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## Total Marginality: Cumulative Marginality among African American Students at a Predominantly White Institution

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A cursory examination of social and educational research exposes the sporadic successes and prolonged struggles of African Americans pursuing a higher education. Particularly evident are trends of African American student progress amidst ongoing disparities in higher education, and the systemic inability of Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) to formulate and implement viable solutions. Despite these persistent challenges, the latest college enrollment data indicates that progress has occurred. According to a National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report titled, *The Condition of Education 2014*, “In 2012 there were no measurable differences among the immediate college enrollment rates for White (67 percent), African American (62 percent), and Hispanic (69 percent) high school completers” (Kena et al., 2014, p. 150). Although the percentage of White high school graduates attending college has been consistently higher than African American high school graduates (p. 150), African American college enrollment has increased from 659,200 in 1976 to 1,720,100 in 2012 (US Department of Education, 2013). This increasing college enrollment is encouraging, but the researchers concerns focus on graduation rates.

While African American students are closing the gap in college enrollment, graduation rates are still bleak especially in comparison to White college students. For example, among the national freshmen college cohort of 2006 only 29.7% of African American students graduated within 4 years at nonprofit institutions compared to 56.2% of White students and 47.4% of Hispanic students (US Department of Education, 2014). Furthermore, disparities exist among males and females of different racial groups within the 2006 college freshmen cohort. African American males (23.5%) and females (34.5%) were half as likely to graduate in four years compared to White males (51.2%) and females (60.2%) (US Department of Education, 2014). Additional consideration should be paid to African Americans graduating from PWIs

given that a report by the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education noted that 75% of all African American college students attend PWIs (“Here is the good news”, 2008).

It is paramount to understand that lower college acceptance, enrollment, and graduation rates for African Americans have collateral social and economic implications. To illustrate, Mincy (2006) reports that the lack of a college education among African American males is related to higher rates of unemployment, incarceration, homicide, homelessness, out-of-marriage births, and poverty when compared to all other racial groups of non-college attending high school male graduates. Furthermore, Mincy (2006), Alexander (2012), Moore and Lewis (2012), and The National Urban League (2007) support the notion that African American students often face social inequalities in addition to the rigors of college that affect their chances of being accepted into PWIs or being successful while attending PWIs. Within this context, understanding the particular experiences African American students who have successfully negotiated the academic and social realities at PWIs is a vital step in fashioning systemic interventions.

Toward this end, the present article first surveys selected literature related to the academic and social experiences of African American students attending PWIs. Second, the authors detailed the results of a qualitative study of ten successful African American students at a PWI in the Midwestern region of the United States. The third aim was to synthesize these major findings into the emergent framework, *Total Marginality*. This theoretical lens proposes a comprehensive and cumulative approach to examining, explaining and enhancing the experiences of African American students attending PWIs. The researchers conclude with recommendations for PreK-12 families, administrators, and teachers concerned with preparing African American students at attend PWIs.

This exploratory study seeks rich descriptions examining and explaining the experiences of African American students attending PWIs through their lived realities. Thus, this inquiry explores:

1. How did African American students attending a PWI describe their experiences in their homes, classrooms, campus areas, and their social and cultural lives?
2. How did these experiences inform their academic success and social adjustment over their collegiate careers?

## **Literature Review**

### **Historical Survey of African American Experiences at PWIs**

The reality of campus life for generations of African Americans attending PWIs is characterized by a long history of exclusion, segregation, and selective inclusion. Consider that during the slave era in the North, free African Americans and escaped slaves were educated in segregated schools, and African Americans seeking to enter higher education encountered numerous obstacles and hardships (Williamson, 1999). In fact, Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1996) reported that only 30 African Americans graduated from PWIs between 1826 to 1890 (p. 37). Over the next twenty years, African American progress in education was evidenced by 700 African Americans earning their bachelor's degrees from PWIs by 1910 (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996).

Still "Jim Crow" segregation continued to severely restrict educational opportunities for many African Americans. In the South PWIs refused to accept African American applicants until the 1960s, so most African Americans who attended college in the South enrolled in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Williamson, 1999). In fact, over 75% of African American college students enrolled in HBCUs prior to the 1950s (Anderson, 1988;

Garibaldi, 1991). In the North only scarce numbers of African Americans were being admitted into PWIs beginning in the 1940s, and in the border states, exclusionary policies were not banned until the 1950s (Williamson, 1999). In the year that *Brown v. The Board of Education* (1954) was passed, only 4,000 of the incoming freshmen attending PWIs across the entire nation were African Americans (p. 93).

Sadly, when African Americans were admitted into these colleges and universities, they faced harassment, isolation, and alienation (Williamson, 1999, p. 95). Reportedly, these hostile environments carried over well into the 1960s and were the impetus for massive student-led protests triggering the Civil Rights Movement. Since that time, researchers have constantly concluded that a true change in the racial climate of many PWIs has not materialized (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen, 1998). Given this historical context, we now turn to more recent literature offering various frameworks for understanding and describing the experiences of African American students attending PWIs.

### **African American Students and Marginality at PWIs**

The researchers reviewed the extent literature on African American student experiences attending PWIs, and selected a few representative examples of qualitative studies that offer frameworks for understanding and describing the experiences of African American students. The present research is concerned with the undergraduate experience at PWIs, yet noted studies have examined the experiences of African American faculty, (Edwards, 2008; Garrison-Wade, Diggs, Estrada & Galindo, 2012; Harley, 2008; Hinton, 2010), international students (Lee & Rice, 2007), and doctoral students (Hines, 2009; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davis, & Smith, 2004) at PWIs. The studies reviewed here demonstrate qualitative efforts to describe and conceptualize African American students' experiences at PWIs (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996;

Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, Thomas, & Thompson, 2004; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davis, & Smith, 2004).

Feagin, Vera & Imani (1996) in their seminal work on African American students' experiences at PWIs presented a vast amount of rich qualitative data. In terms of conceptualizing African American student experiences they offered a number of useful concepts. Arguably, the two most germane concepts are *collective memory* and *invisibility*. *Collective memory* refers to the notion that African American students, parents and communities develop a set of beliefs and sentiments about educational institutions. These memories are shared among African American students providing realness and a sense of group validation to individually experienced acts of discrimination. Individually experienced marginalization or discrimination becomes generalized within the shared consciousness of African American students, staff and faculty at institutions. Consequently, a single negative experience has wide reaching impact, and persists in the form of story over time. The second concept of *invisibility* represents students' concerns about feeling ignored in the public spaces on campus and in classrooms as they interacted with students and faculty. More importantly, Feagin, Vera & Imani (1996) concluded that the hostile and unwelcoming campus environments that characterized PWIs in their study negatively impacted the academic performance and potential of African American students.

A second framework offered by Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, Thomas, and Thompson (2004) provides a more recent qualitative analysis of African American students' experiences at a PWI. Their study featured in-depth interviews with African American students across academic majors, and yielded five major themes derived from their interviews of 11 **graduating** students. First, they reported that students perceived that they were victims of *unfairness/sabotage/condescension* by White students, faculty and staff members. The second

trend that emerged from their interviews was *isolation and connection*, which described the challenges students encountered as they tried to form interracial relationships with peers. Their third concept addressed students' concerns about feeling different and out of place because of their race or due to ideological differences with other African American students. Next, students expressed that they felt that White students and faculty did not consider them intelligent enough to be in college. As a result, the students reported feeling that they constantly had to prove themselves. Lastly, students complained of both *invisibility* and *supervisibility*. The latter concept describes the pressure that African American students feel when they are asked to represent their race during class discussions or when issues related to race arose during class.

These studies typify qualitative studies on African American students' undergraduate experiences at PWIs. The researchers selected this atypical review literature because of the synergy across the literature. The typical findings from studies such as these reveal the presence of institutionalized, covert, and overt instances of racism that causes African American students to feel alienated and isolated. However, a unifying framework synthesizing these reoccurring themes has not been offered, only themes and concepts describing African American student experiences in various spaces and situations. The goal of improving the experiences of African Americans at PWIs can be furthered by developing a unifying theory on the experiences of African American students. To that end, the present qualitative investigation will add to this research tradition, particularly to the underdeveloped themes of home environment and the intra-racial experiences of African American students at PWIs. More importantly, we will also offer a unifying framework for understanding, sharing, and enhancing the experiences of African American students at PWIs. We conclude by offering recommendations for institutions desiring to improve the experiences of African American students attending PWIs.

## **Methodology**

### **State University**

This study was conducted with African American college students at a midsized, majority White university that we call State University. It is a PWI with an undergraduate student body of approximately 16,000 students enrolled in the Spring of 2014. Currently, approximately 1,100 of State University's undergraduates are African American, which is 6.8% of the undergraduate student body. Presently, White students are 81% of the undergraduate student body. According to State University's institutional reports their racial makeup has been consistent for the past decade.

### **Participants and Sampling**

The researchers targeted 10 upperclassmen, more specifically six seniors and four juniors. We interviewed five males and five females, which enabled us to explore how gender informed their experiences throughout college. Specifically, two females were juniors, three females were seniors, likewise three males were seniors and two males were juniors. We decided to focus this study on upperclassmen, because during a preliminary study the freshmen and sophomore participants offered much less detailed reflections when compared to upperclassmen. We snowball sampled upperclassmen from the preliminary interviews. Each student was assigned a pseudonym and some demographic information was changed to further insure anonymity. Students included in the study had an average GPA of 2.9 on a 4.0 scale and a minimum of 90 hours of college credit, which we verified by viewing online unofficial transcripts provided by the participants.



## Methods and Data Analysis

In order to study the lived realities of the students we conducted 10 “semi-structured life world interviews” (Kvale, 1996). The initial interview lasted for one hour and was followed up by a second interview within three weeks that lasted on average about 30 minutes. The major topics explored in each interview were educational values, perception of college and home environments, and interracial and intraracial interaction. During the interviews we were careful to allow students to clarify their ideas, to read through interview notes, and once the audiotapes from each interview was transcribed students were able to review them as well. Also, students were provided a copy of the initial interpretations of data and the final report to provide feedback which was incorporated in this piece.

To analyze the data we employed Kvale’s (1996) phenomenologically based meaning condensation technique (p. 189-196). First, we read the entire transcript and field notes to get a sense of the whole interview and to check both sources against one another for consistency. Next, we separated the master transcripts into “natural meaning units” while capturing the authentic meaning and intent of each participant. Fourth, we explored the relationships between these meaning units or themes and relevant research questions. Finally, we interweaved the condensed themes together across interviews to create statements describing the process or phenomena in question (p. 194). Our analysis yielded a deeper understanding of the complex nature of marginality at PWIs. The forthcoming findings highlight the voices of students and are organized into the themes of an emergent framework, *Total Marginality*.

## Findings

*Total Marginality* is the key construct that emerged after synthesizing the major themes from the ten interviews. The construct of *total marginality* attempts to conceptualize and more

fully describe the social location of African American students who attend PWIs. It illustrates how Black students to varying degrees feel marginalized in their classes, on the quad, in their dormitories, in the college town, among other Black college students, and even at home. *Total Marginality* is not an attempt to quantify these feelings of isolation, but rather to describe them in their situated and cumulative nature. Thus, *total marginality* is defined as the *cumulative dissonance* that a Black student encounters in the various academic and social situations common to campus life at a PWI. Students reported encountering marginalizing experiences as they interacted with others in their home, academic, social, and cultural lives, while attending a predominantly White university. Each of these areas of concerns will be highlighted in this section with lengthy insights from participants.

### **Dissonance with Home**

Dissonance within their home environments were characterized by *conflict* and a *lack of shared experiences* with their family members. First, dissonance resulted when family members accused African American students of “acting White” or “wanting to be White” after they began attending a PWI. For second generation college students like Vanessa, Tanya, and George these accusations came mostly from their cousins. In each instance, these family members were not from college educated families themselves. The students from college educated families never reported any accusations of “acting White” from their parents or siblings. For those unfortunate enough to endure these tests the accusations primarily came from their siblings or cousins who did not attend college yet, and mostly during the participants’ first year of college. For instance, we asked Uncle Kel, “If he had ever been accused of acting White?”, and he replied:

Yes I have, but not on this campus (laughing). I have been accused of acting White by my family during high school and at the beginning of college. It was

not my parents; it was my brothers, sisters and cousins. Not only am I the only one to go off to college, but when I was getting ready to leave for college my music become more diverse, it was not all rap. But I developed a liking for alternative music as well, and they did not like that so they said “Oh you want to be White”. When I dated a white girl they said “Oh you want to be White”. But that was never the case, and that’s just another example of how Black people place stereotypical ideas on you. Why can’t I just be me?

In addition, when Tifi was asked “If she had ever been accused of acting White?” She explained:

Yea, my nephews, because when I go home they perceive that my dialect is White. They would even say something like “man you must gonna be a doctor”, because I sound so “intelligent”. Because I speak clear and so called “proper English.” So, it was difficult during my first year of college, but now my family uses me as an example for the younger children in my family to follow.

Furthermore, in extreme cases these disputes concerning their “blackness” became the impetus for further erosion of family relationships. For instance, when we asked Summer the same question she explained:

I was told by my cousins that I talked “White” and “I acted White”. But that’s because of the neighborhood that I grew up in, it has nothing to do with the college I go to. So, I talked and acted like the people that were around me, which were mostly Whites. But most Black people put you down for that, they think I don’t know anything about Black culture. But I learned a lot from my mom who is from Arkansas. Then when I went to college and started dating a White guy,

my sisters would say “Oh you really think that you White”. I just think that they believe that I feel that I am better than they are. It’s still so bad that this year one of my sisters will be getting married, and I was not invited and I don’t want to go anyway.

In sum, there were two reasons why Black students were accused of “acting White” or wanting to be White by their siblings or cousins. First, if they dated a White person in high school or college they were accused of wanting to be White. Secondly, if the students spoke “proper English” they were told that they talked White. These incidences occurred mostly when Black students came home to visit from college and their family members noticed that they spoke differently than before. The students reported that their speech changed because the academic nature of college required them to pronounce words correctly, use less slang, and express more complex ideas. But when they visited their families this new speech pattern caused many of their siblings and cousins to question why these changes occurred. Ultimately, they concluded that their speech was not “Black” and it pointed to the students’ desires to “be White.” In most cases these tensions occurred during the participants’ freshman year and gave way to respect the further they progressed in college.

Perhaps the contributing factor in the decline of these incidents was that Black students learned to switch from their academic language to a more common form of English when visiting or speaking to their families. For instance, Candice stated:

When I am around Black people or my family, I won’t say that I would down myself. But, I would speak in a way that they could understand me and that makes them feel more relaxed. I can’t use slang well (laughing), but I change the flow and tone of my voice, that’s what I would do. I do this because... you don’t

want to show-up your family or whatever. I don't want to make it seem like I am better than them when I sit down and talk with them.

A second concern that created dissonance between students and their families was that Summer, Uncle Kel, Malcolm, Bawi, Vanessa, Paul, Tifi and Candice all felt that their families really didn't understand their college experiences. This was a concern mostly for students whose parents did not attend college. Students whose parents did not attend college struggled to help them with financial aid, housing issues, selecting classes, or coping with their marginal experiences as minorities on a White campus. Not because they did not care but because they could not relate to the new world that their children were entering. For instance, Malcolm is the first person in his family to go to college, and he explained:

I know that my mom cares that I am going to college, but I don't think that she understands it really. I had to fill out all my college applications, financial aid forms, and even find my own way down to college. She sent me about hundred dollars the first semester of my freshman year, and that's all the money that I received from my family so far. And it's not because she does not care, she has to take care of my little brothers, so I am really on my own. I do know that she is extremely proud of me and talks about me all the time to her friends and co-workers. But it's like we live in two different worlds, besides my struggles here are not hers, they are mine to work out.

Also, Bawi expressed concerns about the lack of understanding from his parents in the following statement:

Although I am a senior, college does not seem to be that big of a deal with my parents, but I am sure that they are proud of me at this point. But I know that they

do care but because they never been to college it's hard for them to relate to the things that I am going through in college. I never called my parents for anything, but they said if I needed anything they would be there. So, I am sure that they are proud because of that, and they respect me because I am an independent person and doing what I need to do to be successful.

On the other hand, parents who attended college were very sensitive to the pressures that their children faced at a PWI, and they attempted to prepare them prior to college. For instance, Vanessa's father is a college professor and her mother is a teacher, and they offered her the following advice:

They would always say stuff to me like "You have to believe that you are smart before you go to college, because you may never hear it from your teachers." They would say also "don't expect to see a lot of Black students down there but don't be ashamed to be Black" and my mom's favorite one is "As a Black woman you will always have to work twice as hard to get just as far as a White woman." And the funny thing is I remember all of their little sayings and I use them when I need them.

College educated parents were a great source of support and information for their children in college, and took steps to prepare them for the cultural rigors of life at a PWI.

In sum, the dissonance that Black students felt with their families occurred if they dated a White person, changed their speech pattern to an academic style, and when their parents were unable to relate to their experiences in college. This form of dissonance is paramount because many of the first generation college students who participated in this study knew that their parents loved them but desired more support, especially during their freshmen year.

## Academic and Social Dissonance

Secondly, *total marginality* is further characterized by *academic* and *social dissonance* with the campus core culture. *Academic dissonance* reflects students' feelings of isolation in the classroom and invisibility in the curriculum. For example, in reference to how he feels in classroom settings Uncle Kel states:

Isolated and put on the spot, simply because you tend to stand out, you tend to stand out. It's like putting a Black dot on a sheet of paper. Like being in class you literally feel uncomfortable. All White students, all White instructors. How can they relate to me? I feel out of place, I feel isolated, I feel like the professors don't care about me. I mean you are surrounded by a lot of White students no matter what class you are in, no matter what year you are in college. So, in a sense it's like all eyes are on you whenever you speak.

Bawi adds:

As a business major I am typically the only Black person in my classes, and it was difficult in the beginning of each new class to gain confidence. Because I felt that when I spoke the teachers and students got uneasy, especially if I referenced a Black author in economics that they have never read. But I always did well in my classes despite feeling like I am not a part of my classes. I guess I just got used to it.

The isolation that Black students felt required them to put forth an additional effort to get involved with their classes if they wanted to be successful. Sadly, many of them found it difficult to muster the energy needed on a daily basis to contend with marginality in classroom settings.

In addition to feeling out of place in the classroom, students were very concerned about the lack of culturally relevant material in their classes. This was especially prevalent among students in education, history, literature, sociology, and political science courses. Students in math or other “hard” sciences did not expect to encounter culturally relevant material because they perceived that cultural issues did not fit easily with the subject matter. But in classes dealing with cultural or social issues students expected to learn about or at least discuss issues that they could relate to. In reference to this subject Tanya exclaimed:

In English classes I didn't get Black writers to read, until I took Black drama, and Black poetry classes. I took English literature classes, and American literature, but they did not offer any authors from my culture. So, it tends to be boring to me, because I can't relate to it, and that's bad because I once majored in English.

Also, Candice is a junior in Education and she commented concerning this subject:

One of the big subjects in education right now is multicultural education, but so far my classes just keep defining it, and not spending anytime on how to make it happen in the classroom. I mean, if we are going to teach on multicultural topics, we should be taught about these subjects first. I read on my own and I am already sensitive to the cultural needs of Black and Brown students, but that's because I spent time finding out the information that I needed and wanted to know. I was not getting this type of reading in classes, so I had to teach myself. But some of these White students from these all White communities will be expected to teach about people and cultures that they never encountered or studied. And I think that's disrespectful.



So, Black students encounter much more than instructors and students in the classroom. They also have to contend with feelings of isolation and invisibility due to Euro-dominant curricula in college classrooms.

*Social dissonance* reflects Black students' struggles for inclusion with the campus culture of State University. The student participants didn't feel like they are equal members of the campus community because of the visible inequalities that they observed between themselves and White students. For instance, all students were concerned about the lack of places where Blacks can have parties or socialize in mass. In reference to this issue Malcolm stated:

I don't go out much anymore, because there is not that much for Blacks to do. The fraternity houses are all White, the clubs are all White, and Black people really don't go out to "kick it" at bars like White students do, so the bars are all White too. When I first got here that really bothered me, but now I expect things to always remain the same, plus I have too much work to do. I am too close to graduation to be playing around.

In fact, the only social outlet many times for Black students are the "Black Parties" which take place at the Student Center from mid-night to 3:00 am on Fridays or Saturdays. However, these events are always monitored by University security, and guards are posted throughout the parties. Students are filed in through metal detectors, and if anything out of the ordinary occurs the police breaks up the party. Typically, Black students' parties or social functions are regulated by State University (SU) while White students enjoy parties and social gatherings with little to no regulation by SU authorities.

Moreover, there are other social activities catering to Black students including one or two plays per year, a formal ball, various comedy shows, Greek week, and educational

programs. But once these events pass the social scene returns to its prior state which leaves many African American students wondering if they are wanted at SU. In sum, in both academic and social settings Blacks feel invisible or isolated from the core culture of the university which adds to their feelings of marginalization.

### **Intraracial Dissonance**

*Intraracial Dissonance* is best described as cultural, social, and philosophical differences among Black students. This is not the same dissonance described earlier which occurred when Black students' younger siblings and cousins accused them of "acting White" or wanting to be White. Rather, the present section focuses on the difficulties encountered as African American students interacted with one another on campus.

The most visible example of *intraracial dissonance* is the restrictive nature of *Black spaces* which are physical spaces on campus that become perceived *Black space* when they are frequented en masse by Black students. Participants reported retreating to these areas to relax, feel safe, and socialize; however, only some Black students felt comfortable enough to sit in these areas. Some feared that the Blacks in these areas were "tight knit groups" and "outsiders would not be welcomed". Yet, none of the students who were afraid to sit in *Black spaces* reported having negative experiences with other Blacks while sitting in these areas. In fact, many of them never sat in these areas because they perceived that these spaces were designated for particular Black students. In response to this topic Vanessa stated:

During my first semester I never sat with all the Black students in the dining center because it just seemed like they all knew each other. And because I was new I did not know any of them. But overtime I met more people and we would sit over there together for lunch or dinner. Now I rarely sit with the Blacks

because I just don't have the time like I use to. And I hardly ever eat in the dining center because I usually bring my food to my room, so I can do homework and watch TV at the same time.

So, *Black space* can be somewhat intimidating to some Black students which causes them to avoid or stop sitting in *Black spaces*. It is clear that *Black spaces* are not an oasis of refreshment for all Blacks, but for some it provides an opportunity to be themselves.

Most often, *intraracial dissonance* results when Black students question each other's "Blackness." The three reasons that caused Black students to question the "Blackness" of another African American were perceived cultural, social, and philosophical differences. First, Black students are expected to understand and operate within an unwritten and unscripted set of cultural norms. For instance, Black students are expected to be able to speak and understand slang, as well as speak in a tone of voice similar to other Blacks. If students could not do these things they are usually accused of "talking White" or "acting White". For example, when asked "how she believes that other Blacks view her?" Summer stated:

Because the way I talk, they say I sound "proper" [White], I don't use any slang in my talk, I mean I had to ask them what does this word mean or that slang word. And I was looked at like I am stupid or something. Then they will always ask me "where am I from" and I tell them, then they would say "it figures". For instance, people [Blacks] at my job even made fun of me when I first started working there. They said "We can tell that you are not from (major city)", and I was like "no I am not". They questioned me because I could not relate to some of the things that they talked about, or use some of the terms that they used. I would ask them what does this mean and what does that mean. [Somewhat hurt]. And

they would make fun of me. I mean that's fine with me, but that's just how I grew up.

Typically, Black students from large urban cities understand this unspoken code, but students from White or suburban communities struggled to talk and act "Black" enough.

Secondly, Black students who associated only with White students or dated a White student were accused of wanting to be White. Black students carefully watched the association patterns of each other, which were used as an indicator of "Blackness" or the lack thereof. In essence, if a Black student was observed mostly or exclusively "hanging out" with White students he/she would be accused of wanting to be White. For instance, Vanessa stated:

A Black student acting White to me...I won't say stereotypical things like how they dress, talk or what music they listen to. But I do question their race if I never ever see them talking to or hanging around other Black people. That would make me really wonder if this person really wants to be White or what?

Also, in response to a question on this issue Uncle Kel added:

Basically, Blacks that join a White fraternity they are not Black or White, but you are in the middle. Because you are in a White fraternity but you are Black. So, you have no race in a sense. Because whatever Black people consider as Black, joining a White fraternity takes that away. You dress like them, your terminology is White and most of the people you know are White. If that person goes back to the Black neighborhoods people will question their race. And Black students down here would be thinking, "There goes another brother trying to be White".

Students who are seen socializing exclusively with White students are considered to be behaving in a manner that warrants their identity as a Black person to be questioned. Also, when Blacks

join White organizations they change to fit in with their new friends, but they may be considered less “Black” because of their White associations.

Another association pattern that caused some students’ “Blackness” to be questioned is interracial dating. For example, Candice stated:

This one Black young lady only prefers to date White men and she only looks at White men. I am not that way if I found somebody Black and his personality was right we could go out. But this person talks to Whites only, and when she does talk to Blacks she considers them “ghetto”. She puts herself above most Black people. If you think Blacks are ghetto and you only date Whites. That’s like a Black person acting White to me.

Summer added:

But as far as my dating preference I did not come here thinking that I was going to find me some White guy or something like that, it just happened. I have had relationships with Blacks before but this one just happened to work out, so far we have been together for 3 years now. But it was really hard at first [heightened emotion], because I mean some of the people [Black women] that were on my dorm floor, they had a really hard time with me. Well I lost a lot of friends because I was going with him [White boyfriend].

Lastly, *intraracial dissonance* is caused when Black students’ racial identity is questioned with regards to their understanding and commitment to the “Black struggle” for equality in America. This was the most common concern raised by the participants when considering the “Blackness” of another student. The participants felt that if a Black student was not aware of the long history of Blacks struggling for humane and equal treatment in America

then they were not truly Black. Regardless of whom they dated, associated with, or how they spoke if they were perceived to be socially and historically ignorant of the “struggle”, then students questioned their identity as a Black person. For instance, Tanya exclaimed:

Anybody who is blind to the fact that Black people are still struggling is trying to act White. I believe that a Black person who is totally and firmly against affirmative action possess a White mentality. A person who thinks that race is no longer a problem has a White mentality to me. And I will certainly call them White or acting White. I don't want to say that a Black person is someone who is “down” for the “cause”, but that is how I feel. But a Black person who wants to be White is a Black person that denies their culture and their racial identity.

Bawi added:

To be Black means that you are a part of a people who have and still are enduring struggle. To be a member you must be an educated, active, and committed individual working toward positive change for yourself and your people. Now there are some people on campus who hang around Black people all day, they date Black women or men, but they are here in college for the money (financial aid refund) and for the next party, and not to find a way to up-lift their people. That person is not Black. I rather have a Black person who dates a White person, but is committed to positive change, than some of the brothers on this campus.

The most important factor for most of the participants in determining who is authentically Black is an individual's knowledge and commitment to the Black struggle for justice in America. In sum, *intraracial dissonance* is the perceived cultural, social and philosophical distance among Black students. Furthermore, Black students questioning each other's levels of

“Blackness” and the restrictive nature of *Black spaces* characterize *intraracial dissonance*. Sadly, because of the presence of this form of marginality, Black students many times cannot depend on each other for support in a hostile environment.

Overall, a social existence characterized by *total marginality* had real effects on the quality of campus life for Black students at State University. The marginal experiences of students in various situations are not isolated, but these pressures are cumulative in nature. They weigh down, overbear, and stress out Black students to the point that they do not feel wanted or welcome in the dorms, on the quad, the cafeteria, the classroom, with other Black students, and for some at home. Uncle Kel provided a vivid description of the pressures created by *total marginality* and their effects when he stated:

It’s so many different things. I mean, you have to learn to get along with the Black people that are down here. Then you have to learn to deal with White people, then you have to learn to adapt to your environment: the food, the music, the community, the social life that you are stuck in, then you need to learn how to stay focused when you are in a lecture with 200 people and 2 Blacks. You have to shield yourself from the stereotypical ideas that are thrown at you because you are Black. A lot of Black people feel as if they are expected to fail. You got to block out a lot of things in order to focus on education.

In sum, in order for Black students to focus their energies and efforts on their academic careers they must find themselves amidst this marginal existence.

### **Discussion**

The key construct developed throughout this study was *total marginality*, which is the *situated* and *cumulative dissonance* that a Black student encounters in their home, academic,

social, and cultural lives while attending a predominantly White university. It is our attempt to illustrate the cumulative adversities that Black students encounter. This concept explores how they feel unwanted, not welcomed, and invisible at home, in their classes, on the quad, in their dormitories, and even among other Black college students. Moreover, the premise of *total marginality* advances the work of Datnow and Cooper (1997) who noted that African American students attending White high schools experienced a form of “double marginalization” with their home communities and campus cultures (p. 112). In addition, to these situations, *total marginality* captures the dissonance experienced by Black students in social and cultural situations at the collegiate level.

Feagin et al. (1996), Davis et al. (2004), and Lewis et al. (2004) offered rich sets of themes that added much to the literature on Black student experiences attending PWIs. Their results typify the findings in this subject area and were confirmed in the present study. Considering their findings and the information presented in this study, we contend that Black students’ experiences can be best conceptualized as varying levels of exposure to *total marginality*. This unifying thread reemerges in studies (Feagin, Vera, & Imani 1996; Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, Thomas, & Thompson, 2004; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davis, & Smith, 2004) and provides a loose framework for exploring the diversity of Black students’ experiences.

However, the notion of *total marginality* cannot be generalized to every student and every campus considering the methodological limitations of the qualitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Nevertheless, this framework is needed to advance research in this area beyond its exploratory nature, toward developing grounded theories on Black students’ experiences at



PWIs, which is desperately needed to animate interventions, especially as it relates to college (a) preparation, (b) attendance, (c) retention, and (d) graduation.

Additionally, a grounded theory of *total marginality* will offer a capsular way to describe Black students' social position with a high degree of accuracy, complexity, and clarity. Themes can be emphasized or deemphasized to accurately reflect both individual experiences and the nature of particular campuses. This complexity and flexibility allows for discussions to center on the situational and cumulative natures of marginal experiences at different education sites within the same framework. Additionally, instead of marginal experiences being viewed as isolated occurrences, the true magnitude and destructive potential of unwelcoming campus environments can be realized and addressed by considering their cumulative nature. Clarity is also required because these experiences are not easily quantified, and if change is to occur, the message has to be packaged in a manner that allows for it to be useable by individuals with varying levels of knowledge about Black student experiences. Additionally the clarity of this theory makes it accessible to PreK-12 administrators, educators and parents who play critical roles in preparing African American students for PWIS. The accuracy, complexity, and clarity of *total marginality* makes it a useful tool to inform faculty, staff, and administrators in PreK-12 and university settings, about the struggles and experiences of the African American students.

The concept of *total marginality* aligns with critical social theory which calls for the "oppositional knowledge" of oppressed groups to be brought to light and considered when attempting to solve problems relevant to these groups (Collins, 1998, p. 150). In addition to "oppositional knowledge" initiatives must also be informed by social research to be effective (Helm, Prieto, and Sedlacek, 1997). These researchers further conclude that the success of

programs for culturally diverse students depends largely on the extent to which various social groups perceive that diversity is valued at the institution, that social groups possess equal levels of power and influence, and the degree to which diversity initiatives are based on social research rather than trial and error methods. We further assert the need for initiatives to be institutional in nature rather than an isolated program or a diversity statement. In essence, improving African American students' experiences and ultimately their academic performance must occur within the context of strengthening the overall academic and social climate of an institution. An institution is ailing when African Americans and more than likely Asian, Indian, Latino, Arab American, and International students are experiencing *total marginality*. Exposed to the condition of *total marginality*, all students are robbed of the opportunity to interact with and learn from a fully engaged, diverse student body.

Moreover, the impact of *total marginality* at a PWI can be remediated with the support of parents, PreK-12 educators and administrators. It is critical that parents provide students with concrete verbal affirmations infused with messages promoting a positive self and cultural image. Participants reported the importance of such messages when confronted with stereotypes, inter/intraracial conflicts, and invisibility at PWIs. Parents without direct experience with *total marginality* at a PWI can help their children understand such environments by drawing comparisons to the pressures they face as to seek to overcome the racial barriers in the American opportunity structure. Schools can also assist by providing opportunities for former graduates to share their experiences with younger students. Also, administrators can form community partnerships with local graduate chapters of Black fraternities and sororities to provide increased exposure to individuals who have successfully matriculated through college. Each of these

recommendations requires engaging the African American community to access a collective wisdom for navigating social marginalization.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the researchers sought to contribute to a robust body of research exploring African American student experiences at PWIs. Yet, we sought to move this line of inquiry beyond isolated exploratory works by offering an emergent theory that affirms the need for PWIs to renew their efforts to create supportive and affirming campus spaces, classes, curricula, and interactions for African American learners. Since *total marginality* is cumulative in nature, the importance of intraracial interactions and dissonance with home cultures identifies issues of concern as well. These matters can only be addressed with serious conversations from within the Black community, but PWIs can support such work by acknowledging this unique challenge and creating opportunities for Black students to dialogue about intraracial relations as well. Responsive solutions can only be fashioned by taking stock of the total weight of Black students' lived realities. It is our hope that the present work stimulates a new wave of conversation, research, and effort to meet the needs of our increasingly culturally diverse student population, especially when they attend predominately White institutions of higher learning.

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