within the workplace (Bloom, 2015). Additionally, being a bully, lazy, uneducated, or inarticulate are a few factors shared regarding these stereotypes. The flip side to this, is that (6) six out of 11 of the Participants mentioned that regardless of these stereotypes, if they are projecting the opposite, then they are difficult to work with. For example, Participant Q9 stated: “I was told that my email communications were too professional, and I should make it less complicated. “It is assumed that we (Blacks) are not articulate, yet, when communication is up to par, it is a problem.” Going above and beyond is intentional, shared by Participants, as to not give any reason to have stereotypes applied towards them. Remaining in a silo has been the immediate option because it seems to be the best decision in avoiding conflict. Additionally, remaining in a silo allows the Participant to stay under the radar. A few of the participants shared the same sentiment as Participant Q7: “All Black women are not the same, we should not be viewed and placed in the same box. Higher education is about retention and supporting students and most of their energy is focused on the development of their students, especially the students that look like them”.

### **Black is Not a Monolith**

The sassy one is deemed as difficult, especially if she is not smiling or seems to be uninviting. Participant Q8 shared the following experiences: “I am a processor, for the most part I am deeply in thought about a particular situation, but I am being viewed as uninviting because my facial expression is too serious?” “When does it become safe to be who you are without the concern of how non-Blacks will respond?” Why should I make them (white colleagues) feel

comfortable because I am not smiling?” Witnessing a White woman or male be ridiculed because they are not smiling or forced to smile because it makes non-Black colleagues comfortable, are shared experiences from each participant. The overall indication from all of the participants is the fact that they are not necessarily uninviting, as their students (different race/cultural background) for the most part connect well with them, yet they are scrutinized because of stereotypes that they never created. Each participant felt that they were being judged and condemned before actually being given the opportunity to show who they truly are. All of the participants have experienced being mistaken as the supporting staff instead of the leader, as the assumption is that Black women as administrators in higher education is unattainable.

The trope of the mammy is usually seen as a happy Black woman willing to provide support without hesitation and this particular stereotype aligns with the assumption that most Black women are a part of the supporting staff. Participants have shared their astonishment when they correct colleagues that they are administrators and at times, are greeted with disdain or disbelief. Disbelief in the sense that their non-Black colleagues are surprised to learn of their professional level status, in addition to their academic credentials. Additionally, regarding the mammy stereotype, she is uneducated, timid, and could never be seen as an equal to their White counterparts (Boom, 2015). A few participants shared similar sentiments: Participant Q1: “I have an education, but why is this not enough?” Participant Q5: “I work twice as hard, pursuing a doctorate, yet, I am still getting paid less than my White counterparts, who do not have a master’s degree.” Participant Q10 said, “if I choose to speak up about the unfairness of how I am being treated, then will I be seen as aggressive? so most of the time I will remain silent.” Directives have been challenged, according to all of the participants, where their decision has

been either dismissed or challenged. Support from their own supervisor is lacking, where the majority of the participants do not feel supported or heard.

The stereotype regarding Black women being difficult or confrontational, falls under the trope of the angry 'Black woman' (Boom, 2015). This stereotype has been experienced by all of the participants, as current leaders in higher education. Additionally, the shared experience of being called angry were shared experiences from all participants. Another factor from this particular trope, is that all Black women are strong, which is not always true based on the responses from each participant. Participant Q7 shared: "I am far from angry, I am very passionate, but I have no reason to be angry and White colleagues can have a bad day, but once I do, it is an issue." The indication that a Black woman who is willing to speak up for what they believe, can be considered aggressive. All participants shared the experience that speaking passionately or speaking with their hands, have been deemed as either confrontational or being angry. Additionally, if this same action is done by a non-Black colleague, they are not accused of being angry or confrontational.

It is a cultural narrative that positions Black women as able to withstand any and all emotional difficulty faced without any support (Boom, 2015). All participants shared that they are expected to remain calm, while dealing with adversity because it is their job. They have been undermined by their non-Black colleagues, yet expected to handle the dismissive behavior with grace without an issue. Participants shared the sentiment that they are not always strong and have moments where they are feeling weak or unsure how to proceed. They do not believe that they have the flexibility or privilege to share their distress, because they are already deemed to be strong. Additionally, all participants have shared that they have been silenced and do not feel comfortable sharing their concerns caused by racial microaggression within the workplace. The



need to be guarded or remaining in a silo to avoid being called something that they are not, were common experiences shared by each Participant. The need to be perfect or going above and beyond to prove that all Black women are not the same, are daily actions utilized by each participant. As evidenced by Participant Q7's comment,

*“I am not seen as an equal, I am consistently mistaken as the supporting staff, I continue to look of disbelief because I speak in an articulate manner, if I am not smiling, then there is something wrong with me, all while remaining professional because if I am not, then there would be another reason added on what is wrong with me in their (White colleagues) eyes.” “It is exhausting to remain strong professionally because there is no room for errors and in comparison to my white counterparts (female and male) they have the privilege to mess up, without judgement.”*

The multiple facets of these stereotypes have motivated each participant to remain steadfast in their leadership position, while focusing on their job responsibility. The determination from each participant is to remain diligent, as well as patient while dealing with adversity within the workplace. Experiences shared by participants relative to their leadership position also elucidated the theme Black is Not a Monolith. Participant Q11 stated: “I tell my graduating students of color, that it is not easy to be in a leadership position while dealing with racial microaggression, nonetheless, once they cross that stage they have the freedom to ask about my experiences, where I can provide teaching moments for them.” Being educated on literature regarding the stereotypes of Black women is important to know, because it can prepare Black women to navigate accordingly when experiencing racial microaggression. Participants were adamant about being comfortable within your skin because confidence is a common factor

each Participant relied on in order to avoid feeling inadequate wholeheartedly due to the racial slights within the workplace.

As current leaders in higher education, each participant is required to remain professional regardless of adversity encountered within the workplace. The choice to remain steadfast, calm, and respectful while in discomfort caused by racial microaggression, can be taxing. All Participants expressed the importance of the development of their students, regardless of the challenges encountered within their department. The consistent challenges for a Black woman within the workplace, where she is trying to figure out how to fit in without compromising what makes her who she is, is one of the reasons why choosing a silo is an immediate option (Alao, 2021). Additionally, remaining in a silo by choice to avoid the accusation of either being angry or difficult, has caused all of the participants to remain cautious within the workplace. Black women within the workplace are at a crossroad while standing against racial microaggression, but prefer to remain in the background to protect their peace (Alao, 2021). Participants have mentioned that they are unable to be their true self, which means they are appeasing their non-Black colleagues so they (non-Black colleagues) can feel comfortable in the Participants' presence. Navigating through predominately White spaces in discomfort has created a resilience for each Participant that is required in order for their leadership to remain resolute.

### **Navigating in White Spaces While Wearing a Mask**

Black is not a monolith and this narrative should be shared to serve as a friendly reminder, that every Black person does not experience the same encounters or raised the same. Additionally, despite the lived experience, cultural, or ethnic background of a Black person within the African diaspora, a Black person is united by how their skin tone is interpreted in America (*Black is Not a Monolith | Reframing the Conversation*, 2021). Regardless of the

experience of the Black person, they seem to be categorized as the same by non-Blacks within the workplace. The participants have shared while navigating through White spaces within the workplace, the stress it entails has not impacted their diligence. All of the participants shared the importance in understanding the tasks as a current leader and regardless of any adversity, their job responsibility as a leader will always take precedence. As leaders in higher education, working in predominantly White spaces is another task to tackle, along with grace, patience, and confidence. As previously mentioned, Black people are not monolithic and navigating through White spaces has allowed these participants to not be themselves wholeheartedly to avoid being stereotyped; therefore, presenting themselves in the workplace with a mask in order to maintain and foster what are considered acceptable interactions by their White co-workers and supervisors. Participant Q2 elaborated on the differences regarding their tone and a non-Black subordinate:

*“Please understand that I am the leader in this situation and I speak to everyone with respect, and I am intentional in watching my tone of voice.” “I should also add, that this same colleague's (White female) facial expressions are usually mad or in disgust when speaking to anyone, however, I am ridiculed for speaking against what she thought was the best decision. At the end of the day, the decision made did not align with hers and she was upset for the remainder of the day.” “If I chose to act in this manner, my supervisor would probably not have been so patient.”*

Participants have shared that they are well-spoken, articulate, told that they speak very well, yet are questioned constantly about their academic credentials. The shared assumptions amongst the participants regarding their non-Black colleagues, is that the expectation is that Black people are not supposed to be well-versed or knowledgeable. The perspective that a Black

woman or person is either unsafe or difficult to work with has become a common occurrence within the workplace for these leaders (participants) and they choose to take the high road. All participants shared that they are not 100% comfortable with being their true representative of who they are because they are met with unwanted racial slights within the workplace. The impact in working within White spaces has caused each participant to remain guarded, where they may not become a topic of discussion regarding Black women or people in general.

The stereotype that Black women are lazy or unapproachable does not apply to each of these participants, as they are cognizant of these stereotypes, which encourages them to keep pushing. Additionally, the factors of being Black, a woman, and a leader within their department, can cause some disadvantages because they (Participants) are not seen as an equal. Participant Q5 elaborated on her experience working in predominantly White spaces:

*“Predominately white spaces can either break you or make you stronger and in my experience, it has allowed me to remain strong.” “I don’t have the choice to remain upset or pout, unlike my non-Black colleagues, I am always being scrutinized, so I continue to focus on how to navigate in these spaces (White) without losing my integrity.”*

The plethora of accomplishments attained by each participant, may not be appreciated by their fellow non-White colleague, nonetheless, this is the territory when working in predominantly White spaces. Black women within the workplace have done their best to look the part, in order to belong or fit in within the culture of their work environment (May, 2019). For example, choosing to wear their hair relaxed in a slick bun, or wearing blazers instead of a colorful African print attire in order to fit in and not be judged wholeheartedly. Black women engaging in small talks with non-Black colleagues on topics that may not be relatable can possibly welcome questions stemmed by biased perspectives. In addition, Black women may not be comfortable in

expressing their concern and keeping a mask on, while navigating through predominately White spaces serves as the best option for office survival. The misery of not being able to be your true-self outside of your personal comfort zone, can cause internal distress or misery (May, 2019). All of the participants have expressed this shared experience, where the choice to be something they are not, in order to navigate through predominately White spaces and not be stereotyped is more of a necessity than a choice.

### **Performance as a Leader Instead of Supporting Staff**

The idea of speaking out against racism or unfair treatment experienced within the workplace for a Black woman can be daunting. Based on the interviews, participants shared their experiences about unfair treatment within the workplace as a current leader, and did not believe their concerns would be validated if reported. Additionally, there is the chance that if they choose to speak up, then their position as a leader would be in jeopardy. Black women may not have the luxury to express a concern without expecting backlash from either their fellow colleagues or management. The act of being undermined within the workplace, per each participants' experiences, has welcomed a form of disconnect between leadership and subordinates. Both sexism and racism, along with the lack of leadership support can negatively impact the Black woman's experience within the workplace (Connely, 2020). Additionally, all of the participants had to defend their directives, due to the lack of support from either senior leadership or colleagues who failed to support their decision-making. Subordinates should not have the privilege to undermine their leader without consequences, yet, all participants have not received support within their department/institution regarding this type of matter.

The questions about hairstyles or the upkeep of hair, is another uncomfortable factor experienced by all of the participants. Overall, each participant expressed the need to defend their directives as leaders within their field, where their White colleagues' directives are respected without resistance. As a professional leader within their department, the responsibility is to represent the institution with high regard, and this is also expected from each employee. Participants shared their reason to pursue a silo nature to help avoid the discomfort caused by questions regarding their academic credentials, professional position, or their hair. Participant Q10 elaborated on why she chooses to remain in silo, especially due to questions regarding her hair:

*“I have been told that my hair styles are nice, but why do I continue to change my look?”*

*“How often do you wash your hair, like you do wash your hair right?”*

*“Why can't I touch your hair? It is so nice, I just want to see how it feels?”*

She also shared

*“I feel like it would be best for them (White colleagues) if I remained quiet and invisible, but I have earned my Master's degree and position so why should I remain quiet?...I find myself asking what did I do wrong or is there something wrong with me, as I have no one at my job to speak to about this.”*

Additionally, eight out of the eleven participants shared that if they choose to kindly decline an attempt from a colleague from touching their hair, then they are seen as confrontational. The best choice of action on how to respond during this type of dialogue, is a common factor shared amongst these participants. Additionally, all participants shared their experience of being addressed as a staff member, or the surprised responses when their non-Black colleagues are corrected on their actual professional title. In addition to being treated

unfairly as a leader, while presumed to be a supporting staff member, a form of overall discomfort within the workplace has been created. The constant disrespect caused by racial slights, ignored directives, or the lack of support from management, has caused unwanted stress and discomfort within the workplace. Each participant takes delight in their leadership roles and are unalarmed by challenges, however, encounters with racial microaggression has caused them to work their best despite their discomfort. Additionally, each participant has been in situations where they are seen as the aggressor, when the cause of the distress were statements made by a non-Black colleague repeating a specific stereotype. As leaders, they have the right to address their concerns with either the subordinates or management, however, the support may be lackluster. Participant Q10 along with a few other participants share the following sentiments:

*“The luxury of being non-Black in the workplace is something that I will never experience.”*

The performance as a leader within their department was never a shared concern from each participant, the assumption that they were the supporting staff member was more alarming. Each Participant felt the need to always prove that they belong within their department, as a professional leader regardless of the belief system of their non-Black colleagues.

Resilience is a common factor utilized by each leader (participant), as the choice is to persevere and not fail.

All of the participants believed their leadership abilities were up to par, where they are unfearful in making decisions or completing tasks. Additionally, all eleven participants have been mistaken as a supporting staff member and greeted with astonishment from non-Black colleagues within their department or institution. The sense of belonging or acceptance would be ideal based on the overall shared experiences of each participant, however, this may not always

be the case and focusing on their leadership responsibilities takes priority over the disrespect caused by racial microaggression. The multiple supporting staff positions within higher education are respected, however, the assumption that a Black woman is automatically an Assistant, and not a Vice President for example, is a part of the problematic issue within the racial microaggression realm. As a director within her department, Participant Q10 witnessed the unfair treatment from non-Black colleagues when vocalizing on a current topic within the department. The lack of accountability and support from her supervisor has caused an unfortunate discord within the workplace environment. Participant Q10 added: "I go above and beyond to make sure my colleagues are comfortable around me because I am the only Black person in my department." Participant Q4 who is the Dean/VP of her division elaborated on the actions of others:

*"I have been in this field for more than 30 years and I have learned to accept that this is how people choose to be, but that their actions do not define my work."*

All of the participants have been intentional regarding their verbal directives, as well as using their hand gestures while communicating to avoid the accusation of being confrontational. A common factor shared regarding leadership within predominantly White spaces, is the significance in focusing on the bigger picture, which is leading effectively and providing support for students. The lack of respect encountered as a leader within the workplace, has caused each Participant to temporarily feel like their work and efforts may not be enough.

Two (2) out of the eleven (11) participants identified their height stature as petite and are not acknowledged or respected as a leader. Being mistaken as a current staff member and not being recognized initially as a professional leader, are shared experiences mentioned throughout



these interviews. Each participant is no longer taken aback when their leadership and academic credentials are questioned by non-Black colleagues.

The variation of years experienced within their (participants) leadership roles, have allotted them to gain ‘thick skin’ to survive as a Black woman within the workplace. Regardless of whether a participant has been in their leadership position for more than fifteen (15) years or less than ten (10) years, the shared concern is that respect is not always given, while racial slights are more prevalent within the workplace. Three (3) out of the eleven (11) participants work mostly with White male colleagues, while three (3) out of eleven (11) worked with a mixture of both White males and females within their department. The shared experience is that White male specifically, are not held at the same level of accountability when undermining directives towards their Black female professional leader. Additionally, there is lack of support or reprimand toward this type of behavior and Participant Q11 elaborated on undermining directives:

*“I have never witnessed my White colleagues being undermined or disrespected when directives are given.” “White male colleagues within the workplace with or without a leadership role, receive the most respect regardless of their position or actions.”*

All of the participants have shared that they may switch their leadership style in order to conform to the comfort of their non-Black colleagues. Additionally, due to the lack of support from senior level management, as a current leader they choose to figure out the best approach on getting their voice heard. In addition to being seen as a supporting staff member, the idea of speaking or defending herself could either lead to losing their position or create a discord within the workplace, per each participant. The constant assumption of being a supportive staff, has allowed

each participant to second guess themselves during a time in their professional leadership experience.

All of the participants decided to make the intentional choice on how to respond towards racial slights experienced within the workplace. The shared experiences from each participant not feeling supported comes with the territory as a Black female leader, where the best decision is to navigate through these types of adversity. Authenticity, along with remaining true to self, were important factors shared by each participant. Participants mentioned the imposter syndrome a few times, where they question if they belong in the spaces they work. The reason for this type of inquiry is due to the constant experiences from non-Black colleagues who continue to question their existence or their directives. All participants did not intentionally choose to remain untrue to who they are, however, in order to survive each day, composing their true self was a form of survival tactic within the workplace. Racial battle fatigue was mentioned by one participant, who expressed the daily stress caused by the racial slights from her non-White colleagues (Smith et al., 2016). Additionally, the lack of available support for each participant, where there are limited resources to express a concern, has made it challenging to share her concerns without judgement.

### **Reservation about Speaking Out Against Racial Microaggression**

Black women have an acute understanding of the negative impacts of sexism, racism, and class discrimination (Collins, 1991). The experience of racial microaggression within the workplace has varied based on the perspective of each Participant. As previously mentioned, Black people (women) are not a monolith, and their experience with racial microaggression will vary (*Black is Not a Monolith / Reframing the Conversation*, 2021). The variety in working mostly in White spaces with either females, males, or a mixture provides different insights

regarding their experiences. Additionally, the lack of available support has caused these participants to remain mostly in silo out of concern that they may not be taken seriously or seen as problematic. The inequalities faced by Black women within the workplace can be emotionally taxing because they choose to remain guarded to protect themselves against discrimination, unfair treatment, or biases (Connely, 2020). The emotional tax caused by choosing to remain silent on the experiences of racial slights caused by non-Black colleagues, is a main reason there is resistance in speaking out against racial microaggression (Connely, 2020). Participant Q10 shared the concern about attending weekly meetings within her department because the burden of being stereotyped has impacted her confidence and comfort within her institution. Participant Q10, believes it is best for her to choose her battles wisely, out of concern of being misunderstood.

The experience of being both Black and a woman have their own unique challenges. Table 3 includes the overarching types from the racial microaggression experiences, as well as the amount of times they were mentioned. The most common type regarding racial microaggression experienced from all participants, is being called angry or aggressive.

**Table 3***Types of Racial Microaggression and the Number of Times Mentioned*

Types of Racial Microaggression	Number of times mentioned
Incompetent: uneducated as a leader in Higher Education	11
Cultural differences; communication styles	4
Overlooked on promotion; wage-gap (Racial and Gender)	5
Hairstyle inquiry; touching hair	8
Undermined on directives or being called aggressive	11
Dealing with the assumption based on stereotype	11

Due to the overarching types of racial microaggression expressed by the participants, the different types of racial slights encountered within the workplace, are also shared experiences amongst the Participants. Speaking out against the unfairness based on gender, race, or both has been a challenge for each Participant because they may not or have not been supported by management in the past. Additionally, speaking out could be seen as an attack towards the non-Black colleagues that caused the strife within the workplace. Directives being undermined, along with the lack of support when this transpires within the workplace, does not encourage these Participants to believe that change could be attained. Elaboration of each type of microaggression that contributes to this theme, Reservation about Speaking Out Against Racial Microaggression, as expressed by the Participants is included to frame this experience of the phenomena.

### ***Incompetent or Uneducated as a Leader in Higher Education***

Regardless of their academic credentials, years of experience, and passion for students, each Participant encountered countless disrespect from their non-Black colleagues regarding their professional status. Additionally, in their experience, they have not witnessed the same type of disrespect towards their non-White colleagues. Directives being ignored or challenged, has been an overall shared experience amongst the Participants. As current leaders within higher education, guiding a meeting or a training is a part of their job responsibilities, however, being blatantly disrespectful by a subordinate has been experienced on multiple occasions. The stereotype that Black women are uneducated, or incompetent does not apply to these participants, and they do believe for the most part that they are being silenced intentionally. Participants have shared their encounters with non-Black colleagues (female or male) where they are being interrupted while either providing a directive or suggestion. If or when this happens nothing is said, and the Participant is left feeling unsupported and uncomfortable. The question on why they pursue a master's or a Doctoral degree, along with the tone of astonishment is another factor that is unsurprisingly received by each Participant. All of the participants believe that higher education is about developing, educating, and providing unique support for all students and they (participants) prefer to channel their energy towards student development as much as possible. There is no luxury to dwell on hurt feelings, as there is work to be accomplished regardless of how they receive the racial slights from their colleagues.

### ***Cultural Differences/Communication Styles***

Four (4) participants shared their experiences regarding the cultural differences and communication styles within the workplace. These participants were first-generation born in the United States and have encountered stereotypes regarding their cultural background within the

workplace. For example, Participant Q9 is of Haitian descent was met with astonishment from a fellow non-White female colleague who did not believe that Haitians were educated.

Additionally, this colleague was unaware of their offensive remark and continued to inquire about the length of time this participant took in order to attain their degree. This participant has expressed that they are very proud of their heritage and refuses to allow offensive remarks to deter them from remaining an effective leader. Participant Q1 who is also of Caribbean descent was told that she was very easy to talk to, which was a surprise from her White female colleague. Instead of responding, this Participant remained silent, as she was unsure how this colleague would respond to how she truly felt. The challenge in these types of situations is not internalizing what is being said, even though it is not their (Participant) reality. The stereotype regarding Caribbean women is that they were born in a third world country and do not have the means to receive an education. Additionally, these participants who are current leaders in higher education, have experienced different racial slights along with the perception of the Caribbean from their non-Black colleagues.

### ***Overlooked on Promotion or Wage-gap***

Five (5) out of the eleven (11) expressed their experiences of being overlooked for a promotion or their knowledge regarding the wage gap. Black women are paid less than their White male counterparts, regardless of their academic credentials and years of experience. Additionally, these participants have been passed over for a promotion, even though they had the qualifications. Participant Q9 expressed that she believes due to her race and gender, is the reason why she is underpaid, even though her years and education should matter. All of the participants shared that their non-White colleagues (female or male) that were elevated, did not have the years of experience or academic credentials, yet they were qualified for the

promotion. Participant Q5 is a director, who has more job responsibilities than her fellow White male colleague, who was promoted over her and is receiving a higher pay grade. She also expressed that this colleague is currently in their Master's program, while she is pursuing a doctorate.

The concern about speaking up has been a shared experience of these participants, however, a few expressed that they have the right to understand the rationale of the decision-making on why they were overlooked. The expectation to work as hard as their other colleagues, without the fair compensation, is an unfair treatment that has been overlooked for a very long time. Advocacy was a shared experience from these participants, as there is no one but them to speak up when experiencing injustice or unfairness within the workplace. Participant Q10 expressed that it seemed to have been a problem when a compensation concern was brought to her manager's attention. Instead of feeling supportive, she recognized then that she will need to keep her concerns to herself and speak on her own behalf.

### ***Hairstyle Inquiry/Touching Hair***

Eight (8) out of the eleven (11) participants expressed their experiences within the workplace regarding their hair texture, hairstyle, or hair upkeep. In addition to the different racial slights mentioned to these participants, they have found themselves defending their hairstyles or explaining in detail to non-Black colleagues why their hair is in a particular state. These participants have expressed that wearing their hair in different styles is a part of their personal style and this should not be a form of discussion initiated by another person. During meetings or training, participants' have received questions from colleagues on how often they wash their hair, or why their hairstyle is different each week. The questions may be innocent, but the concern is that it is mentioned during meetings, where their hair is not a part of the agenda.

Additionally, non-Black colleagues have shared that offense when a participant refuses to allow them to touch their hair. The feeling of being on display each time a new hairstyle is seen, has allowed each participant to feel uncomfortable. If they choose to explain that they are at a discomfort with this type of dialogue, then they may be either seen as being difficult or confrontational. Participant Q8 expressed that she is not a pet, that Black women are not pets to be viewed and petted. She also added that she appreciates the admiration, however, it gets to a point where the discomfort is intolerable.

### ***Undermined on Directives or Being Called Aggressive***

All eleven participants (11) indicated they have been undermined by their subordinates within the workplace, where the lack of support was provided from upper management when this occurred. Additionally, as current leaders in higher education, these types of occurrences have happened on countless occasions. The concern of these participants is that when directives are undermined, there are no consequences implemented, however, if they were to do the same thing, they would be reprimanded without question. The majority of the participants have also shared that they are more than just the token Black worker within the workplace. Overall, they have expressed that they should not be the only colleague speaking on Black issues. They are not the spokesperson for all Black people, and race is never a simple topic to address. Participant Q6 expressed it can be very tiresome educating Whites on the disadvantage Blacks experience. The positive is the opportunity to help non-Blacks to understand a snippet of what Black people experience regarding racial injustice or being stereotyped.

Participants shared their experiences of being called too aggressive or confrontational and most of the participants do not identify as confrontational. This particular trope encouraged the majority of the participants to be very intentional on how to respond, which includes their hand



gestures, body language, as well as tone. Participants have shared that their White female colleagues are not held at the same level, and no assumptions are made based on their disposition. The overall frustration shared by all participants is the disparity between their non-Black colleagues' behavior, where they are not reprimanded, but they (participants) are automatically placed in a category of difficulty based on stereotypes or assumptions.

### ***Dealing with the Assumptions of Black Women Due to Stereotypes***

All eleven (11) participants expressed that their non-Black colleagues have applied the stereotypes of Black women towards them, as well as remain uncomfortable on speaking up. The action in speaking up has been seen as being either confrontational or aggressive. The thought process on how to navigate within the workplace when encountering discomfort caused by racial microaggression has encouraged the majority of the participants to remain steadfast as leaders within their institution. Due to these assumptions, the majority of the participants believed that they have been overlooked for a promotion or they should be timid in order for non-Blacks to feel comfortable within their presence. Participants who have been promoted, had the sense of belonging, but were met with resistance from colleagues, who have expressed that they did not deserve this form of elevation. The idea that it would be best for non-Black colleagues to work with a meeker Black female because she is not as expressive, indicates that silence works best in their favor (White colleague). The act of working in predominantly White spaces can be taxing, but the opportunity to seek comfort from other Black colleagues outside of their department could pacify the hurt experienced within the workplace. Each participant reported that they enjoy their leadership positions and believe there is always an opportunity for teachable moments when racial microaggression is experienced. The challenge is accountability from colleagues who participate in such conduct. Additionally, proving that they belong or are capable

of doing their job is a constant battle encumbered by each participant, who does not feel it is worthy to convince non-Blacks that there is an issue regarding racial microaggression.

The multiple layers each participant chooses to pursue to avoid being outed as a stereotype, is another factor of racial battle fatigue (RBF) (Smith et al., 2016). All of the participants expressed the importance in surviving this type of space because it can assist their students who are experiencing a form a racial injustices on how to navigate effectively. Being seen as a threat is a shared experience from the participants, which can cause distress within the workplace. The constant reminder that stereotypes are applied, while avoiding being called a stereotype or having directives ignored, can be daunting. Participant Q3 expressed that she creates multiple scenarios in her mind on how to confront or manage a situation within the workplace. The sense of belonging is challenged each time they (participants) are undermined, where the imposter syndrome was mentioned a few times because of this. Participant Q9 embodied this sentiment with her statements,

*“I remain in silo, alone because it is safe. I am not allowed to be me, so why even bother.”*

*“I am a Director and have the right to be here, but I don’t have the right to be the true me and I find myself questioning if I deserve this, if I belong, when will I be accepted.”*

*“I am a bubbly person, who enjoys being around people, but in my department I feel like I am an intruder, like I don’t belong here”*

Each participant indicated they do not believe that they belong in a category of stereotypes that does not apply to them. Additionally, they are proud of their leadership role within higher education, where the opportunity to lead, guide, and positively influence students are important factors to consider. The lack of support or constant disrespect endured due to racial

microaggression has enabled them to remain both resilient and steadfast. Overall, each participant continues to recognize that they have rightfully earned their degrees, their leadership position, and the right to be a part of their current institution. The acts of others should not define their ability to successfully accomplish their given tasks as administrators. The stereotypes created towards Black women, which has been executed within the workplace has allowed them (participants overall) to remain guarded as a leader. Additionally, the following overarching themes which were mentioned throughout the interview, has enabled them to remain steadfast because they anticipate this type of behavior.

Racial battle fatigue (RBF) is caused by distress, where a person of color anticipates encountering racial slights within their workplace (Smith et al., 2016). Black women of African descent have experienced a plethora of challenges within the workplace, which in return can hinder their growth as successful and effective leaders. The following factors have been prevalent towards the experience of the Black women leader: black gender discrimination, race, and different types of microaggressions which stemmed from unfortunate stereotypes (McGrit, 2017). As expressed throughout this section, Participants who felt the need to alter their leadership style were able to navigate through predominantly White spaces effectively because racial microaggression is not a surprise, it is more of an expectation. Stereotypes encountered within the workplace, especially in predominantly White spaces have been a part of the professional experiences of each Participant. Additionally, the ultimate goal is to support their students, while creating a new path for future Black female leaders.

### **Conclusion and Summary**

This chapter elicited a combination of phenomenological methodology of Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2015), which aided the researcher in developing themes that captured the

true experience of Black women and how they experienced microaggression. The stereotypes of Black women, the behaviors within the workplace, and the overall experiences of racial microaggression were the emerging themes regarding Participants' encounters in the workplace. This chapter also expressed how Black female leaders navigate through predominately White spaces as either a mid-level or senior-level leader within their department/institution. The effect of these experiences has not necessarily negatively impacted their work performance, nonetheless, they do not rely on support from colleagues in the workplace, as working or feeling in a silo serves as a survival approach.

Due to the five (5) tropes regarding the stereotypes towards Black women, each participant chose to remain steadfast as a current leader within their institution regardless of setbacks caused by racial slights. The experience of working in predominantly White spaces has been challenging to navigate while avoiding the stereotypical judgement made by White colleagues. Participants shared that Black women (people) are not a monolith and assumptions should not be made before knowing who they are first. Lastly, the stereotype of being uneducated or directives being ignored, are factors of racial microaggression encountered as a Black female leader in higher education. The next and final chapter presented the interpretation of findings, implications, recommendations for action, recommendations for further study, and the conclusion.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study focused on the direct experience of Black female leaders facing racial microaggression while employed in higher education. One-on-one semi-structured interviews highlighted the lived experiences of this specific population. The limited research available on the experience of Black female leaders in higher education sought to capture a transparent narrative from each participant. Their unique experiences with racial microaggression leaders in higher education were led by the following research question: How do Black female leaders in higher education perceive the impact, if any, of racial microaggression on their role as a leader? The exploration of the lived experiences of each participant, provided more in depth understanding regarding their experiences as a professional leader within higher education and identified key components caused from racial microaggression. The effects of racial microaggression as a mid or senior level leader, as a Black person, and female were broken down by the unique situations encountered within the workplace.

This study used a phenomenological approach to collect qualitative data via one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The data was coded and analyzed to identify emergent themes from this research exploration. The themes identified from the generated codes stemmed directly from the twelve (12) research questions during the interview with each participant. These themes were analyzed and presented in Chapter (4) four, where the researcher discussed emerging patterns within each theme. Additionally, the themes that surfaced from the interviews, focused on the following: navigating through predominantly White spaces, not living up to the stereotypes towards Black women, and remaining steadfast for the students who rely on their professional

leadership. The societal perception of Black women within the workplace was consistently shared by each participant. This chapter focused on how the themes that emerged from the research findings aligned with the literature, which included the theoretical framework of Black Feminist theory. In addition, recommended action and further research, as well as the conclusion will be presented.

Black women progressing to leadership roles within academia has slowly increased in the 21st century, however, women of color in leadership roles are still underrepresented (Miles, 2012). The lack of Black women in senior administration positions within higher education continues to be a consistent concern from the participants, who are seeking additional guidance on how to navigate in spaces where they are silenced or unheard. Black women in either mid or senior level roles seek policy changes, where it addresses unfair treatment within the workplace without being condemned for speaking up.

Previous research regarding Black women and racial microaggression have been covered in different fields, but there is limited research focusing on Black women leaders in higher education experiencing racial microaggression (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). The expectations and demands within a leadership position were constant factors shared by each participant, who recognized how important it is to serve their students with compassion and dedication. While encountering a form of racial microaggression within the workplace, the feeling of being stigmatized based on either their gender or race, has forced them to remain steadfast in executing their professionalism, no matter how much they may feel disrespected or dismissed.

### **Interpretations of Findings**

The analysis of the data from the one-on-one semi-structured interviews touched on the following emerging themes based on either race, gender, or both were discovered: stereotypes

about Black women, behavior from non-Blacks within the workplace, and the experience of racial microaggression within the workplace. The data and analysis derived from the research was based on the following two (2) research questions:

RQ1: What is the lived experience of Black female leaders in higher education with racial microaggression?

RQ2: How do Black female leaders in higher education perceive the impact, if any, of racial microaggression on their role as a leader?

The historical factors regarding Black women and their professional experiences vary based on their cultural environment, gender discrimination, prejudices, or lack of support within the workplace (Miles, 2012). While there is significant research available regarding Black female leaders within higher education, literature regarding the impact of racial microaggression for this population seems to be scarce (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). Additionally, navigating through both sexism and racism within the workplace may impact a Black female's confidence (Miles, 2012). The following are reflections of the interpretation of the findings.

### **Racial Microaggression and Leadership**

The connection between the research questions and the responses from each participant, included their unique approach on how to navigate as a leader while experiencing racial microaggression within the workplace. According to Mosley (2020), Black women have been pre-judged based on either their race, gender, or both before learning about their ability to perform as a professional. Black female leaders in higher education either in mid or senior level jobs who experience a form of microaggression may not have available resources or support within their institution to share their concerns regarding these types of ongoing encounters. The expectation of their (participants') behavior from each institution is to execute excellent work

regardless of any challenges or adversity that may arise. The participants in the study reflected upon how stereotypes played a critical role as a current leader, which has caused unwanted distress.

Several participants mentioned the psychological symptoms of racial battle fatigue (RBF) associated with microaggression as a leader within the workplace (Smith, 2008). Additionally, being undermined as a leader where subordinates are comfortable challenging directives due to either race or gender or both, have become both taxing and complex as a Black female leader. Participants have shared that their White female colleagues seem to be intrigued by specific hairstyles or if the participants washes their hair daily. These types of dialogue are not always welcomed, especially during meeting or conference settings and participants have chosen not to fully indulge in such conversation. Subordinates who are comfortable undermining or offending their Black female leader, creates an uncomfortable work environment. Due to the negative stereotypes regarding Black women being either angry or confrontational, defending themselves may be seen as a negative dynamic, which encourages the participants to keep their concerns in silence.

### **Alignment with the Black Feminist Theory Framework**

The lived experience of Black female leaders in higher education and their experience with racial microaggression, aligned with the focus of the Black feminist theory, which centralizes and validates the intersectional dimensions of both race and gender based on the different experiences of Black women (Collins, 1991). The Black feminist theory consists of four themes based on the experiences of Black women. The first theme, is the lived experience as a criterion of meaning or the knowledge gained by Black women regarding their unique experiences (Collins, 1991). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the



lived experience of Black female leaders in higher education and their encounter with racial microaggression within the workplace. Black people, or Black women, are not monolithic, their experiences, their culture, and their perspectives will and do vary. Additionally, the more narratives shared regarding their unique experiences, can provide a better understanding on how to support this group that is feeling isolated within their respective leadership roles.

The second theme of Black feminist theory is the use of dialogue or establishing important bonds and relationships where contentious or oppressive situations are present, can seldom cause isolation (Collins, 1991). Participants in this study shared that they choose to remain guarded or in a silo, as they usually do not have an additional colleague to share their experiences or/concerns with. The participants are primarily employed in predominantly White spaces, therefore, there is limited opportunity to converse with another Black colleague. Black or African-American women have developed distinctive interpretations of a Black woman's oppression, where there is an underlying understanding of possible shared experiences (Tong, 2019). These types of shared experiences among the participants has allowed them to remain in a silo, because the opportunity to share their experiences with another Black colleague, comfortably, is limited. The participants have shared that the lack of Black female representatives within the senior administration level, could be a partial reason of why support is unavailable within the workplace regarding their encounters of racial microaggression.

The overall concern of each participant regarding support, was the lack of diversity within their institution, in order to understand the impact caused by racial microaggression. Their perspective and experiences within the workplace are unique and support is unavailable, for multiple reasons. For one, the participants that choose to remain silent, out of concern of being singled out from their non-Black colleagues, who may not understand encounters with racial

microaggression. Each participant was cognizant of how Black women are perceived and are very mindful of how they choose to move within the workplace. The Black feminist theory, focuses on the intersectionality of Black women, their experiences in dealing with the double oppression of both their gender and race, as well as remaining steadfast, without projecting vulnerability (Collins, 1991). Additionally, the lack of Blacks in senior administration roles, could make their concerns seem minor, based on the responses from their immediate supervisor. The common shared experiences regarding ignored directives by each participant as a current professional leader, has encouraged their subordinates or colleagues to not adhere to their decision-making. The overall message executed within the workplace from subordinates who chose to ignore directives, have not been reprimanded for their choice of actions. The decision to remain in a silo due to the lack of support or respect for the participants' leadership position were commonly shared experiences.

The unique experiences by Black women regarding the ethic of caring which incorporates the use of expressiveness, empathy, or emotions are common factors, which is one of the third themes of the Black feminist theory Collins (1991). Black female leaders in higher education have experienced their unique form of racial microaggression that could be either verbal, behavioral, or environmental (Harrison & Tanner, 2018). Participants in this phenomenological study shared when using their hands to express their thoughts, it is assumed that they are being confrontational. The inability to freely express yourself as a Black female leader without concern of being stereotyped, are shared experiences among all participants. An example of verbal microaggression shared by one participant was: "I didn't think Haitians have degrees because they are from a third world country". An example of behavioral microaggression is ignoring a person based on their gender or sex intentionally due to personal biases or discriminatory

ideologies of a specific group (Pierce, 1970). Black women may not have the privilege to express themselves authentically around their White colleagues, without the concern of being perceived as a stereotype that does not apply to them (Roberts et al., 2018). All of the participants expressed that being passionate should not equate to being aggressive. Support, along with empathy is a part of their job description, which serves as a reminder to remain steadfast within their position.

The next Black feminist theory theme, which also emerged from the findings, was ethics of personal accountability which lacks objectivity (Collins, 1991). Collins (2006) stated that these themes expressed by Black women may vary due to the differences in region, class, age, and ethnicity, which can individually impact the lives of these women. The lack of accountability is not necessarily demanded when a form of racial slights is directed from a White colleague, which is a shared experience from each participant within the workplace. The participants in this study shared they are expected to remain professional regardless of any adversity experienced within the office, however, their fellow non-Black colleagues are not held to the same expectation. They are also expected to be held accountable for actions such as, ignoring directives or vocalizing a racial slight within the workplace.

Participants in this phenomenological study shared their intentions for making their non-White colleagues comfortable in their space, regardless of discomfort caused by the racial slights. Although the participants did not mention having fear of their colleagues, they shared how they felt disrespected in situations where they could not share their concerns. The race and gender intersectionality of these participants were mentioned throughout the interviews, as they have been treated differently within the workplace by their non-Black colleagues. Collins' (2006) themes correlated to the analysis of the data due to the shared experiences of Black

women navigating through spaces, where they are a part of the marginalized group. The participants' experiences regarding racial microaggression and choosing to remain in a silo, due to the lack of support, connects to the overall research.

The lived experiences of each participant aligned with the Black feminist theory (Collins, 1991), where the opportunity to express themselves while sharing their unique experiences demonstrated a prolific connection because in order for these experiences to decrease, the elimination of sexism and racism, and their intersection, would be the first step. The intersectional identities of Black women and their experiences should be shared, to educate society on why racial microaggression is important to explore. Having a voice is a form of empowerment, however, it is not always accepted and respected within the workplace. The participants may have expressed their pessimistic perspectives regarding racial microaggression, nonetheless, they are adamant about persevering because they recognize that they do belong amongst their non-Black colleagues.

### **Intersectionality Theory and Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF)**

Intersectionality provides a lens for understanding regarding instances where oppression is prevalent (Crenshaw et al., 2013). Crenshaw's theory focused on the experience of gender and race as well as racial battle fatigue (RBF) that can develop while living in the United States (Smith et al., 2016). RBF can be described as a public and mental health illness, where it stems from both racism and microaggression (Smith, 2017). Oppression is relevant regarding the participants' experience with racial microaggression, which is based on both their race and gender. The participants would encounter racial slights based on their gender, race, or both due to the demographics within the workplace. One of the participant's shared their encounters with her predominantly White male colleagues, where she is their superior, but has been dismissed

without hesitation during meetings or training. The lack of respect as Black women, while working predominantly with White male, has been very challenging for this participant. Participants' experiences varied based on the racial slights stemming directly from predominantly White females, males, or both within the workplace.

Oppression experienced by Black women derives from the racist perception regarding gender and race due to the intersecting hierarchies of gender, class, and race (Collins & Essed, 1992). Due to the tropes of Black women, each participant has encountered a form of disrespect from White male colleagues, who are never reprimanded for their actions. One participant shared that she was passed over for a promotion because management did not want to hurt the White colleague's feelings or leave the department. Based on the everyday experiences of Black women, their standpoint is marked by an intersectional understanding of oppression and a legacy of struggle against such oppression (Harnois, 2010). Each participant have shared their unique experiences about directives being ignored, not being seen as an equal as a current leader, and being silenced are daily occurrences within the workplace.

Racial microaggression and RBF are interchangeable due to the fact that stereotypes are untrue and anticipating this type of encounter can become tiresome (Smith, 2017). The participants shared the following direct exposure to microaggression on a daily basis: astonished non-Black colleagues who are surprised by their articulation, academic credentials, or focusing on the texture of their hair or hair upkeep for example. The challenge in encountering these types of actions, from colleagues, supervisor, or subordinates, could eventually cause a psychological mental breakdown (Smith, 2017). The work environment should feel, as well as be, a safe place for all employees, however, if one is experiencing anxiety coming into work because of what is being encountered, this can negatively impact a person's overall health. Racial battle fatigue

(RBF) is experienced by individuals who experience unwanted slights, and regardless of their position, they are hesitant in speaking up out of concern on how they will be received (Smith, 2017). The consistency in facing insensitive comments or actions, can create a hostile environment, where the Participant is responsible for the actions caused by others. Smith (2017) also indicated that racial battle fatigue can lead to mental illness if the individual is unaware of how racial insensitivity within the workplace is not addressed. Additionally, RBF can be described as a public and mental health illness, where it stems from both racism and microaggression (Smith, 2017). The participants in this study were not fully comfortable in sharing the unprofessional remarks made by their non-Black colleagues, therefore, this may have interfered with their ability to be transparent about their overall experience regarding racial microaggression. The participants shared that they have grown accustomed to not having support within their leadership role and continue to persevere regardless of adversity encountered based on their race, gender, or both. The following will focus on the interpretations of findings, which are based on the analyzed data.

### **Implications**

This study had pragmatic implications for professionals within higher education, who may or may not be aware of the racial encounters experienced by Black female leaders. Regardless of the academic credentials (e.g., Master's, Doctorate, or Juris) and the current leadership role of each participant in this field of higher education, they feel the need to continue to prove why they belong within their institution. Additionally, being undermined as a current professional leader in higher education, where subordinates are not reprimanded for these actions, were similar experiences shared by all participants. This study's findings included the limitations Black female leaders encountered when attempting to speak up for themselves

without being judged as aggressive or intimidating. For example, a couple of participants who identified as short stature, are not seen as qualified or confident due to their under 5'5 height. When participants chose to address their concern, they were accused of being confrontational or difficult by their White male-colleagues. The constant banter of stereotypes regarding Black women, has encouraged the participants to remain more in a silo and extra guarded. Another example shared by a participant regarding a conversation about her hair, where she expressed that this was not a topic she was comfortable engaging in, was told that she was being too sensitive. The lack of support available or willingness to understand the unique experiences caused by racial microaggression, has caused the participants to feel temporarily stifled. A participant, who has been in the field of higher education as a leader for over fifteen (15) years, does not believe she will ever have the privilege to speak as freely without repercussions in comparison to her non-Black colleagues.

Participants indicated that having more diverse representation within senior leadership, can provide more options for support and better education regarding racial slights within the workplace. Additionally, a participant shared the important factor that diversity is more about the inclusion of different races, it should also include different ideologies, which can represent more than one group within their institution. In doing so, professionals within the field of higher education, which includes senior administration, should be knowledgeable about racial microaggression, as biases and discrimination exists within the workplace (Pittman, 2012). As stated by all of the participants, a hostile work environment can be created indirectly or directly, regardless of employees causing the toxicity being aware or unaware that their actions affect the individuals it is directed towards. Additionally, each participant's institutions are expected to

provide diverse education and effective support for all students, however, the contradictions of not providing this same type of support as Black female leaders seems to be an on-going issue.

Lastly, Black women are receiving their bachelor's and master's degrees at a higher rate in the past 10 years, where they may have the qualifications to become future leaders in higher education (NCES, 2019). However, based on the analyzed data from this phenomenological study, participants do not feel supported from their direct supervisor or from senior administration. Participants shared the importance of representation because students, especially female students of color (or Black) may want to pursue a career in higher education and may require guidance on how to accomplish this goal. Nine (9) out of the eleven (11) participants shared that their current role as a leader is to exhibit to students that they can also attain leadership roles as a person of color within higher education. The adversity encountered within the workplace will be inevitable, nonetheless, each participant's passion towards education and students motivates them to excel as a current leader.

Leadership requires organizational skills and the ability to guide with confidence as well as purpose (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011). Undermining directives should be further explored based on the experiences of each participant, as it is setting an example that it is acceptable to be insubordinate to a Black female leader within the workplace. Additionally, all of the participants shared that future Black female leaders seeking employment in higher education should not be concerned about experiencing racial microaggression within the workplace, however, this is a reality which may continue to happen. Participants also shared that change will not occur within their institution if accountability is not executed toward colleagues engaging in racial slights. The act of remaining in a silo due to the lack of available support, which has caused discomfort within the workplace, should not be acceptable at any professional level.



Based on the analyzed data, it is relevant to learn different approaches on how to navigate the encounters of racial microaggression as a Black female leader within the workplace. Participants have shared that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training are not enough because personal biases from employees are not evaluated. Five (5) out of the eleven (11) participants, shared the importance of allowing DEI training to become more relatable, where non-Black colleagues can participate in different types of scenarios which mirrors forms of racial microaggression. All of the participants are not convinced that racial microaggression will not be dismantled within their department or institution, nonetheless, each participant is more focused on proceeding as effective professional leaders within their institution.

### **The Principal Investigator**

The principal investigator of this study is a woman of African (Jamaican) descent and works in the field of higher education, while pursuing her doctorate degree in Educational Leadership. During this study, she worked in the northeast region of the United States and has been in the field of higher education for the past 6 years. The career switch from corporate to higher education was motivated by the urgency to work with collegiate students, where student development has always been a passion of hers. Additionally, mentorship both personally and professionally, has been an intricate part of her life for over 15 years.

The researcher was able to recognize the commonalities shared from the participants in their reflection of intersectionality and racial microaggression in the development of the following emerging themes: being angry, questioning about hair upkeep, or the astonishment about academic credentials, to name a few. The investigator also shared the same experience of choosing to remain in a silo or guarded to avoid being called a stereotype within the workplace. In order to make her non-Black colleagues comfortable in her presence, the investigator is

cognizant of how she may be perceived and is very intentional about her tone of voice, choice of hairstyles, as well as attire. The position of deanship is the professional goal to attain within higher education and the topic of this study was to learn more about the trajectory of Black female leaders in higher education and how they navigate throughout the workplace when dealing with racial microaggression.

The participants reflected how imposter syndrome was present because the sense of belonging within the workplace is challenged daily (Clance, 1985). For example, questioning a Black woman about her academic credentials or dismissing her directives on a daily occurrence, could allow her to feel unaccepted within her workspace. The investigator was able to relate to these same experiences, especially as a fairly new professional in higher education. The sense of belonging is not the main interest of the investigator, as they have been able to navigate in predominantly White spaces, however, it can become unnerving because her true self is limited due to the expectation of experiencing a form of racial microaggression within the workplace.

The Principal Investigator sought solace or comfort from her mentors, who would understand the effects caused by racial microaggression. She was very intentional in seeking other Black or persons of color within the workplace for support, as she recognized that remaining in a silo is not always the wisest professional decision. The lack of respect or the increase in dismissive behavior caused by non-Black counterparts, has motivated this investigator to always remain ten steps ahead to prove that she is qualified. Being passed over for a promotion by a White male colleague, is another shared experience of feeling indispensable by their supervisor. Dealing with these types of occurrences on a daily basis can cause unnecessary stress, both physically and mentally. Due to the awareness of the history of Blacks in America, the investigator was not surprised by the stories shared from each Participant. Regardless of the

stereotypes and the aftermath with these encounters, the investigator is purposeful about self-preservation where the stereotypes from non-Black colleagues does not become her own reality.

The connection between the investigator and the participants' experiences regarding racial microaggression within the workplace, encouraged the investigator to remain unbiased throughout this process. The narrative of each participant and their experiences regarding racial microaggression as a current leader in higher education, is an important story to share especially for future higher education professionals. The authenticity of this research is maintaining morals and ethics, which is important to the investigator. Additionally, the investigator's interest in this topic derived from past and current experiences regarding racial microaggression. Additionally, minimizing her biases throughout this study provided authentic unaltered narratives from each participant's story. The investigator has experienced racial battle fatigue (RBF) due to stress-related occurrences caused by racial slights within the workplace. The impact of RBF propelled the investigator to carry-on cautiously within her work environment and limit conversations with fellow non-Black colleagues to avoid uncomfortable situations. The investigator has also been told by a fellow White colleague that she is smart for a Black girl and greeted with astonishment for answering a question correctly or earning a master's degree. Being disregarded or disrespected within the workplace based on gender, race, or both are common shared experiences between the participants and the investigator. The interests of the participants were of paramount importance for the investigator, which made the process simple to remain objective towards their experiences.

### **Recommendations for Action**

The results from this phenomenological study demonstrate that it is imperative to reassess the current diversity, equity, and inclusion training that are available within higher education institutions. Participants shared that it is good that these types of training are available, however, the same employees that need the most training may not apply what was taught. The unfortunate events, which occurred during the year of 2020, regarding police and Black individuals (George Floyd or Breonna Taylor, to name a few) heightened the discomfort faced by Blacks in predominantly White spaces, per each participant. The practice of making a symbolic effort for inclusion purposes, specifically for a marginalized group to give the appearance of racial or gender equality within a workplace or educational setting is called tokenism (Turner, 2002). Instead of assigning that one Black colleague to address racially unjust issues, creating a more improved training where personal biases are required to be addressed, could be a new approach towards education on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Additionally, if employees that are unaffected by racial microaggression partake in real-life scenarios, where they are seen as the marginalized group member, then this could offer additional insights on the experiences of a person of color within the workplace.

Additionally, assigning Black employees to speak on racial issues, could possibly lead to a traumatic experience, in regards to current racial events happening within the country. For example, a participant shared that they oversee the Equity and Diversity department and are expected to answer questions regarding Black issues or current events which include Black people and law enforcement. The lack of concern from this participant's White male manager regarding her own personal state, is common within this institution. Another participant shared that she has experienced traumatic episodes caused by racial injustices and have been assigned to

Speak on these very same topics without regards to her feelings or mental state. White fragility, where White people are uncomfortable in speaking about racism or current events affecting a person of color, can become challenging because they may not be willing to acknowledge their biases (Diangelo, 2018). Based on the data from this study, the lack of White individuals acknowledging their biases, could be one of the factors explaining why racial microaggression is experienced daily within the workplace. The shared concern from seven (7) out of the eleven (11) participants regarding tokenism, is the lack of follow through after assigning a Black employee to speak on racial issues. The reactive and trendy disingenuous approach from non-Black colleagues in reference to racial issues, are temporary until another concern is brought to the table to be addressed. A Black person or person of color have experienced their own traumatic encounters regarding racial injustice, discrimination, a form of inequalities, yet are expected to be the token person to speak on issues that impact them directly. Additionally support should be available, however, the intentionality of wanting to understand the experiences of marginalized employees regarding racial microaggression should be addressed.

One of the emerging themes indicated that there should be more senior leadership presence in order to dismantle the constant occurrences of racial microaggression within the workplace. If the leadership is not encountering these types of concerns on a daily basis, then it is simple to assign employees to manage diversity training, where personal biases are not mandatory to be acknowledged. The reality of racial microaggression can no longer be ignored, but it seems to be the “elephant” in the room because dealing with it, means that it actually exists. Five (5) out of the eleven (11) participants shared the same ideologies about non-Black colleagues and their ignorance towards discrimination, racial injustices, and personal biases. As previously mentioned, White fragility is where a White person is uncomfortable acknowledging

or addressing racial issues, and this could be a main factor why dealing with racial microaggression seems to be non-important, per these participants. An idea shared by a participant for a more improved diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training is creating real-life scenarios. Real-life-scenarios training could possibly provide deeper insight to non-Black employees, regarding the effect of racism, while navigating through the workplace as a person of color. This same participant is confident that this type of an approach could possibly help her White colleagues gain a small comprehension of her experiences with racial slights within the workplace.

The tenacity of the participants within higher education proves that they belong in their spaces and why they deserve not to be stereotyped or categorized. Inclusion, per one participant, is the ability to listen to everyone at the table, as everyone should have a voice and the voice of a White male is not the voice for everybody. Inclusion is acknowledging or recognizing different ideas that may positively impact all employees (Cole, 2017). People of color, specifically Black women are not a monolith, and their cultural background, as well as experience with racism may not be similar. Nonetheless, the common denominator is their skin-tone that enables non-Blacks to feel comfortable speaking or doing actions that fall under the discriminatory or biased realm.

The final question regarding this study was: What do you think can be done to decrease the occurrence of racial microaggression toward Black women in higher education? And the responses were more pessimistic, than optimistic. The primary response of the participants in the study was to remove any stereotypes applied to Black women. Based on the overall shared experiences from participants due to racial microaggression, it seems to be safer to remain both guarded and in silo in order to feel safe. The need for representation within the workplace should be a collective effort, but it is not a simple solution to attain (Adekunte, 2018).

Predominately White institutions (PWI) could do more to improve their diversity within the professional sector, which can create more representation for people of color (Adekunte, 2018). Diversity training is not enough, and this issue may or may not be addressed within the institution, but the participants in this study are not expecting change, instead they choose to focus on their professional responsibilities as a leader. Representation matters on multiple levels, such as having Black women in senior administration level, could encourage staff or mid-level Black females in higher education to pursue these types of roles. The stereotypes utilized, be it directly or indirectly, will continue until accountability and acknowledgement is granted towards the individuals taking part in racial slights. Fair treatment within the workplace is the ultimate goal, yet each participant is convinced that this may not be accomplished.

### **Recommendation for Further Study**

Literature regarding racial microaggression and Black female leaders in higher education is scarce, there needs to be more research completed regarding this population (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). Black women in higher education continue to experience a form of racism or unfair treatment due to their gender, race, or both (Miles, 2012). As current leaders, the act of being undermined by their subordinates should not be expected or accepted, yet this seems to be an ongoing issue. Based on the results of this study, the following were consistently highlighted and should be further investigated: wage gap, ageism, and mental health. Developing this understanding can create a safer work environment, where it can assist employees from engaging in racial microaggression behavior. One participant who is the Associate Vice President in her department, shared her suggestion on implementing more diversity training, which should include different ideologies on how to provide additional support for people of color. Black women within the workplace are expected to be excellent but have to work three times as hard to

be recognized for their work in comparison to their White male or female counterparts (Hall et al., 2011).

The wage gap between Black women in comparison to White men is an on-going concern, especially if the Black female has both the experience and academic credentials (Hall et al., 2011). For example, in the state of New Jersey, White males average salary is \$70,954, while Black women average at \$44,407 (Nationalpartnership, 2021). Being passed over for a promotion, or being undermined by White male subordinates, who believe that their decisions alone matter is an issue that should be further investigated. Two (2) out of the eleven (11) participants shared that they were passed over for a position and their White male colleague did not possess the required academic credentials. One of the participants vocalized their concern regarding the promotion to request the rationale of the decision. She was told by management that the department did not want to hurt the White male colleague's feelings and did not want to lose him as an employee. A Black woman should not feel inferior or in the wrong by requesting the rationale of a decision that affects them. The participant shared that she is expected to perform at 100% but is paid at a fraction of the rate in comparison to her White counterparts. Additionally, if their concerns are not addressed, but instead are seen as being controversial, then this can create a hostile work environment. For example, one of the participants with a doctorate was passed over for a promotion by a White male counterpart, who is currently in a Master's program but has less experience; the White male was awarded the promotion. Additionally, her concern after asking the question on why she was passed over, was seen as either confrontational or difficult. The wage gap is still in existence, and Black women are not receiving the pay that should match their skill sets and qualifications (NCES, 2019).



Ageism was a common factor mentioned throughout the study both from the younger leaders, as well as the seasoned leaders. The act of being discriminated against due to your age is a form of ageism (Donizzetti, 2019). Leaders younger than 35 years of age in this study indicated their encounter with ageism, in addition to racial microaggression. These particular participants are seen as too young, and the expectation of their leadership ability is lackluster. In addition, they have non-Black colleagues who may be in the same age range but are not questioned about their decision-making or directives. Three (3) out of the eleven (11) participants, who are between the ages of 30-35, and have experienced a form of prejudgment due to their age within the workplace. Further study regarding ageism regarding younger leaders, who are fairly new in the field of higher education (1-5 years), should be investigated.

The cause and effect of mental health regarding Black females in higher education experiencing racial microaggression should also be further investigated. Racial battle fatigue (RBF), along with the everyday occurrences of stereotypes, has taken a mental toll on each participant respectively. They are expected to remain professional, as well as productive, but have limited support available when encountering these types of experiences. Racial battle fatigue (RBF) stems from the experience of racial microaggression, which can impact a person of color's job performance, due to mental or physical distress (Smith, 2017). As leaders in higher education, their intersectionality is questioned, as well as their performance and if their White counterparts are not being held at the same standard, then mental distress or anxiety can be experienced. Further research regarding mental health due to the effects of racial microaggression on Black female leaders should be investigated.

## Conclusion

This qualitative phenomenological study highlighted the lived experiences of racial microaggression by Black female leaders in higher education, who for the most part lack resources or support when encountering this phenomenon within the workplace. Additionally, Black female leaders are undermined, ignored, and expected to perform, while providing the utmost service. Black women are not a monolith and should not be treated or assumed that they are a certain way due to the color of their skin-tone. Their race, gender, and working in mostly White spaces, has allowed them to feel either silenced or unheard, as their voices seem not to matter. The lack of respect for their leadership position, along with the lack of support when such disrespect is encountered, has pushed them to remain in a silo due to the adversity caused by their White counterparts.

The Black feminist theory (Collins, 1991), along with the intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 1989) were infused throughout this study, as the lived experiences of each Participant gave them the opportunity to share their story regarding their race, gender, and as a leader. The discomfort caused by the racial microaggression, where they feel responsible in making their non-Black counterparts feel comfortable, as they caused the discomfort has been an on-going taxing experience. The lack of knowledge regarding Black women outside of the tropes (the sassy one, the angry one, the mammy, the strong one, and the hypersexualized one (Collins, 1991) have caused them to remain both guarded and preferably in silo. They do not feel free to always speak up or question the rationale behind certain actions or decisions, where they are alienated and expected to be accepted without questioning. The motive is to remain steadfast and resilient.

One participant shared that things will never change and instead, they choose to focus on their resilient nature, which is a form of survival. The only way a person's mind will change, is when they are ready for their thought process to adjust. There is no room for doubting 'self' because the imposter syndrome is caused by the influence of other people's ignorance, not necessarily the Black female leader. The decision to come back to a work environment, where these same occurrences are encountered, is the main definition of resilience (Hall et al., 2011).. Authenticity, along with integrity is what keeps them motivated, as the goal is bigger than the racial microaggression experience because it is expected, and supporting students is the requirement. Regardless of any adversity, the job will and needs to get completed no matter what. The privilege to speak up without repercussions or complaining about a task, is not a part of their reality (Black women) and remaining true to their job description assists them in remaining above the trivialities.

Self-preservation, self-awareness, and believing that you matter are mantras shared because resilience is a requirement for survival. Black women are not always protected, which is expected (shared from Participants) and navigating throughout spaces where they are the most vulnerable enables them to remain steadfast in their profession. Granted, they may not feel like their true self is being represented due to the stereotypes attributed to them, nonetheless, they are determined to prove that they belong as a professional leader. Having a voice enables them to speak up even when it may be uncomfortable, questioning the rationale behind decisions, defending directives or challenges, are the rights that they should have as mid or senior level leaders in higher education. There is no room for hypersensitivity and the expectation that Black women cannot or should not get upset or sidetracked due to adversity, is another form of a stereotype encountered. For a person of color, resilience is learned at a young age, where it is a

form of survival. Empowerment is resilience because regardless of the discomfort or disrespect, the work and influence of the Black female leader, will continue to open the doors for the future Black leaders in higher education.

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## Appendix A

**PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT MESSAGE**

Greetings,

I hope this message finds you well and safe.

My name is Simone Flowers and I am conducting a study about cis-gender (gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth) Black (African descent) female leaders in higher education and racial microaggression. Racial microaggression are verbal insulting slights towards a person of color. Examples such as: “You're the whitest Black person I know” or “I don't really see you as Black”. This dissertation will focus on the experience with racial microaggression within the workplace while holding a leadership role.

- Have you ever experienced racial microaggression at your current job in higher education?
- Do you currently hold a leadership role in higher education? (*i.e.: President, Vice Provost, Dean, Associate Dean, Director, Associate Director, Tenured Faculty, or Chairperson*)
- Would you be willing to share the details of your experiences for this study?

If you are a cis-gender Black woman, responded yes to the above questions, and would like to participate then please email me at [simoneflowerstaylor@gmail.com](mailto:simoneflowerstaylor@gmail.com) for further inquiries.

Thank you in advance for your participation.


## Appendix B



**CALL FOR RESEARCH STUDY PARTICIPANTS**

## Racial Microaggression, Have you heard of it?

- Are you a cis-gender Black (African Descent) woman?
- Have you encountered Racial Microaggression as a current professional leader in the field of Higher Education?
- Do you currently work in the Northeastern Region of the United States?



If you answered YES to all three questions above, then I would like the opportunity to interview YOU for an IRB-approved dissertation research study. Interviews will take about an hour, where inquiries about your experience as a Black female leader in higher education and racial microaggression will be explored.

If you are interested in volunteering your time, then please contact me at [simoneflowerstaylor@gmail.com](mailto:simoneflowerstaylor@gmail.com).



Ms. Simone Flowers is currently a Doctoral Candidate in the Educational Leadership Program at the University of New England. Her research interests are racial microaggression, mentorship, student development, & leadership.

The preliminary dissertation title is:  
*"Examining the experience of Black female leaders in higher education and racial microaggression"*

## Appendix C

**UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND****CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH**

**Project Title:** Examining the Experience of Black Female Leaders in Higher Education and Racial Microaggression

**Principal Investigator(s):** Simone Flowers

**Introduction:**

- Please read this form. You may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to give you information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document that choice.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

**Why is this research study being done?**

This research is being done because the investigator is interested in learning about how cis-gender Black women professional leaders working in the field of higher education experience racial microaggression.

**Who will be in this study?**

Black cis-gender females who currently hold a professional leadership role in higher education.

**What will I be asked to do?**

You will be asked to voluntarily participate in a virtual one-on-one interview via ZOOM. The focus is to learn about your experience with racial microaggression.

**What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?**

Risks for participants is that describing their experiences could lead to anxiety, distress, or trigger an emotional state while sharing their experiences (either past or present). Resources will be available upon request.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?**

A possible benefit of participating in this study is to allow the voice of the participant to be heard based on their personal unique experience. The experience can assist others, as well as educate others regarding racial microaggression.

**What will it cost me?**

Your time, voluntarily.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

Each participant will be assigned pseudonym, which will also apply to their work location.

**How will my data be kept confidential?**

The interview will be transcribed via a program called Temi and stored in a required password Google Drive application, that is only synced to the investigator's personal account.

**What are my rights as a research participant?**

- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University.
- Your decision to participate will not affect your relationship with Simone Flowers.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason.
- If you choose to withdraw from the research, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You will be informed of any significant findings developed during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to participate in the research.
- If you sustain an injury while participating in this study, your participation may be ended.

**What other options do I have?**

- You may choose not to participate.

**Whom may I contact with questions?**

- The researchers conducting this study are Simone Flowers
- For more information regarding this study, please contact Simone Flowers
- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Dr. Debra Welkley, [dwelkley@une.edu](mailto:dwelkley@une.edu)
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Mary Bachman DeSilva, Sc.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4567 or [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu).

**Will I receive a copy of this consent form?**

- You will be given a copy of this consent form.

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**PARTICIPANT'S STATEMENT**

**I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.**

---

Participant's signature or Date  
Legally authorized representative

---

Printed name

**RESEARCHER'S STATEMENT**

**The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.**

Simone Flowers \_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's signature Date

Simone Flowers  
Printed name

## Appendix D

**EXAMPLE OF THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS****DEMOGRAPHICS**

*What is your race? (If you are more than one race, choose the 'other' option and type which race you are mixed with.*

\_\_\_ Black or African descent \_\_\_ Non-Hispanic White \_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

*What is your highest level of educational attainment?*

\_\_\_ Some college, no degree \_\_\_ Bachelor's degree \_\_\_ Master's degree \_\_\_ Doctoral degree *Do you currently work in the northeastern region of the United States? (Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania)*

\_\_\_ Yes, enter state: \_\_\_\_\_

**QUESTIONS ABOUT RACIAL MICROAGGRESSION**

1. How long have you been in your current position?
2. How long have you worked in the field of higher education?
3. Do you believe that you are treated differently due to your race or gender, or both at your work?
4. Are there any distinctions between how you are treated by male or female non-Black coworkers?
5. How have these experiences affected your interactions with your non-Black co-workers?
6. Have you experienced microaggression as racially based? Gender based? Both?
7. What are some stereotypes about Black women working in the field of higher education?
8. What are some ways you are treated differently due to stereotypes about Black women?
9. What are some microaggression you have experienced at work?
10. Has your work performance as a leader been affected due to experiencing racial microaggression?
11. What do you think can be done to decrease the occurrence of racial microaggression toward Black women in higher education?



NOTE – Quests 3, 4, 5, and 11 were adapted and modified from:

Dickenson, S. R. (2018). *Effects Of racial microaggression on Black women's work*

*performance as government workers*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of New England]

<https://dune.une.edu/theses/185>